

FEATURE

American Idol

Twenty years ago he was a ditchdigger living on welfare. Today he's one of the most powerful— and one of the richest—preachers in America. Can T.D. JAKES get an amen?



By William Martin

August 2006



IN 1998 “NEW YORK TIMES” RELIGION WRITER Laurie Goodstein called to ask me a familiar question: “Who is going to be the next Billy Graham?” More specifically, she asked if I thought that T. D. Jakes was a likely candidate to assume the mantle of “America’s Pastor.” Since Goodstein had contacted me because I’m an ostensible expert, I found it a bit embarrassing to tell her the truth: I had never heard of T. D. Jakes. I felt a bit better when her subsequent story acknowledged that Jakes was “not well known among experts who follow rising evangelists.” Still, I tuned my antenna to pick up signals from this apparent new star in the constellations I track. It was worth the effort. It is unlikely that anyone, regardless of talent and commitment, will ever achieve the singular eminence accorded to Billy Graham. That said, it is equally true that few, if any, contemporary religious figures can match the prodigious talent, driving ambition, entrepreneurial genius, commanding presence, rhetorical power, and tangible accomplishment manifested by the senior pastor of Dallas’s 30,000-member Potter’s House, Bishop Thomas Dexter Jakes.

Barely 49, with three decades of ministry under his collar, Jakes has written more than thirty books, at least a dozen of which have been best-sellers. The

latest, *Mama Made the Difference*, reached number four on the *New York Times* Advice list in less than a month this spring. His weekly television program has long been one of the most watched on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, and he now appears on Black Entertainment Television and other outlets as well. His 1999 appearance at the Georgia Dome drew 87,500 people, smashing the venue's single-event record held by none other than Billy Graham. His music albums have won numerous major awards, and a 2004 movie called *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*, which he wrote, produced, and appeared in, was so successful that Sony Pictures signed him to produce up to nine more films over the next three years, on topics of his choosing.

In light of these accomplishments and continued attention from the media—Time called him “America’s best preacher” in a 2001 cover story and put him on the cover again in 2005 as one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America—I have been surprised to discover how many people, particularly Anglos who don’t watch religious television, have never heard of him. Even in Dallas, many folks know only that he’s “that black preacher” and perhaps that he enjoys an opulent lifestyle, probably with money cadged from poor people. That level of awareness is bound to change; the ambivalent assessment may linger awhile. A complex man, Jakes is difficult to encompass and impossible to pigeonhole. He has a deep sense of the injustice and injury wrought by slavery and racism, but he eschews the confrontational approach of some civil rights leaders in favor of efforts to cultivate cordial relations with those at the centers of power, including occupants of the Oval Office. He rose to fame on the strength of his sensitive understanding and support for abused women, yet he holds a traditional view of men as heads of their households and primary providers. Like many Pentecostal preachers, he proclaims that Christianity and prosperity can sleep comfortably in the same manger, but he’d rather teach his flock the value of starting their own businesses and putting money into 401(k) accounts than have them believe that cheerful givers will automatically prosper or rest content with the promise of pie-in-the-sky by and by. He preaches and practices liberation of the poor and criticizes business and government for ignoring their condition, but he has gained great wealth by embracing and fully exploiting the free-market capitalism that exacerbates

their plight. He encourages generosity, yet he cuts shrewd financial deals and brooks little resistance from those who challenge him. He believes that homosexuality is sinful, but he chides religious conservatives for allowing abortion and same-sex marriage to trump all other questions of morality and politics. And so it goes.

To get some understanding of his power, one needs to see Bishop Jakes at home, in the Potter's House, named for the passage in Jeremiah 18:2: "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words." To the staff and congregation at the Potter's House, he is not "the bishop" but simply "Bishop," even when spoken of in the third person. His wife, Serita, is known and addressed as "First Lady." The two Sunday morning services, at eight and eleven-thirty, last about two and a half hours each. The first hour includes offerings from one or more of the church's numerous musical groups—a "praise team" of instrumentalists and singers, a youth orchestra that plays Bach, a chorale that specializes in classical church music, or the Before His Throne Dance Ministry, a troupe of lithe women twirling long ribbons as they pay homage to the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." And, of course, on most Sundays, a large traditional gospel choir will have the eight-thousand-seat auditorium throbbing with jubilee for Jesus. The first hour also includes the "Potter's House News," a slick video review of programs at the church, and five to ten minutes of warm and widespread mingling. On my first visit, I hugged or shook hands with more than fifty people as the orchestra, organ, choir, and congregation proclaimed, "This is the Lord's church!"

Jakes is built for leadership. He stands six feet two inches and weighs between 250 and 300 pounds, and his massive shaved head is supported by a nineteen-inch neck and shoulders to match. He can look deadly serious with an intimidating frown, but when he smiles, as he often does, a wide gap between his teeth gives him a playful mien, and the gray goatee is more grandfatherly than sinister. He dresses like a man confident of his taste, sometimes choosing banker's gray but just as likely to wear designer suits of bright gold or copper hue. Some are double-breasted, but others fasten with four or five buttons all the way to mid-sternum. Most of the jackets extend

lower than the norm, and the trouser legs are at least twelve inches wide, adding to the impression of great substance.

