Prologue

The sermon begins beneath studio lights,
each bulb a sun ordained by production.
A gospel of slogans hums through the speakers,
polished and punctual as policy.
Hands rise on cue,
praise rehearsed like choreography,
faith broadcast in high definition.

The altar gleams with chrome and conviction,
where once stood a table carved for hunger.
Now the bread is branded,
the wine imported,
and every blessing bears a watermark.

The verses have been edited for efficiency.
Parables trimmed to fit the frame.
Even the silence has been scored
a pause for applause,
a break for advertisement.

In this liturgy of control,
obedience masquerades as devotion.
Freedom becomes a slogan for compliance,
salvation, a trademark in fine print.
The preacher's cadence thunders like empire,
righteousness dressed in rhetoric,
doctrine distilled into policy.

The crowd kneels before a promise
that never meant to free them.
The air itself bends with persuasion,
thick with the perfume of certainty.

And somewhere, far beyond the broadcast range,
a whisper still remembers dust,
remembers a touch that healed without condition,
a voice that spoke of love
without a podium.

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If there is one thing I've learned after nearly two decades of living in communities shaped by Pentecostal and conservative Christian churches, it's this: faith is rarely just faith. Even at its best, it functions as a structure of control. That's a harsh thing to say, but it's true. Religion, in these communities, does more than shape belief. It shapes behavior, identity, families, and entire communities. And in minority communities, where systemic inequities already exist, the burden of this control is often heavier, more insidious, and profoundly personal.

Growing up, I noticed the sermons first. The lights, the microphones, the perfectly choreographed applause: it was ALL theater. Not theater meant to inspire reflection or critical thought, but theater designed to ensure compliance. Every gesture, every tear, every repetition of the "right" words signaled belonging. Obedience became performance. Performance became identity. Identity became survival.

Survival of the fittest.

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Part One, The Word

In the beginning was silence.
And silence was not enough.
So language was carved from fear,
shaped into doctrine, sharpened into rule.

The ink was still wet
when authority spoke its first prayer.
Letters became chains,
and scripture, a blueprint for obedience.
Those who could not read were taught to bow;
those who could were taught to lead.

The Word promised light
but delivered order.
It sanctified kings,
absolved their wars,
and wrote mercy into margins
small enough to overlook.

Every syllable bloomed into judgment,
every verse a stone in the foundation of control.
The prophets were replaced with translators,
their tongues washed clean of rebellion.
Meaning was measured,
cut to fit the mouth of power.

In time, even truth forgot its sound.
The holy tongue spoke only in imperatives,
its vowels gilded, its consonants exact.
And faith!
That tender, trembling thing
was pressed into the parchment,
flattened between the lines.

Thus the Word became law,
and the law, unchallengeable.
The voice of creation,
now a decree.
The Father's echo
rewritten to command,

remembered not as breath,
but as a border.

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The Word came first. Before the altar, before ritual. Far before identity. And from the first, it was never truly neutral. Language is destiny and words are power, after all. Scriptural syllables, repeated and memorized, were treated as an unchallengeable sort of law. Those who could not read were taught to bow, and those who could were taught to lead others in compliance.

I've seen this happen. There is much that I have witnessed in my short time here. Children memorizing passages they could barely understand, yet internalizing them as moral imperatives. Families teaching obedience as virtue, care as a secondary concern. Community members monitor one another for lapses in faith, policing speech, behavior, and even thought. Sociologists call this symbolic power, the capacity of language and ritual to shape social reality. Foucault calls it disciplinary power: the subtle, pervasive ways that norms are instilled, self-policing is enforced, and dissent is contained.

This Word promises liberation, but often delivers conformity. It sanctifies authority, punishes deviation, and molds identities before they have a chance to form. And in minority communities, this process is compounded. Speaking a home language other than English becomes a marker of difference, a potential threat. Questioning doctrine can bring ostracism or shame. Expressing cultural identity outside the prescribed norms is interpreted as rebellion. Children absorb compliance before curiosity. Parents absorb judgment before love. Communities absorb doctrine before humanity.

