

God doesn't need Ole Anthony

Televangelists have called him a cultist, a fraud, and the Antichrist. He says he's just doing what Jesus would want.

By Burkhard Bilger

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Ole Anthony is tall and gaunt, with a shock of white hair and searing blue eyes. He has a high, bony forehead and the pale, scraggy features of his Norwegian ancestors (his first name is pronounced "Oh-lee").

His many enemies, most of them televangelists, sometimes call him Ole Antichrist, and it's true that he has a certain familiarity with apocalypse. When he was an intelligence operative with the Air Force, he witnessed a nuclear blast at close range. A few years later, he was accidentally electrocuted.

Evangelists often claim that they've been "slain in the spirit"—possessed so completely by the love of Jesus that they've died to themselves—but Anthony, who is sixty-six, really looks as if he'd just stepped off a gurney. He looks the way Moses might have looked had he been born in Minnesota.

Anthony is the founder and president of the Trinity Foundation, a religious community in East Dallas that functions variously as a soup kitchen, a rehab center, a Christian publishing house, and a private detective firm.

Trinity's fifty or so active members (supported by some four hundred other donors) live in a row of creaky two-story bungalows with deep, shaded porches, along a dead-end street in a neighborhood known as Little Mexico. They take most of their meals in a communal dining hall and meet three times a week for Bible studies that have been closer in spirit, at times, to barroom brawls.

The problem with the modern church, Anthony believes, is the church itself. So he has patterned Trinity on the underground Christian communities of the first century, before denominations or cathedrals or the strict separation of Christian and Jew: a church before churches existed.

The first time I visited, I asked Anthony what drew him to the area. He looked at me as if I had lost my mind. "Nothing," he rasped. In the late nineteen-seventies, when Trinity's first members arrived, there was a flophouse across the street and the neighborhood was ruled by two of the most dangerous gangs in Dallas—the East Side Locos and the A.V. Boys (A.V. stood for "Always Violent").

The place has improved only a little since then. During the day, old women wrapped in shawls sell hot tortillas on the corner, and a man with sunburned skin sits by the highway overpass holding a sign: "Visions of a Cheeseburger." In the evenings, the local toughs drink too much tequila or rum and like to fire their handguns into the air. "They're just fun bullets," one Trinity member told me. "The police don't even bother to investigate anymore." Most members have taken in homeless people for months or even years at a time, and new probationers and petty criminals arrive every week, seeking shelter or performing community service.

"You don't come here because you choose to," Anthony said. "You come here because you're desperate." Yet East Dallas does offer Trinity one distinct advantage: proximity to its targets. Over the past fifteen years, Anthony has waged a guerrilla war against televangelism—"a

multibillion-dollar industry," as he describes it, "untaxed and unregulated, that preys on the elderly and the desperate."

The United States has an estimated eighty million evangelical Christians, and about twenty-five hundred ministries that broadcast to them over radio and television. Dallas, the buckle of the Bible Belt, is one of their unofficial headquarters. Fifteen miles from Trinity's ramshackle homes, its opposite number, the Trinity Broadcasting Network, owns a gleaming office building that resembles the White House.

Since 1973, TBN has created a twenty-four-hour lineup of religious shows that now go out over forty-six satellites to nearly seven thousand television stations worldwide. A few of its most popular ministers, among them local figures such as Benny Hinn and Kenneth Copeland, tend to preach what's known as the "Prosperity Gospel," which promises health and wealth to all true believers and generous donors.

Twice a year, TBN hosts "Praise-a-thons," which raise an average of ninety million dollars each. Anthony calls this the "Gospel of Greed" and has made it his mission to expose its excesses. Six Trinity members are licensed private investigators, and they have a network of informants and undercover agents in ministries across the country.

Their most damning discoveries have led to prosecutions for fraud and to exposés on "Prime-Time Live," on "Dateline NBC," in the *Los Angeles Times*, and elsewhere. Trinity's admirers like to think of the foundation as the conscience of evangelical Christianity. Its targets prefer to call it a godless, penniless, and deeply annoying cult.

"The televangelist I worked for not only feared Ole—he wanted to do him physical harm," one of Anthony's informants told me. "These guys think he's Satan incarnate." The opinion is not a new one. When Anthony was six years old, the family's Lutheran minister, in St. Peter, Minnesota, asked his mother not to bring him to catechism class anymore.

"He told her I was an evil child," Anthony says. "I was disruptive and asked too many questions."

After his family moved to Wickenburg, Arizona, Ole pulled himself together for a while. He earned straight A's in school and a citizenship award from the local veterans' association. But at the age of sixteen the Devil reclaimed him—"Or maybe it was just hormonal," he says. He grew his hair down his back and shot Mexican heroin with his girlfriend. He went on joyrides in stolen cars.

The spree culminated in the high desert on an Easter morning in 1955, at a chapel in a natural amphitheatre that had a forty-foot cross. Anthony took a can of gasoline and doused the cross, then lit a match and threw it on—just in time for the sunrise service. "The cross was treated with creosote, and it burned forever," he says.

The police gave him the usual ultimatum for small-town delinquents: he could go to prison or enlist in the military. He ended up at Parks Air Force Base, near San Francisco, where he scored so well on a battery of tests that he was transferred to Denver for intensive training in geophysics, atmospheric science, and electronics.

"We heard every kind of rumor," he says. "We were going to be super-spies. We were going to blow up Russia." In fact, the Air Force was training him to detect nuclear tests in countries suspected of developing the bomb. For the next twelve years—from 1956 to 1968—Anthony skulked behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains, installing arrays of seismic, atmospheric, and oceanographic sensors.

When a nuclear blast occurred, he would triangulate its position, factor out wind currents and natural seismic activity, and calculate its power.

"Ole always pushed the edge," William Ballard, his commanding officer at the time, told me. "I wouldn't have guessed that he would become so religious. But, when he gets into something, he gets into it right up to his eyeballs."

