

# PREACHING AS AN ART FORM

## Robert Duvall's *The Apostle*

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Pentecostal revivalism invites caricature, and the media have never been slow to ridicule the healing evangelist who exploits his followers' credulity or generosity. From Burt Lancaster in *Elmer Gantry* (1960) to Steve Martin in *Leap of Faith* (1992), film actors have relished the opportunity to expose charlatan preachers who abuse their calling or betray the trust of their congregations. Robert Duvall's moving portrayal of a Southern Pentecostal preacher's fall and ultimate redemption is equally honest but much more sympathetic. His 'apostle' may have a weakness for women and for brawling, but he is altogether more credible as an evangelist who genuinely loves his people and has a passion for his calling. The authentic romance, inspiration, and glory of Gospel preaching shines through this wonderful movie.

*The Apostle* is Robert Duvall's labour of love. He worked on it for more than a decade. He researched, wrote, directed and even financed it himself - to the tune of five million US dollars - when none of the mainline studios would touch the project. He acts the main character - a Southern Pentecostal preacher and church planter - with such conviction that it makes the work of an evangelist look about the most exciting adventure anyone could ever have. Duvall wanted to make a movie to reach two distinct audiences: secular moviegoers who've never experienced the power of a Pentecostal service, and Christian believers whose taste in religious films is often corny and melodramatic. He succeeds on both counts. *Christian History* magazine described it as 'the closest you can get to a classic Pentecostal church service without actually attending one.'<sup>1</sup>

Duvall, veteran of nearly sixty films since his debut in 1962 in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, described his motives in bringing this unique project to the screen in an interview with *Charisma* magazine. 'It's something I had to do,' he said. 'I think in a way it could be a calling, but it's hard to judge in absolutes what that all means.' The son of a Methodist father and a Christian Scientist mother, Duvall has a deep respect for Jesus Christ and an attraction to Pentecostal preaching, which he describes as 'one of the true American art forms.' For the first time in American movie history, a film devotes the same attention to a Bible-toting evangelist that Hollywood usually lavishes on sex and crime. 'We make great gangster movies,' says Duvall, 'so why not make this kind of movie right too?'<sup>2</sup>

A number of elements make this movie 'right'. The first is a good story line. Texas Pentecostal preacher Euliss F. ('Sonny') Dewey is voted out of the church that he founded and built up, to the neglect of his wife and family. Smarting from this humiliation, he learns that his wife Jessie - acted by Farrah Fawcett, in her first independent film appearance - is having an affair with his youth minister Horace, played by Todd Allen. He turns up at his children's baseball game and fells his wife's lover with a bat. Fearing that he has killed the man, Sonny flees town, spectacularly

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Rise of Pentecostalism,' *Christian History*, Issue 58 (1998), p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Rabey, 'Robert Duvall Plays Pentecostal in *The Apostle*,' *Charisma* (March 1998), p. 26.

ditching his car in a river. The fugitive undertakes a fast, rededicates himself to the cause of the Gospel, baptises himself as 'The Apostle E. F.', pledges to follow God 'every step of the way', and sets off for Louisiana under the guidance of the Lord.

Sonny revels in preaching. Flashbacks reveal that he grew up being taken to services at a poor black church as a child, and that he started out as a boy preacher at the age of twelve. Soon he has met Brother C. Charles Blackwell and gathered some people to start a new congregation in a derelict wooden church, which he renames the 'One Way Road to Heaven Holiness Temple'. He supports himself by working in a roadhouse café, and advertises his cause by some enterprising preaching on the local radio station - the DJ soon becomes a supporter, but the secretary, nicely acted by Miranda Richardson, is nearly his undoing.

In due course, his wife, back in Texas, accidentally overhears him on the radio. Sonny, unaware that his whereabouts have become known, confesses the murder to his colleague Brother Blackwell. One night, during an evening service, police cars surround the church, and after a farewell message illuminated by the flashing lights, the apostle surrenders to the waiting policemen. There is a great line as he is led away, when the policeman tells him he has the right to remain silent. 'Me?' he chuckles, 'I always got somethin' to say.' We last see him, still preaching for Jesus, in a prison work gang.

