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The Punk-Christian Son of a Preacher Man
By JOHN LELAND

In an Atlanta coffeehouse one night last summer, Jay Bakker squinted through patchy stage lights and asked for prayer requests. It was the regular Wednesday-night Bible study for Revolution Ministries, and about 30 people, most of them in their 20's, sat at scattered tables and listened. Bakker wore green Vans, jeans, a Johnny Cash belt buckle and a black Social Distortion T-shirt, revealing arms tattooed to the wrists. A silver ring protruded through his lower lip, and black discs stretched both ear lobes.

"My friend Mitch got shot in the face and is in critical condition," one waifish young man with choppy brown hair said. "I found out he pushed someone, and the guy shot him."

Bakker, whose full name is Jamie Charles Bakker, acknowledged the prayer request and added one of his own, for his mother, whose cancer had spread from her colon to her lungs and throat. At 29, he still faintly recalls the cherubic kid who appeared almost from birth with his parents, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, on their syndicated television show, "The PTL Club," then disappeared during the family's sexual and legal scandals in the 1980's. "We're just trying to love people with no agenda," he told the group. "That's hard, to be a Christian and have no agenda, and it's hard for people to think of a Christian with no agenda."

This was an important night for the ministry, he announced. The Masquerade, a multistory rock club, had invited them to hold their weekly services there, with cocktail waitresses and a full bar. Though the club is secular, its three levels are called Heaven, Purgatory and Hell. Bakker said that Revolution's service would start on the middle level, Purgatory, but that if they drew enough people, they could move downstairs to Hell. He spoke without rhetorical flourish, moving the lesson informally from an Alanis Morissette lyric to the Old Testament story of Abraham, apologizing when he felt he was getting too preachy. A booth in the back sold T-shirts and buttons with the ministry's slogan, "Religion Kills."

"Maybe this is what the postmodern church is supposed to look like," he said. "For the first time I feel we're having some peace in this, we're starting a church where there is no church. We're not the first to do this, but for Revolution, it's a big step."

It was a big step for Bakker as well. He was 2 when his parents started Heritage USA, a 2,000-plus-acre Christian theme park, and 11 when the family's empire crumbled amid revelations that his father had had sex with a staff member named Jessica Hahn. In the years since, Jay Bakker has been a teenage alcoholic, a skate punk, a Christian pariah, a high-school dropout, a Gap employee and, for a while, a singer in a Social Distortion cover band. He wears this journey on his sleeves, literally: the tattoo on one wrist reads "Broken"; on the other, "Outcast."

Revolution, which he founded with two friends in 1994, is his response to the family legacy. His father, who served five years in prison for defrauding investors, is now back on cable television with "The Jim Bakker Show," a low-budget production taped in Branson, Mo. His mother, who has become something of a gay icon, resurfaced in 2003 on the high-camp reality series "The Surreal Life," bonding with Vanilla Ice and the porn actor Ron Jeremy. Bakker's older sister, Tammy Sue, has battled depression and is now a singer and minister based in North Carolina. After the Bible study, as Bakker considered his young congregation, he weighed the tribulations of growing up Bakker. "I think it opens more doors than it closes," he told me of the family name. "The younger people don't really know who my family is. Or they know my mom was on 'Surreal Life.' They know her from that, not 'PTL.' The older people know me from the jokes on 'Saturday Night Live.' A lot of them were very standoffish at the beginning. But they know that I haven't ever asked them for anything or tried to get anything from them. So there's a lot of having to prove myself to certain groups of folks. But that's O.K. I understand."

Bethra Szumski, 33, a tattoo artist, said she came to Revolution in 2002 with a low opinion of Christians, whom she found judgmental. She told me she believed in God, not in church or religion. But she was drawn to Bakker because he was wrestling with his own problems and because he did not judge her. "Under my own resources, I'm incredibly ineffective to do anything except self-destruct," she said. "He said salvation wasn't anything I could find on my own. Jesus had atoned."

ed for me." At Revolution, she said, the teaching never strayed far from this core idea of grace. "We hear that a lot, it's really repetitive, but I need to hear that every single week."