In the summer of 1958, Anthony was sent to the Marshall Islands, in the South Pacific, to calibrate his sensors against a newly designed hydrogen bomb. The Air Force had estimated that the explosion would be equivalent to 3.5 megatons of TNT, but it was equal to 9.3 megatons instead.

Standing on the shore of an island thirty miles away, Anthony watched the target island disintegrate in a blinding flash. A few seconds later, the blowback hit him—a shock wave of wind and sound so powerful that it knocked him into the water. Anthony's body still bears traces of the explosion.

His blood is so marked by radiation that a doctor once told him he should be dead. His flesh is pocked with more than four hundred lipomas—hard, fatty tumors, strung under his skin like knots in a clothesline.

"My body is a disaster zone," he says, but when he mentions the explosion now it's merely as a metaphor for his spiritual awakening fourteen years later. His foundation, as it turns out, is named not after the Holy Trinity but after the first nuclear device, which was detonated in New Mexico, in 1945.

"God vaporized my value system the way that bomb vaporized its target," Anthony says. Anthony quit the military in 1959 but continued to work on nuclear detection for Teledyne, a civilian defense contractor.

By the time he moved to Dallas, in 1962, he was earning more than seventy thousand dollars a year—good money for a high-school dropout. He bought a salmon-colored Cadillac Coupe De Ville and rented a twenty-first-floor apartment in the tony district of Turtle Creek. He worked as an advance man for Barry Goldwater in the 1964 Presidential election, and as the regional campaign manager for Texas Senator John Tower in 1966.

"He was always with a different woman, as I remember, and she was always tall and leggy and blond," Alan Steelman, a former Texas congressman, told me. Still, Steelman thought enough of Anthony's intelligence and charisma to recruit him to run for the state legislature in 1968.

"Back then, in my district you could fit the whole Republican Party in a phone booth," Anthony says. Yet he lost the election by fewer than eight hundred votes. A year later, he was appointed to the board of directors for Dallas County's War on Poverty, an experience that he now calls a turning point in his life. He spent three months living in a housing project, just to see what he was up against. But although the experience moderated his politics—"I stopped believing in the trickle-down theory," he says—it had little effect on his life style.

After helping Wes Wise get elected mayor of Dallas in 1971, he used the new mayor's well-stocked Rolodex to launch a public-relations firm called Anthony and Company. "He was a con man and a hustler—with a great wardrobe," his best friend, John Bloom, better known as Joe Bob Briggs, a redneck comedian and movie critic, later wrote. "I liked him immediately."

On the day of Anthony's conversion—January 17, 1972—he was thirty-three years old and hadn't belonged to a church in more than two decades. A few months earlier, he had been hired as a fund-raiser for an all-Christian television station called KBFI, one of the first of its kind in the country.

An evangelist named Norman Grubb had been invited to speak at the station's dedication, and Anthony was in the audience. He still isn't sure what happened next. He has gone back and read Grubb's books and found much to dispute in his theology. But on that day its essential message—that all success is an illusion and all striving futile; that selflessness is the only real path to transcendence—stirred some certainty inside him.

"It was like being taken into the heart of God," he says. An hour and a half later, the other businessmen had left the auditorium, but Anthony was still in his seat, sobbing. Religious conversions, like rock-star documentaries, nearly always follow the same pattern: the skyrocketing success and riches without fulfillment, the fall from grace and the rise to new heights on the wings of faith.

In Anthony's case, that plot has been acted out in reverse: he found religion at the pinnacle of his career and has grown steadily poorer since. God's purpose, he believes, is not to ease our pain or to answer our prayers but to strip us of all expectation—to reveal the hollowness of our existence so that we might sacrifice our lives for others, as Christ did.

True faith, Anthony says, takes us as low as we can go. It's not a message that has broad appeal. Christianity may, at heart, be a religion of charity and self-sacrifice, but few go to church to be told that their prayers are futile.

The Prosperity Gospel is a far more comforting creed. Its doctrinal fine points vary from one televangelist to another (the pastor Benny Hinn, for instance, has said that each member of the Holy Trinity is himself a triune being—"That means there are nine of them!"), but its central message is fairly consistent: Poverty is just a matter of bad faith and negative thinking. God wants us to be wealthy, but only our prayers and offerings can unleash his power.

When Jesus told his followers, in Mark 10:30, that they would receive "a hundredfold" what they'd given up, he meant it literally. "You give \$1.00 for the gospel's sake and the full hundredfold return would be \$100. Ten dollars would be \$1,000. A hundredfold return on \$1,000 would be \$100,000," Kenneth Copeland's wife, Gloria, wrote in her book "God's Will Is Prosperity."

In short, she added, "Mark 10:30 is a very good deal." The Copelands' ministry is tangible proof of this principle, believers say.

Thirty years ago, Kenneth Copeland was a pilot for Oral Roberts, the godfather of the televangelist industry. When he and his wife began teaching Bible studies in Fort Worth, their small classes quickly blossomed into full-blown revivals, then weeklong assemblies at convention centers. Today, the Copelands preside over a mega-ministry of their own, worth a hundred and fifty million dollars.

Its headquarters sprawl across fifteen hundred acres of short-grass prairie forty miles west of Dallas, and include a television studio and a private airfield. The church has a sizable gift shop in the lobby, where books with titles like "No Deposit, No Return" sit next to pamphlets on "Bible cures" for cancer, ADD, and prostate problems.

One shelf is devoted to videos of Copeland's homemade Westerns, in which he plays a God-fearing marshal called Wichita Slim rounding up heathens on the Texas plains. Another is full

of pious exercise videos—"Bodies for Christ: Firm and Tight" is a popular title.

When I attended a service there one Wednesday night, accompanied by Trinity's lead investigator, Pete Evans, the Copelands were off on one of their crusades, and Kenneth's son-in-law George Pearsons was preaching.

