

# *Resurrection Life of Jesus Church*

## **BACK TO THE BOOK OF ACTS (BBA)**

RLJ-1145

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### **PART 34: STRIFE AND UNCLEAR DOCTRINE**

#### **CHAPTER AND VERSE DIVISION**

The original manuscripts of the different books in the Bible did not have chapter and verse division; instead, each book was just one continuous letter. Chapter division was introduced during the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. with verse setting not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, it is possible to find several topics discussed in one chapter and sometimes a subject is covered in two or more chapters.

#### **THE CONFLICT IN ANTIOCH**

We have already covered the dispute that took place between Paul and Barnabas in Part 31. They had been good friends and companions for some 15 years and neither of them knew that their friendship would end and that they would end up bitter enemies. But the Holy Spirit knew before the foundation of the world that these men would not be able to work out their differences and moved upon one of the chief elders from Jerusalem not to go back but to stay in Antioch, and as a result, Silas was chosen to be Paul's companion in preaching of the Gospel. **Acts 15:32-41**

After this event in Antioch, Barnabas fades away into history and the Bible doesn't tell us what he did and how his life ended. I personally believe that if Barnabas had stayed with Paul, he would have played a bigger role in the formation of the Church of Christ. The only thing known about the outcome of this fight is that Paul later reconciled with John Mark and he was considered a valuable asset by Paul during his latter years. **Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11**

#### **PAUL'S ERROR**

The Bible doesn't cover up the errors of God's people during their life on this earth. Paul had just been to Jerusalem and argued that salvation is by grace with no need for a Gentile to be brought into Judaism and for males to be circumcised.

When he met a young man named Timotheus, Paul decided to please the Jews in the area and personally circumcised him. **Acts 16:1-3**

Some ten years later, the Holy Spirit had done a work in Paul as he wrote very clearly to the church in Galatia that when a Christian is circumcised for religious reasons, it destroys the work of Christ in that person. **Galatians 5:1-12**

Here is what we should learn from Paul's mistake: When a person comes to Christ and is born again, he will carry a lot of baggage in form of traditions from his religious background. It takes time for God to take out the pagan traditions



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and sinful habits. So how is a new Christian developed? By studying the Scriptures and obeying what God has spoken in His written Word. **John 8:31-32**

There were many things wrong with me when I surrendered to Christ in 1965. The first thing that God cleaned up in my life was to take away all the foul language and dirty jokes I used to tell. This took place instantly by the power of the Holy Spirit but it took a year to have me stop drinking beer and many more years to have me stop watching movies and sitcoms. I did not give up the idolatry of Christmas until some 20 years later and shortly thereafter I accepted God's law as laid out in Leviticus chapter 11 by not eating pork and other meat from scavengers.

**What was the result? God was able to use me more each time I surrendered and cleaned up a sinful habit.**

You will be held accountable once God has shown you the truth. He will not allow you to walk back into old sins without paying a heavy penalty. **2 Peter 2:9-22**

**KNOW THIS:** God will meet the sinner where they are at but that doesn't mean that He condones their sins. God used me to lead people to Christ and sharing the Gospel in my first year as a Christian despite my sinful activities. But as I gained more and more knowledge in the Word of God, more was required of me. **Hebrews 5:12-14; 6:1-3**

## **THE HOLY SPIRIT TAKES CONTROL**

Very few Christians have grasped that all events on earth were planned in advance by God before He began the creation.

