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**WAITING FOR THE END OF THE WORLD**

**8** **Waiting for the end of the world**

Of the four million pentecostal/charismatic church members in the country, about 3,000 attend Mount Paran Church of God, a large and popular church in Atlanta that has become a regional center of "charismatic" activity. The preachers and the people of the church view many events happening in the world today as a fulfillment of Biblical prophecies. "We take Christ very seriously," says preacher Paul Walker. "And we would take His coming very seriously. We believe we are in the 'end' times but we realize the wheels of history don't always move on our time table." Story by Phil Garner.



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Nobody could call Debby McCarty, the new councilwoman of Council District 16, a weak sister. Twenty-five and white, she took on black incumbent John Calhoun and crushingly defeated him in a 2-to-1 victory in the October elections. But she goes in branded as the white who kept blacks from getting a majority on the 18-member body. However, whatever bitterness is left over from the campaign has begun to fade, and Debby McCarty can get on with the business of helping District 16 to cope. Story by Margaret Shannon.



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*Cover photograph by Floyd Jillson*



# Waiting for the end of the world

*'We run 4,000 people through this place every Sunday,' says the pastor of the Mount Paran Church of God.*



By Phil Garner

*In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come to Egypt . . . Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria . . .*  
—Isaiah 19: 23-24.

**T**O MILLIONS of fundamentalist Christians across the United States, the sudden appearance of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in the Israeli parliament was startling evidence of fulfill-

ment of Biblical prophecy. If the signs were read aright, the next event would be the coming of the Antichrist in the guise of a protector of Israel. Three and a half years later the "saints" of the church would be "raptured" into Heaven, from there to watch in safety three and a half years of "tribulation" below. Then Christ would return with holy armies to fight the Antichrist in the Battle of Armageddon in the Jezreel Valley. Christ would win the battle and rule for a thousand years of peace and prosperity in a new Jerusalem. At the end of the thousand years or "the millennium," a new Heaven and earth would be created and the old destroyed by fire.

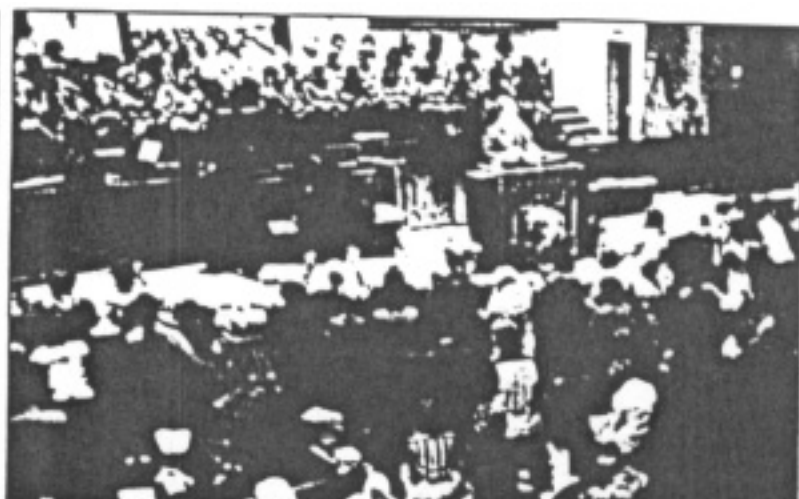
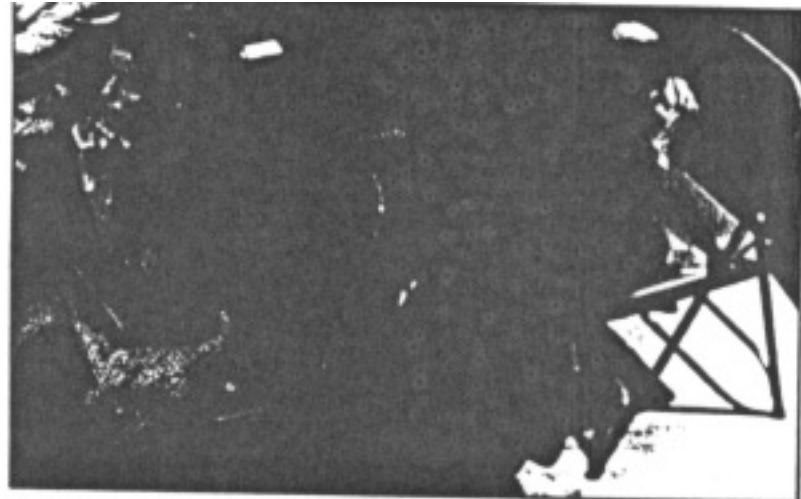
True believers in the literal truth of the scriptures were having

these things pointed out to them by their preachers. If they were truly sanctified, they might never need die a physical death, rather be sent straight to Heaven within three and a half years. Within seven years, they would have a ringside seat over the last great war fought on earth. Christians through the centuries remained steadfast in the faith despite ridicule and persecution, seldom daring hope for fulfillment of the prophecies in their own lifetimes. It had been one thing to believe, to watch and pray—another to inspect the words and gestures of every potentate of every Middle Eastern country for some tell-tale sign that he would be the Antichrist.