Like his appearance, Jakes's voice, a powerful, raspy-rich baritone, commands attention. It is the voice of an orator, indeed of the most compelling kind of orator, the black preacher. Using an outline projected onto the JumboTron screens but speaking without notes, Jakes usually starts by having the congregation read aloud, from the King James Version, the "assignment" for the day. On the morning of my visit, his sermon was called "Building Between Storms" and was based on the parable of the two men who built houses, one on the sand and one on the rock (Matthew 7:24–27). Jakes assured his listeners that "storms are *gonna* come," emphasized the importance of a firm foundation, kept them involved with regular instructions ("Touch three people and say, 'Don't let the storm stop you'"), illustrated his points with pertinent applications to situations in their lives, then hammered his theme home by repeating the crucial message—"Build! Build! Build!"—his rising voice pulling his flock to an emotional peak, then stopping before ascending to the next height. At times, he paused without a word for as long as thirty seconds, wiping the sweat from his face and head with a maroon hand towel, and just looked over the congregation or walked slowly across the big stage. And when he knew he had made a telling point, he would cock his head, put his hands in his pockets, give his big trouser legs a few shakes, and say, "Oh, my God! Somebody better grab my coattails. I feel the anointing of the Holy God in this place!"

On the final climb, sometimes known as "putting the gravy on it," he pulled out the extra syllable so characteristic of black preaching: "Through sickness-*ha*, through trials-*ha*, through aggravations-*ha*, through layoffs-*ha*, through crisis-*ha*, through lies-*ha*, through adversity-*ha*, build! Build!! Build!!!" The organist punctuated each phrase with an increasingly louder pulse as almost everyone in the building stood up, swaying, clapping, raising hands in agreement and resolution, tears streaming down many a face. As if ignoring the evidence before him, Jakes turned his back on the crowd, walked slowly away, then asked, "Anybody still standing? I want the still-standing folk to give God the praise this morning." At that, the band broke

out in a jazzy celebration of lives built upon the rock, and I recalled the words of Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration: “Lord, it is good for us to be here.”

Whence cometh this man?

Though he has experienced poverty, Jakes was not born into it and certainly never considered it as fate. His father, Ernest, expanded his job as a janitor into a thriving cleaning service with more than fifty employees and a contract to clean grocery stores and the West Virginia capitol building, in Charleston, where the family lived. His mother, Odith, taught school but earned extra money as an Avon dealer and by buying and selling real estate. She also grew vegetables and allowed Jakes to sell them. “When he was very young, he would bag up the collard greens and take them around the neighborhood and sell them for maybe a dollar a bag,” his sister, Jacqueline, recalled. As he got older, he cut grass, delivered newspapers, and sold Avon and Amway products. As if confirming the observation of a former neighbor that “those Jakeses were some selling fools,” Jacqueline said, “It seems to run in our family. He just got the spirit.”

Although Jakes doubtless observed and absorbed some of his father’s strong work ethic, it was Mama who made the difference. Odith was, by all accounts, a remarkable woman. One of fifteen children, thirteen of whom graduated from college (as did their mother, in her fifties), she entered Tuskegee Institute, in Alabama, at age fifteen and completed the four-year program in three. She taught her three children to cook and sew, but her lasting legacy ran far deeper than practical skills. As a frequent speaker for events sponsored by her sorority and educational associations, she insisted that her children memorize poetry, particularly the work of black poets. Before he entered first grade, Jakes could recite James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (the black national anthem) and was soon able to quote so much Scripture that one of his nicknames was Bible Boy. Odith often took her son with her when she spoke; one day, when he was only six, he confidently announced, “Today, I travel with you and listen to you speak, but the time will come when you will travel with me and I will speak.”

The Jakes family suffered a harsh jolt when the boy was ten and his three-hundred-pound father developed kidney failure, brought on by high blood pressure. For the next six years, until his father died in 1972, he helped operate a rudimentary dialysis machine, mopping up the blood that spilled from it during frequent malfunctions. Jakes had been brought up in the Baptist Church and had led a youth choir since he was twelve, and the uncertainty and trauma of those adolescent years drove him deeper into a life of faith, leading him to visit Charleston's Greater Emmanuel Gospel Tabernacle, where he received the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues and, at age sixteen, began his new life as a Pentecostal Christian. He also felt a strong conviction that God was calling him to the ministry. He dropped out of high school during his senior year, in part to assist his mother, who was having health problems, but he soon completed his GED and enrolled at West Virginia State College. A job at Union Carbide paid well, but he found it so difficult to keep up with his studies that he dropped out of school once again, never to return as a formal student. (In the nineties he earned a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and a doctorate in ministry, all by correspondence from Friends International Christian University.) This did, however, give him the opportunity to see if he had a future in the pulpit. He preached his first sermon in 1976 at age nineteen and was shortly afterward licensed to preach by the Greater Emmanuel Churches. For the next two years, he traversed the rugged mountains and valleys of West Virginia in a silver Trans Am, preaching wherever he could get an invitation, no matter how modest the venue, and rapidly built a reputation as a powerful pulpiter. In 1979 he established a storefront church in the tiny town of Montgomery, about thirty miles southeast of Charleston, giving it the impressive name of Greater Emmanuel Temple of Faith, despite its having only ten members, including his sister, Jacqueline. "If there were eight people in the room, he preached like there were eighty thousand," she recalled.