A second element that is right in this movie is the characterisation. Duvall steers a fine line between his main character's human faults and his divine calling. Nimble of voice, foot and fist, Sonny is a likeable, energetic, driven person, who quit school because he 'didn't like recess.' An archetypal Pentecostal showman, it is his impulsiveness more than his sensuality that is his undoing. The ambivalence of his character illustrates exactly what Peter Hocken, a sympathetic but astute observer, calls 'the glory and the shame' of the Pentecostal Movement, a movement that is 'of the Spirit,' but 'much mixed with the flesh.'<sup>3</sup>

Duvall's portrayal of Sonny is remarkably true to real life, for the rise and spread of Southern American Pentecostalism, particularly since the healing revival that followed World War Two, has been due to many such charismatic personalities.<sup>4</sup> Often flawed in character, lacking education and balance, and making extravagant claims, they nonetheless showed heroic dedication to the cause of the Gospel and, in the estimate of John Wimber, 'have done more in this century to evangelise the world than any other group'.<sup>5</sup>

Duvall succeeds in creating a complex character whose obvious faults do not invalidate the genuineness of his faith. Sonny's humanity lends credibility to his preaching. The same drive which leads him to sin sparks an ebullience which causes him to shine. A consummate risk-taker, his verve is an inspiration to those

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<sup>3</sup> *The Glory and the Shame: Reflections on the 20th Century Outpouring of the Holy Spirit* (Guildford, Eagle, 1994), p.15.

<sup>4</sup> See the fine study by historian David E. Harrell, *All Things Are Possible: The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> John Wimber, 'Some Notable Personalities: Their Practices and Pitfalls', *Signs and Wonders and Church Growth* [Part 1] Conference Manual (Placentia, California, Vineyard Ministries International, 1984), Section 8, p. 33.

around him. Yet his evangelism is tinged with a tenderness born of an awareness of his own sins. He is courageous, but merciful, in correcting the faults of others.

This gives the conversion scenes - at the beginning, middle and end - an extraordinary realism. They are so well done, so well contextualised, so intimate and touched with grace, that you feel you have interloped on the most intimate transaction of which a human soul is capable. Not since Bob Dylan's 'Every Grain of Sand' has the tenderness of the moment of conversion, 'the sinner's blub' as John Wimber called it, been so well described in contemporary art:

In the time of my confession  
In the hour of my deepest need  
When the pool of tears beneath my feet  
Floods every newborn seed . . . <sup>6</sup>

Another thing that is right about this film is the Southern ambience, conveyed in both landscape and music. This is bayou country, cradle of American popular music, home of the blues. Coastal Louisiana is wonderfully portrayed, with its steamy heat, sluggish river estuaries, poor hovels and jetties, and its indomitable inhabitants - some of whom appear as extras in the movie. There are vivid landscapes as the fugitive preacher runs across a russet swamp in the blue haze of a summer's day, or as his blood-red church bus crosses a silver river on an orange punt against the backdrop of a levee topped by sombre green trees.

The musical score reinforces the Southern feel. There are some vibrant performances of Gospel music, and a fine sound track produced by David Mansfield, the mandolin and dobro player who made his debut as a nineteen year old in Dylan's famous 1975 Rolling Thunder Revue. The film's score includes such Gospel classics as 'O How I Love Jesus' and a duet of 'I Love to Tell the Story' by Duvall and June Carter Cash (who acts Sonny's mother), as well as Steven Curtis Chapman's 'I Will Not Go Quietly' and Dolly Parton's new song 'Shine On'.<sup>7</sup> Even the radio station KBBR Bayou Barré, with its genial overweight DJ, is an authentic touch, reminding us of the Southern roots of modern American music. We recall, for example, that the young Bob Dylan growing up in northern Minnesota used to listen secretly to rhythm and blues broadcast by Louisiana radio stations, on a radio concealed under the bedcovers after his parents had gone to sleep.<sup>8</sup>

The fourth and central element that is right about this movie is the preaching. One reviewer, unfamiliar with the genre, felt that Duvall's script 'overdoes the evangelical flights' - while admitting that their 'aria-like' quality gave him a wonderful opportunity to show off as an actor.<sup>9</sup> People will debate whether he, rather than Jack Nicholson for *As Good as it Gets*, should have got an Oscar for his riveting performance as a 'Holy Ghost, Jesus-filled preaching machine' - as Sonny describes himself in the movie. But Duvall is showing forth more than showing off - he made the film because

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<sup>6</sup> On Dylan's album *Shot of Love* (Columbia, August 1981).