- ❑ The prophet Isaiah testified to this truth 700 years before Christ. **Isaiah 49:1-6**
- ❑ 200 years later the prophet Jeremiah confirmed it. **Jeremiah 1:1-10**
- ❑ Some 25 years after the resurrection of Jesus, the apostle Paul confirmed that this truth is eternal. **Galatians 1:11-18**

God knew before the creation, that some 600 years after the birth of Christ, Satan would raise up a man by the name of Mohammad and use him to create a religion that was Satanic, evil, barbaric and militant and would wipe out the Christian churches in North Africa, the Middle East and advance deep into Europe. The churches planted in these regions by the apostles and their disciples would only last for 600 years and then cease to exist. The plague of Islam is tightly holding more than a billion people today and causing grief to the rest of the world population as terrorists and suicide bombers are sent out by Satan's underlings. Therefore, the Holy Spirit moved upon Paul and Silas that the Gospel would go west and be planted in Europe that it might be preserved when Islam came along. **Acts 16:4-12**

Paul and Silas didn't know that some 1,400 years after they had finished their work on the earth, God would raise up a man by the name of Martin Luther in

Germany, who would read Paul's letter to the Romans and be saved. Luther was the man that God used to restore the true message of salvation.

Paul and Silas couldn't have known that men like Tyndale and Calvin were going to be used to firmly plant the Gospel in England, which would later be brought over to America and cause great revivals. They didn't know that more than 1,800 years after they left this earth, great missionary projects undertaken by men and women in Western Europe and North America to re-establish the Christian churches in the areas where they had been destroyed.

### **WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS?**

1. All people on the earth are born at a particular time for a specific purpose.  
**Psalms 139:1-18**
2. Some people are created to bring great glory to God while others are destined to be vessels of destruction. **Romans 9:9-23**
3. After the flood, Noah, his three sons and their wives all knew God and His requirements, *but they failed to teach their children and grandchildren about God!* As a result, the Devil took over these generations by default, and for more than 6,000 years, the people living on this earth are paying for the sins of Noah and his family! **Deuteronomy 6:5-12**
4. Rejoice that you have heard the Gospel and been born again. You are among a small remnant on this earth who heard the Gospel and were able to accept by the gift of repentance and grace bestowed upon you by the Holy Spirit.  
**John 6:44; 65**
5. Be sure to pass it on; you don't want to be like Noah and his family!  
**Luke 10:1-2**

### **DO YOU HAVE AN EAR TO HEAR WITH?**

# Capital Christian pastor leads a new kind of church

**Pastor Rick Cole has transformed his church from a bastion of right-wing values to the hub for a kinder, gentler approach to God. If you don't believe us, just ask his dad.**

By Nancy Brands Ward

There's something going on at Capital Christian Center.

On a recent Sunday morning, congregants inside the sanctuary were whooping and cheering, doing a little praying, standing repeatedly in ovation to praise singers and musicians and laughing uproariously at an oddly funny skit featuring a militant megaphone-wielding, whistle-blowing lifeguard controlling the actions of a dumbfounded man in a wading pool. The skit was performed right up there on the pulpit.

So when the senior pastor took the stage, the 1,000-plus churchgoers at one of the area's biggest churches were primed for the message he delivered to kick off a month-long series of sermons titled "The Gift of Laughter." "Joylessness may actually be a serious sin," Rick Cole proclaimed. "Negativity is not what God wants in us."

Capital Christian isn't your grandmother's church. And Rick Cole isn't your stereotypical evangelical preacher. The 3,000-seat church, which sits next to Highway 50 just 10 miles east of Midtown, feels more like a theater than a sanctuary. There's not a cross in sight inside the church, and you won't find any figures of a crucified Christ or images of bloody crowns of thorns. Two concert-style television screens hang high above the pulpit where you'd expect to see stained-glass windows. You will see trailers of upcoming church events and, depending on which service you attend, hear music beat out by musicians on drums, electric guitars, keyboards and brass.

When he preaches, Cole doesn't wear vestments or a collar—he doesn't even wear a suit and tie. A youthful 50, Cole's hair is just starting to gray; neither tall nor short, he's fit and athletic, with all-American good looks. You couldn't imagine a more regular guy.

No one calls him Pastor Cole; that's his father, Glen Cole, his predecessor on the pulpit, the legendary man who built Capital Christian into one of the nation's earliest megachurches and a powerhouse of evangelical influence in Sacramento during the 1980s and 1990s. Rick Cole is Pastor Rick or simply Rick. It was easier that way when Cole served under his dad as pastor of the single's group beginning in the mid-1980s. Now, 13 years after taking over leadership of Capital Christian after his father's retirement, he's still just Pastor Rick. But, today, that informality is deliberate—it's something Cole cultivates.