One young woman who was impressed with Jakes's talent was Serita Ann Jamison, a coal miner's daughter who sent him secret letters of admiration until he approached her after services one day, flashed his great gap-toothed smile, and asked, "Do you know where a bachelor can get a home-cooked meal?" After dating for six months, he and Serita married, in 1981. The young

couple fell on hard times, though, the following year when the Union Carbide plant closed, costing them and their new twin sons their main source of income. For the next decade the family was mired in grinding poverty, as the money Jakes made digging ditches was sometimes not enough to keep the gas and electricity connected and the only way to put food on the table was resorting to welfare, which he found humiliating.

Though the family's financial situation was precarious, Jakes continued to lead his little flock, and the ministry began to bear modest fruit. In 1984 he moved the church to the neighboring town of Smithers, where he turned a dilapidated movie theater into a worship center, and he was ordained as a regional bishop of the Greater Emmanuel Churches in 1987. Three years later, in part because many of his members were already driving in from Charleston to hear him preach, Jakes relocated to South Charleston, where the congregation quickly grew to around three hundred.

As his church expanded, the number of women who came to Jakes for counseling also grew. After hearing repeated accounts of women who had been abused by fathers and uncles and boyfriends, he decided to teach a Sunday school class just for women. Though he had planned it as a one-shot effort, they urged him to continue, and he did for six weeks. When a pastor friend invited him to offer a concentrated version of the series in Pittsburgh, Jakes agreed. Recalling the story of a woman Jesus healed of a long-standing "spirit of infirmity" (Luke 13:10–17), he called the program "*Woman, Thou Art Loosed*." When 1,300 women showed up, Jakes realized that he was on to something significant, but he could hardly have imagined how dramatically his life was about to change.

Despite his relative obscurity during this period, Jakes had been a diligent networker, attending conferences and using what contacts he had to help him build ties with the luminaries of black Pentecostalism. In 1993 they invited him to preach at their most important conference, a Tulsa gathering known as AZUSA, named for the 1906 Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, from which modern Pentecostalism exploded across America. Jakes delivered a crystallized version of his classes for women, once again giving it

the name “Woman, Thou Art Loosed.” The reaction was electrifying. As biographer Shayne Lee described it in his book *T. D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*, “Thousands of women were jumping, screaming, and crying because Jakes had put his finger on their pain. Some were awestruck in catatonic stupors after being mesmerized by his message... . No other male preacher had diagnosed women’s struggles so eloquently and effectively, and no one with such precision had ever articulated women’s anguish.” According to Lee, sales of audiotapes and videos of Jakes’ sermon brought in more than \$20,000.

The AZUSA triumph led to a weekly program on the Trinity Broadcasting Network and to urgent pleas from around the country asking Jakes to bring his women’s conference to other cities. Because he could not accept more than a fraction of the invitations, and also because he recognized the insistent knocking on his door as a golden opportunity, Jakes poured himself into capturing the essence of his conferences in his first book, titled—no surprise—*Woman, Thou Art Loosed*. Using \$15,000 of his own money, Jakes paid Albany Publishing, a small Christian publisher, to produce the book. He would never have to do that again. The first printing of 5,000 copies sold out in less than a month. Before long, boosted by promotion on Jakes’s television program and personal appearances, sales topped 200,000 and continued to sell at a brisk pace, with more than 2 million sales recorded to date.

Spurred on by his success, he relocated the Temple of Faith once again, this time to the predominantly white Charleston suburb of Cross Lanes, and quickly saw his congregation triple in size, to more than a thousand. He established T. D. Jakes Ministries as a nonprofit entity to generate and handle income for his broadcast ministry and soon moved his TBN broadcast to a prime-time Sunday night slot. He also began appearing on BET and hosting a syndicated radio program. Not long afterward, he created T. D. Jakes Enterprises, owned and operated by Jakes as a for-profit way to market his books and videos. He organized regional “Woman, Thou Art Loosed” conferences around the country and initiated “ManPower” conferences to encourage African American men to assume the roles of faithful husbands, caring fathers, and dependable providers. By 1996 the energetic pastor who

had endured more than a decade of anonymity and poverty had suddenly ascended to the top ranks of African American preachers. And along the way, he had become a wealthy man.