"I can tell you're tired tonight," he told the congregation. "But that's O.K. Just sit back and take it in." He nodded quietly for a moment, eyes shining behind gold-rimmed glasses. Then he began to amble across the stage. To his left, a five-piece electric band fell into an easy, reggae-inflected shuffle, picking up the rhythm of his stride. Behind him, a small crowd of deacons and assistant ministers swayed to the music.

"I was singing a little tune to myself the other day, and I could feel myself getting lighter and lighter and lighter," Pearsons said. "It was just a simple little song, but it was spiritual. It edified."

He raised the cordless microphone to his lips and began to sing, in a slightly nasal tenor. "No more thinking, I'm just drinking, drinking of the spirit. No more thinking, I'm just drinking, drinking of the new wine."

The crowd hardly looked like the singing and drinking type. The men, both black and white, wore three-piece suits or woollen sweaters with slacks; the women, flanked by well-scrubbed children, had on long dresses and strands of pearls. Soon, everyone was swaying to the music, joining in a call-and-response with the minister: "No more thinking! (No more thinking! I'm just drinking! (I'm just drinking!))"

As their voices grew louder, the band began to punch up the rhythm, sounding almost funky now, until Pearsons fell into a kind of trance. Standing center stage, he threw back his head and shouted, "*Behlehbehlehbehlehbehleh! Hulehbehlehbehlehbehleh!*"

On his final note, the other deacons and ministers joined in harmony, sustaining the chord till it faded to a hush. Then Pearsons gestured for the ushers to take up the collection. "We thank you for the financial outpouring in Jesus' name," he said, looking directly at the video cameras in the balcony. "We thank you for the bills that are being supernaturally paid and the debts that are being supernaturally forgiven."

Beside me, in the back row of the church, Pete Evans was smiling blandly, but his hands were white at the knuckles. "Here we go," he said. Evans spends a good deal of his time attending church services. He maintains files on more than three hundred televangelists, helps tape and monitor their broadcasts four hours a day, and occasionally goes undercover. (In 1994, for instance, he spent five months posing as a homeless person at a charismatic church in Spindale, North Carolina. Using a camera hidden in his book bag, he filmed church members screaming at children to exorcise their demons, and saw them strapping the children to chairs.)

He is slight of build and bespectacled, with an uneven thatch of gray hair and a face shaped like a keyhole. His voice has a quiet, measured intensity, and, like most of the Trinity members I met, he can be disarmingly self-critical.

Yet he's also a great fan of cop shows, and takes evident pleasure in nailing his perps. Copeland, Pearsons, and their fellow-ministers represent a new generation of televangelists, Evans said: folksy yet sophisticated, as well versed in HTML as in Leviticus.

Though they speak in tongues, they choreograph their outbursts with music. And though

they still heal by the laying on of hands, they're careful not to make any actionable claims. Their preaching is plainspoken and soothing, but no less financially demanding for all that.

Recently, a call for donations appeared on Copeland's Web site: he and his wife require his-and-her Cessna Citation X jets, valued at twenty million dollars apiece.

"When God tells Kenneth to travel to South Africa and hold a three-day Victory Campaign, he won't have to wait to make commercial travel arrangements," the Web site explains. "He can just climb aboard his Citation X and go!"

After the offering, men and women began lining up in front of the stage to receive Pearsons's healing touch. As he made his way down the row, a trio of thickly built deacons, wearing ear-bud headphones, gathered behind each believer in turn. Pearsons would clasp someone's face and murmur a blessing, then step back as he or she collapsed into the deacons' arms, slain by the spirit.

Soon people were sprawled all over the floor, and female ushers were covering their legs demurely with small blankets. The more people Pearsons slew, the wilder his gestures became, until he was merely slapping believers on the forehead and moving on.

When a pair of deacons finally led him away, his face was flushed and beaded with sweat, and his whole body was shaking with what charismatics call "holy laughter." "That's the shtick," Evans said, surveying the fallen. "He gives them an extra little shove sometimes, just to get them to go down." Still, he admitted, the service had almost moved him.

Most of Pearsons's sermon was quoted straight from the Bible, and his performance had an instinctive appeal. "When he started singing and the band started picking it up, I had the urge to sing and dance right along with him," Evans said. "That's what everybody's looking for: spontaneity, peace of mind, freedom of expression. You could feel the excitement in the room."

He shook his head. "But here's the test: Can you be at peace when things aren't going your way? When the healings aren't working and the riches aren't pouring in? The danger with guys like this is that they mislead people into believing that suffering is strange. That if you're suffering you're not following the will of God. But that's not the way life works for anybody."

When Evans first joined Trinity, in 1974, he was nineteen years old and studying at Austin College, in Sherman, Texas. His mother was a youth counsellor at a Presbyterian church and was later ordained. She had taught him that every word in the Bible is holy, and that a good Christian should be nice to everyone. Then, a month or two before Pete left for college, his mother ran off with the church pastor, who also happened to be their neighbor's husband.

Afterward, the pastor sent Pete and his two younger sisters a long, bitter letter enumerating their sins. By then, "the idea of not having to be nice appealed to me," Evans says. "The idea of not acting anymore, of stark honesty, of just being me."

Late one night, Evans was in his bedroom listening to FM radio when a religious talk show came on the air. It was called "One Trinity Place," and the host was Ole Anthony. Evans had never heard anyone talk about God the way Anthony did.

The show's guests were celebrity Christians or just plain celebrities—Jim Bakker, Billy Graham, Johnny Mathis, Frank Sinatra—but Anthony had no stomach for pious small talk. His questions were biting, irreverent. He made quick work of his own failings, then set about

exposing theirs.

Evans listened to Anthony every night after that, and eventually invited him to speak to his theology class. "He kind of blew everybody away," he says. To Anthony, conflict and sorrow were God's conduits to the real, and the Gospels were just commentary. "He held up a Bible and said, 'You can burn this book, because these are just words about the Word,' " Evans recalls. " 'The true Word is in your heart.' "

For a while after his conversion, Anthony had tried to work in television. He left his public-relations company and began hosting a show on KBFI, the religious television station he'd helped launch. In less than a year, however, the station was bought by Pat Robertson and Anthony's show was cancelled.

