

When Jesus Walked

A tour of Trinity Christian Center International
BY TYLER STALLINGS

LYING IN BED, ENVELOPED BY A FLICKERING BLUE AURA, I will occasionally pause on the TBN channel and include myself in Paul and Jan Crouch's international telecongregation. From their studio set, and their gilded, throne-like chairs, they seem to praise Jesus less than they do the strength of their broadcast signal. It is their Holy Spirit, bandwidth over benediction. In fact, the Trinity Broadcasting Network's signal is broadcast to more than 700 stations around the world via its own satellites and dish antennas, which the Crouches have endearingly nicknamed their "Holy Beamers."

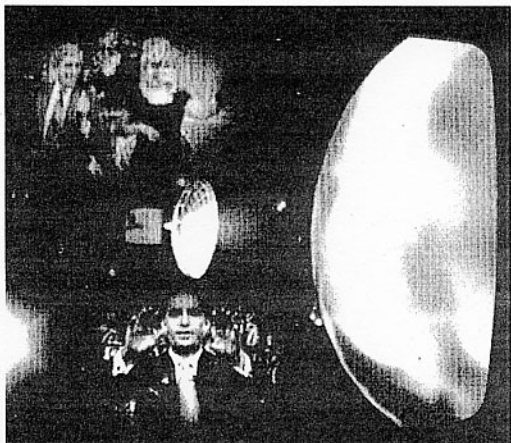
In Los Angeles, the tradition of techno-show-biz-proselytizing can be traced back to the 1920s and Aimee Semple McPherson, founder of the Church of the Four-square Gospel in Echo Park and the first Christian radio station, KFSG, in the United States. The Crouches' approach, akin to sister Aimee's, is a strange combination of traditional values and cutting-edge technology, a mixed message that hovers over their enterprise like a warped halo. In their 25th-anniversary program, they proudly wrote, "The beginning, 1973, TBN goes on the air, an update of the more low-tech, primal 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.'"

TBN evolved out of a Pentecostalism that includes Paul Crouch Jr. and Pat Robertson. Believers preach the benefits of returning to a Christian primitivism, a Year 1, when the Bible and God's laws were above humankind's. Today, this impulse is combined with a desire to get the message out as fast as possible and to as many people as possible. Besides broadcast and cable television, TBN programming is available on shortwave radio and live Webcasts. As the pledge page on www.tbn.org once pronounced: "YOUR TBN now covers the globe

with 16 SATELLITES! Nearly 1 BILLION new souls can be reached... YOUR TBN is literally able to say 'Hello World!'"

TRINITY CHRISTIAN CENTER International, which opened in 1998 and houses the new TBN headquarters, is situated on one side of the 405's most of eight traffic lanes, directly opposite Orange County's citadel of materialism, South Coast Plaza. Its exterior is a cross between a wedding cake and an antebellum mansion, yet it houses a high-tech mission control to download heaven to earth and upload our souls to God. Presently 10,126,370 have been saved, as indicated on a gilded placard sitting stage right on the studio set. The location and the contradictions between what the exterior and interior communicate, in terms of value systems, suggest that the sacred and the profane are still locked in battle — along with education and entertainment, history and kitsch. "Education" and "historical" are in abundant evidence during my walk through the complex, entering such places as the Gold, Franciscense and Myrrh Book & Gift Shop, where the clerk says, "If you get hungry, the Bread and Fish Bistro is on the second floor."

The Crouches cry a lot on their show, *Praise the Lord*. This emotional exhibitionism, begun when TBN was founded and located in Tustin, was and is ahead of the times. "Reality" programming, or "realtainment" if you will, is the hot trend on television. On-the-job policemen, firemen or doctors saving people are passed; the scripted reality of MTV's *The Real World* or CBS's *Survivor* is now dominant. And whether on TBN or MTV, devotees/participants are presented as enduring hardships, sometimes straying from the flock and other times breaking up with a love >



Uploading souls

TECH JESUS

interest, depending on the channel. Suffering is good entertainment.

