

## The World of Evangelism

*Redemptorama: Culture, Politics and the New Evangelicalism* by Carol Flake (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1985), 300 pp., \$15.95.

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AS CAROL FLAKE observes, 1976 seemed to be "the year of the evangelical" as the media focused its attention on Jimmy Carter, a born-again Christian who taught Sunday School in his small Georgia hometown and who had trounced the leading figures of the Democratic party establishment to win the nomination and then the general election. Four years later not only Carter but Ronald Reagan and John Anderson were claiming born-again status for themselves, a fact which led Gene McCarthy to quip that he might well be the last presidential candidate to have been born only once.

In 1980 the born-again Carter lost his bid for reelection, partially because of his unpopularity with many of the evangelicals who elected him to office but who now regarded him "not as a dyed-in-the wool Baptist but a liberal in sheepish clothing" (p. 7). Of more importance than Carter's defeat, however, political observers realized that there was an evangelical constituency of several million voters who were, in Flake's words, "not yet closely allied to any party but possessing enormous power for single-issue crusades." The new Christian right, personified by Rev. Jerry Falwell, seemed to be fast becoming an important political force for politicians to reckon with—and to court.

Flake does not deal specifically with Mormons or their relationship with evangelical Christians, but much of what she says about contemporary evangelicalism applies to contemporary Mormon society, especially in the way that evangelicalism is an all encompassing philosophy that provides not only a world view, but a tightly

organized structure for all aspects of daily life. Moreover, there is much about the evangelical mind set that seems similar to that of many Latter-day Saints.

Primarily, *Redemptorama* provides an informative and fascinating look at the world of Christian evangelicalism. The author, raised a Southern Baptist, distanced herself from her denomination while attending college, then used the research for this book to return to her roots. She discovered that her "own church back home" was now televising its Sabbath services and had changed as much as she: "Fundamentalists were no longer grappling with the demons within, but with the humanists without. Instead of peering into their own souls for evidence of guilt, they were looking across town, across the state, across the nation, toward the politicians and purveyors of culture who had invaded their homes, schools and neighborhoods with unsettling change" (p. 13).

Evangelicals, Flake observes, have traditionally had two essential characteristics. First, they divide the world into the saved who have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and the lost who don't. Second, they feel responsible to transform the latter into the former.

Flake found that contemporary evangelical Christianity had added a new commercial component as well: "As I made it through this bright new world of Christianized culture, I sensed a curious air of unreality, of artificiality about it. The total man had married the total woman in the total Christian church to fulfill the dream of the total Christian family in a total Christian country. . . . Conservative evangelicals like love-starved secularists had adopted the tokens of mass-produced affection, the illusion of community: bumper sticker smiles, personalized form letters, televised compassion, published advice" (p. 17).

Contrasting that culture with the one of her youth, Flake comments that the "church of my childhood had touched my

heart and shaped my life in a way that secular culture never could" (p. 14). She was repelled by "evangelists who rattled the rusty sabers of Christian militancy or the suave TV Super Savers who sold their shut-in viewers ever more costly plans of salvation" (p. 12).

And though she admits encountering many kind, generous, and sincere people practicing "too many good deeds" among the evangelical community, she also found herself "longing for the old clapboard churches" of her youth which offered a "strong system of values and a real community." Whatever the church of her youth had in the way of faults, she notes, at least it had offered a noncommercialized "glimpse of a better life and a better self" (p. 15).

*Redemptorama* is much more than a nostalgic look at the church and community of Flake's youth. It is a helpful resource for anyone interested in understanding the evangelical experience and its impact on our society. For instance, Flake provides four general evangelical categories in the American religious tradition: (1) separatists, who want to remove themselves from the world and run the gamut from Mennonites and Amish to survivalists who see Armageddon on the horizon; (2) recruiters, who argue that Christians must not run from the world but confront and convert it; (3) civil religionists, who have taken the long-held American view that God ought to be in government but have enhanced that view with computers, mass-mail campaigns, and sophisticated media techniques; and (4) Christian capitalists, who argue that since Jesus was the "greatest salesman of all time," evangelicals ought to use modern marketing to sell everything from Christian sex manuals to Christian T-shirts.

Most of the book deals with the last two categories because, Flake asserts, it is "Christian capitalism and political engagement that have transformed the world of evangelicalism and have begun to influence the affairs of the nation." In the process,

despite their protestations to the contrary, these evangelical entrepreneurs and pulpit politicians are "not creating a Christian counter-culture but rather a counterfeit culture" (p. 22).

Flake adds a fifth type of contemporary evangelical, much less well known to a mass audience and represented by the Sojourners community of Washington, D.C., the Berkeley Christian Coalition and similar groups. These are the radical evangelicals whose "activism has taken a different direction" and who have "rejected the prosperity and power that conservative evangelicals felt to be their just reward for living good Christian lives. Unlike fundamentalists who wanted to fight fire with fire by banning and burning, Christianizing the culture, and hoarding arms for Armageddon, radical evangelicals call for a scaling-down of Christian enterprise, a rejection of the arms race, and a build-up of social concerns" (p. 243).

Above all else, says Flake, radical evangelicals hold fast to a set of ideas that resemble biblical teachings—"the importance of peace and community and the danger of complacency." These evangelicals, she comments, find in Jesus "not only an apostle of peace but a radical savior who had met his fate by casting his lot with the oppressed and opposing the powers of business, church and state."

No doubt many readers will find *Redemptorama* a controversial account of evangelical Christianity. For those acquainted with conservative religion in Utah, both Mormon and non-Mormon alike, much of what Carol Flake says will sound familiar. Some will find her assessments harsh. Others may take issue with the characterizations she has made. But her closing words are worthy of consideration: "Evangelicalism [today is] a house divided against itself . . . , a community . . . torn between those who were trying to learn how to live the good life, Christian style, surrounded by other Christians in a total Christian culture; those who were trying to return America to some mythical age of