He appeared as a guest once on "The 700 Club," but he wasn't invited back. ("I told them that God should either send me a wife or stop condemning fornication as a sin," he says.) In the fall of 1972, Anthony founded Trinity with the help of two other Dallas businessmen, both of whom are now dead, hoping to raise money for Christian causes.

The foundation funded youth ministries for troubled teens, produced Anthony's radio talk show, and organized a benefit concert headlined by Pat Boone and Andraé Crouch and the Disciples. Once again, though, things quickly went bust. The corporate underwriter for the concert backed out at the last minute, leaving the foundation in debt before it was really in business.

By the time Evans met him, Anthony was essentially homeless. Trinity could afford to pay him only twenty dollars a week, so he gave up his apartment and spent his nights sleeping on the floor of the foundation's office, above a carpet store in a strip mall.

He spent his days at Southern Methodist University's theology library, translating the Bible and reading Martin Luther, until he was kicked out. Then he moved to Temple Emanu-El, in north-central Dallas, where he read Kabbalah and debated scholars, earning the affectionate nickname "the Gentile rabbi."

For early Christians, he came to believe, after poring over religious calendars, their faith had a kind of stereophonic depth. Every major event in the Gospels seemed to fall on or near a Jewish holy day: Christ's birth on Rosh Hashanah, his baptism on Yom Kippur, his crucifixion on Passover.

Eventually, Anthony organized a Bible study along the same lines: a small group of believers, around the size of a minyan (no fewer than ten), who are dedicated to parsing Scripture, verse by verse, according to the Jewish calendar.

"He thought it could be a businessmen's breakfast," Anthony's friend John Bloom told me. "He was a big Republican, and he thought he would get all those guys. But that wasn't who showed up. Who showed up were the scum of the earth, as Ole used to call them. All these hippies and people who had never worn a suit in their lives. And of course they all had problems." Anthony would try to keep the discussion scholarly. He would open the Talmud or the Torah, turn to some cryptic line, and start to tease out its meaning with his Greek and Hebrew dictionaries. Then things would fall apart.

"It's a strange fact, but when you study the Scripture seriously it brings out all this stuff in people," Bloom says. "You'd think you were going to read the Book of Ephesians and suddenly someone was saying, 'Oh, my crack-addicted sister came over last night and slapped my daughter.' And that's what you ended up dealing with."

Bloom calls this the “fistfight stage of Trinity Foundation.” He was working as a writer for *Texas Monthly* at the time, in an office across the hall in the same strip mall, and became fascinated by Anthony—his bizarre life style and utter lack of concern about it, his foul mouth and fervent theology. “He was relentless,” Bloom later wrote in a Dallas magazine.

“He was a charging Brahma bull breathing Scripture out of both nostrils.” Late at night, when Bloom was writing on deadline, he’d sometimes hear shouting and the sound of furniture being thrown around across the hall, followed by slamming doors and squealing tires.

Later, at some local dive, he’d ask Anthony what all the ruckus was about. “Romans. We’re still studying the Book of Romans,” Anthony would tell him.

“What specific aspect of Romans is causing this level of interest?”

“Well, we were talking about your place in the body of Christ. And I told one guy his place was to be a pimple on the ass of the body of Christ. I just said it. It just came out.”

“And he didn’t agree?”

“A lot of these people are clinging to their miserable little self-images. They don’t understand that it’s about God. It’s about them, but only the part of them that contains God. They still think they’re special.”

Anthony’s crankiness was oddly consistent with his theology. In the first century, his studies suggested, new believers were ritually rebuffed three times before they were allowed to join Christian communities, so he strove for the same effect.

“Nobody is trying to sell God here,” he told me. “In fact, I’m trying to do the opposite—I’m trying to kick people out.” He insisted on absolute honesty in his Bible study, and he took literally the Biblical injunction “Let not the sun go down upon your wrath.”

The sessions would roll on hour after hour, cycling through confession, self-justification, anger, and regret. At least twice Anthony’s life was threatened, and once he jumped into his car vowing never to return. (He later remembered that the car belonged to Trinity.) During one meeting, a normally sweet-natured man who wrote for the *Dallas Morning News* socked Evans in the mouth, chipping a tooth. Evans got over it.

As fractious as the meetings were, they were also exhilarating. Anthony, for all his orneriness, took the people’s sorrow seriously. He treated it as indispensable—as profoundly revelatory—rather than merely inconvenient.

“I know it sounds dramatic, but there was this sense that you were fulfilling your destiny,” Evans says. “That you were in exactly the place you needed to be, at exactly the right time.” Every once in a while, some solid citizen would show up and inevitably get scared off by the “hippie feel of the place,” Bloom says. Others stayed for a few months or a year and then went back to their old lives—to their families or prison-furlough programs, suburban homes or the street. But there were always a few to take their place.

A gifted musician named John Rutledge showed up in 1975, after his marriage fell apart, and went on to write most of the group’s folk-flavored hymns. Bloom joined a number of years later, after a near-fatal car wreck led to his own conversion. At one point, a man named Bob Jones (name changed at his request) brought in a list of pointed questions from the organization Cult Watch, and read them out loud at a meeting. “You know what a cult is?” Anthony told him. “It’s a place where someone tells you what to do in the name of God. If I ever tell anyone what to do around here, they should shoot me.” Jones ended up staying for twenty-five years, leading his own Bible-study group when Anthony’s grew too large.

By the late nineteen-eighties, the members of the Trinity community had settled in East Dallas—one of the few places they could afford—and Anthony had noticed a trend. The new arrivals still tended to be down on their luck, but for some of them the crippling blow had come from religion itself.

