

**THINE IS THE KINGDOM:
THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF 21ST CENTURY EVANGELICALISM**

by

JOANNA TICE JEN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

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Joanna Tice Jen

Advisor: Professor Corey Robin

ABSTRACT:

Despite renewed attention to religion and ethics in political theory, there is a notable absence of inquiry into evangelicalism. Social scientists have studied Christian right policy in the late 20th century, but how has the movement shifted in the new millennium and what are the theoretical beliefs that undergird those shifts? By reading popular devotional writings as political texts, this dissertation distills a three-part evangelical political thought: 1) a theory of time in which teleological eternity complements retroactive re-birth; 2) a theory of being wherein evangelicals learn to strive after their godly potential through a process of emotional self-regulation; and 3) a theory of personhood wherein identity develops concurrently within the evangelical subculture and today's (neo)liberal ethos. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that for the last fifteen years, an evangelical revival has been transforming the movement from a policy-driven politics to an ontologically driven politics—innovatively pivoting it away from the Christian right. Whereas most secular observers focus on the internal contradictions of evangelicalism, my close reading and interpretation of devotional texts instead describes a series of creative tensions that work to strengthen religious belief, support a strategic revivalism, and catalyze evangelicalism as a new kind of socio-political movement.

For my mother, Kathleen Amelia Tice (1950-2003),
for being brave enough to believe
and for loving me, no matter how much I questioned

&

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"I wonder why you care so much about me – no, I don't wonder. I only accept it as the thing at the back of all one's life that makes everything bearable and possible"

– Gertrude Bell

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When thou prayest, enter into thy closet,
and when thou hast shut thy door,
pray to thy Father which is in secret;
and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

— Matthew 6

Introduction

In January 2009, Pastor Rick Warren took the stage at the inauguration of President Barack Obama. Warren's appearance was supposed to provide a sense of unity to a nation deeply divided by belief. He began the invocation by celebrating the election of the nation's first African American president. It marked "a hinge point of history" about which "Dr. King and a great cloud of witnesses are shouting [joyfully] in heaven."¹ For most Americans, King is a unifying figure, but it soon became clear that Warren's invocation of King was meant to signify a shared religious faith rather than a common political struggle or principle of government.

The final sentence of the invocation read, "I humbly ask this in the name of the one who changed my life, Yeshua, Isa, Jesús, Jesus, who taught us to pray."² By reading the name of Jesus of Nazareth in Hebrew, Arabic, and Spanish, Warren managed to deftly acknowledge a unifying multicultural spirit, while also drawing a clear line in the sand. While the Obama inauguration marked a momentary victory for the left coalition, Rick Warren's selection as invocation speaker was widely seen as signifying the power and persistence of the Christian right. By portraying a common embrace of Christianity across multicultural America, Warren attempted to widen the audience of his invocation along racial, ethnic, and political lines.

However, the invocation wasn't describing a common Christianity, but was instead a testament to the power and hold of a specific Christian tradition—evangelicalism. The invocation outlined the chief tenets of evangelical faith, which are hardly unifying, but are clearly powerful and prevalent enough to serve as an unquestioned stand-in for a national belief: the assumption of human weakness and error, God's forgiveness and the possibility of being born again through a personal relationship with him, and reference to the last judgment.

¹ Richard Warren, "Inaugural Invocation for Barack Obama," *Speech* (Washington, D.C., January 20, 2009), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2009/january/rick-warrens-inaugural-invocation.html>.

² Ibid.

Thus, Warren's reminder of the ultimate division between evangelical Americans and everyone else—between sinners and saved—ran counter to the narrative of inter-group harmony in which it was veiled. Where Warren was tasked with creating a sense of unity, he took the opportunity to write the American story in religious—and more precisely, evangelical—terms. Although most Americans might agree to the invocation of King, and even of God, the invocation of a specifically evangelical God was not a gesture of solidarity, but a show of power.

Searching for the source of that power, this dissertation seeks to understand the evangelical belief system as a mode of political thought. By seeking out a common thread running through contemporary evangelical texts, this project envisions an evangelical politik.³ The evangelical politik isn't a political position (party affiliation, right or left leaning), but an ethos, a spirit, a disposition, and a cultural character that attaches itself to the minds of evangelical citizens and leaders alike. It is an imagination.

The search for the evangelical politik engages not only the Christian right or the Christian left, or the masses of believers in the middle, but evangelicalism as a system of spiritual belief and practice, which nonetheless has the potential to sway a large sub-class of individuals in one political direction or another. This conceptualization of the evangelical politik resists the common error of reducing evangelicalism to specific policy positions or party affiliations. Instead, it examines how everyday spiritual practices are reflected in larger political and ethical viewpoints. Despite the diversity of evangelical political positions, I argue that there is an undercurrent of a not-quite-systematic political thought (evangelical politik) running through the devotional literature that may prove to be the key to understanding evangelical politics.

To find the source of that powerful imagination today—in an era of shifting belief, practice, and ultimately politics—this dissertation analyzes the devotional writings of missionary

³ I use the German term to highlight and distinguish my usage from evangelical politics, popularly construed.

and Christian counselor Sarah Young, “Christian teacher” Rob Bell,⁴ “Jesus feminist” Sarah Bessey, and megachurch pastor Rick Warren in order to distill a comprehensive evangelical political theory about such important—and classically political—topics as time, being, and personhood.

How do the leading figures of contemporary evangelical thought and culture describe their own beliefs, daily practices, and political identity? What role do evangelical devotional texts play in evangelicalism and evangelical revival? What theoretical claims undergird these accounts? What technologies of the self emerge as crucial practices for contemporary evangelicals? How do evangelicals understand the relationship between self and community? What are the political implications of these shifting modes of being? How can we make more sense of who evangelicals are today, what their movement stands for, and how their identities and values have shifted since the late 1990’s, if indeed they have shifted?

