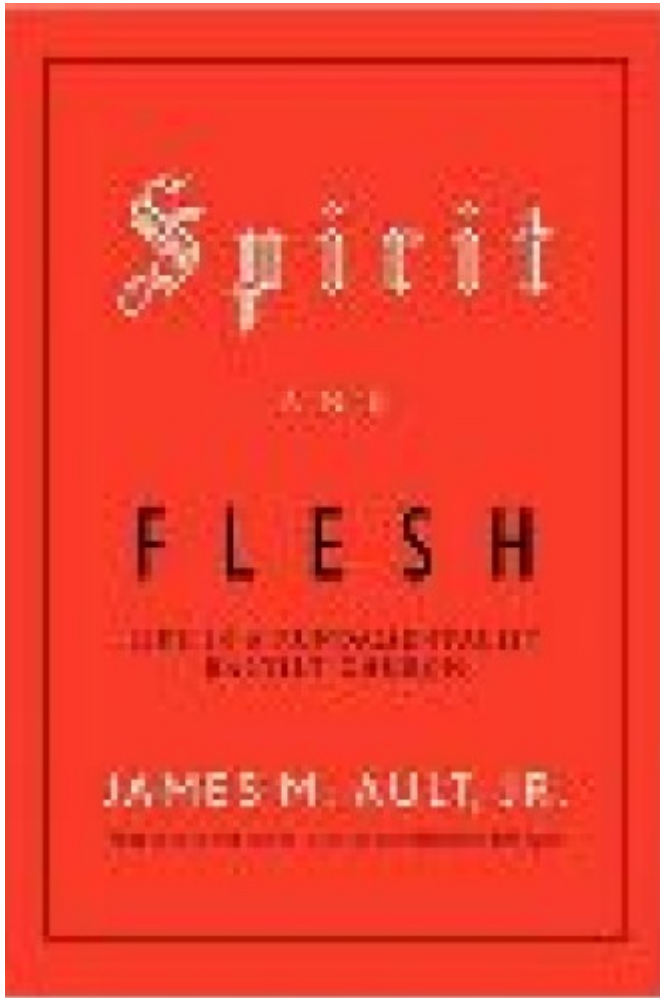


Spirit and Flesh

reviewed by [Eugene H. Winkler](#) in the [March 22, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Spirit and Flesh: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church

James M. Ault Jr.
Knopf

If you want to understand how Christian conservatives think, act and interact, here is a balanced narrative combined with groundbreaking analysis. The son of a Methodist

bishop, James M. Ault Jr. was educated at Harvard and Brandeis universities, then served as a professor of sociology at Harvard and at Smith College. He wanted “to better understand popular support for new-right conservatism—a movement that had transformed American politics,” so he immersed himself for more than two years in a Worcester, Massachusetts, congregation to which he gives the pseudonym Shawmut River Baptist Church.

At Shawmut River, Ault found a community whose beliefs sustained a social world of surprising richness. Fundamentalists’ timeless, God-given absolutes appear rigid to Catholics and mainline Protestants, but Ault discovered some very flexible interpretations within the close-knit congregation, whose members embraced him as a friend and fellow seeker while trying to get him to be saved according to their understanding. Ault’s film portrait of Shawmut River, called *Born Again*, won a blue ribbon at the American Film Festival and was shown both in the United States and abroad. In his book he examines the congregation in more depth than the film format allowed.

The differences between the members of Shawmut River Baptist Church and Ault’s liberal friends and colleagues are stark. Ault came to view “popular conservatism as an effort to defend family obligations as sacred duties against the tide of individualism and individual rights unleashed in the 1960s and 1970s.” This “made sense,” he writes, and it “helped resolve some of the puzzles it poses for outsiders—why right to life coheres with militarism and capital punishment, for example, or why government welfare programs are seen to undermine the moral fiber of American life.”

The leading sociological studies of these conflicts typically explain the differences in terms of conflicting “worldviews” or conceptions of “moral authority”—the conservative view understanding moral authority to be fixed and transcendent, the liberal view perceiving it as relative and conditional. But those studies do not explain why these conflicting views happen to develop among and to be embraced by particular groups.

It is true that working-class people and those in small, family-based businesses tend to be more traditional in certain ways on issues of family and gender. But because of his intimate experiences in the life of Shawmut River Church, Ault does not see new-right positions simply in terms of worldviews or ideas. Rather, he conceives of them in terms of lives organized in circles of cooperating kin and friends.

Consider the issue of divorce. When Pastor Frank Valenti proclaimed “God hates divorce!” the “Amen” came from a flock that included his mother-in-law, his sister-in-law, a deacon and many others who were divorced. “None of those who had experienced divorce seemed troubled in the least by his blanket judgment.” Was this wanton hypocrisy? The paradox, writes Ault, “can be resolved” if we see “fundamentalists’ absolutes against the background of the kind of moral disclosure their lives support. The moral absolutes members take from scripture achieve their flexibility not in any explicit qualification but, instead, in the occasions of their actual use, guided firmly yet tacitly by a collective sense of the particularities of so many situations at hand.” In other words, fundamentalists live by situation ethics while decrying the very idea.

Or take gossip—a problem in congregations of any size but especially pernicious in a close-knit, fundamentalist group in which people know the contents of one another’s refrigerators. “Gossip,” Ault writes, “is a particular form of talk known, above all, for its capacity to affect reputation, the commonly accepted identity a person carries in a community. Once reputation crystallizes, whether true or not, it provides a lens through which all members can legitimately see what that person’s actions obviously are.” So Pastor Valenti was preoccupied with gossip, and rather than being “the all-powerful commander of his ship, he seemed its frustrated pilot, nervously scanning the seas around him for signs of hidden icebergs whose creation and movement he was unable to control, things that would drive parents from his school or turn his flock against him.”

Ault also points out that while fundamentalists believe that it is through scripture that saved people can understand the spiritual truths God intends for us to know, the church operated on an “organic basis within the ever-flowing stream of talk.” Oral tradition lies at the heart of the fundamentalist world. Church life is replete with memorization exercises, games and contests to help children and adults to know the Bible “by heart” (or to “hide it in their hearts”—not their heads—where it will shape their motivation to yield the visible fruit of spiritual life), and members of Shawmut River Church used certain verses of scripture repeatedly. Any argument could be countered with a memorized passage. The congregation developed a working knowledge of the Bible far more through talk than by reading. “In this way the Bible became used and known largely as a body of stories and sayings—aphorisms or maxims—which are the characteristic tools of moral discourse in an orally transmitted culture.”

The New Testament, particularly the apostles' letters, was the main source of doctrine. In order to understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, members of the men's Bible study group were taught to repeat the poetic couplet, "The new is in the old concealed, and the old is in the new revealed." The authority of such folk sayings derives from the fact that they have been passed down, just as they are, by those who came before; hence they are repeatable, memorable and unassailable. This is an important reason for some fundamentalists' persistent preference for the King James translation of the Bible. The King James "expresses sayings in old-fashioned language. . . . It has the sound and feel of ancient, time-honored truth—the ring of tradition."

Fundamentalism and the new right, along with feminism and the new left, are part of a distinctly American pattern of conflict. Many foreigners look upon this "nation with the soul of a church" (G. K. Chesterton) with bemused wonderment; we debate abortion, sex education, evolution and the political process so vehemently because we feel them bone-deep. Unlike James Hunter (*Culture Wars*), Ault does not believe either side will win, or can win. Each depends too intimately on its enemies for its thought, sensibility and practice—for its very identity.