The changes taking place at Capital Christian are reflective of broader transformations taking place in evangelicalism across the country. The scathing judgments, activist tactics and vitriolic right-wing politics of the Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons are giving way to the kinder, gentler centrist leadership of pastors like Rick Warren—author of the mega-bestseller *The Purpose Driven Life*—and Bill Hybels—who leads the "seeker-sensitive" Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois that incorporates services designed to attract the "unchurched." They're Cole's contemporaries, and he credits them with influencing his thinking.



Pastor Rick Cole and his wife Cathy speak to a full house of congregants inside the Capital Christian Center on a recent Sunday morning. His predecessor on the pulpit was his dad, the infamous Glen Cole.  
Photo By KYLE MONK

Now Cole is moving beyond his father's generation of churchmen. He's also listening to the voice of the next generation—principally through the even-more liberal views of his oldest son, Nate. And in leading Capital Christian in this new direction, Cole clearly is coming into his own.

### Across the generations

More like a conversation than preaching, Cole's down-to-earth Sunday messages are sprinkled with phrases like "I totally get that" and "I saw that and I thought, 'Dude!'" When writing his sermons, he asks himself: "Does this sound religious?" If so, he tosses it. His style is open and vulnerable, showing easily what his brother, Randy, who's the men's pastor at Capital Christian, describes as his "tender heart." For his sermons, Cole draws lessons from everyday life and shares personal insecurities and struggles purposefully "to narrow the gap in people's minds from where they're sitting and I'm standing—to change their image of the clergy."

Clergy make a big mistake, Cole said, in presenting an image that they have it all together. That just intimidates those who are struggling with the daily challenges of living. He's seen preachers put up on pedestals, and to him it's always a signal that a downfall's coming. He's also conscious of how precarious trust is today, with unprecedented violations of leadership in business, politics and his own church, with the high-profile defrocking of fellow Assemblies of God preachers Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart in the late 1980s.

"The whole trust factor of the younger generation is completely broken," Cole explained. "The only way to rebuild that is to say, 'You know what? I am just like you.'"



What's going on with Pastor Rick Cole at Capital Christian is reflective of sweeping changes taking place in evangelicalism across America.

Photo By KYLE MONK

It's a different style from his 74-year-old father who stands above his congregation at Sacramento's Trinity Life Center, where he was recently elected senior pastor, commanding from the pulpit: "I am your shepherd—you are my sheep." Cole's approach is more subtle, encouraging people to trust him: "Come along with me," he seems to be saying, "I'm gonna take you somewhere, and it's gonna be good."

It wasn't always so. Ten years ago, Cole sounded more like his father, hammering home lessons to prick the consciences of congregants. Here's Glen Cole in his recent June 1 sermon at Trinity Life Center blasting Laker coach Phil Jackson, a former Assemblies of God Christian, for his Zen ways: "I don't care if the Lakers win, Phil Jackson is a loser if he doesn't get back to his life in Christ." Not that long ago, Cole himself might have made a similar statement. But about five years ago, he began transforming his preaching style, his ideas about how to do church and some of his beliefs.

Today, rather than sounding preachy, he explains, cajoles, seduces with his message, calling attention to distinctions among shades of gray as opposed to drawing lines between black and white.

Here's Cole a few months ago cautioning members against taking seriously Oprah's "new-age message" from Eckhart Tolle: "Oprah used to be a Christ follower, and somewhere along the line, by her own admission she's opened her mind up to bigger things. I'm not against her. In fact, I'll tape some of those shows and watch them, because there's a lot of really great human interest things. There's a lot of things I like. I don't watch them for spiritual help, though."