Harry Guetzlaff, a filmmaker and former marketing executive for Coca-Cola, was a typical example. When his projects went belly-up and his wife divorced him, he gave his last five thousand dollars to Robert Tilton, a self-proclaimed Prophet of Prosperity with a daily television show called "Success-N-Life."

Tilton was famous for his waved silver hair, his wacky antics onscreen—shadowboxing with the Devil, babbling holy baby talk—and for the unabashed greed of his preaching. "It made perfect sense at the time," Guetzlaff told me. "I believed that God was active in my life, and Tilton was saying, 'Give me a buck and God will give you back a hundred.' I needed some snake oil, and he had some snake oil to sell."

It was near midnight, an hour or two after the service at the Copelands' church, when Evans pulled into a deserted parking lot and switched off the headlights. The sky was streaked with racing cirrus clouds, and the empty streets glowed with rain and reflected neon. Evans reached into his backpack, pulled out a pair of surgical gloves, and slipped them on. Then he led me into a patch of scraggly trees.

A small office stood at the bottom of the hill, its plate-glass windows dimly lit from within. I could just make out the bookshelves and panelled walls of what looked like a lawyer's office. Evans made his way to a cinder-block bunker just below it, with a six-by-five-foot industrial Dumpster inside.

"I know Brewer's office is in that building, but I don't want to know if that's it," he said, glancing up. He was referring to Dennis Brewer, Sr., an attorney who has represented several local televangelists, including Copeland and Hinn, whose trash he was there to plunder. "It would just make me more nervous," he said. Then he slid open a door in the Dumpster and stepped inside.

Trinity's approach to detective work hasn't changed much since 1988, when it began to investigate Robert Tilton after hearing Guetzlaff's stories. Tilton had the fastest-growing ministry in the country by then, with more than eighty million dollars a year in donations. He owned or had personal access to several lavish "parsonages," one of which was worth four and a half million dollars, and a hundred-and-thirty-two-thousand-dollar yacht. Yet his ministry, like any other church, was exempt from most federal and state taxes.

Anthony tried to complain to the National Religious Broadcasters association and to the district attorney's office, but he was told that religious claims—however cynical or extravagant—are strictly protected by the First Amendment.

With no budget for surveillance equipment and no legal access to his targets' files, he could only follow the paper trail. Much of Tilton's success had come through direct mail—Trinity, ironically, was on his mailing list—so Anthony asked Guetzlaff to trace the letters to their source.

Two months later, Anthony showed up at the offices of Response Media, Inc., the marketing firm in Tulsa that handled Tilton's mailings. He had sent the firm a proposal that he had written for a talk show on the Fox network, and told the staff there that he needed some help with the mailings.

At the same time, he had been in contact with Diane Sawyer, the co-anchor of the ABC news show "PrimeTime Live." Sawyer had become intrigued by Tilton while watching his antics on cable one night. After vetting Trinity, she had agreed to collaborate on an investigation.

On the day Anthony went to visit Response Media, he was accompanied by two "media consultants": a cameraman from "PrimeTime Live," who had a video lens hidden in his glasses, and a producer for the show, who had concealed a microphone and a video recorder in her purse. For the next two hours, they documented just how well the psychology of direct mail—with its crude manipulation of curiosity, expectation, habit, and obligation—was suited to religion.

"New names is the key. Just think, New names," Jim Moore, the president of Response Media, told Anthony. The firm began by gathering the addresses of hundreds of thousands of Tilton's followers. Then ghostwriters put together a series of direct-mail packages. Some packages contained prayer cloths (a red one for healing, a blue one for miracles, a green one for financial breakthroughs) that Tilton promised to anoint if they were sent back to him. Others contained plastic angels and outlines of Tilton's feet for donors to stand on while praying.

Whenever someone sent in a pledge and a prayer request, he received a personal reply from Tilton, mentioning his problem specifically and promising to talk to God about it. Then he received a bill for the pledge. As the letters from donors poured in, they were bundled together in Dallas and sent to a bank in downtown Tulsa, Moore explained. But he couldn't, or wouldn't, say what happened next. How did Tilton handle the prayer requests—thousands of them a day?

Anthony and Guetzlaff made fourteen trips to Tulsa over the next thirty days. They rented rooms in a fleabag motel and began raiding Dumpsters behind Response Media, Tilton's lawyer's office, and the bank downtown. At the bank, they found a series of deposit slips that led to a branch bank in a Tulsa suburb. From there, they tailed a delivery van to a company called Internal Data Management, and yet another Dumpster.

Every night, they hauled an average of sixty bags of garbage back to the motel. "At first, I had Harry sleep with it," Anthony says. "Then we finally got a room just for the trash. The televangelists call me a garbologist, and to do garbology correctly is an art." Sifting through the pizza scraps, crumpled invoices, and coffee-stained spreadsheets, they slowly pieced together Tilton's "Wheel of Fortune," as Anthony later called it.

The letters made their way from Dallas to the main bank to the branch bank, where they were opened and stripped of donations. The prayer requests were then read by Internal Data Management employees, who summarized their contents with a simple code ("JBS" for "job needed," for instance, or "BAR" for "barren wife"; "PCA" for "rebellious child" or "FON" for "Bob, please call me"). The codes were entered into computers and used to generate personalized form letters from Tilton. Anthony and Guetzlaff found thousands of prayer requests in the Dumpster behind the branch bank. One of them, which Anthony keeps in his wallet, was from a woman whose son had lost his job. If he didn't find work, she said, he might commit suicide. "I couldn't believe the callousness of this whole mechanized operation," Anthony says.

"PrimeTime Live" aired a series of exposés on Tilton, based on Trinity's research. The minister fought back from his pulpit and on his own show. He sued ABC and Trinity, accusing the network of yellow journalism and calling Anthony a liar, a drunkard, and a womanizer. He said that he had never preached poverty to anyone—"I ain't supposed to have nothin'? Get that religious garbage out of your brain!"—and that handling his donors' letters had become

hazardous to his health. "I laid on top of those prayer requests so much that the chemicals actually got into my bloodstream, began to swell the capillaries," he said. "It got into my immune system, and I had two small strokes in my brain that brought about some numbness in my body."