In response to these questions, this dissertation: 1) reframes evangelicalism as political thought and conducts a textual analysis of the four devotional writers; 2) outlines three major concepts—time, being, and personhood—comprising that thought; 3) argues that shifts within the movement do not mark a decline, as political scientists have suggested, but rather a theoretical transformation that ushers in a new phase of the recurrent cycle of evangelical political engagement, alignment, and strength; and 4) discusses what these findings suggest for evangelical spiritual and political futures. The chronological focus of the dissertation is from 2002—when Warren published *The Purpose Driven Life*⁵—through 2016, encompassing a period of revival in which innovative evangelical devotional texts came to the fore.

⁴ Evangelicals often refer to themselves as “Christian,” despite distinctions from Catholics and mainline Protestants.

⁵ *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

The 2015 Pew Forum *Religious Landscape Study* identifies 25.4% of Americans as evangelical Christian—according to denominational affiliations—while reporting that 35% of Americans self-identify as evangelical. By either measure, evangelicalism is the largest religious group in the United States, including the unaffiliated (22.8%).⁶ Despite the movement's dominance in the United States and growth globally, social scientists who study Christianity fail to analyze a key part of the evangelical story. Portions of the evangelical ethos are captured by extant scholarship, but others are not, and that is because, I believe, political theorists have not yet taken up evangelicalism in a serious way. Most scholarship focuses either on changes within the church (the focus of sociology, anthropology, religious studies, and theology) or on shifts in the relationship between church and state (the focus of history and political science). Neither of these approaches attends to evangelical political thought. This dissertation attempts to meld these two disjointed emphases, to explore the relationship between spirituality (devotional practices and theology) and politics (positions held by church leaders and the voting habits and activism of adherents). While there is ample historical, demographic, and ethnographic work on the evangelical movement, scant attention is given to the ideas of evangelicalism and how those ideas have changed over time.⁷ This dissertation is distinctive in describing and analyzing evangelicalism as a body of thought.

⁶ Evangelicalism is technically a transdenominational religious tradition. It overtook mainline Protestants in the 1970's as largest religious group in the US. Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa J. Wilde, "The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 2 (September 2001): 468–500. In 2015 data, they are trailed by Catholics (20.8%), and mainline Protestants (14.7%). The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, "The U.S. Religious Landscape Study" (Washington, D.C., May 12, 2015), <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

⁷ E.g., Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); James A. Morone, *Hellfire Nation the Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); William C. Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005); Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, 4th ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*; George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York; London: W. W. Norton, 2007); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free*

Survey data indicates a growing generational split among evangelicals, with the younger generation supporting a range of left-leaning policies that their parents and grandparents vehemently opposed. Data like this has led many political scientists to argue that the Christian right era is drawing to a close,⁸ with little discussion of why this shift in political realignment is occurring. At the same time, anthropologists and sociologists have delved into the personal religious practices of evangelicals in particular church communities, producing important ethnographic accounts, but without thinking about the larger political ramifications and meanings of these practices. If there is a change underway within evangelicalism today, neither survey data nor ethnography nor history alone can tell the complete story. Close readings of popular devotionals as political texts—using the methodology and orientation of critical political theory—will help furnish an essential piece of that story. In this dissertation, I examine neither the political beliefs of a disintegrating Christian right nor the religious beliefs of one small corner of the evangelical movement. Instead, I examine the political thinking and culture of evangelicalism today as it is taught to evangelicals the world over through popular devotional literature, illuminating the evangelical politik.

What Is Evangelicalism?

Across the social sciences, scholars of the evangelical movement have long struggled to attain precise descriptions of the beliefs and practices of its adherents, both across time and across the

Enterprise (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).; Clyde Wilcox and Carin Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers?: The Religious Right in American Politics*, 4th ed (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011).; Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Worthen, *The Apostles of Reason*; Putnam and Cambell, *American Grace*; T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

⁸ E.g., Wilcox and Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers?*; Steven P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

diversity of the movement at any given time. Mark Noll, a historian who also personally identifies as an evangelical writes:

‘Evangelicalism’ is not, and never has been, an ‘-ism’ like other Christian isms. Rather, [it] has always been made up of shifting movements, temporary alliances, and the lengthened shadows of individuals. All discussions of evangelicalism, therefore, are always both descriptions of the way things are as well as efforts within our own minds to provide some order for the multifaceted, complex set of impulses and organizations.⁹

Sociologist Christian Smith describes the contemporary movement as simultaneously “embattled” and “thriving”;¹⁰ historian Molly Worthen calls evangelicals a “nebulous community,”¹¹ and anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann describes evangelicals as comprising an “enormous range of people whose views and practices and spiritual imaginations veer wildly.”¹²

In this dissertation, “evangelical” is distinguished from both the terms “Christian right” and “fundamentalist,” despite the fact that these three classifications do somewhat coincide. For our purposes, “Christian right” refers to politically conservative Christians—not all of them evangelical—engaged in activism such as that of the Moral Majority. This movement was most prominent and powerful in the 1970’s-1990’s. Meanwhile, for our purposes, “fundamentalism” refers only to theology, in the sense of a literal interpretation of the Bible. In general, “fundamentalism,” has also acquired a connotation of extreme political conservatism or traditionalism, but that meaning will not be directly engaged here. Although “Christian right,” “fundamentalism,” and “evangelical” are often used interchangeably in both contemporary journalism and scholarship, conflating these terms confuses discussions of evangelicalism, especially today, when forces from the Christian left are on the rise.¹³

⁹ Mark A Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 8.

¹⁰ *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹¹ Worthen, *The Apostles of Reason*, 4.

¹² Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 13.