Even the senior Cole's self-described "old-school" style is a tempered version of the stereotypical evangelical preacher that evokes fire-and-brimstone sermons about hell and damnation. A gifted and dynamic speaker, the senior Cole knew from the time he was struck with the calling at age 17 that preaching was his destiny. Before coming to Sacramento, he led a Pentecostal church in Olympia, Wash. Once he got hold of the Sacramento church, he transformed it into the Capital Christian Center, situated it on its current 63-acre site, complete with a Christian school, Bible college and worldwide missions, and built it up into one of the region's most powerful Christian forces. But these days, in that same June 1

sermon, he acknowledged the evolution that's taken place at Capital Christian, telling his new congregation: "Boy, have my sons changed!"

The changes are certainly generational, but they also reflect a growing movement creeping its way into America's churches. That idea is an amorphous concept being called the "emerging church." And it's shaking up the country's largest denomination: evangelical Protestant churches, which comprise 26.3 percent of churches, according to the just-released Pew U.S. 2007 Religious Landscape Survey. Critics charge it's dumbing down Christianity.

"We are in transition to being an emerging church," said Cole, explaining the necessity to move slowly since people naturally resist change. That's the reasoning behind holding three different services on Sunday mornings, each characterized by different music. At 8 a.m., there's traditional hymns and organ music guaranteed not to "offend senior ears." At 9:30 a.m., the 100-member choir bursts into song accompanied by musicians that form a group somewhere between an orchestra and a band. Then at 11:15 a.m., Pastor Rick changes into shirt-sleeves and jeans, and a rock band performs secular-sounding church music.

"A lot of what we're doing may be controversial to people in our tradition, no doubt about it," Cole said. There's a part of him, however, that delights in shattering conventions he believes have outlived their usefulness. For example, though brought up to believe the church itself is holy, today Cole says it's just a building. When their kids were growing up, the Coles threw a birthday party for one of their two boys—Nate and Travis—inside the church, letting the junior-high kids run screaming through the sanctuary playing an outdoors game called "Capture the Flag."

Some would be appalled.

"I know," Cole said, with a slightly wicked smile and a glint in his eye, adding that he believes church should be fun. "Then when the kids go there to services, they don't see it as this serious, negative thing."

It's all about lightening up, about delivering the message in a way that's easy to hear.

At the same time last month that Cole was encouraging his members to actively pursue joy and laughter every day, televangelist John Hagee, a right-wing nondenominational preacher from Texas whose endorsement John McCain first courted, then rejected because of his extreme views, demonstrated how the same message sounds completely different with another delivery. Preaching about joy in front of a banner screaming "Don't Worry, Be Happy," the corpulent preacher sounded downright pissed off.

"Honestly, I don't know if I should say anything, but he drives me crazy," Cole said. "That's a perfect illustration of how you take a right principle and you can deliver it in such a wrong way that you drive people away with it instead of draw people to it." [page]

### **'He's not a Glen Cole'**

After graduating from Bethany Univeristy, a bible college in Santa Cruz, Cole stayed out from under his father's long shadow for a number of years, serving as a youth pastor at a church in San Jose. He was still struggling to discover his own identity when, in 1984, the senior Cole called on him to pastor the 600 single adults at Capital Christian. Plagued then, as now, with feelings of inadequacy, Cole doubted he had anything to offer. But he thought the answer would come if he sat through service at the Sacramento megachurch.

It didn't take that long. As it turns out, God made the call during the night flight into town, as Cole watched the lights of Sacramento spread out beneath him: "I had a feeling that God spoke to me, I heard him say, 'I'm giving you this city to influence.' I thought, 'That's weird. But if that's what God wants, I'll at least entertain it.'"

