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OPINION

Carlos Aguilar: Please keep your modern-day Crusades to yourself

Pastor Greg Laurie preaches at 2012 Harvest, which came to Angels Stadium Saturday for the first of two days with performances by Third Day, Güngör and David Crowder. ///ADDITIONAL INFO: harvest.crusade.0826 – 8/25/12 – ROD VEAL, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER -Pastor Greg Laurie's 2012 Harvest came to Angels Stadium Saturday for the first of two days with performances by Third Day, Güngör and David Crowder. Pastor Greg Laurie preaches at 2012 Harvest which came to Angels Stadium Saturday for the first of two days with performances by Third Day, Güngör and David Crowder. ///ADDITIONAL INFO: harvest.crusade.0826 – 8/25/12 – ROD VEAL, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER -Pastor Greg Laurie's 2012 Harvest came to Angels Stadium Saturday for the first of two days with performances by Third Day, Güngör and David Crowder.

By **CARLOS AGUILAR**
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I converted to evangelical Christianity at 17. A real come-to-Jesus moment, as they say. One minute I was a nominally Roman Catholic teen ducking mass at St. Louis of France in Bassett and the next I was arms-raised, tear-streaked, fully "saved" on the field of Angel Stadium at a Harvest Crusade.

That was my entry point: an emotional spectacle framed as salvation but functioning more like spiritual salesmanship.

I went all in. Bible studies, college ministry, mission trips, rapping evangelism, even seminary. But by 30, after years of cognitive dissonance, theological fatigue and deep moral discomfort, I deconverted.

So when I see another Harvest Crusade billboard pop up along the 10 Freeway, I wince. Not because I have a problem with people believing in God.

But because these crusades aren't what they say they are. Or, worse, they are exactly what they proclaim.

Let's start with the name. "Crusade." As in conquest and colonization. As in we're here to save your soul whether you asked or not. You'd think someone in church administration might've raised their hand and said, "Hey, maybe let's not name our event after centuries of religious violence."

But no. They've stuck with it for more than 30 years. And in doing so, they've tipped their hand.

The modern-day crusade isn't about spiritual revival. It's about recruitment into a religious identity that increasingly overlaps with a far-right political agenda.

According to Pew, about 80% of White evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in 2020. That's not new but here's what might surprise you: Latino evangelicals are not far behind, with about 65% voting Republican in the last election, compared to only 32% of Latino Catholics. That's a huge gap. It's political formation disguised as religious commitment.

The Harvest Crusades, like others of their kind, are the tip of that spear.

The message is clear: come for the salvation, stay for the culture war. Behind the smoke machines and soft-rock worship sets is a deeply political operation, shaping people into voters who oppose LGBTQ+ rights, reject climate science, resent social safety nets and view pluralism as a threat, not a strength.

I know. I was one of them.

I cried during altar calls. I learned that guilt was spiritual fuel. I passed out the Four Spiritual Laws in Old Pasadena on Friday nights. I learned that "evangelism" meant getting someone to reject their cultural, familial and personal histories and adopt your worldview, wholesale.

And here's the quiet part that rarely gets said: these crusades aren't really aimed at the unchurched.

They're for the already convinced. A kind of spiritual pyramid scheme, where you bring your primo, your co-worker, your homie, and hope they'll catch the bug. Then the books, the small groups, the Christian school applications, the tithe envelopes follow. Salvation is the pitch. Membership is the goal.

Meanwhile, the "saved" often walk away not with peace but with a brand new existential burden: a sense of never being good enough, never quite clean, never quite free. You're told you're broken, and only they, the arbiters of truth, have the fix.

They call it religion but it's emotional captivity.

But when that belonging demands you vote a certain way, reject your family members or teach your kids that they're morally depraved, you're not being discipled. You're being indoctrinated.

So here's my charge: skip the crusades. Better yet, protest them. Call out the manipulation.

Ring your tía who's going and tell her you're praying for her this time.

Because if someone says they're here to save you, the first thing you should ask is: from what?

And the second is: at what cost?