JAKES SOON DISCOVERED THAT, in West Virginia as elsewhere, something there is that does not love a rich preacher. Although his extravagances were neither unknown nor apparently resented by his parishioners, Jakes was irritated when local newspapers criticized him for driving expensive cars and purchasing a mansion that included an indoor swimming pool and a bowling alley, and he decided to relocate his church one more time. He had already felt somewhat boxed in by the limited air travel in and out of Charleston and perhaps also by the fact that only about 3 percent of West Virginians were African American, far fewer than lived in the entire city of Dallas. So when he learned that Dallas-based healing evangelist W. V. Grant had been sent to prison for failing to render unto Caesar an appropriate share of his income, Jakes swooped in and scooped up Grant's five-thousand-seat Eagle's Nest church, office complex, and TV facilities for \$3.2 million. Accompanied by fifty families, most of whom were employed in one of his operations, Jakes established the Potter's House in 1996. The first service attracted more than two thousand people and reportedly raised some justified concern among the shepherds of rival flocks; within a few months, attendance had swelled to more than eight thousand, making the church one of the fastest growing in the country and the only one to claim Dallas Cowboys stars Deion Sanders and Emmitt Smith as members.

Now truly out of the box, Jakes continued to flourish. His national conferences drew phenomenal crowds; a gospel music CD—*Woman, Thou Art Loosed*—received a Dove award and a Grammy nomination; and a 1998 book, *The Lady, Her Lover, and Her Lord*, also aimed at women and heavily promoted by his new publisher, Penguin Putnam, quickly reached the best-seller list and stayed on it for months. Attendance at the Potter's House continued its explosive growth, requiring a new \$45 million worship center, which was consecrated in October 2000 and paid off in less than four years. At the same time, Jakes's personal fortunes grew dramatically, symbolized by his purchase of a stable of luxury cars, a Lockheed JetStar II, and a 10,000-

square-foot mansion valued at more than \$3 million on the shores of White Rock Lake, next door to Mount Vernon, the estate once owned by billionaire oilman H. L. Hunt.

AS WE SAT IN the executive suite of the Potter's House, sleekly furnished in chrome, glass, black marble, and yellow-beige leather, Jakes seemed relaxed and unpretentious, casually clad in gray trousers and a gray-and-black-striped long-sleeved sport shirt with a sizable but not flashy silver necklace barely showing at the collar. Neither defensive nor attempting to steer the conversation, he answered my questions thoughtfully, often with self-deprecating chuckles of awareness that no one could live up to the perfection some of his admirers attribute to him. "I'm not the Christ," he said. "I'm just a donkey the Christ rides on."

The Potter's House and Bishop Jakes are excellent examples of modern Pentecostalism, often called neo-Pentecostalism because the emphasis on distinctive doctrines, the rigid rejection of "the world" and its pleasures—alcohol, tobacco, movies, short skirts, makeup, and jewelry—and a sense that God looks on the poor more favorably than on the rich (but is waiting until Judgment Day to prove it) has largely given way to a nondenominational ethos that combines dynamic worship services that reflect secular styles, preaching focused more on practical living than on theological hairsplitting, and the enthusiastic support of prosperity. Such charismatic gifts as healing and speaking in tongues are still exercised, but less often and less publicly. Though some churches retain ties to a specific denomination, many, especially the megachurches, have chosen generic names such as Lakewood, Saddleback, Cornerstone, and Harvest Time Fellowship, lowering barriers to affiliation and giving pastors great leeway in developing a market-sensitive product and approach.

"I see Pentecostalism more as a way of life than as a denomination," Jakes conceded, but it would be inaccurate to characterize him as primarily a motivational speaker or his message as just another version of the prosperity gospel. He regularly hammers home the importance of Jesus' atoning death and resurrection—"He died ... for me! He rose ... for me!"—and the wonder-

working power in “the blood, the *blood*, the *BLOOD*” of the Lamb. He holds out Christ as the answer, here and hereafter, and chides those who pray more fervently for a new car or success in business than for the eternal salvation of a son or daughter.

Like most standard-issue prosperity preachers, Jakes places great emphasis on cheerful giving. When the time comes for the offering, the Potter’s House worshippers have been socialized to erupt with applause and joyful shouting as they wave envelopes containing their tithes, and he reminds them that “when tithes go up, blessings come down.” And yet he avoids depicting God as a magic gum ball machine—penny in, blessing out. Shayne Lee asserts that Jakes once subscribed to a cruder form of prosperity preaching, perhaps to justify his own sudden wealth, but agrees that his current approach focuses much more on non-miraculous economic empowerment. For his part, Jakes is at pains to deny being a simplistic prosperity preacher. “I do believe God blesses us when we give,” he explained, “but I don’t think that’s the end of the story. Jesus said, ‘My people perish from a lack of knowledge.’ So when I do a major conference, it’s not uncommon to see a Suze Orman talking about investments. Many times, our community is hearing that for the first time. ‘What is a mutual fund?’ ‘What are stocks and bonds?’ This is not ‘Send me \$10.99 and God is going to bless you with a new house.’”