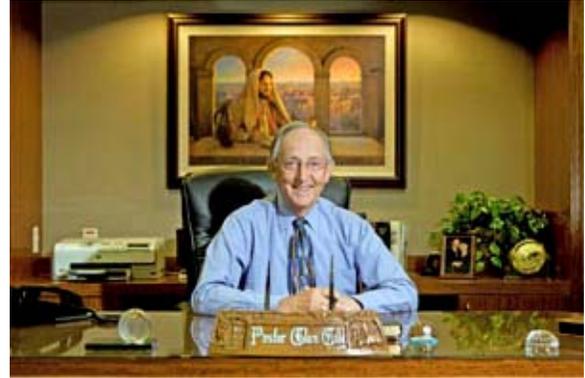
Cole stayed six years before moving on to a senior pastor job in Omaha, Neb., where he doubled the size of his Assemblies of God church there. A more intense internal struggle began 13 years ago, when the leaders of Capital Christian called him back from Omaha to step into his father's shoes when he announced his retirement from the pulpit.

“My dad is bigger than life. He’s uncompromising and driven,” said Rick’s brother, Randy. “He’s a natural leader. Rick isn’t a natural. He’s not a Glen Cole.”

Those are big shoes to fill.

Cole’s the first to admit he doesn’t have the big personality associated with his father and other leaders of most of the country’s megachurches. Shy into his high-school years and a homebody who returned home every weekend while in college—his brother calls him a “momma’s boy”—Cole today tends to take a back seat to his gregarious wife, Cathy, in public. And although those close to him believe his path to the ministry was as direct and certain as his father’s, Cole said it wasn’t quite that clear until a broken foot and shattered ribs in his senior year of high school dashed his hopes of following in his brother’s footsteps with a baseball scholarship to college.

Cole took that as a sign of God’s will that he go to Bible college.



Cole’s father Glen built Capital Christian into one of the nation’s earliest powerhouse megachurches during the 1980s and 1990s. The elder Cole was famous for doing political battle against abortion, pornography and gay rights.

Photo By KYLE MONK

### **Fight against the right**

“Get out of here!” It’s Cole, captured on video, shouting at sign-wielding gay bashers protesting last September in front of Capital Christian. “Get off of our property and get away from this message that Jesus is honoring today. And stop this madness! That’s what I’m saying to you right now,” he says, pumping his arms in agitation, jabbing his finger at the offending message on a protester’s T-shirt. “Under the anointing of the holy spirit of the living God, that’s what I’m saying to you right now, get off of our property.”

The video next captures Cole talking to someone off camera: “I see the hate messages on this person’s shirt.”

“This message?” the man responds in astonishment, as the camera pans to the words emblazoned on his T-shirt in dripping letters, as though written in blood: “Sodomy & Hatred Are Sin: Christ Can Set You Free!” “This is a hate message?”

“It is,” Cole says. “To people, that message is a message of hate, not love.”

Nearly 4,000 people have seen the minute-long video on YouTube of Cole losing it with the protesters. Mention it to him and he groans with dismay. Cole’s embarrassed by his outburst—he rarely loses his temper—and he changed tactics to employ kindness when the protesters returned, retreating to the Bible’s message to “bless your enemies.” His reaction, however, testifies to how strongly he feels about the damage those kinds of extreme positions do to the reputation of evangelicalism—and the fear that passersby will think they represent the position of his church. The common perception that Christian evangelical churches are working to advance a right-wing political agenda largely by opposing those whose lifestyles they disagree with is well-earned, and it’s one that Cole constantly fights against.

For nearly two decades, Cole’s own father was one of Sacramento’s leading conservative voices. The media turned to him often for comment on controversial political issues. A 1985 newspaper report claimed Capital Christian had spent the previous year “engaged in local political battles against abortion, pornography and gay rights.” Looking back, the elder Cole says the media overstated the church’s political involvement: “As I told one reporter, if you’re preaching from the Bible, you’re going to step on toes, because you’re talking about morality.”

The younger Cole himself found his conservative views scrutinized in the media in those early years. The Bee quoted him in 1985: “The church looks upon homosexuality as a sin. It is a sin that has brought about the condition of AIDS to the majority of those suffering from the disease.” That sounds suspiciously Falwell-like, bordering on suggesting that gays deserve the disease. Cole said that’s not his view: “I don’t see AIDS as a curse from God or God’s judgment on this particular act. I do think there are always natural consequences no matter what we do, and it’s not just about sexuality.”