Even at its purest, the Word can be weaponized. Verses meant to inspire love are cited to enforce discipline. Passages meant to cultivate empathy are used to justify exclusion. Authority hides behind scripture, scripture becomes law, and law is presented as divine.

The Word, in practice, is not just faith. It is governance.

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Part 2, The Flesh

And the Word was made visible,
poured into stone and circuitry,
draped in robes of light.
Hands once lifted in mercy
learned to bless through glass and broadcast.

The altar grew teeth.
It devoured the faithful one tithe at a time,
spitting out gold and slogans.
Salvation began accepting donations,
and the miracle of bread
was rebranded as enterprise.

Faith was no longer a pulse,
it was a platform.

A body formed from applause and fear,
every gesture rehearsed,
every prayer monetized.
Grace took on flesh
and signed a contract.

The choir sang louder to fill the hollow,
their hymns competing with advertisements for eternity.
The preacher's mouth glowed like a forge,
shaping words into weapons,
melting scripture into policy.

Behold the temple, alive and consuming.
A body swollen with sanctity,
veins lined with silver,
heart pulsing with power.
It feeds on the very souls it promises to save.

And the people look upon its gleam
and call it divine.
They do not see the seams,
the trembling of the thing beneath its skin.

The Flesh walks among the masses,
not to heal,
but to be seen.
And the light that falls upon its face
no longer warms.

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Next comes the Flesh. The Word, when embodied, becomes performance. Hands lifted, voices raised, tears shed are all signs of devotion and compliance. Pentecostalism, in particular, has perfected this: emotion as evidence, physicality as proof, visible devotion as membership. Trembling before the altar signals faith. Crying, shouting, dancing *must* be evidence that the system works. A distant stranger, Durkheim, would call this collective effervescence. But here, it's engineered, orchestrated, performed. Children learn to cry at the right time. Adults learn to clap and cheer at the right time as well. Communities become self-policing. Ritual becomes regulation. The Flesh is both worship and measurement.

And in America, the Flesh becomes spectacle. Faith is nationalized, racialized, politicized. The altar may be an altar to God, but it is equally an altar to the flag, to patriotism, to the myth of the "good Christian citizen." The religious body becomes a symbol of morality and obedience. Even sincere acts of devotion are repurposed to serve the machinery of cultural control.

I remember the church where I spent Sunday mornings as a child. Families arrived in matching outfits, children fidgeting in choreographed rows, parents nodding as though every eye in the room was watching them. Tears were expected. Confession was expected. Devotion, if performed incorrectly, could become cause for public correction or quiet shame. I watched children struggle to reconcile their natural curiosity and defiance with the strict choreography of obedience. I watched parents bend under the weight of expectations imposed not only by God, but by the community itself.

Even at its most benevolent, the Flesh is dangerous. It disciplines and it codifies. It has no other goal than to socialize compliance. And when minority families enter this environment, the tension doubles: the weight of belonging collides with the weight of marginalization. A family might be praised for their faith, but simultaneously punished, subtly or openly, for their difference. Obedience becomes survival; deviation becomes risk.

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Part 3, The Revelation

Scripture has been edited in marble,
each verse trimmed to suit the crown.
What was once a table for the hungry
has been refinished into a throne.
Beneath it, the crumbs still gleam faintly,
memory of a meal that fed without price.

The name lingers like incense-
sweet, choking, everywhere.
It rises from banners, from coins,
from the lips of those who trade grace for votes.
Each syllable a currency,
each prayer a contract.

Somewhere, the fields where forgiveness once bloomed
have been paved into parking lots for temples.
The shepherd's crook has turned to scepter,
and mercy now comes with a receipt.

The prophets are quiet,
their mouths full of gold dust.
The choirs sing to empty skies,
and the silence that answers
is mistaken for approval.

Still, in the cracks of the cathedrals,
in the ruins of every televised benediction,
a faint hum remains.
Sound of truth refusing burial,
the sound of a kingdom that never asked for walls.