Jakes’s outreach isn’t limited to the United States, however. Last fall, he led more than three hundred African Americans on a humanitarian and evangelistic trip to Kenya. He paid for the digging of six water wells and five water stations in a drought-stricken region and brought a team of medical professionals who treated more than six thousand Kenyans and built a clinic. The trip ended with a worship service in Nairobi’s Uhuru Park that attracted almost a million people. In our conversation, Jakes spoke movingly about walking through the Gate of No Return on the Ivory Coast, “a gate they said we would never go back through again. Caucasian ministries have done a great job of evangelizing throughout Africa, but I think there is a different impact when African Americans come, because for us it is more than winning souls. It is a family reunion. It is much like a set of twins who were separated at birth and raised in two different environments, meeting again as

adults for the first time. Part of my history is hidden from my eyes and beyond my touch, and when I touch Africa, I touch a part of my soul that aches for definition.”

To the criticism that his message may work in America but not in desperately poor third-world countries, Jakes responded, “I’ve seen Christians go into third-world countries and pass out tracts and come back and brag about how many people got saved but leave them starving, eating out of trash cans, selling their bodies for prostitution to get something to eat for their families. My approach is very pragmatic. I am no longer interested in throwing Thanksgiving dinners for homeless people once a year to give me a good feeling. What are they going to eat the other three hundred sixty-four days of the year?”

JAKES ACKNOWLEDGES that he does not look back on his own season of poverty as the good old days but insists his wealth has not changed him deep down. And he has no qualms about being rich or spending money on worldly goods. “Many people,” he has written, “view accumulating wealth as unchristian behavior. There’s a tendency to think that the Christian must dress like a monk and live in a monastery, or he or she is not sincere. Well, I bring a message of liberation. The Lord does not mean for you to forsake all ambitions in order to serve him. He just wants to be your priority.” Jakes is also quick to note that his wealth comes not from his salary as a preacher but from his success as an author, as a creator and producer of albums and movies, and as a businessman. And he points with deserved satisfaction to an article in the May 2006 issue of *Black Enterprise* magazine that notes that he “oversees two kingdoms, divided by a carefully constructed firewall,” with two separate staffs, two sets of accountants, using separate financial institutions, to avoid any hint of impropriety. Ole Anthony, who heads the Dallas-based Trinity Foundation and keeps a watchdog’s eye on television evangelists—he played a role in bringing down W. V. Grant and in exposing another charlatan from Dallas, Robert Tilton—disapproves of Jakes’s lavish lifestyle, but he points out that all available evidence indicates that he is an honest man and runs a clean operation. “I don’t believe the man has a bone of larceny in his body,” Anthony said.

It is worth noting that the existence of two sovereign kingdoms does not preclude diplomatic relations, and T. D. Jakes Enterprises unquestionably benefits hugely from its symbiotic relationship with the Potter's House and T. D. Jakes Ministries. The church and the viewers who contribute to his ministry pay the tab for Jakes's telecasts, which, in addition to carrying the message of the day and drawing people to the Potter's House, serve as infomercials for his books, CDs, DVDs, and other products. They also advertise at conferences in which these same products, including videos and tapes of conference presentations, are sold. Jakes has on several occasions matched the theme of his large conferences to the title of his latest book. And when he strikes the mother lode, he mines it with impressive tenacity. The classic example, of course, is *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*. In addition to the original book, issued in hardback three years after it appeared in paperback, Jakes has written a WTAL workbook and devotional guide; produced a WTAL music album, a WTAL cookbook, and a WTAL pink Bible, with pink pages containing his advice to women interspersed with the Scriptures; written and produced a successful touring play by the same title; turned that into a novel and then into a movie; then promoted and marketed all these at his church, on television, on speaking tours, and at his conferences. Further, he reworked many of the same ideas in half a dozen other books designed for women. Similarly, when he realized the attraction of gender-specific themes, he began his "ManPower" conferences and wrote *Loose That Man and Let Him Go!*, *T. D. Jakes Speaks to Men!*, *So You Call Yourself a Man?*, and his latest, *He Motions—Even Strong Men Struggle*.

As these efforts indicate, Jakes never strays far from the themes that first brought him to fame and wealth: women, men, and the complicated relations between them. He remains a strong advocate for women, defending their right to preach and serve as pastors and featuring them prominently in his conferences. He urges them to take leading roles in the church and in other realms of their lives, as they do at the Potter's House, and he pokes sarcastic fun at patriarchal situations in which women "can virtually do anything that needs doing as long as they let men have the voice and take credit for it." Yet he tells men, "as the man and priest of [their] house," that they should exercise spiritual authority in the home.

Similarly, he insists that women should receive equal pay for equal work, but he warns that a man with a successful wife may feel intimidated by her achievements. “Anytime the woman is the primary breadwinner,” he has written, “it destroys the man’s self-esteem.”