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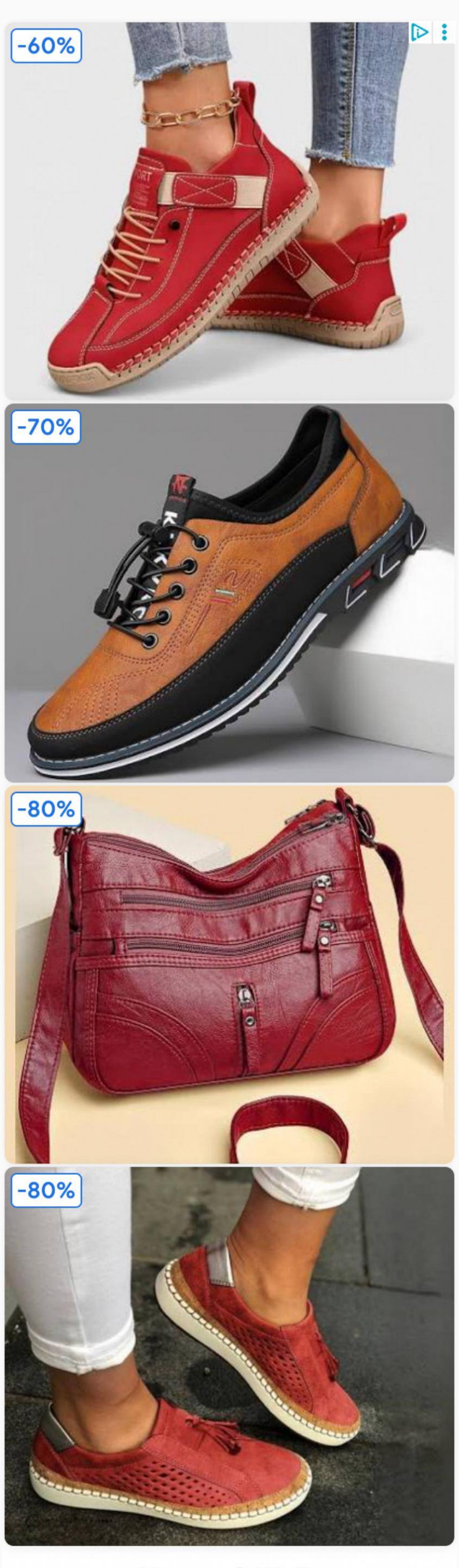

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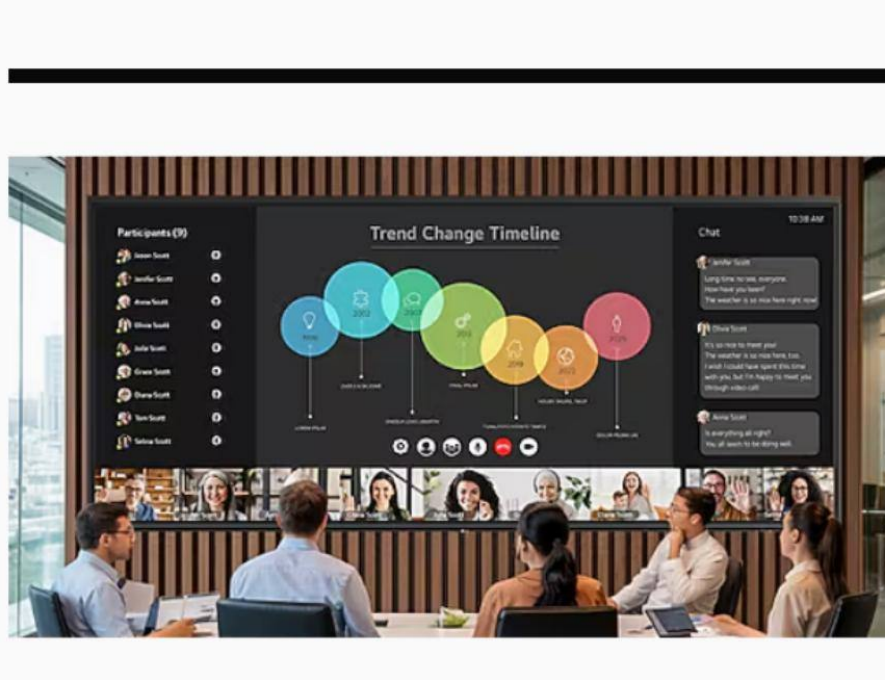
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