¹³ “Reemergence of the ‘Religious Left’?” in Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, 218–250.

While the terms “fundamentalism” and “Christian right” only date back to the 1920’s and late 1960’s respectively,¹⁴ “evangelicalism,” dates back to the early 1500’s. Martin Luther—although not the originator—used the term to refer to his movement and belief system. “Evangelicalism” came into widespread use as it traveled to the Americas and other British colonies on the wave of the 17th century European pietistic revival.¹⁵ While Smith defines evangelicalism as “an activist faith that tries to influence the surrounding world,”¹⁶ I follow Noll and David Bebbington in conceiving of evangelicalism theologically, defining it as belief in and practice of:

Conversionism (an emphasis on the ‘new birth’ as a life-changing experience of God), biblicalism (a reliance on the Bible as the ultimate religious authority), activism (a concern for sharing the faith), and crucicentrism (a focus on Christ’s redeeming work on the cross, usually pictured as the only way to salvation).¹⁷

All four of the devotional authors whose work I analyze, as well as most other high profile evangelicals, abide by or engage with these four tenets of evangelicalism.

Luhrmann, who wrote one of the few recent studies of evangelical thought but whose approach is ethnographic within a psychological anthropology framework, defines evangelicalism similarly to the Bebbington-Noll version, except that hers consolidates their four commitments into three: 1) a belief in the literal or near literal truth of the Bible, 2) belief that one can be saved only by choosing a personal relationship with Christ, or being “born again,” and 3) the belief that one should, to some extent, evangelize and share the good news of

¹⁴ “Fundamentalism, N.” *Oxford English Dictionary (Online)*, 2010. Worthen, *The Apostles of Reason*, 168.

¹⁵ Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001.

¹⁶ Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 242.

¹⁷ My usage of “evangelical” follows David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1995), 2–17. The in-text quotation is Mark Noll’s paraphrase of Bebbington’s canonical work, which renders Bebbington’s conceptualization clear, accessible, and concise. Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 13. “Activism,” in Noll’s definition refers to evangelism or proselytizing – not to “political activism.”

salvation with others.¹⁸ Luhrmann’s explanation of “Bible-based” (“biblicalism” in the Bebbington-Noll version) is also informative. She points out that most evangelicals not only read the Bible literally but ahistorically. They do not believe historical context or translation of the Bible should be taken into account when reading the text. Thus, Luhrmann’s evangelicals largely believe they can read the Bible themselves, without specific education, training, or even simple textual guides, such as a concordance. They believe that the Bible “can be read straight, for its truth, [without any] sense that texts from the past hide from us behind authorial intentions we can no longer understand, or that they were written for a social or economic community we do not live in now.”¹⁹ In this way, evangelicals read the Bible for direct, literal guidance on what actions to take in their daily lives and in overall life plans and goals. In 1994 Noll issued a clarion call within the movement – his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* – that this persistent anti-intellectualism is destructive to the faith.²⁰ However, the training and interpretive tools used by today’s evangelical thought-leaders suggest that evangelical biblical interpretive methods may be shifting away from both Luhrmann’s and Noll’s descriptions.

The devotional style of early 21st century evangelicalism emphasizes an experiential, bodily, and charismatic practice wherein spiritual healing, speaking in tongues, signs, and direct conversations with God are expected parts of the everyday evangelical experience.²¹ Miller calls this worship a kind of “sacred lovemaking, transcending the routinized rituals that so often structure the human-divine encounter.”²²

¹⁸ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 13. Luhrmann’s ethnographic subjects are a specific subset of evangelicals belonging to New Paradigm Protestantism (also called neo-Pentecostal, or renewalist). *Ibid.*, xx.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

²⁰ Noll 1994, 10–11.

²¹ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 14.

²² Donald E Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), 87.

However, beyond these theological definitions and spiritual styles, it is important to note that in some spheres, “evangelical” is limited to a cultural signifier, “a kind of secret handshake,” indicating that any church that describes itself as evangelical is “safe, good, O.K., or kosher.” It “put[s] people [who identify as evangelical] at ease” whether they have thoroughly determined what evangelicalism means for them or not, and whether they have personally scrutinized the thing being labeled evangelical or not.²³ In these cases, it is a cultural signifier—without being a theological marker—which labels a pastor, a believer, or a book as similar culturally to the expectations of the self-identified evangelical.²⁴ While culture is important to this dissertation, it is located within a religious-spiritual-political-cultural assemblage, where all of the component parts are necessary to produce the whole of evangelicalism.

Evangelicalism, for our purposes, encompasses a wide array of spiritual, social, and cultural positions, including: the charismatic and Pentecostal movements;²⁵ non-mainline Protestant congregations; believers across the socioeconomic spectrum; conservatives and progressives. Evangelicalism is a transdenominational tradition that encompasses Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, German and Dutch Reformed, and Restorationist Church congregations.²⁶ The movement might otherwise be described as a “loose alliance of Protestants,” united by a spiritual “emphasi[s on] both clarity and intimacy: a perfect Bible and a personal Jesus.”²⁷ The movement is evenly spread across all fifty U.S. states, with a slightly higher concentration in the South. The state with the highest concentration of evangelicals is Tennessee, with 52%, and the state with the lowest concentration

²³ Sanneh, “The Hell-Raiser.”

²⁴ Geoffrey Layman, “Where Is Trump’s Evangelical Base? Not in Church,” *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2016.

²⁵ Pentecostals and charismatics (23% of US) emphasize experiential and bodily practices: spiritual healing, signs miracles, prophesy, and speaking in tongues are expected in daily life. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xx, 14.

²⁶ Some of these denominations also include mainline churches. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001, 11.