Less than two years later, Tilton's show was off the air and his wife had divorced him. In 1999, a decade after Anthony's investigation began, Tilton's Word of Faith Family Church was sold. "And I'll tell you something, you pastors and parishioners," he had warned on his show. "You don't know when Ole's going to get after you."

Televangelists have grown savvier since then, Evans told me on the night of our Dumpster raid. Most now shred their documents or lock their garbage behind iron gates. "It's a bunker mentality," he said. He shined the beam of his flashlight around the Dumpster's rusted interior. He'd been rooting around for half an hour without any luck. The garbage bags reeked of stale refried beans and leaked unsavory fluids. "I've got some really bad stuff on me," he said, aiming his light at something gray and viscous on his shoe. "I hope it's paint." Then his eyes fell on a bag in the corner. He waded over to it, fished out a typewritten sheet, and held it up to the flashlight. The letterhead was Brewer's. "All right," he said. "We've got a keeper." He wrenched the bag loose from the pile, then high-stepped out of the Dumpster and headed back into the trees.

The next morning at seven-thirty, nine or ten Trinity members were huddled over coffee in the dining hall, waiting for Anthony's Bible study to start. A pale, wheat-colored sun slanted through the blinds, hatching the room in shadows and dusty light. Across the room, Ronnie Dunbar and Jim Petty sat side by side like a photograph and its negative. Dunbar was black and squarely built, with a brooding manner and a carefully shaved head. He had been H.I.V. positive for eighteen years but had yet to show any symptoms. Petty was skinny, white, and easily spooked. He had craggy features and fidgety eyes, like an old-time mountain man who'd seen one too many cougars. Both were homeless and alcoholic when they first came to Trinity more than a decade ago, and both have had bouts with drugs or alcohol since then.

To my left, Evans looked as if he'd never left the Dumpster—his hair was matted on one side and stuck out on the other. He'd been sharing a twelve-by-twelve room with Dunbar and was getting a little tired of it. A few days earlier, Evans told me, he jokingly prayed, "God, when I was asking for a wife, I wasn't asking for Ronnie."

The only face in the room that looked fully awake belonged to Frank Bono, a former Wall Street broker who helps manage Trinity's finances. Frank and his wife, Annabelle (I've changed their names at their request), are "Levites": members of Trinity's full-time staff who take a vow of poverty and earn fifty-five dollars a week. He has sharp, raw-skinned features, a stiff bristle of gray hair, and a voice with the pace and muted precision of a stenography machine.

Six years ago, he belonged to a Dallas country club, drove a Mercedes and a Porsche, and owned a condominium in Siesta Key, Florida. Then, in the winter of 2000, he was indicted for securities fraud. Facing eighteen months in a federal prison (he eventually served eleven), with no means of supporting his wife and their two daughters, he placed a call to Anthony, whom he had met only once or twice.

"I'll never forget our conversation," Bono told me. "When I explained my situation, there was silence for about ten seconds. Then Ole said, 'It's easy. Pack everything you own in a van and bring it here.' I said, 'Ole, I don't want to be a burden.' And he said, 'I don't have any burdens.'"

Anthony was sitting at the far end of the room, feet propped on a chair, a wooden cane within arm's reach. Mornings are his best time—his only good time, really—but even then his face is often haggard with pain. Twenty-five years ago, he sat down in a steam room at his health club, tucked his legs under the bench, and touched his left heel to a live wire that a workman had left hanging from the wall. The shock threw his head back so hard that he cracked a joint in his jaw, and seared the nerve endings on his left side, from ankle to ear. Heavy doses of relaxants and various misguided therapies have only exacerbated the condition over the years, so that Anthony now spends much of the day in his bedroom, racked with muscle spasms.

"Peace is really what we're searching for," he said, swivelling his fierce gaze around the room. "But a life without suffering is meaningless. We are like hunks of quartz, and our real identity is a vein of gold inside it. Whenever we prefer someone's interest over our own, whenever we lay down our lives for someone, we knock off some of the quartz and reveal the gold."

Anthony has never expected his preaching to become popular. "It costs you your hopes and dreams," he says. But he believes that if just a few more people in every community shared his values they could transform society. There are some three hundred thousand churches in the United States and, on any given night, some six hundred thousand homeless people. If every church could adopt just one or two of the homeless, he says, a seemingly intractable problem might be solved.

The Dallas Project, as Anthony's brainstorm came to be called, was the flip side of Trinity's televangelist work: it was a gesture of faith in organized religion. Anthony launched the project at a press conference in 1988, then went around Dallas with other Trinity members pitching it to churches. In each congregation, they suggested, a core group of ten to twenty members should form a kind of extended family for one homeless person, housing, feeding, and taking care of him with the church's support.

The project received admiring notices in the local press and eventually prompted a letter from the White House. "Word has reached me of your outstanding record of community service," President George H. W. Bush wrote. "Barbara joins me in wishing you every success as you continue to set a fine example for your friends and neighbors."

The friends and neighbors in question, however, hadn't quite got the message: instead of housing the homeless themselves, most local churches simply sent them to Trinity. "I'd be over there visiting," John Bloom recalls, "and three more of them would show up from the First Baptist Church. I'd be, like, 'The First Baptist Church! That's the biggest church in Texas!' And Ole would say, 'Well, they say they don't have any room for them.'"

At around the same time, a couple of judges who knew Anthony from his political days began sending him young probationers, thinking that Trinity might offer an easier transition back into society. Anthony would interview the new arrivals and place the diciest ones in private rooms or with single adults. The rest were distributed among Trinity's families.

In 1988 alone, more than forty homeless people made their way to Trinity. Boarders would come home so deliriously high they had to be taken to a hotel, or so raging drunk the police had to be called. In the past, when someone got out of hand the whole community would help deal with him. ("We knew they couldn't kill all of us," John Rutledge's son Johnny told me. Now everyone had a domestic crisis to quell.

