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Evangelist Charles Colson's final mission: Spiritually cloning himself

By [Michelle Boorstein](#), Published: March 21, 2011

Charles Colson assembles the newest members of his Christian army at a Loudoun County convention hall on a winter Saturday.

Seated before the aging Watergate-era felon-turned-evangelical leader are dozens of handpicked disciples: a woman who sings at patriotic events, a sports psychology professor, a real estate developer, a pharmaceutical salesman.

They've spent the year — and as much as \$4,000 — reading the books Colson reads, watching the movies he watches, praying the way he prays. It's all part of an ambitious effort by Colson to replicate his spiritual DNA and ensure that his vision of Christianity doesn't die when he does.

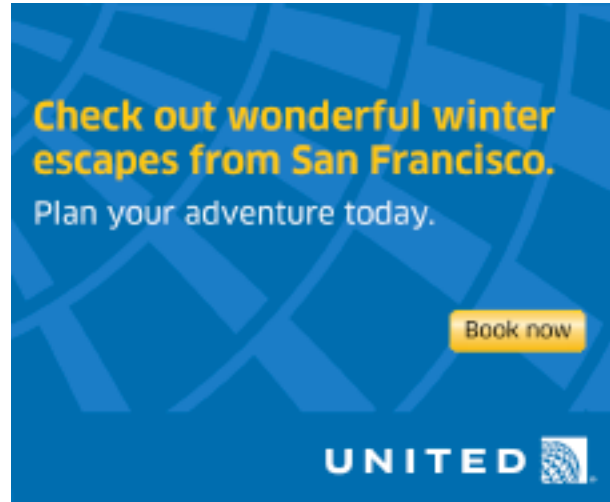
"This is the time for us to metastasize and impact society!" the gravelly-voiced [former Nixon aide](#) tells his rapt audience. "And this is a really, really urgent hour."

For decades after emerging from a federal penitentiary, Colson focused on building what has become the world's biggest prison ministry. Now, at 79, he has shifted his attention to the final mission of his remarkable life: saving what he regards as true Christianity from American extinction.

Time is running out.

There are no clear heirs to lead the movement that made conservative evangelicals a political force in the United States. No new Jerry Falwells, Pat Robertsons, James Dobsons or Charles Colsons. Even Franklin Graham, the son of legendary evangelist Billy Graham, is 58.

Like many other religious conservatives, Colson believes that his views about the inerrancy of the Bible and Jesus's role as the only path to salvation aren't being taught — not in schools and not in churches. Instead, he laments, those essential, unchanging tenets are being replaced by a seeker-driven



Christianity-lite, something not far from secularism and relativism.

Which is why he is working furiously, long after many men his age have hit the golf course.

Walking to lunch between weekend sessions in Virginia, Colson admits he is tired. He's sick of meetings. He calls himself an introvert who forces himself to globe-trot to spread his message.

He lectures, blogs and broadcasts a daily radio commentary that is also sent out via e-mail; the commentary reaches about 2 million followers each weekday. (He also serves as a panelist for [On Faith](#), The Post's online forum about religion and politics.) And he is molding hundreds of men and women eager to be his spiritual progeny.

"If Jesus Christ can pick some believers, zealots and prostitutes, and these people can change the world, then we can do the same. We don't need anything more," says one of Colson's followers, Steve King, a 57-year-old paddle-sports equipment salesman and former Olympic kayaker from Quebec.

They are called Centurions, a name that conjures battle-hardened Roman soldiers. They number 640, and their marching orders from their commander are clear — to expand Christ's kingdom.

"What this country needs," Colson declares, "is a movement."

'Christ rejects Colson'

Chuck Colson's biography defies a single tag: Nixon's dark side. Watergate scoundrel. Republican strategist. Adulterer. Drunk. Best-selling author. Prisoner advocate. Towering evangelist.

Long before he became a regular on top-10 lists of U.S. evangelical leaders, Colson was famous for being Richard Nixon's "hatchet man," the aide who created the president's infamous enemies' list. He was Nixon's lawyer by the time he was 38.

In 1974, he was indicted for conspiring to cover up the Watergate burglary that brought down the Nixon presidency. But he pleaded guilty to a separate charge of obstruction of justice for his role in trying to discredit Daniel Ellsberg, the military analyst who leaked the Pentagon Papers. He served seven months at a federal prison in Alabama.

So dark was Colson's reputation that much of Washington laughed skeptically when he announced that he had embraced Christianity.

"Someone in the newsroom wrote a fake headline saying 'Christ Rejects Colson.' Here was the toughest of the tough," said [Bob Woodward](#), an assistant managing editor for The Post who won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on the Watergate scandal with partner Carl Bernstein.

But the drama of Colson's plunge was key to [his rise as a Christian leader](#).

After his incarceration, Colson could have easily made millions in business or as a celebrity evangelist. Instead he founded [Prison Fellowship](#), a multimillion-dollar ministry that advocates for prisoners and preaches behind bars in 1,400 U.S. jails and in 110 other countries. His prison work was his redemption, transforming him into one of the country's most admired evangelical leaders.