²⁷ Sanneh, “The Hell-Raiser.”

is Utah, with 7%.²⁸ Evangelicals are diverse in both class and education level,²⁹ and while they are slightly whiter than the U.S. population as a whole, they do have significant representation among other ethnic groups: Latino, 11%; Black, 6%; Asian, 2%.³⁰

The last fifty years has seen a rapid rise in transnational evangelicalism. While the United States still boasts the largest concentration of evangelicals, American evangelicals now make up less than a quarter of the global total.³¹ While non-Western evangelicalism is nothing new, the vitality, innovation, and local autonomy of evangelicalism in the global South has reached new heights in the early years of the 21st century. Mark Noll writes that global evangelical “worship practices are for the most part locally determined and continually negotiated, rather than being uniform and directed by central church authorities.”³² In Noll’s estimation, evangelicalism’s transnational character gives it much of its distinctive shape today, as traditional practices mix with indigenous ones.³³ The regional centers of global evangelicalism include Southeast Asia (especially Korea), Latin America (especially Brazil), the Indian subcontinent, and a number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa—where projected growth of the movement is also high.³⁴ While the focus on this dissertation is on American evangelicalism, it is certainly a tradition that ignores borders and is influential both inside and outside the US.

In this way, the revival is culturally and geographically hybrid. On the one hand, the cultural hegemony of U.S. evangelicalism is undisputable due to the financial resources of U.S. churches; their global missionary work; the flow of global philanthropic funding; their advantage

²⁸ The Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life, “The Religious Landscape Study.”

²⁹ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 7.

³⁰ “Racial and Ethnic composition Among Evangelical Protestants” The Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life, “The Religious Landscape Study,” 2015.

³¹ Pew Research Center, “Global Survey of Evangelical Protestant Leaders” (Pew Research Center, 2011), <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/06/22/global-survey-of-evangelical-protestant-leaders>.

³² Mark A. Noll, *Protestantism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 17.

³³ *Ibid*, 74.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 59.

on technological, cultural, and social media platforms; as well as the ease of global travel for American citizens. On the other hand, the American discourse is greatly influenced by evangelicalism elsewhere. Churches and pastors in the global South – displaying a wide array of regional variation – usually possess complete autonomy and indigenous distinctiveness. Thus, the revival is hybrid wherever it exists. When evangelicalism speaks in Seoul it echoes Los Angeles, and when it speaks in New York, it echoes Pretoria. In a globalized world and in a church with a global mission, transnational American evangelical thought is always, already crossbred with thought from across the globe.

Evangelicalism's 20th Century

The intellectual history of the American evangelical movement provides a framework for analyzing the interface between spiritual and political revivalism. One set of intellectual histories traces the development of evangelicalism from the Puritan colonists through the four Great Awakenings.³⁵ A second set of scholarship, which is my focus here, recounts four distinct periods of American evangelical political development in the 20th century.

The 20th century history begins with a period of active evangelical engagement in political reforms and cultural debates, following the third Great Awakening. This period of activity ended abruptly in 1925 with the humiliating defeat of the Scopes Monkey Trial.

Although the evangelical side won the legal battle, they lost in the court of public opinion.³⁶ For

³⁵ The Great Awakenings were spiritual revivals which occurred in the 1730's-1740's, 1800-1840, 1850's-1900, and the 1960's-1970's) A. Kenneth Curtis, J. Stephen Lang, and Randy Petersen, *The 100 Most Important Events in Christian History*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: F.H. Revell, 1998), 135; Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 415–454; Kathryn Long, *The Revival of 1857-58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening*, Religion in America Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Robert William Fogel, *The Fourth Great Awakening & the Future of Egalitarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 10; Martin E Marty, *Modern American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 434–455.

³⁶ Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001, 16.

the next twenty-five years, the movement turned inward for unification, reflection, instruction of the next generation, and rebuilding of their base. During this period, one large segment of the movement embraced a stance subsequently termed “neoevangelicalism.” This sub-movement was characterized by moderation in religious, social, and political positions, while embracing orthodox doctrinal views.³⁷ Neoevangelicalism also focused on establishing separatist institutions like evangelical liberal arts colleges, theology schools (or Bible colleges), media outlets, as well as social and political organizations. While commentators of the day described evangelicalism as declining, recent scholarship sees this as a key gestation period.

In the 1950’s, Billy Graham’s tent revivals pushed evangelicalism back into public view, enabling a quick reversal in the movement’s social standing. While Graham began as the leader of a subcultural movement of neoevangelicals, he pushed it into the political spotlight with his unprecedented influence as a counselor to every U.S. president from Harry Truman to George W. Bush. When organizations like the Moral Majority came to dominance in the 1970’s, the transition from a cultural movement to a political movement was complete. Some scholars refer to this shift as the Fourth Great Awakening. Graham’s supporters threw their electoral weight behind the campaigns of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan,³⁸ allowing for a politically active evangelical movement to reemerge in the form of the Christian right at the same moment that evangelicalism was eclipsing mainline Protestantism as the U.S. majority religion.

The election of George W. Bush—the most openly conservative evangelical president in the nation’s history—was the crowning achievement of the Christian right.³⁹ However, the long

³⁷ Wilcox and Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers?*

³⁸ Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012); J. Brooks Flippen, *Jimmy Carter, the Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right, Since 1970 : Histories of Contemporary America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Daniel K Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³⁹ Martin, *With God on Our Side.*

decline of his administration in public approval culminated in a political humiliation for the Christian right reminiscent of the Scopes trial, a souring of popular taste for overtly religious politics, and a consensus that the movement should refocus its energies. The Christian right political machine that reached its zenith with Bush's two-term presidency crumbled in his hands. Movement leaders could not agree on a presidential candidate in 2008. Their least favorite, John McCain, won the nomination. The election of Barack Obama delivered a final blow, which was "made even more bitter by the defection of a number of young evangelical voters to the Democratic ticket."⁴⁰ As Christian right influence in Washington eroded, a number of retirements, deaths, and scandals shook its leadership: former Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed and former president of the National Association of Evangelicals, Ted Haggard, were enmeshed in scandals; Jerry Falwell and D. James Kennedy died in 2007;⁴¹ James Dobson of Focus on the Family's retired, and Beverly LaHaye retired from Concerned Women for America.