The low point, for John Rutledge, was when a neighbor with aids overdosed on cocaine and vomited all over his apartment. "I was getting ready to clean it up, putting on rubber gloves to keep from getting infected by his bodily fluids," Rutledge told me. "And I remember think-

ing, How did I get to this place? If this is about laying down my life for someone else, I've gone about as far as I want to go."

More than any of Anthony's schemes, the Dallas Project laid bare the contradictions at the heart of his theology. He believes that suffering brings us closer to God, yet he devotes his life to alleviating it. He believes all earthly striving is pointless, yet he pleads his case on talk shows and on "PrimeTime Live." He wants Trinity to start a revolution, but he doesn't think the world is much worth fighting over.

In the Gospels, Christ's last statement on the Cross is "It is finished," and Anthony takes him at his cosmic Word: mortal life, in a messianic age, is just a play of shadows in a shadow box; our only true purpose is to locate the divine within us.

"Can you get it in your heads—is there some way it can penetrate—that today you are seated in Heaven, on the mercy seat?" he asked his Bible-study group that morning. "There is nothing left for you to do, no career path to fulfill you. Your warfare is over."

Why, then, waste time exposing televangelists? Why bother caring for the homeless? The easy answer, Anthony says, is that Christ would have wanted us to. "Whatever you do unto the least of my brethren, you do unto me," Jesus told his disciples. But Anthony knows that his motives aren't always so humble.

"My own grandiose bullshit can get in the way," he told me one afternoon, sitting in the converted sunroom that serves as his office. Along the wall beside him, a sagging bookcase held well-thumbed volumes of the Talmud and the Zohar, as well as ring binders full of his Bible translations. Beside it, in the window, a red-breasted lovebird twittered in a wooden cage. "I can start to think that this is the way to solve the world's problems," he said. "But it's just B.S. It's just nothing. I was a schemer and a promoter. That's just the way my mind works."

Outside, on the brick patio behind the house, the garbage taken from Dennis Brewer's Dumpster was spread out on a blue tarp, drying in the sun. Evans was crouched over it in a black T-shirt. "If I see coffee stains, it usually means I'm getting close to something good," he said. There were a few references to Robert Tilton and Benny Hinn, but nothing really incriminating. Trinity's cases tend to accrete slowly, Evans said, but even Anthony's opponents agree that he usually gets his man.

"Give the Devil his due: he does a tremendous job of getting his cases together," Dennis Brewer told me. Brewer doesn't fault Anthony for inaccuracy so much as arrogance and indiscretion. "Of course there are bad apples," he says. "It was that way in Bible times, too. David committed adultery and had Bathsheba's husband murdered on the front lines. But God doesn't need Ole Anthony to chastise them. He can do that rebuking himself, and he can do it on a private basis, where it doesn't bring down the church."

Brewer says that he and other born-again Christians don't mind the opulent lives televangelists lead, and that Anthony is motivated by pure envy. "He had aspirations of high and mighty, rich and famous things, and I think through failure and bitterness he has become a professional critic. The Word says that we will know them by their fruit, and his fruit is shrivelled up and sour."

Trinity's cynicism is best exemplified, Brewer and other critics say, by its bi-monthly magazine, *The Door*. First published in 1971, by a Christian youth ministry in California, *The Door* was named after the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, on which Martin Luther posted the ninety-five theses that triggered the Reformation. When Trinity inherited the magazine, nine years ago, it was a favorite among seminarians for its subversive wit and its interviews with

theologians. The current editor, Robert Darden, is a Trinity supporter who teaches writing at Baylor. He has tried to preserve the magazine's spirit, but Trinity's investigations sometimes introduce a strident, acerbic tone. Mild satires like "Harry Potter in the Lake of Fire" now alternate with cover stories on Pat Robertson, "Lifetime Loser," or on Charlton Heston as a "Christian Soldier of Fortune," dressed as Moses with a machine gun.

The low point, even Trinity members now say, came when *The Door* set its sights on W. V. Grant, a local faith healer who presided over a five-thousand-seat church. In 1996, after a two-year investigation by the foundation, Grant was sentenced to sixteen months in prison and ordered to pay three hundred and fifty-three thousand dollars in back taxes, in addition to a fine. Afterward, to celebrate the conviction, Anthony insisted on publishing a Playboy-style centerfold of a picture that a Trinity investigator had found. It showed Grant standing at a window, buck naked and uncommonly hairy. If Darden hadn't objected strenuously, Anthony would have added a caption in large print: "Even the hairs on his ass are numbered."

He was wrong, of course; no amount of bad press can keep a good televangelist down. Robert Tilton has a new show on cable TV, and Benny Hinn recently held a crusade in India for nearly five million people. Even Jimmy Swaggart, whose visits to prostitutes once shook the religious right, now broadcasts his show to more than fifty countries.

Though Christ was anything but ambivalent on the subject of the wealthy ("It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven"), there has never been a shortage of people to contradict him. You can hear their voices echoed in the Bible, when Paul rails against those who presume that "gain is godliness," or in the words of then Enron executive Kenneth Lay. "Throughout my life, things have fallen into place that turned out to be the right thing to do at the time," Lay told *The Door*, in an interview conducted shortly before his company went bankrupt. "I am convinced that God was—and is—guiding all the way."

On the Sunday morning before I left Dallas, Evans and I drove down I-30 to visit W. V. Grant's new church—a plate-glass plaza that was once a used-car dealership. In his heyday, Grant was a master of medicine-show flimflam, pulling strangers from crowds and guessing their ailments using crib sheets from his assistants. (Trinity found several such sheets in a Dumpster, scribbled with lines like "Dorothy, ulcer, asked to be closer to new clinic.")