Reflecting that suffering is part of life, two of the main attractions of the Trinity Christian Center are the Via Dolorosa, which allows one to share in Christ's pain, and the Virtual Reality Theater.

After a 15-minute video synopsis of TBN's history, which I watch in a narrow theater with four other visitors, the screen rises and a set of curtains behind it separates to reveal an ancient cobblestone street. A disembodied female voice — automaton or angel? — says: "Please, ladies and gentlemen, walk into the past. Walk in Jesus' footsteps. Walk down the Via Dolorosa, the street in the old walled city of Jerusalem where Jesus carried his cross to Calvary."

The other four visitors walk ahead of me, back into time. When I enter, I can feel and hear the distinct hollow, theater-park sound of footsteps on plywood covered by plaster — the old-fashioned kind of virtual reality. As on Disneyland's theme-based rides, we, and I do mean all five of us, are simultaneously placed in the position of protagonist, in this case not Snow White but Jesus Christ. Recalling Christ's celebrity status, I expect Roman paparazzi to pop out as we (Christ) walk to Calvary. I do hear a recording of whispering women behind the closed doors, suggesting the verbal gauntlet that Christ must have suffered, not one sympathizing with this crazy man — the pain of words. At the end of the "ride," our collective incarnation of Christ is lifted when we suddenly see ourselves, that is, Him, in a painted backdrop, depicted in the distance hanging out at Calvary hill.

Past this crucifixion in progress is a set of double doors. It is the next world.

Have I been a good person? I enter with eyes closed. The four other visitors rush in. I hear a voice. Again, it's the techno-angel. She says: "Good afternoon. I hope you enjoyed your journey through the streets of Jerusalem. You are about to see *The Revolutionary*, which was shot in high-definition video, and the sound is being presented in this theater over 48 speakers. These two technologies combined create your virtual-reality experience of Jesus' life." Another movie theater — always heaven on Earth.

Three other movies are offered at varying times: *Revolutionary II* (further adventures of Jesus), *The Emissary* (highlights of apostle Paul's scenes from the Book of Acts) and *The Omega Code*. The last, produced by Paul Crouch Jr., opened in commercial theaters last year. It is based on the belief that the Bible contains a secret, three-dimensional code that holds answers to the world's problematic state of affairs, apparently indicated in the prophetic books of Daniel and Revelation. We can only now decode it with our powerful computers — again, a perfect example of the Digital Spirit. All are unabashed action movies, titillating the supposedly bored with special effects. I'm sure the Crouches are at work on *Jesus Bond*, who will always be battling the villain who wants to control the world, Satan. By now Q must have developed a remote-control gun of thorns that explodes on impact. Tie-in action figures could be sold in the GE&M gift shop.

I separate from my tourmates and search for the heart of the complex — the

TV studio in the Demos Shaakarian Memorial Building. I climb a gilded spiral staircase to the second floor and find my way, though I am first confronted with California Penal Code Section 302a, prominently displayed at the entrance. It is a reminder to the Sunday telecongregation that this is *live television*, seen around the world by millions, and that disturbing religious worship by "profane discourse" and other rude behavior is a misdemeanor. In other words, TBN is not a community church for a few hundred people.

No one else is present in the studio. Several cameras rest on ladders cranes and tripods, pointing toward the stage. The Crouches emphasize in their literature that TBN was built as a working studio, and one through which people can take self-guided behind-the-scenes tours. Is this transparency meant to reinforce the idea that anyone can have a direct relationship with God, whether one owns a TV network or not? A very Protestant notion, despite the very Catholic décor of gold, cherubs and other idolatrous stereotypes of "heaven" throughout the building.

The Crouches' "issue" box sits on a gilded coffee table, center stage. I am drawn to it because it is the most mundane of all the props, as if were the Holy Grail hiding itself, waiting for the truly faithful to see through its layers of tarnish and recognize it as the chalice from which Christ drank at the Last Supper; take a tissue. I want to have a good cry, but I can't and won't. The Holy Beamers are dark. There is no TV audience, lying in bed, to view my tears. □