Evangelicalism's 21st Century

While much of this movement decline seemed based on political and historical contingencies, the withering of the evangelical movement's political arm was prefigured within its ranks. In 1999, Ed Dobson, a disenchanted former Moral Majority executive wrote *Blinded by Might: Why the Religious Right Can't Save America*, which served as an early harbinger of today's evangelical revival.⁴² Dobson argued that the evangelical movement's impact would be greatest by focusing on changing culture instead of engaging in partisan politics.⁴³ In an

⁴⁰ Wilcox and Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers?*, 5.

⁴¹ Falwell was the founder of the Moral Majority and Kennedy was an evangelist and Christian broadcaster.

⁴² With Cal Thomas (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999).

⁴³ Ibid.

interview with PBS's *God in America*, Dobson explains his choice to leave his political work with Jerry Falwell:

There's a huge danger in getting too involved in the political process. You become co-opted by it, and you end up as [one] voice out of many voices at the big table. You can either be a prophet who stands on the outside of culture and argues against the injustices, or you can be the king. I don't think you can be both. A prophetic voice that is accompanied by a life that cares about injustice [is the most effective]. And I think the Moral Majority was good in getting the movement going. But now we care about creation and the greening of America. We care about poverty. We care about HIV-AIDS. We care about a whole list and litany of stuff, much more than just abortion or the secularization of America.⁴⁴

Five years after the publication of Dobson's book, after the Bush decline had begun, Dobson's intellectual protégée, Rob Bell, wrote *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, which charted a path for the very type of cultural and spiritual change Dobson had called for.⁴⁵ Bell and other young pathbreaking pastors that share his desire to reform the faith are often described as leaders of the "emerging" or "emergent" church.⁴⁶ Launched at the outset of the new millennium, the raison d'être of this movement encapsulates many of the characteristics of the new generation of evangelicals. Led by a loosely organized group of pastors, the emergent church aspires to a less defensive, more open evangelical culture. The movement seeks to,

re-imagine both a theology and an ecclesiology that [allow] for ambiguity and welcoming, rather than defending against, the narrative turn in literature and postmodern philosophy. [They] eschew theological shibboleths as alienating and uninspiring.⁴⁷

Alongside their loosening theological beliefs, emergent author-pastors diverge sharply from the older generation of evangelicals. They have moderate political views, higher educational status, and a critical stance towards institutionalization and formal leadership. Despite their disapproval

⁴⁴ Ed Dobson, *God in America*, Public Broadcasting Station, Interview transcript, October 15, 2009, <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/interviews/ed-dobson.html>.

⁴⁵ Bell (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004); Sanneh, "The Hell-Raiser."

⁴⁶ See: Mark Juergensmeyer and W. C. Roof, "Emergent Church," *Encyclopedia of Global Religion* (Los Angeles: Sage Reference, 2012); Scot McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church Key Elements of the Most Controversial and Misunderstood Movement in the Church Today," January 19, 2007.

⁴⁷ Juergensmeyer and Roof, "Emergent Church," 383.

of official authority, they continue to sell books and fill large venues—signaling the appeal of the emergent church among younger educated evangelicals.⁴⁸ Although this breakoff movement has already begun to show signs of erosion in 2016—it nonetheless highlights many of the spiritual and cultural impulses of contemporary evangelicalism that I want to describe in this dissertation. These developments demonstrate that evangelicalism has indeed entered a new era since the turn of the century, not only in terms of waning political influence, but also in terms of their own self-understanding and strategy as a primarily spiritual movement.

Survey data of contemporary evangelical political opinions report a shift in the last decade. Polling on evangelical social and political views reveal a divided movement: 44% of evangelicals identify as Democrats or moderates; 33% of evangelicals believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases; 36% of evangelicals believe that homosexuality should be accepted; 45% of evangelicals think that stricter environmental regulations are worth the cost.⁴⁹ Another national poll, the 2010 Baylor Religion Survey, shows that 35% of evangelicals have “consistently progressive attitudes about homosexuality” (believing that homosexual behavior is not wrong, and that homosexual partnerships should be afforded legal recognition.) The Pew report corroborates this finding, noting that 36% of evangelicals “believe homosexuality should be accepted by society” in 2014, up from 26% in 2007.⁵⁰ However, the Baylor study shows that an additional 24% of evangelicals support legal recognition of gay partnerships, despite the fact that they think homosexuality is “always wrong/almost always wrong.” This finding is interesting: it not only shows that fully 59% of evangelicals supported gay marriage or gay civil

⁴⁸ Ibid 384.

⁴⁹ The Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life, “The U.S. Religious Landscape Study.” 2015.