Prison hadn't changed his style much. After a warmup act by the Prophetess Gloria Van Johnson—a pint-size Janis Joplin who promised to anoint our checkbooks with "prosperity oil"—Grant jogged out of the wings and up the aisle, grabbing a microphone as he went.

His face was flushed and jowly, his black hair so perfectly coiffed that it seemed to levitate above his brow. "Reach out and tell your neighbor, 'I'm in love with a two-thousand-year-old Jewish man!' " he shouted. The congregation dutifully obeyed. Grant went on to deliver a short sermon, in language that was equal parts King James and "Petticoat Junction," then crooned a few numbers and commenced with the healings.

He told one woman that she had a water-retention problem and an underactive thyroid. He told another that her mother-in-law, Rita, was an instrument of the Devil. "But, Chantel—is that your name? God's gonna put a hook in Rita's jaw and yank her away! I'm gonna break the Devil's principality, Chantel! I'm gonna break it right now!" He touched his fingertips to her forehead like a revolver—"Okapatashavehpatapa!"—and watched her collapse.

Evans had an aisle seat, where all the action seemed to be. For a moment, it seemed that Grant would pass him by. Then, suddenly, the minister's hand shot out and seized the top of Evans's head. He kept it there for a moment, like a bird of prey roosting on a stump, but

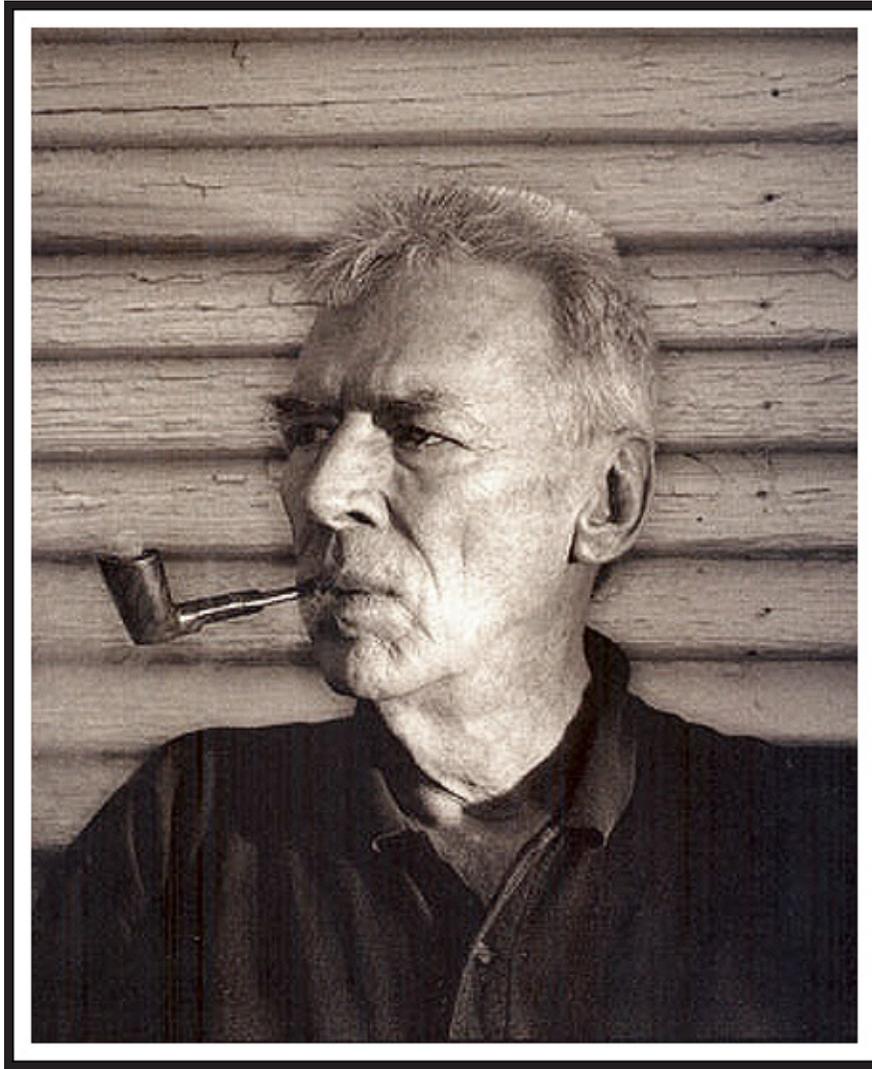
something in Evans's face must have unnerved him. Grant smiled quickly and asked him how he was doing, then slowly released his grip.

"I didn't care too much for that," Evans told me later, driving home. But when I asked about the rest of Grant's performance, he grinned and shook his head. "He's back in swing," he said. "He's back in full evangelical swing."

All the old con men return eventually, he said, and some never really leave. After the wave of televangelist scandals in the early nineties, the Federal Communications Commission considered a truth-in-advertising clause for religious solicitations. If a televangelist declared, on the air, that he had cured a donor's cancer or tripled his bank account, that claim would have to be verifiable. Anthony made three trips to Washington to lobby for the change, and was told that it was certain to pass. Then, in 1994, the Republicans won control of the House, thanks in part to the religious right, and the measure was quietly tabled.

"I think my investigations will step up before they step down," Evans told me. "I can imagine doing this at Trinity when I'm seventy years old." As for Anthony, he's sometimes tempted to leave everything behind and live in the desert like a medieval hermit—perhaps with his friend John Bloom in the cave next door. The only thing holding him back is his own evil nature.

"I couldn't be a believer outside this community," he said, when I stopped by his office to say goodbye. "I know my own greed and my need to be right." He leaned back in his chair and glanced around the room, at the peeling paint and the twittering bird and the books full of words about the Word. "I own nothing, I have nothing, and I make fifty-five dollars a week," he said. "I'm sixty-six years old, and I have no privacy and no retirement plan. I am a blithering idiot by my own definition." He shrugged. "The mystery is, this place satisfies every desire of my heart."



photograph of Ole Anthony by Dan Winters