Few topics are more important to Jakes than having men take responsibility as husbands and fathers. In *He Motions*, he decries the high fatherless rate among African Americans, notes that nearly three quarters of juvenile and adult inmates are fatherless, and points to the destructive effects on future generations. Given this sensitivity, Jakes shows justifiable pride in the fact that, unlike in most black churches, men make up 45 percent of the Potter’s House congregation, and a visitor immediately notices that almost all of them are dressed for success, wearing suits and other accoutrements of the upwardly mobile American male.

Jakes conceded that, despite the encouragement he gives to women, “I probably am pretty traditional [with respect to gender roles]. I divide the roles of the family much like the Scriptures do. In a corporation, if you don’t have an organizational chart, you have chaos. There has to be some structure, some order as to who’s going to do what, no matter what. It doesn’t mean one is any better or worse than the other. There is equality in terms of worth and value and contribution.” His view of gender roles, however, goes well beyond organizational charts and division of labor, beginning with what he perceives to be a close connection between biology and psychological and emotional inclination. “The receptacle is the female and the plug is the male,” he wrote in *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*. “Women were made like receptacles. They were made to be receivers. Men were made to be givers, physically, sexually and emotionally, and by providing for others. In every area, women were made to receive.” He describes women as naturally soft, tender, and delicate and longs for the “gentle femininity that once sat on porches and sipped tea in the gentle breezes of softer times.” Men, by contrast, are naturally hard, aggressive, closed, yet vulnerable and in need of reassurance. “Ask any woman who has ever loved a great man, and she will tell you that she has seen a little boy peeking out of the window of his soul... .

He is wrapped in hard muscles, but beneath this rugged exterior are the ingredients that teddy bears are made of.”

He urges men to free themselves from the burden of macho stereotypes. He has ordered subscriptions to *GQ* magazine for all the men in his organization to expose them to a healthier form of masculinity and praises them for indulging in pleasures such as gourmet meals, massages, and pedicures. Yet elsewhere he says, “Let the male be masculine and the female be feminine! It is a sin for a man to misrepresent himself by conducting himself as a woman. I am not merely speaking of homosexuality. I’m also talking about men who are feminine in their mannerisms.” He regards masculine women in the same light and asserts that gender confusion may well be traced to an abusive upbringing: “Every time you see a bra-less woman in men’s jeans, choosing to act like a man rather than to sleep with one; every time you see a handsome young man who could have been someone’s father, walking like someone’s mother—you may be looking child abuse in the face.”

Although Jakes believes homosexual behavior is sinful and refers to it as a choice, he argues that the sin is no worse than heterosexual sin and repeatedly condemns the mistreatment of gays. “The church has done a poor job in many cases of not standing up when there has been the abuse of gay people,” he told me. “I think that strengthens the position some gay people have that the church doesn’t care. We should care whenever anybody is beaten, killed, or bashed in any way. We should speak out, whether we agree with them and their choices or not.”

Jakes is not prudish about sex, and his writings provide frequent evidence that he has given the matter considerable thought. He writes of “climbing into bed for a little after-dark fun” and reminds wives, “You must realize that sex is important to a man. Rationing out sex to him in the same way you give a dog a bone if he sits up or rolls over may have dire consequences.” He also reminds men that good sex is more than plugs and receptacles: “Being a good lover is more than hips, lips, and fingertips ... I am convinced that the woman’s special spot is in her heart. It is there that her nerve centers flash lights and honk horns.” He recommends sensual baths and slow dancing to

sultry love songs and acknowledges that “as people age there is need for more ‘ramp-up time.’” He does not recommend satin sheets, noting that they are cold in the winter, hot in the summer, and their slipperiness destroys all semblance of balance and leaves men “grabbing for the bedpost ... to turn around in the sack, much less try an acrobatic feat of passion.”

Though he believes sex should be reserved for the marital bed, Jakes does not ask people to deny their sexuality but suggests they direct that energy toward God. He exhorts single women to pamper themselves: “Light a candle in the bathroom, play some soft notes, and slip into a hot tub with scented bath beads. Lie in the water and raise your hands in the air and praise the God that blessed you to be alive ...” Elsewhere he writes, “The Lord wants to make sweet love to you ... He wants you to come in at the end of the day and say, ‘Oh, Lord ... I’m so glad I have You in my life ... Hold me. Touch me, strengthen me. Let me hold You ... I’ve set the night aside for us. Tonight is our night ... My body is Yours. Nobody touches me but You.’” Jakes knows a truth that the secular world has long understood: Sex sells.