⁵⁰ Robert Jones, Daniel Cox, and Juhem Navarro-Rivera, “A Shifting Landscape: A Decade of Change in American Attitudes about Same-Sex Marriage and LGBT Issues” *First Things* (Public Religion Research Institute, February 26, 2014); The Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life, “The U.S. Religious Landscape Study.”

unions in 2010, but that views on gay marriage and gay civil unions are moving towards acceptance, even as feelings about homosexuality remained static.⁵¹

In terms of political party affiliation, Pew Research Center reports that from 2000-2008, young white evangelicals (aged 18-29) changed their party affiliation, with the numbers of evangelicals registered as Republican dropping from 55% to 40%; Independent rising from 26% to 32%; and Democrat rising from 16% to 19%.⁵² Furthermore, rising evangelical support for Democrats in the 2016 presidential primaries indicates a larger shift: 20% of Democrats voting on March 1, 2016, “Super Tuesday”⁵³ were evangelicals,⁵⁴ up from just 3% evangelical Democrats and 9% evangelical moderates in the 2004 election.⁵⁵ Despite this shift, data analysts caution that many young evangelicals still hold conservative views on issues such as national defense, abortion,⁵⁶ and capital punishment, and that while their party affiliation may have shifted, their description of their political views has not (44% describe themselves as conservative, 34% as moderate, and 15% as liberal).⁵⁷ However, young white evangelicals were also 14% less conservative on this measure than white evangelicals 30 and older in 2008.⁵⁸

Thus, while there is still plenty of conservative activism against LGBTQ and women’s rights waged under the banner of the Christian right, the next generation of evangelicals are showing some left-leaning movement through their interest in environmentalism, global poverty,

⁵¹ Lydia Bean and Brandon C. Martinez, “Evangelical Ambivalence toward Gays and Lesbians,” *Sociology of Religion* 75, no. 3 (March 30, 2014): 395–417.

⁵² Daniel Cox, “Young White Evangelicals: Less Republican, Still Conservative” (Washington, D.C.: The Pew Research Center, September 28, 2007), <http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/09/28/young-white-evangelicals-less-republican-still-conservative/>.

⁵³ Democratic elections and caucuses held in Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, and Virginia.

⁵⁴ Michael Lipka, “A Closer Look at Religion in the Super Tuesday States,” (Pew Research Center, February 25, 2016), <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/25/a-closer-look-at-religion-in-the-super-tuesday-states/>.

⁵⁵ Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, 222.

⁵⁶ See also: Hannah Fingerhut, “On Abortion, Persistent Divides between -- and within -- the Two Parties,” Election 2016 (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, April 8, 2016).

⁵⁷ Cox, “Young White Evangelicals: Less Republican, Still Conservative.”

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

the AIDS epidemic, and their more moderate approach to gay rights—while continuing a generally conservative tack on abortion, national defense, and capital punishment.⁵⁹

There have been many historical precedents for this shift, moments when evangelical leaders put their weight behind causes that might be seen as progressive today: “the old fashioned gospel” of the Gilded Age;⁶⁰ the “social gospel” of the Progressive Era;⁶¹ and the political preaching and religiously-infused activist rhetoric of black evangelical pastors during the Civil Rights era.⁶² Furthermore, since the 1970’s, the dominance of the Christian right has always been countered by progressive evangelical denominations and organizations such as Sojourners and Messiah College. Frank Lambert and others suggest that these forces of leftist evangelicalism may be on the rise today.⁶³ However, it would be a gross misrepresentation to say that evangelicalism is clearly on a path towards becoming a progressive force. I am, rather, attempting to demonstrate the complexity and diversity of evangelical political positions over time and across a vast movement, while also suggesting that the devotional literature of the last fifteen years has a decidedly leftist tenor compared to the heyday of the Christian right.

At this moment of generational shift, it is useful to consider the previous shift, when the Christian right was conceived and brought to life in American politics, as one model of how the movement evolves. Robert Zwier points out that prior to the election of 1980, conservative politicians conspired to draw evangelicals into the fray through groups like the Moral Majority:

⁵⁹ Wilcox and Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers?*, 54.

⁶⁰ Associated with Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday. Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, 87–94.

⁶¹ Walter Rauschenbusch’s, author of *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, was a Baptist pastor (1917) Ibid., 94–103.

⁶² Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and Jesse Jackson were all Baptist pastors. Ibid., 160–183.

⁶³ “Reemergence of the ‘Religious Left’? America’s Culture War in the Early 21st Century” in *ibid.*, 218–250.

The aim from the beginning was to mobilize a group of people who had traditionally avoided politics because they saw it as a dirty, corrupt business by convincing people that political involvement was a God-given responsibility.⁶⁴

Thus, with a shift in the view of politics and where evangelicals should be focusing their life energies, the Christian right came to center stage—after some sixty years in which the evangelical movement had avoided the “dirty, corrupt business” of politics.⁶⁵

The Christian right was significant because of its political activism, which took evangelical engagement in politics to a new level, if not in an entirely new direction. However, they also had a devotional significance, as the worshipful work of a good evangelical expanded to include political activism. Activism that was inspired, in part, by a theory of time that focused on eschatological themes like apocalypse and final judgment—a narrative powerful enough to shift longstanding social attachments between Christianity and political liberalism:

these theologically liberal and diversity-embracing, social-service-oriented religious perspectives proved from the 1940s on far less appealing to many Americans than forms of faith focused on ‘facilitating a close emotional relationship with the divine,’ with Jesus Christ as one’s savior [Hollinger 2011, 22, 33–34, 37]. Such evangelicalism better responded to the “desire for immortality” that Tocqueville saw as tormenting most if not all human hearts. Many evangelicals also supported public policies aimed at fostering a ‘vibrant world of Christianity, not compromise and accommodation with diversity,’ in ways that many Christian Americans found inspiring [34].⁶⁶

In his description of an uncompromising American Christendom, Rogers Smith highlights a linkage between theological narratives—immortality and intimacy with the divine—and political and ethical systems. Where Smith argues that the early 20th century alliance between political liberalism and evangelicalism ended when a more appealing theological narrative arrived, I

⁶⁴ Robert Zwier, “The New Christian Right and the 1980 Elections,” in *New Christian Politics*, ed. Bromley, David G. and Anson Shupe (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984), 9–10.

⁶⁵ Ibid. For more on this pre-Christian right quietism, see: Dobson, *God in America*, Public Broadcasting Station.