Revolution is one of several thousand alternative ministries that have emerged in the last decade, meeting in warehouses, bars, skate parks, punk clubs, private homes or other spaces, in a generational rumble to rebrand the faith outside of what we think of as church. To travel among them is to feel returned to the alternative-rock scene of 15 years ago, just before Nirvana and Lollapalooza put it on the map. Instead of criticizing major record labels, these ministries criticize megachurches; instead of flattening the status of the rock star, they flatten the status of the pastor. They cluster in cells rather than in denominations or arenas, and connect through D.I.Y. zines online. They are a counterculture on two fronts: at odds with both their secular peers and conventional churches.

"We've all been damaged by fundamentalism or the traditional church," said Bakker's assistant pastor, Matt DeBenedictis, who came to Revolution after being a roadie for various rock bands, Christian and secular. "I know so many people who won't call themselves Christians but are following God and Jesus -- who walked away from seminary or Christian rock bands, and who feel completely outcast."

On a sluggish afternoon at an Atlanta strip mall, I asked Bakker about the influence of punk rock in his ministry. We were in a shop called Timeless Tattoo, where Bakker was getting an afternoon's worth of minor touch-ups. Though the shop has no religious affiliation, a couple of the staff artists play in Christian punk bands; another had played with Bakker in the Creeps, their Social Distortion cover band. Bakker took several passes at the punk question, never mentioning music. "Those are the people that reached out to me when the Christian world rejected me and my family," he said of the punks and skaters. "That's something about punk-rock ethics. Your friends have your back. We share our lives together, and there's a loyalty there."

In contrast to his father, who larded his show-biz patina thick, Bakker is unpolished and self-effacing. He has mild dyslexia, which makes it hard for him to write, and as a child he suffered from an eating disorder. Recently he stopped taking the antidepressant Paxil, which had caused him to gain weight, and started taking a little Zoloft instead. "We are who we are, and that's got a lot to do with punk," he said. "We try not to live a lie or have a false perception of ourselves, that we're holier or better than other people. We don't try to live up to the standards of mainline Christian society and the pressures they put on you."

He talks of punk now as a mixed blessing. Some of his younger friends, he said, think it's punk to use heroin or play anarchist, as long as their parents are supporting them. But he also sees in punk the integrity of the misfit or the wounded, a recurring theme in both his conversation and his ministry. Like their pastor, the members of Revolution share a generational consciousness of their hurts: of family dysfunction or drugs or traumatic church experiences. "We're seekers of truth, really," he said. "I think punk rock has something to do with that. We're looking for truth, looking for answers. We're disillusioned with the way the system works, and we want to see the system changed. I don't want anarchy, but I want a new system, one that runs and works and is for the people."

As a child, Bakker said, he thought of his father as "a businessman slash entertainer" and of his own life as unreal. His closest friends were his security guards, and even they left him when the ministry crashed. "I've had so many of my heroes in grace slam my parents, or not be associated with me because of my parents," he told me. We were at a suburban coffee shop near the home he shares with his wife, Amanda, a pretty, wary woman with dyed red hair and a tattoo of Jesus on one arm. As a recovering smoker and alcoholic, Bakker doesn't smoke cigarettes or drink, but he usually carries a cigar with him.

His biography, which forms the narrative center of his ministry, is an object lesson in what Ryan Dobson, the heavily tattooed son of James Dobson, founder of the conservative group Focus on the Family, calls "the Christian tendency to shoo out our wounded." When Jim Bakker went to prison, the family became objects of public rebuke in the televangelist world they helped create, and a punch line for comedians everywhere. Like Elvis Presley, the Bakkers were poor rich people, and when they fell, their son's adolescence crashed on top of him.

"Jamie Charles got on drugs really bad, he was drinking real bad," his mother told me the first night I met her at the Masquerade. "When we lost 'PTL,' people were not only mean to us, they treated our children terrible. And I thought, How can adults treat little kids so bad? The sadness of it was what happened to our children."