WHEN I ASKED Jakes the standard question about Jesus’ pronouncement that it is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:24), he gave what has been for centuries the standard answer: The “eye of the needle” was an opening in the wall of Jerusalem sufficiently small that to pass through it, a camel had to get down on its knees. “I think what Jesus was teaching was humility,” he said. “We have a responsibility, like the camel, to humble ourselves, by giving back to people, by helping people who are less fortunate. I think God doesn’t mind you having things; he minds things having you.” In fact, there is no historical evidence for such an opening in the wall of Jerusalem, and it seems plausible that Jesus used this hyperbolic metaphor less to lay down an impossible rule than to emphasize a point made in the previous verse—“A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.” That is to say, wealth has an uncommon ability to divert one’s attention from matters of the spirit.

One of the strongest, though seldom openly voiced, criticisms of Jakes is that his embrace of capitalism extends to a monopoly of a profitable market.

According to Lee, Jakes is generous about sharing the platform with other preachers and musicians who appear at his conferences and typically offers an impressive honorarium, but he controls the rights to tapes and videos of their performances. When a stunning woman known as Prophetess Juanita Bynum delivered a riveting sermon at a Jakes conference for singles in Dallas in 1998, confessing her powerful sexual longing and lustful pursuits, the video, “No More Sheets,” quickly caught fire and sold more than a million copies, making it the most popular sermon ever given at a Jakes conference. After Bynum mounted a legal challenge to Jakes over rights to the sermon, she soon found herself shut out of the lucrative preaching appointments to which she had grown accustomed. “It is a known fact in ministry circles that Jakes blacklisted her,” Lee told me.

In his book, he quotes an anonymous pastor who observed that “Juanita Bynum thought she had the power to stand up to Jakes but didn’t realize how truly powerful he is.” Eventually, Jakes and Bynum made peace, culminating in her getting down on her knees before tens of thousands of women at a 2003 women’s conference in Houston’s Reliant Stadium and asking Jakes to forgive her, noting that her behavior had moved God to cut off opportunities for her to preach, to rid her of her pride. “She projected it onto the Lord,” Lee said, “but insiders know that it was Jakes.”

Lee, who regards Jakes as enormously talented and unquestionably sincere in his beliefs, insists that any treatment of the man that overlooks his calculating business side is inadequate. “At the very core of his identity,” he said, “he is both a businessman and a preacher. If you minimize either one, you miss Bishop Jakes. Bishop is one of the greatest metaphors of the American experience—not just the capitalism but the tenacious spirit that transcends life’s situations and also seeing yourself and everything you do as needing to be commercialized and commodified.”

AS IMPORTANT AS the church is to Jakes’s financial empire, it is far more than simply a stage, studio, and sales machine for his sermons, books, CDs, and videos. Looking beyond the power of its pastor and behind the scenes of the dynamic worship services reveals a remarkable network of nearly sixty

separate ministries, many expressly designed to help people move on up. In addition to the standard offerings of the modern megachurch—Bible classes, multiple choirs, counseling services, evangelistic outreach, help for the homeless, an AIDS ministry, Scouting programs, fitness training, and sports teams—the Potter’s House offers intensive mentoring and training programs for youth, with such ego-boosting titles as Seed of Abraham, Judah’s Lions, Esther’s Court, and the Potter’s House Diplomats (PhD), who receive instruction about national and international issues in preparation for assuming leadership roles later in life. The Michael’s Angels group offers support to teenage single mothers; the King’s Daughters “explore the beauty of being a virtuous woman”; and Rahab, a group named for a woman of Jericho who had some blemishes on her résumé, works to restore confidence and strength to women suffering from “the illusion of failure.” A continuing-education program offers classes on leadership and investing, skills also nurtured in the God’s Leading Ladies and the Mighty Men of Valor classes and the School of Kings Economic Kingdom Building class. Even ushers undergo training to become “professional ministry technicians.” For those seeking a respite from self-improvement, the Wassup Fellowship promises nothing more uplifting than “talk, networking, and fun.”

One of the most far-reaching and impressive endeavors is the Potter’s House prison ministry. Led by Larry Gardner, a former chaplain in the Texas prison system, 150 volunteers hold services in 28 Texas facilities at least once a month. Beyond that, Potter’s House services, religious-education classes, and a life-skills program beam into 300 prisons nationwide via satellite and 600 more receive copies of the bishop’s books, CDs, and DVDs. “What we’re doing now [in the criminal justice system] is simply not working,” Gardner said. “We can’t imprison our way out of our problems. We need to offer people another chance.”

For a fortunate few, the investment involves participation in the Texas Offender Reentry Initiative, a Potter’s House program that works with newly released criminals—currently about four hundred a year—to provide them with such crucial resources as housing, employment, job readiness and coaching, GED training, alcohol and drug counseling, and help with fitting

back into their families. The program currently operates in four cities—Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, and San Antonio—and director Tina Naidoo hopes to have a Houston unit up and running soon. Neither Jakes nor his program directors actively challenge aspects of the criminal justice system that have led to the disproportionate imprisonment of African Americans and Hispanics, but they are clearly aware of such inequities. Jakes speaks out regularly in favor of restoring the right to vote to people who have been incarcerated and laments the difficulties poor people have in obtaining justice because they can't afford a lawyer.