Colson, who lives in Florida full time after years of dividing his time between the Sunshine State and Northern Virginia, hasn't lost his taste for politics. He works against measures to legalize gay marriage and served as an informal adviser to former George W. Bush aide Karl Rove. But he doesn't usually sound strident when he talks about hot-button social issues and is viewed more as the wise grandfather of the religious right. He is funny before a crowd, quick to hug fans (especially prisoners) and is treated like a rock star at Christian events. People constantly approach him to talk about their ministry projects, push their books or ask for an autograph.

It was his stature that led to the suggestion that Colson find a way to multiply himself — passing on his orthodox Christian beliefs as well as his talent for communicating them.

“The point was to get more people to be like Chuck,” says Chip Mahon, a retired financial services executive who sits on the board of [BreakPoint](#), the umbrella group for Colson's various ministries, including the [Centurions](#), which began in 2004.

The timing appealed to Colson, who believes Christianity is in crisis in the West, particularly in churches. Religion, he says, has become a vague word for self-exploration and spirituality.

Even the word “religion” has a bad name among Centurion types, who tend not to use it. Some argue that the word “Christian” has become co-opted; they prefer to say they have a “biblical” worldview.

Spiritual clones

Regardless of how traditional evangelicals describe themselves, they are facing some discouraging trends.

Polls show that young evangelicals are more concerned about poverty and environmentalism than same-sex marriage or abortion and other “sanctity of life” issues. A few months ago, Apple [booted an iPhone app](#) for a conservative Christian manifesto that Colson co-wrote called the Manhattan Declaration because the company deemed the document's opposition to gay marriage and other “immoral sexual partnerships” to be offensive. Just one of [the original signers](#) was under 40.

The opposite is true of Colson's newest crop of Centurions, who are almost all white and over 40.

The disciples come to Colson in various ways, including by seeing ads in conservative evangelical magazines such as *World*, or through word of mouth at church. The program's application hints at the tactics they will learn, asking potential participants if they consider themselves “winsome, articulate, a good listener and humble” or “someone who wants to win the argument rather than win/love the person.” The former is the kind of person Colson is seeking.

He wants Centurions to be able to meet the challenge of religious pluralism, know their own worldview and be able to debate others with different beliefs. He hands out [the same basic grid](#) he carries with him at all times that lays out his interpretation of how major worldviews (including “biblical,” “secular naturalism” and “Islam”) answer questions such as “Where did I come from?” and “What is my purpose?”

Those who sign up spend a year becoming Colson's spiritual clones. They are regular people for the

most part, though graduates include a few politicians (Bill Redmond, a former New Mexico congressman, and Bob Snelling, a former member of the Georgia House) and high-ranking executives (former Freddie Mac vice president Chris Morris and Documentary Channel Chief Executive James Ackerman).

[The required reading list](#) includes Colson's bestseller, "[How Now Shall We Live?](#)" works by classic evangelical thinkers such as C.S. Lewis as well as books by contemporary authors such as Tim Keller and Mark Noll.

Participants also read poetry and fiction and watch films, which Colson loves analyzing and mining for theological themes. He is a big Woody Allen fan, and this year Centurions watched "[Crimes and Misdemeanors](#)" as well as "[The Matrix](#)" and "[Shawshank Redemption](#)."

Other than three weekend seminars, much of the instruction takes place online. The year is structured around a daily Bible study created by T.M. Moore, Colson's longtime spiritual consultant. Moore is a minister with shoulder-length hair and a daily blog on Celtic Christianity.

An e-mail list is used for group discussion, with Colson weighing in on, for example, on how Christianity views capitalism and socialism. "The more there is competition and dissent, the healthier every society is . . . all economic systems are not morally neutral" reads one of his posts.

Centurions are required to create a three-year ministry plan. Most involve grass-roots evangelizing to work colleagues, neighbors or people at church who think they know Christianity but don't.

Darren Ho, a preppy 34-year-old, has flown into Dulles from Shanghai, where he works in sales for a pharmaceutical company. He talks quickly and passionately about his "business ministry" plan to work with American expatriates when he returns to China. He describes their worldview as: "Me as the center of the Earth."

The Centurion program has helped him explain Christianity better to other people, he says, and has made him scrutinize his life more carefully. What is the purpose of being in business? he asks. To make money, or to redeem others?

Colson, he says, is his inspiration and model.

God's plan

Ho is among the 84 Centurions who march, one by one, across the stage at the National Conference Center in Leesburg to receive their graduation certificates. They grip Colson's hand and smile for a photo, as their spouses and other family members applaud and snap pictures.

There are celebratory hugs and some final words of encouragement from their spiritual mentor.

"I'm at a point in my life where the thing that excites me the most are people coming out like you are, reoriented in your thinking," Colson says with a smile.

The key is to have "a really big vision," he tells them. And to listen for God's plan — just as he does.

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