The great mythic systems of the Old Testament prophets and the belief in their ultimate fulfillment form a bridge from the ancient past to the modern future that imposes a matrix of highly structured cause and effect in the lives of millions of church members. They have been reminded each Sunday that they should live as though The End were nigh. Now Anwar Sadat seemed to be ushering in The Last Days.

**O**F the 4 million pentecostal/charismatic church members in the country, about 3,000 are members of the Mount Paran Church of God, a large but unpretentious church in a neighborhood of \$100,000 houses in a fashionable section of northwest Atlanta. Mount Paran, with a popular and forceful 45-year-old pastor and several assistants, several choirs and a gigantic counseling program, has become a regional center of "charismatic" activity.

Every Sunday night large numbers of members of other churches,



many from out of town, attend services at Mount Paran, where the gifts of tongues, interpretation and prophecy are known to flower.

Three days after Sadat's audacious gambit, in which he stood alone among Arab heads of state in seeking peace with Israel, the members of Mount Paran were still much excited about a sermon-slide presentation delivered by their pastor, Dr. Paul L. Walker, on the Sunday of Sadat's visit. The sermon was entitled: "The New Israel in God's Future."

Volunteer workers were preparing for the Wednesday night church dinner. An attractive matron with frosted hair and stylish eyeglasses sat on a sofa near the pastor's office, intently reading the Bible.

"Oh, my, this is exciting!" she said, rocking slightly back and forth.

**A** corporation executive wearing a cook's apron padded by, entered a nearby office, popped back out. The woman stopped him.

"When do you think Armageddon will be?" she chirruped.

The executive hedged his options. If the Antichrist were already in the world, seven years, the seven years of The Tribulation. If he hadn't slipped in yet, then some years longer. The man was off again, to oversee preparations in the kitchen.

"Oh, this is just so exciting," the woman reiterated. Another woman carrying a cake entered the room.

The discussion stopped. The cake was taken into the kitchen. The topic of Armageddon was abandoned for a time, as if it was merely an upcoming TV spectacular.

In his office, the church's pastor was counseling, a major activity at Mount Paran. A third-generation Church of God preacher, Paul Walker holds an M.Ed. and a Ph.D. in counseling from Georgia State University. His undergraduate divinity degree was earned at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, the haven in the 1950s of the "God is dead" theologian, Thomas Altizer. His B.A. came from a Bible college. He has preached since he was 18.

Walker is tall, fit, stylishly dressed in a three-piece suit. His voice has the timbre of a radio announcer's but without a brassy quality. His eyes are clear, his smile wide and friendly. He is what many church people call a "dynamic preacher," without submitting entirely to the stereotype. He is a mixture of psychiatrist and evangelist. His salary, he

*Emotional experiences directly with God lie at the heart of the pentecostal movement, exemplified by such practices as praying with hands raised (far left), the touching and holding of hands of fellow worshippers, kneeling while praying, and talking in "tongues." Dr. Paul Walker (bottom right), pastor of Mount Paran Church of God, where these scenes were photographed, leads prayers, speaks in tongues, and interprets messages in tongues spoken by others.*

says, is about what a psychiatrist would expect to make. "We take Christ very seriously," said Walker. "And we would take His coming very seriously. We believe we are in the 'end times' but we realize that the wheels of history don't always move on our timetable."

Despite his liberal education, Walker takes every word, period and comma of the Bible literally.

His rationale marshals a circumstantial case for divine inspiration of the scriptures, delivered ad-agency style: "The validity of the Bible hinges on four things: One, the fulfilled prophecies. Second, that whole baby hangs together, 1,500 years, 30 authors and 66 books of it. Thirdly, the preservation of it. How did it stay around this long if it isn't true? And fourth, experientially it is colossal, impact-wise.

"You look at those four hinges and I don't think you can blow those babies out."

**W**ALKER'S congregants range from \$200,000-a-year corporation executives to impecunious drop-outs, and come to the church from every corner of the city and the state. They are drawn by a need for answers to cosmic riddles. And Walker attempts to put them directly in touch with the Lord of Hosts.