Cole credits his eldest son Nate, 27, for engaging with him in a series of conversations that led the pastor to fundamentally reconsider his mission at Capital Christian and what's most important in the teachings of Jesus.

Courtesy Of NATE COLE

It's not the church's place to be political: "The mission of the church is to represent Jesus—to help the poor, the broken and the strong."

Surprisingly, that idea borders on the controversial in some circles.

It's those emerging church ideals that so vex traditionalists. It's hard to define the emerging church, but most agree that it identifies with the life of Jesus, welcomes strangers and believes in transforming the secular realm. Controversy swirls around the idea that being born-again is just the start of an evolution on Earth that involves applying the teachings of Jesus during this lifetime. Sure, churches that adopt these ideas continue to do their part through charitable works, but they also have come to embrace the need to transform society in the here and now in such secular areas as health care, race, poverty and the environment.

Young people feel strongly about this, Cole acknowledged. His own politics underwent a metamorphosis about four years ago through a series of conversations with his oldest son, Nate. Lead singer with a secular band in Los Angeles called Castledoor, the 27-year-old Nate Cole is mystified by the credit he's been given for reshaping his dad's more liberal perspective.

The Coles have always been Republican. That's the way it was throughout Nate Cole's growing-up years. So without thinking, he voted for George W. Bush in 2000. But when the next election came around in 2004, there was no way he'd cast the same vote.

"I'm not a heavy political person," he said. "But I began to feel that the church had taken upon itself enforcing things that people should decide for themselves. I didn't like how the line in the sand for a lot of Christians was this homosexuality issue—it just sickened me. Why are these things so huge? Why is it such a divisive issue? It doesn't affect my life. If you're going to vote morals, I think the war would be at the top of the list. We need to ask ourselves, what are people going to benefit from? They're going to benefit from health care, the environment."

That more moderate view of homosexuality isn't what drew the ire of protesters from the informally organized Church of the Divide from Placerville, Calif., in protests that began last year. Capital Christian became a target after some of its members handed out bottled water as an "offering of love" to marchers at last summer's gay pride parade. The protesters accuse the church of being "pro-gay" and Cole of watering down the Bible's message.

Softening the Bible's truths is an easy criticism; it's also one leveled by critics of the emerging church. Cole insists that his steadiness to the Bible's message has not wavered, noting that too often people use "truths" from the Bible to judge and castigate others. He's not pro-gay. Instead he delivers a message of acceptance. In his sermon the Sunday after California's Supreme Court struck down the state's ban on gay marriage, he cautioned church members to take care to express love to people in same-sex partnerships.

"We are not going to picket against lifestyles we don't agree with," Cole said, telling members to welcome homosexuals to the church. "We need to love those people and not be some self-righteous jerk condemning people." And in a kind of let-those-without-sin-cast-the-first-stone argument, Cole equated homosexuality with pornography and adultery and asked who among the congregation was without sin, then answered his own question: "Zero!"

It's not what many expect to hear an evangelical Christian preaching. It's not what many might believe is being preached at Capital Christian today—even among his congregants, the message drew only scattered applause. But Cole says it is the message of Jesus.

It's not the church's place to be political: "The mission of the church is to represent

Cole credits those talks with making him think deeply about the mission of the church and his own politics. Today, he joins a generation of baby-boomer evangelical preachers who are pushing to save souls and to better this world through a renewed attention to Jesus' teachings about social justice. While he remains a social conservative in many ways—he's not pro-gay, pro-abortion or pro-divorce—he is also anti-poverty, anti-racism, anti-hatred and in favor of a leveling of the social and economic playing fields.