⁶⁶ David A. Hollinger, “After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity,” *Journal of American History* 98 (2011): 118; quoted in Rogers M. Smith, “‘Our Republican Example’: The Significance of the American Experiments in Government in the Twenty-First Century,” *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 118.

argue that the political conservatism of the Christian right was also corroded by a shift in devotional narratives in the early 21st century—destined to be but a fragile product of its era.⁶⁷

As the historical account above shows, evangelicals have not always been politically conservative and for much of American history were not seen as a political force at all. In my view, evangelicals were always political, but their influence often worked in more subtle ways than it did at the height of the Christian right. Is there a relationship between the shifting devotional discourse and the shifting political one? It seems that there might be a connection between the contemporary “re-imagining” of a theology that allow for “ambiguity and welcoming”⁶⁸ and the ambivalence seen in the movement around various political issues in the last fifteen years.⁶⁹ Furthermore, this newfound political ambivalence (and even leftism) is consistent with historical evangelical revivalism. In exploring evangelical devotional writing in the early 21st century, I keep these political shifts in view, in order to probe what relationship, if any, exists between these two moving targets—evangelical faith and evangelical politics.

Today’s evangelical revival is moving the collective away from outward political engagement to a focus on philosophical questions about life’s purpose and the human-divine relationship. My suggestion that these political shifts are connected to shifts in devotional texts is based in part on aspects of these texts that challenge normative formulations of the self in surprising ways. Some devotional writers promote techniques that subtly resist capitalism or neoliberalism, even as the same thinkers may be involved in conservative activism against reproductive or LGBTQ rights—and still others work to promote those rights. As Pentecostalism and the Christian left gain

⁶⁷ Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism*.

⁶⁸ Juergensmeyer and Roof, “Emergent Church,” 383.

⁶⁹ E.g., Bean and Martinez, “Evangelical Ambivalence toward Gays and Lesbians.”

traction,⁷⁰ more and more conservative congregations may work to align themselves with these rising powers—as churches moved towards the Christian right in the middle of the 20th century. This dissertation analyzes one key locus of that realignment through a close reading of devotional texts complemented by limited discourse, historical, and comparative analyses.

The main thrust of the revival is a shifting of the collective away from outward political engagement, to a focus on philosophical questions about the purpose of life and the human-divine relationship. Compared to the flamboyant, overt, and direct politicking that typified the Christian right between the 1970's and 1990's, today's movement—especially the younger generation—is withdrawn, modest, and introspective.

Despite this shift in the focus of evangelicalism, the movement itself is not on the decline. The shift is just that, a change or redirection, rather than the signs of a slow disintegration. Thus, the declaration that the Christian right is dead without a follow up qualification that the evangelical movement is alive and well is misleading. Evangelical institutions—“the world that evangelicals made”⁷¹—continue to reproduce themselves (colleges, graduate programs, media outlets, summer camps, and countless other organizations and companies). Compared to Catholic and mainline Protestant losses, the numbers of evangelicals has held steady since the 1970's—driven by a high conversion rate, high rate of coreligionist marriage, the retention of children raised evangelical, and the popularity of the label “evangelical” among other Christian groups.⁷²

Political science has nonetheless overlooked this massive and thriving socio-political assemblage, focusing instead on the recent decline of expressly political organizations—like the Christian Coalition. While this decline makes the movement seem less overtly political, political

⁷⁰ Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001; Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*.

⁷¹ Sanneh, “The Hell-Raiser.”

⁷² Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “Pew: Evangelicals Stay Strong as Christianity Crumbles in America,” *Christianity Today*, May 11, 2015.

theory must attend to the important transformation taking place in the thought of the movement. Smith's conception of "compromise and accommodation with diversity"⁷³ is under discussion again today as evangelical youth contest their church's position vis-à-vis Black Lives Matter, treatment of Muslim Americans, and LGBTQ rights. Contemporary evangelical thinkers have ruptured the Christian right moment and transcended it, making the necessary innovations to keep their movement alive while beginning to slough off late 20th century political associations. Today, evangelicals are weighing questions concerning race, gender, and sexuality against one another as they reconsider their political allegiances during the 2016 presidential race.⁷⁴

Theoretical Focus and Literature Review

Max Weber's secularization thesis—perhaps the predominant theory of religion in 20th century scholarship—states that the increase in education and technology in modernity would naturally bring about secularization. Furthermore, much scholarship following from Weber takes the position that religious fundamentalism is an especially anti-modern phenomenon that would experience even more rapid declines over the course of the 20th century than religion as a whole—emphasizing the ways that fundamentalist movements react against the culture, technology, dynamism, and existential presuppositions of modernity and post-modernity.

However, Weber's thesis does not bear itself out in evangelicalism. Scholars of the movement note its ability to refashion itself to appeal to each new zeitgeist. Randall Balmer describes evangelicalism's ability to "adapt to the changing needs and cultural conditions"⁷⁵ of its surroundings, while Noll notes that the movement "[has historically] adapted [itself] to important American ideologies like republicanism, the Victorian home, and therapeutic

⁷³ Smith, "Our Republican Example."

⁷⁴ Michelle Boorstein, "For Evangelicals, the Question Has Become: Which Is a Worse Sin, Abortion or Racism?," *The Washington Post*, June 27, 2016, sec. Acts of Faith.

⁷⁵ Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, Videorecording (Worcester, PA: Gateway Films Vision, 1992).

individualism,”⁷⁶ suggesting that it can adapt itself to an endless array of ideologies in the future. These scholars emphasize a symbiotic relationship between evangelicalism and modern secularism that contradicts the secularization thesis, while the persistence of the evangelical population throws Weber’s thesis further into question.