"The church has left the emotions of the people untended for many years," said Walker. "And the big problem people have had is to accept divine phenomena as natural. We touch, we share and we pray for one another. We try to confront a person with himself and how he relates to God and his environment."

Walker's observations could have come as naturally from mystical gurus or deists in philosophy departments as from the lips of a pentecos-

## WAITING FOR THE END OF THE WORLD...

tal preacher. Visited by the Holy Spirit, one is in receipt of communications not capable of verbalization. Speaking in tongues, one may find the highest expression of the self. Believing in the phantasmagorical prophecies of Revelations for the seven kinds of special doom to be visited upon the wicked may seem no less acceptable to the faithful than the contemporary nightmares that plague the modernistic, anguished soul.

As leader of a flock of thousands, Walker takes his interpretive responsibilities very seriously. Glossalalia must not turn to mere gibberish, nor prophecy to gross panic.

**G**LOSSALALIA — speaking in tongues—usually occurs in Walker's services at some point of emotional calm such as at the end of a hymn or during prayer. As the strains of the hymn wind down or a moment of silence fills the sanctuary, a voice will rise somewhere among the rows of benches. It will rise and fall in a rhythmic cadence.

All the other worshippers will listen raptly. Walker will bow his head and close his eyes and let the message of the words penetrate his consciousness. He does not know the language, does not recognize the words, but the message appears on the screen of his consciousness. As an interpreter, Walker can distinguish between gibberish and a true unknown language. He can tell, also, whether the message coming through is in keeping with the spirit of the meeting, or is divisive and inappropriate. If no one can interpret the message, the talker is discouraged. The Apostle Paul himself, Walker points out, advised Christians to sit down and be silent if their tongues could not be understood.

Walker prefers to call his restatement of the messages sent in tongues "inspiration" rather than translation. When the speaker has finished, usually after only 30 seconds or so, Walker in a low, mellow voice begins: "If you will seek my face and trust in my ways and walk in my word, ye shall find strength for your spirit and ye shall find love for your heart and ye shall

find joy springing up as a living well, and ye shall not be caught in the web of this world but ye shall be set free and made whole . . . ."

Such "inspired" translation seems to draw heavily in style and content upon scriptural phraseology, down to the Elizabethan cadences of the King James version of the Bible and the messages of comfort and hope. Seldom would the message come through as a jeremiad, forecasting dire consequences for continued sinful action.

Walker's interpretations are poetical, full of metaphor ringing of scriptural imagery: "Rejoice, rejoice, and again rejoice for my spirit has made manifest to thee the presence of my power."

For the troubled in spirit, the inhabitants of what Walker frequently calls "a broken world," the messages of the spirit bring a strong balm: "I call unto you my children that you might come unto me, that I might gather you unto myself, that I might protect you and build a house of defense round about you to save you."

And, in nearly all the messages, the repeated admoni-

tion to be ready for the day when the faithful will be taken up with God and the rest of the world will receive its just dues: "I am bringing to pass that which you have read and seen in my work. Therefore be ready for in such an hour as ye think not, my redemption cometh upon the world and I shall call you unto myself and ye shall delight yourself in the goodness of my glory. But until that hour, I have given unto thee my spirit that shall be as a comforting force that shall never leave you or forsake you, but go with you even to the end of the world, saith the Lord of Hosts."

Speaking in tongues is thought to have occurred with varying frequency throughout the history of Christianity. Some data suggest it was practiced by Anabaptists in 16th century Germany and by the Jansenists in 17th century France. Some believe the Shakers in mid-18th century America spoke in tongues. In the 19th century, the Irvingites, founders of the Catholic Apostolic Church, practiced glossolalia. Gifts of tongues, prophecy, revelations, visions, healing and interpretation of

tongues are provided for in the Articles of Faith of the Mormon Church.

Today, "charismatic" movements, which once brought ostracism from the more reserved Christian denominations, are being tolerated, even encouraged, in such denominations as Catholic and Episcopalian. Businessmen gather for prayer breakfasts and speaking in tongues before starting out on the day's commerce in cities throughout the country.

But the mainstream "pentecostal movement" is considered to have started at Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kan., in 1901. On New Year's Day of that year, several students gathered to pray with and "lay hands" upon a "Miss Agnes Ozman," who underwent "a remarkable religious experience and began to speak in other tongues."

But the pentecostal movement did not begin to spread in earnest until 1906, during a three-year revival meeting that attracted blacks and whites in Los Angeles. The meeting began in a private home. After a black boy spoke in tongues, crowds grew until larger quarters

had to be found. The meetings were moved into an abandoned Baptist church on Azusa Street. The services were led by a black preacher, W. S. Seymour, who was not eloquent and had sight in only one eye. Usually Seymour merely rested his head on a packing crate and prayed, appearing to some to be asleep, while the services went on around him. But thousands of persons "received the Holy Spirit" during those meetings and went out to tell others.