Capital Christian's involvement with Oak Ridge Elementary School in Oak Park is an example of the church's work to level those fields. The church built a computer lab, installed computers in the library and constructed a teacher's lounge for the underperforming school. Cole ran his first marathon to raise \$25,000 in pledges for the project, and another church member recently ran a 100-mile race to bring in funds to for health care for the students. For Cole, it's one of the most rewarding things his church does. "It's so pure," he said. "We just go there with no strings attached. There's no mention of Capital Christian. We don't proselytize."

So if Cole's sounding a bit more like a Democrat than a Republican nowadays, that's because he's come to believe that the GOP can learn a lot from the Democratic platform about how the message of Jesus looks in practice: "Some of the Democratic ideologies have a stronger connection to the Bible than the Republican ideologies."

Most evangelical Christians in America today are Republicans. According to the Pew 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 38 percent of evangelical Christians say they're Republicans; another 12 percent lean that way. The survey, however, revealed a migration away from the party among white evangelicals between the ages of 15 and 29. Fifteen percent say they're no longer Republicans; an equal number of older evangelicals also say they've left the party. Some left not because the party's not conservative enough, but because it's not liberal enough. Cole hasn't revealed where his allegiances lie, but said he would follow Pastor Rick Warren who had Barack Obama speak at his Saddlebrook Church by inviting Obama to talk at Capital Christian, if he could get him.

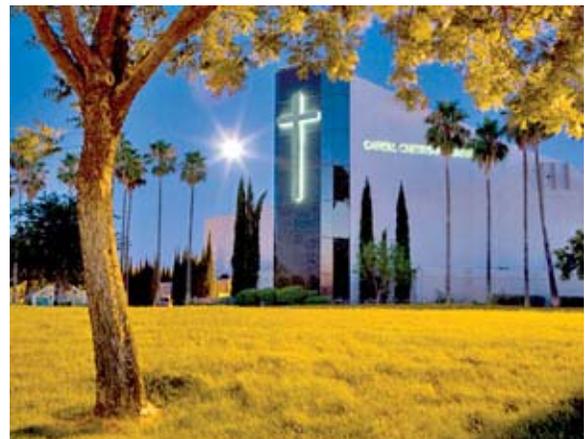
"We're always talking about Obama—joking back and forth about it," Nate Cole said. "It looks like we might be on the same side of it for once." [page]

### No snake handling

Cole has remained committed to his calling to the ministry since Bible college, though he has had to work at developing his leadership skills. Running Capital Christian Center is a big job. It's a \$16-million-a-year enterprise that employs 300 people.

Though he succeeded in stepping into his father's shoes, Cole grew frustrated about six years ago. Church attendance had plateaued. Cole ached to take it to another level. He looked for the solution by examining his performance. He hired a consultant and spent the next year and a half analyzing his church and other churches. He traveled to Florida to study with Mark Rutland and earned a master's degree in church leadership. He hired a personal life coach. And he read widely: The key to moving forward came with an epiphany when he recognized his own soft-spoken, behind-the-scenes style in the leaders who led *not* the "good" but the "great" companies profiled in Jim Collins' best-selling *Good to Great*. He began to appreciate his own style and skills.

As Cole's confidence grew, his ideas evolved. Watching Joel Osteen—the Houston-based televangelist whose nondenominational Christian ministry reaches more than 2 million each week—up close during a minister's workshop helped shape Cole's ideas about how church should be done. Osteen's upbeat, positive and accessible style captivated Cole, and attending the dynamic services inside his Lakewood Church was a powerful experience: "You really feel God's presence—it's very life-giving."



According to Cole and a new generation of baby-boomer preachers, the evangelical movement must evolve or die.

Photo By KYLE MONK

The experience reshaped Cole's attitude toward his members. He found the key to spreading the message in his relaxed personal style, removing barriers to hearing it. Sharing personal insecurities and humbling experiences—getting beaten by his father at golf, falling in the street while biking—strengthened his connection to members. Knowing that Pentecostalism's more extreme tenets can chase people away even more quickly than its sometime ultra-right-wing politics, Cole takes a moderate position. The prosperity message gets taken too far, he says. Too much is made of the church's stance on male leadership, Cole claims. And the talking in tongues that some sects of Pentecostalism claim is necessary as evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence isn't a big focus at Capital Christian.