The most ambitious of the Potter's House ministries operate under the umbrella of the Metroplex Economic Development Corporation, a nonprofit entity whose programs include extensive practical instruction in such matters as financial management, home ownership, and entrepreneurial activity. In a mammoth effort newly under way, the MEDC is developing an entire residential community, to be known as Capella Park, on a four-hundred-acre tract just across the highway from the church and Dallas Baptist University. When completed, the development will include 1,500 homes, ranging in price from \$120,000 to \$400,000 and situated along broad boulevards and expansive greenways. At the center will stand Clay Academy, a private Christian preK–8 school that already operates in another location but will soon move into an impressive \$11 million state-of-the-art facility scheduled to begin its first classes this fall.

The respect engendered by the scope and soundness of such efforts has enabled the Potter's House to join with other organizations to meet both immediate and long-term needs. When Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast last August, Jakes raised \$1 million in less than an hour on the telephone, and the local CBS affiliate broadcast live from the church as hundreds of volunteers helped people locate one another and matched offers of housing, transportation, employment, food, medical care, and cash to those in need. It was this superb showing that led to Jakes' serving as the homilist at the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance a few days later and to his being chosen by former presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill

Clinton to help distribute \$20 million to churches and religious organizations following Katrina and Rita.

Because of his unapologetic championing of capitalism and his cordial relationship with presidents present and past—during the Clinton impeachment hearings, Jakes said on *Larry King Live* that a pilot's personal life is less important than how well he flies a plane and compared those hounding the president to a lynch mob—some black leaders and liberal whites believe that Jakes has not used his influence and power to challenge unjust social and economic systems. He contends that he can be more effective by offering strong suggestions in private to the president and other leaders rather than screaming at them through a microphone. And he does not seem a likely candidate to be co-opted by the religious right or by political forces that enlist conservative Christians to support policies that have little to do with religion. “Go ahead and preach against abortion,” he told a Cincinnati audience, “but when you get through preaching against abortion, give us some milk up here so that we can feed the babies you told us we ought to have.” And when he spoke at the post-Katrina prayer service, he looked President Bush in the eye and asked, “What are you going to do?”

Jakes rejects the claim by some on the religious right that America is or was ever intended to be a Christian nation and has said, “As we continue to try to politicize God or market God or say that America is Christian or that God is with one [political] party or that God is here and not there, it only further points to the fact that we don't understand how big God is—and how great God is.” He also resists identifying with a political party. “It is simple for me,” he explained. “I pastor Republicans and Democrats. They don't come to hear me talk about that on Sunday morning. I preach the gospel. My role here is as pastor, not president. I tell them I'm not for the right wing. I'm not for the left wing. I'm for the whole bird. If you do that, the eagle can really fly.” As for his comfort with capitalism, he said, “If you just teach raw capitalism without teaching that the greater values of life are family and friends and love and commitment and spirituality, you are going to have a problem. By the same token, the church cannot allow all the wealth and political power to go to the world while we clap our hands and sing and wait on Christ to come.

It is very important that there be some power in the church to influence the community and the world.” Clearly, Bishop Jakes and his team at the Potter’s House are working and succeeding at that task. The Reverend William Bryan, the director of the intern program at Southern Methodist University’s Perkins School of Theology, observed that Jakes has brought power and influence to South Dallas, an area that has long been neglected by the rest of the city. “It’s hard to imagine that it could be done better,” Bryan said.

Despite remarkable success in allowing and enabling minorities to participate fully in American society and the consequent growth in the black middle and upper-middle classes, race and ethnicity still retain deep significance. Although modern Pentecostalism has generally returned to its original proclamation that “God is no respecter of persons” and that racial differences should be ignored, centuries of separation are hard to overcome. The Potter’s House Web site claims that 13 percent of its members are Caucasian—and that may be true—but the number of Anglos at the services I attended seemed smaller than that, though they were clearly present, fully participating, and likely felt more comfortable than people of color at mainline Protestant churches in, say, Highland Park.

The Potter’s House is still largely a black church, reaching down to rescue the fallen and disadvantaged but devoting much of its effort to providing support and encouragement to upwardly mobile African Americans—an extremely important cultural task. It seems easier and is certainly more common for a white preacher such as Houston’s Joel Osteen to attract large numbers of blacks and Hispanics than for a black preacher such as Jakes to attract significant numbers of whites and Hispanics. That could change. As black preachers become increasingly familiar to white viewers of religious television and as black megachurches meet similar needs and attract similar attention in other cities, whites may learn to look past unfamiliar or once-devalued cultural styles or, more positively, even embrace their vitality and richness. Black churches are already having a transformative effect on contemporary Pentecostalism, and Pentecostalism is arguably the most dynamic segment of contemporary Christianity, here and abroad. No

preacher, of any hue, seems better prepared to dominate that emerging landscape more compellingly than Bishop T. D. Jakes.