On a 1992 visit to prison, when Bakker was 16, he had to tell his father that Tammy was leaving him for a family friend

amed Roe Messner, the architect of Heritage USA. When he was 18 and not yet sober, he briefly attended a school for aspiring pastors, where he clashed with the other students. "He had jet black hair, Doc Martens, and he was going into a dorm with these preppy Christian kids," said Kelli Miller-Myus, a classmate of Bakker's there. She invited him to leave the school and help her and another friend, Michael Wall, start an alternative ministry among the skateboarders and punk rockers of Phoenix. Bakker jumped at the offer. Like missionaries in a foreign country, they saw these untapped tribes as a "mission field," a native culture more appealing than the one the school was trying to impose. "I always felt drawn to them," Bakker said. "And they didn't seem to have a reason to need God. They had plenty of reasons to reject God, but they didn't have any reason to want God, especially Christ. So I felt those people needed and deserved to be loved and cared for."

His tattoo habit dates from this period and has become a connective strand in his family life. He got his first, "Revolution," when he was 18; his father did not approve, he said, because "it reminded him of prison." His mother became interested through her son, though. Last fall, when I met Tammy Faye, she had just administered her first tattoo, on one of Jay's friends. "I thought I was going to throw up," she said, excitedly. "I was so scared that I was going to hurt him. I was shaking so bad the cross was crooked, and I straightened it out when I calmed down a little bit. And I signed it, 'TF.' "

Running through Jay Bakker's conversation are twined themes of grace and family. His 2001 autobiography, "Son of a Preacher Man: My Search for Grace in the Shadows," is largely a spirited defense of his father and a rebuke of Jerry Falwell, who took control of "PTL" after the Bakker family scandal. Bakker speaks about his own troubles as injuries inflicted upon his family by Christians and the church. "What Revolution's doing -- that all came out of what we went through," he said.

The insults his family endured give his ministry identity and narrative. "I don't know if I ever would have learned about God's grace," he said. "My dad forgives them all. For me, I still struggle. There are times I pray for those folks, but there are times I'm angry. But I've got to forgive them."

His mother's resurgence might seem like a mixed inheritance -- both a kitsch rehash of the family's humiliations and a masqueraded triumph over them. In the 2000 documentary "The Eyes of Tammy Faye," narrated by the transgendered singer RuPaul, she refuses to be photographed without her flytrap eyelashes, saying: "Without my eyelashes, I wouldn't be Tammy Faye. I don't know who I'd be, but I wouldn't be me." Bakker says of his mother: "She does funny, campy stuff, but it gets people. She's a different type of minister. She's where Jesus would be. People condemned her, and she never changed. That's been a strong encourager to me to be myself."

Where his father punctuated every broadcast with a signature "God loves you, he really does," Bakker offers a similar message in a different language. "We're not about issues," he said. "We don't get on bandwagons. In the church today, the only two things that matter are abortion and homosexuality." He shied away from taking a position on either of these issues. "I'm not saying something's right, something's wrong," he said. "I don't have a right to judge. God's called us to love people no matter who they are or what they've done. . . . You can't change people. You can for a little while, but eventually they'll rebel or be hurt or realize what's going on. I'm not in that rat race. I'm just in the game to say, 'This is who Jesus is, he loves you for who you are and hopefully you see that in my life and you see the positive things that are coming from it.'"

Stu Damron is one of the people drawn to Bakker's ministry. He introduced himself to me at the coffeehouse Bible study as "the only conservative Republican" in the group. At 49, a Southern Baptist minister, he has neither tattoos nor an interest in punk rock. His college-age son led him to Bakker and Revolution. "What I saw him doing was what I had not seen, which is just loving people," Damron said. "In my Southern Baptist church I said that but didn't mean it. And didn't know how."