It's those types of extreme beliefs and practices that the media uses to portray Pentecostalism. And that exasperates Cole. If you see Pentecostals in the media, you're likely to see parishioners jabbering nonsensically or being struck to the floor after being healed of hideous diseases by a preacher's touch. You might see depicted those extreme sects that today still prohibit watching movies and owning television sets; don't permit women to wear makeup, jewelry or cut their hair; and dictate the kind of clothing both men and women are allowed to wear.

"Sometimes the people who focus on just the outward things the most can be some of the meanest people in the world," said Cole's wife, Cathy. "What is the point of having that in your life if it shows up ugly to other people? That is not a good example of what Jesus was."

Cole wants people to know that there's no snake handling going on at Capital Christian, driving home the point that: "You can be normal, and have God all over your life."

Although never part of the fringe Pentecostal element, the Coles obeyed strict rules throughout their childhoods. They didn't watch movies, listen to secular music or dance. And heaven forbid, they didn't drink or smoke. The Coles were far more liberal with their three children—two sons and a daughter—and there was even dancing at their daughter's recent wedding.

"Believe me," Cole said, "it was a really big deal to have dancing at the pastor's kid's wedding." "Has the effort to adapt the church to an evolving culture gone too far?"

Cole's father side stepped that question in a telephone interview last month; however, he did call the emerging church a fad and cautioned: "There's so much change that a lot of folks are floating around feeling, 'I've lost my church.' My concern is that younger ministers don't go too fast that they pass by those who built the church."

But as Randy Cole said: "You can't argue with the results."

Church attendance over the past five years has risen by 25 percent. Capital Christian claims more than 3,000 members. On any Sunday, some 4,000-plus people attend services; attendance over a month is more than 7,000 different people. Nearly 12,000 came to church on Easter weekend. Capital Christian is far from the biggest church in the country. Osteen's 47,000-member church holds that title. But it was the 10th largest Assemblies of God church in the country—the 13th fastest-growing—in 2006, the most recent year for which figures are available. Assemblies of God is the 10th largest denomination in America, holding steady in 2007 at about 2.8 million members.

Comfortable now with his insecurities, Cole dreams of extending the church's influence across Sacramento. With his father installed as senior pastor of Trinity Life Center on Highway 80, Cole sees his family's reach "sandwiching the city" and their message touching more Sacramentans than ever.

Cole breaks from his conversational style and pumps up the volume when he needs to.

In a mid-May sermon about the Church's future, he spoke of dedicating 2009 to the evangelical's highest calling: spreading the word. He called on members to get a jump on next year's mission by bringing a friend to church before year-end and to work at finding ways to reach children, "Because if you get the child, you get the family." His voice rose still another pitch when talking about an opportunity he sees to reach some 250,000 "confused" college students in the city currently being taught by "godless and humanistic" professors: "I have an image in my mind to sweep across a campus like Sac State to

where the professors are coming to know Jesus, and they change their tune in the classroom, because they realize there is a truth and a foundation, and it's not based on Darwin, and it's not based on Freud and it's not based on some other person who thought they had the answer. It's based on God and his word and the truth that he established."

If the evangelical's mission to spread the word of salvation is to be achieved, Cole believes the church must evolve or die. It must reject the political agenda that swept America's most unpopular president in history into office and now repels so many Americans. It must shuck the old-school preaching style of its fathers and listen to the social concerns of its sons.

The time is ripe. And Cole's still got the fire as he delivers this impassioned vision, his arms punching the air right and left and up and down to give emphasis to his words: "I have a dream. I want to install outdoor lighting on this church. Right now when people drive by at night, all they see is a black hole. But with lights, when everybody drives by every night, the only thing they'll see at Highway 50 at Bradshaw Road is Capital Christian.

"They'll wonder what's going on in there!"



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