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The embodiment of belief turned into social machinery, scripture has been edited, polished, and repurposed not to feed the soul, but to feed power. Every verse is measured to suit crowns, agendas, and political narratives. What was once a table for the hungry has been refinished into a throne. Beneath it, crumbs still gleam faintly: a memory of a meal that fed without price, a reminder of what faith might have been.

And yet, the world built upon that faith rises almost like incense, sweet, choking, unavoidable. It ascends from banners, coins, microphones, and the lips of those who trade grace for influence. Every syllable becomes currency. Every prayer becomes a contract. The language of salvation is now the language of obligation, the medium through which obedience is purchased, measured, and enforced.

Somewhere, fields that once bloomed with forgiveness, compassion, and mercy have been paved over. Churches now sit on concrete, asphalt, or digital screens. Beneath the gleam of altars and podiums, the shepherd's crook has turned into a scepter. Mercy, once freely given, now comes with a receipt, a disclaimer, a ledger line. The prophets are quiet. Their mouths are full of gold dust. Choirs sing, but the skies remain as empty as their verses, and silence is mistaken for approval.

Families bend, children shrink, communities internalize surveillance and compliance as ritual. Minority communities, already navigating the weight of systemic inequities, are forced to perform devotion while simultaneously negotiating other forms of oppression: racial marginalization, cultural erasure, socioeconomic precarity. The altar is not neutral. It literally cannot be because it is a stage, a measuring stick, a site where morality, obedience, and social worth are monitored and codified.

And yet, in the cracks of cathedrals, in the ruins of televised benedictions and social media sermons, a faint hum persists. The sound of truth refusing burial. The whisper of mercy that cannot be fully commodified. The flicker of possibility that faith might still, somehow, breathe freely. It is faint, fragile, and often ignored but it does exist. It reminds me that the kingdom that once asked for nothing now demands everything, yet even within the machinery, human agency and compassion persist.

The Revelation is not comforting, I think. It is a reckoning of sorts. A reflection of what faith becomes when language, ritual, and devotion are harnessed by power: a structure that polices, disciplines, and extracts, even from the most faithful. But it is also a reminder that faith is not inherently machinery. Even here, in the spaces of control, the whispers, the cracks, the unnoticed acts of resistance remind us that belief, care, and humanity cannot be fully silenced.

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Epilogue

I've seen this play out in subtle and devastating ways. A child chastised for asking too much during Sunday school. A mother pressured to discipline her child in ways that felt unnatural and violent, simply because the church said it was holy. A family that gave all they had in tithes, only to see the preacher purchase new cars for his children. A teen struggling to reconcile desire, identity, and doctrine, constantly told that questioning God is questioning God's authority.

In a way, I too, have contributed to it all. I am not free of such a sin, it would seem.

But I've also seen resilience. I've seen whispered prayers, quiet acts of care, moments of doubt that are never punished but never celebrated. These are the fragments of what faith could have been, before it became infrastructure, before it became performance, before it became Empire.

All of these things leave marks. On children. On families. On communities. On identity itself. And those marks persist long after the sermons end, the lights dim, and the stage is cleared. For me, growing up in this world has been a constant negotiation. Between obedience and self-expression, between love and fear, between cultural identity and imposed identity. Between faith and autonomy as well. I have witnessed families fracture, communities conform, children shrink, parents bend. I have witnessed hope diverted into ritualized performance. And yet, I also recognize those small resistances. They remind me that faith is not

inherently machinery, not inherently discipline. Faith is, at its core, human. Compassionate. Loving. Vulnerable.

This manifesto is my reflection, my protest, my reckoning. Even when faith is wielded as empire, even when doctrine and ritual serve control, there are cracks. And in those cracks, humanity persists, as does possibility. Resistance, indeed, persists.

Faith was never meant to be infrastructure. It was meant to be human, vulnerable, alive.

And in the smallest acts of resistance, it still is.