Two of those converts became evangelists. Their travels took them one day to Golden Valley, N.D. Paul Walker's grandfather and his wife lived nearby at the time and were "saved" at the tent meeting. Later, Walker's grandmother, who was ill and had been given two years to live by her doctors, underwent a miraculous recovery. She lived for 24 more years.

In the meantime, however, the Walkers sold their ranch and moved to Cleveland, Tenn., there to join with the denomination to which the evangelists belonged, the Church of God. Walker's father was entered in the Bible college there. The elder

Walker soon returned to farming, but his son remained in the Church of God as an official, an "overseer," and founded 67 churches.

The denomination now has more than 4 million members in 6,000 individual churches.

Paul Walker remembers his father fondly. He is proud of the fact that he was a "progressive" man who did not force his beliefs upon his son. Yet the dose of family religion "took" in Paul and has not seemed in danger of running out since.

**M**OUNT Paran's budget now exceeds \$1 million annually. The church employs 38 people, including its five pastors.

"We run 4,000 people through this place every Sunday," Walker said. "We've got a fantastic music program—eight choirs, two of them with 100 members, the New Life Singers, several youth and children's choirs. It really makes for a beautiful experience. We can swing musically any way you want, from the Messiah and Elijah to gospel-rock. It's that kind of flexibility that makes it so that Catholics as well as pentecostals can come here to worship and feel comfortable."

The church's counseling center utilizes interns from the Georgia State University counseling programs. At least 20 percent of its users are not members of Mount Paran Church.

Counseling takes a large amount of Walker's time, as well.

"I'm booked up through next month right now," Walker said. The church also operates a "prison ministry" and "sharing" groups which meet in the homes of interested non-members to share with them the "good news" of

cern lies the belief that Israel is somehow a potential receptacle for all the hopes of the Christian world. All those who embrace Christ will make up "the New Israel." As the End Days begin, predictable events will take place in Israel bringing about, ultimately, the return of Christ, the destruction of the old world and the creation of the new Heaven and earth.

"The stage is being set," Walker told his flock, "for the coming of a new world leader who will fit the Biblical description of the Antichrist and usher in the actualities of the tribulation period."

The new leader will overthrow other kingdoms and "astonish the world," Walker said. He will bring order out of chaos and be known as a peacemaker and humanitarian.

Shortly before the Antichrist is exposed for what he is, Christians will be taken away in the rapture for the coming period of "Tribulation."

"God is shaking and sifting Israel, preparing the world for the finality of his decree," Walker said. "The stage is already set—economic insecurity, energy crises, international immorality, lack of world leadership, aligning of nations one with the other and the strategic importance of the Middle East."

Walker's description of the Tribulation evokes images of events of cataclysmic nature on a scale more colorful than the most fantastic science fiction movie: "Seven trumpets will sound. On the first hail and fire mixed with blood rain down on earth; the next trumpet and a giant blazing mass smashes into the sea; then one-third of the earth will be turned to blood and one-third of the rivers and streams will be bitter and un-

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"The sharing groups are responsible for most of our new members," Walker said.

Mount Paran is large and may soon grow even larger, Walker said. "It's easier to meet people's needs with a large church because you have more resources."

Walker's brand of religion may be less bucolic than that of his forbears, his congregations more urbane, services to the community more sociologically oriented, but the doctrines have changed not at all. The Word is still, literally, The Word.

And that is why the preachers and people of Mount Paran are watching Anwar Sadat's every move with more than ordinary interest.

At the heart of their con-

frontally before the world christ is exposed for what he is, Christians will be taken away in the rapture for the coming period of "Tribulation."

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At the end of his presentation, Walker gently and dramatically addresses Israel as an instrument of God to serve its function as the light of the world.

He leads the congregation in a prayer, which begins, imploringly, "Come on down, Lord Jesus, come on down."

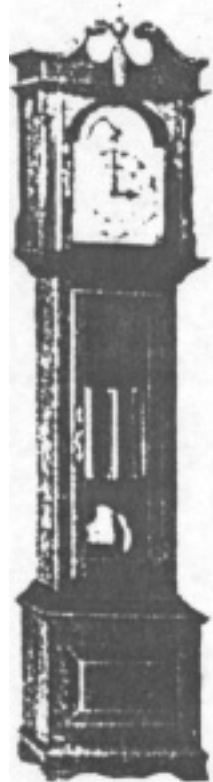
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