<sup>7</sup> A CD recording of 'music from and inspired by the motion picture' is available from Universal, entitled *The Apostle* (1998).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: the Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (London, Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 38-39.

<sup>9</sup> Helene Wong, 'Act of God,' *New Zealand Listener*, (8 August 1998), p. 45.

he believes that backwoods American preaching is a genuine art form, deserving of wider recognition. Many people, many preachers even, are ignorant of the vitality and power of Southern Gospel preaching.

Duvall's interest in this subject was whetted way back in 1962 when he visited a small-town Arkansas church while researching a character in a play, and was impressed by the sincerity and liveliness he saw. 'I got off the Trailways bus and wandered into this little church. There was a lively preacher; the congregation was stomping and moving and feeling the spirit. I said I'd like to play one of these guys one day.'<sup>10</sup> To prepare for the role he studied dozens of preachers, including T.D. Jakes of Dallas and E.V. Hill of Los Angeles. Duvall was deeply moved by a sermon Hill preached at his own wife's funeral.<sup>11</sup> The movie is dedicated to the Rev Isham Williams.

In *The Apostle* Robert Duvall has done for the varieties of religious expression what William James did in his 1902 classic for *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: he catalogues and celebrates a rich and unforgettable collage of the Gospel preacher's art. We are regaled with tent preaching, large church preaching, small church preaching, radio preaching, tandem preaching, tab team preaching, translation preaching, testimony preaching, impromptu preaching, interactive preaching, participatory preaching, responsive preaching. There is even a classic piece of work-gang preaching, a litany extolling Jesus while the credits roll at the film's end, a tribute to the black slave preachers in whose afflictions the art-form originated. Common to all these varieties of Gospel preaching is the call and response style - a form descended from what Harvey Cox calls 'the distinctively African American experience of resisting oppression through exuberant worship.'<sup>12</sup>

The Gospel genre is extemporaneous as well as participatory. Bookish preachers, sticking timidly to their notes, miss the thrill and wonder of extempore preaching. Duvall's preaching scenes, with their vitality, joy and inspiration, remind me of what one of the century's greatest preachers, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, says about 'the romance of preaching':

There is nothing like it. It is the greatest work in the world, the most thrilling, the most exciting, the most rewarding, and the most wonderful. I know nothing comparable to the feeling . . . especially when you feel you have a message from God and are longing to give it to the people. . . .

There is something glorious even about the uncertainty; because if you are a true preacher you really do not know what is going to happen when you enter a pulpit. If you are a lecturer, . . . you do know; but if you are a preacher you certainly do not. . . .

[To discover] the theme developing while you are preaching. . . . is a most thrilling and wonderful experience which fills one with a sense of amazement.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Richard Corliss, 'Divine Inspiration,' *Time* (September 7, 1998), p.52.

<sup>11</sup> Steve Rabey, *Art cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, Massachusetts, Addison-Wesley, 1994), p. 145.

It is quite extraordinary, and one seems to have no control over it; it just happens.<sup>13</sup>

Genuine preaching is dynamic, mysterious, uncontrollable. The muse of poetry may be a 'tall girl' - as New Zealand poet James K. Baxter once described her<sup>14</sup> - but she is a stripling compared to her twin sister, the muse of oracy. You have to stand on tip toe to kiss her. Preaching is more than inter-personal communication, though the relational element is essential, and you cannot preach as Duvall's apostle does without a responsive congregation. Authentic preaching has a transcendent quality, heaven-caressed, full of grace and truth, as the living Word anoints the preacher's lips and the Saviour's mercy melts the sinner's heart.

Today much Western preaching has lost its fire; become impoverished, wooden, lifeless. Many Christian ministers have lost confidence in the power of preaching to communicate and convert, to inspire and redeem. Duvall's greatest achievement might be to give us a taste of what we are missing.

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<sup>13</sup> *Preaching and Preachers* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1971), pp. 297-9.

<sup>14</sup> *Aspects of Poetry in New Zealand* (Christchurch, Caxton Press, 1967), p. 7.