For opening night at the rock club Masquerade, Bakker's mother drove down from North Carolina to preach at the service. She wore a pink leather jacket and slacks, and used a knockoff Louis Vuitton note pad. After five months of chemotherapy, her cancer is in remission. Bakker buzzed anxiously around her, a quiet son in the presence of a mother who is used to a lot of attention. The crowd was large enough that they had been bumped up from Purgatory to Heaven, a larger room. Revolution's tattooed regulars mingled with old "PTL" fans and members of Tammy's considerable gay following. "The gay community is so open to my mother," Bakker said. "She's really helped vindicate this family in a way that I don't think she realizes, and I don't think my dad would ever expect."

Her sermon began with an off-color joke about suicide and moved easily between campy self-denigration and a motherly message of grace, all punctuated by her staccato laugh. "I was hurt by our society, by the church, by Christians," she said.

d. "I was humiliated in front of the world. Can you imagine what it's like to walk by a drugstore and you're on the cover of every single magazine except Bride's -- ha, ha, ha!"

In the dim light of the rock club, she was both a curiosity and that generic totem of the current television age, a Survivor. Her sermon, which wove family stories among the Ten Commandments, ended with an auction and a barbecue. The crowd bid on Tammy Faye's shoes, cosmetics and other miscellany. News cameras and a documentary-film crew recorded the action. For Jay Bakker, it was all a part of his ministry's work. "So much of what we do is just hanging out with people," he said. "Some people wouldn't consider it ministry, because we're not trying to evangelize. I tell people that God knows we'll fail."

At the height of their success, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker reached more than 13 million people a week through their own satellite network, and Heritage USA claimed to be the third-biggest theme park in the country. By comparison, Revolution draws a weekly attendance in the dozens, mainly people who have bounced around churches or religious schools. If it grows to 200 people, Bakker said, he'll ask part to split off and form another ministry. His father's desire for growth, he said, and the need for money to support that growth, ultimately undid him. "I don't want to get too big," he said. His ministry raises its budget of just over \$90,000 a year, which includes Bakker's and DeBenedictis's salaries, through its Website, which sells buttons, T-shirts and CD's of the weekly services, and also solicits donations. Bakker does not pass the plate at services. "For me, this feels like a lonely place, and hard," he said.

During one of our conversations, I asked Bakker what he had learned from his father, and he said that he always made sure the bands that played for the ministry were fed and paid. This seemed a minor inheritance, but when I thought about it, one that was well suited to his ministry. There are worse things to remember than treating people well. At the Masquerade, he closed the service with an invitation to come back next week and a reminder to tip the bar staff. And then the D.J. took over, filling Heaven with his transcendent noise.

Re: Son of a preacher man. - posted by Spitfire, on: 2005/1/23 19:20

Neil, what do you think of all this? I went to Revolution's website. I listened to a bit of the "sermon" that Tammy Faye preached at their opening day in the Masquerade. I can't make all this jive with my new way of thinking. I remember a quote from Leonard Ravenhill on one of his messages: "What we need is a bumper sticker that says, 'God Hates You!'. But...another quote comes to mind and I can't remember who said it."Before you start preaching repentance, you better pledge your head to heaven." Oh God! What are we gonna do? Help us to think like you think.....Dian.

Re: - posted by CJaKfOrEsT (), on: 2005/1/24 5:55

Quote:

Spitfire wrote:

Before you start preaching repentance, you better pledge your head to heaven.

Dian,

That was Ravenhill too:-). How about this quote as well, "You can't win the world by being like the world" - Keith Daniel (The Power of Prayer).

The reality of "Christian's shooting their own wounded" is true. You think the guys with tattoo's and funny clothes cop it, try being one who'll uncompromisingly speak out for truth, when prudence permits. At least you can socialise, in relative comfort, with the rebels if you're a rebel. Taste true isolation. Separate yourself from the world "even in the guise of chastity", while living amongst it, and loving the victims of it (no matter how much it pains you). Hey, it was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me.

Re: - posted by Spitfire, on: 2005/1/24 21:07

Quote:

-----That was Ravenhill too

Hey Aaron. I'm saturated in Ravenhill. :-D Here's another quote I heard him say today, "God corrects the heart with the b
lood, he corrects the head with the rod." Ain't that good?

Re: - posted by crsschk (), on: 2005/1/24 21:22

Sounds messy ;-)