This symbiosis between evangelicalism and modern secularism is exhibited in the fact that, throughout the 20th century, evangelicalism grew alongside other major political movements like civil rights, feminism, and LGBT rights—always affecting and being affected by those movements.⁷⁷ Several recent accounts articulate a strong link between the counterculture of the 1960’s and the growing influence of the evangelical movement in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Sub-movements such as the “Jesus people” are now read not only as a reaction to 1960’s counterculture but also as an extension of it.⁷⁸ And the mystique of radical norm shift is still a factor in the appeal of evangelicalism today: “the sense of being a countercultural activist who sets out to remake the world [is part of the allure of evangelicalism]. The mainstream churches offer nothing like this edgy rebellion, this nose-thumbing at ordinary expectations.”⁷⁹ In this sense, evangelicalism drives popular culture, even as it is a product of that culture.

Furthermore, because evangelicalism has a symbiotic relationship with popular culture, the nature of evangelical power is cyclical; its influence rises and falls, based on broader economic, social, and political conditions.⁸⁰ Developments in the last decade signal that this type of cycle—witnessed in the 20th century from the post-Scopes quietism to the the zenith of the

⁷⁶ Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001, 2.

⁷⁷ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*; Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

⁷⁸ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*; Mark Oppenheimer, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Luhmann, *When God Talks Back*.

⁷⁹ T.M. Luhmann, “The Appeal of Christian Piety,” *The New York Times*, July 4, 2015.

⁸⁰ Michael Lienesch, *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Morone, *Hellfire Nation the Politics of Sin in American History*.

Christian right—may be re-starting in response to the failures of the second Bush administration.⁸¹

This dissertation addresses three gaps in the literature concerning contemporary evangelicalism. First, although scholars allude to shifts in the Bush-Obama period and the demise of the Christian right, almost no studies extend substantively past the mid-1990's. Instead, they lump evangelical history from 1970 to present into one period. Second, scholars place too much attention on the decline and death of the Christian right rather than on the evangelical transition that moves beyond it. For example, responding to Christian right leadership retirements and deaths, as well as declines in active membership rolls of Christian right organizations, Clyde Wilcox and Caren Robinson suggest that the Christian right is “not dead, but neither is it thriving,”⁸² making no mention of the evangelical movement more broadly or other forms of activism it is involved in. Third, and most significantly for this project, scholars of social science fail to frame this shift as a turn in evangelical thought.

One exception is Robert Wuthnow's attention to ways the next generation is changing the American religious landscape, noting that today's twenty and thirty year olds not only church “hop” and “shop,” but often seek spiritual answers outside of orthodox religious institutions, through mediums such as music and art.⁸³ The significance of Wuthnow's findings for evangelicalism is twofold: First, he explains that the current era represents a general religious revival in which young believers of all faiths are seeking to redefine what it means to be

⁸¹ These failures include the financial collapse of 2008 and the quagmire of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For more on the recurrent cycle of evangelical political engagement and orientation, see: Morone, *Hellfire Nation the Politics of Sin in American History*; Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*.

⁸² Wilcox and Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers?*, 5.

⁸³ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

religious, creating a moment of turning inward for religious reflection; second, he suggests that this turn makes political mobilization difficult, as those questioning their affiliations and identities don't make for a strong base. Bell's appeal to young evangelicals follows this model:

[He] attracts an earnest crowd of young people, full of questions about the church they once loved unquestioningly. Bell is a reassuring figure: proof that it's possible to challenge certain articles of faith without leaving behind faith itself. One college-age fan greeted him by saying, 'If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't still be a Christian.'⁸⁴

Following Wuthnow, I argue that there is a relationship between spiritual activism and political quietism.⁸⁵ The 21st century revival has shifted evangelicalism away from a position of outward political engagement—or at least away from a consistent and largely predictable affiliation with the GOP—to an inward position of focus on spirituality and ontology. This inward turn, which was prescribed by some movement leaders in the late 1990's,⁸⁶ has responded to the movement's loss of political appetite and weariness from the perceived defeats of central Christian right causes over the course of the previous decades.⁸⁷

Thus, while this transformation may appear apolitical from the outside, it is partially in response to political events and—on another level—actually represents a foundational sort of activism—an introspective revival that stands to alter evangelical cultural and political expression in the future. While this evangelical positioning appears less openly political from the outside, the ideological shift it generates is activism on the most basic level.

It is a politically significant quietism, not simply a turning away from the political, but a quietism that seeks authenticity and redefinition that can be used to position the movement for future mobilizations, which will most likely have an altered political orientation. But regardless

⁸⁴ Sanneh, "The Hell-Raiser."

⁸⁵ See also Jonathan J. Keller, "Right Without Might: Prophecy and Enervation in the American Political Tradition" (PhD diss., The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2014), 2.

⁸⁶ Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*.

⁸⁷ Losses such as: *Roe vs. Wade*, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, and, *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt*.

of the behavioral outcome of these theoretical shifts, scholars of American political thought must attend to ideological and identity transformations within the movement.

Thus, this study argues that because of both the collapse of Christian right political organizations and the ontological focus of the movement today, the Christian right *is* dead, while evangelicalism once again rises from the ashes in a new form. While the specter of the Christian right may still be haunting American politics—often in the confused form of movements like the Tea Party⁸⁸—its fully active manifestation expired around the turn of the 21st century.

The orientation I bring to interpreting the devotional texts is drawn from critical theories, including post-secularism, comparative political theory,⁸⁹ pieces of affect theory and theories of time, specifically, the work of Charles Taylor, Saba Mahmood, Sara Ahmed, Roxanne Euben, and Wendy Brown.⁹⁰

Passionate debate over the role of religion in politics has proliferated across contemporary political thought in the last thirty years.⁹¹ However, while this represents a scholarly renaissance for the study of politics and religion, a sort of “return” to religion, this debate is better understood as an extension of a longstanding conversation in political thought going back to the canonical texts of the ancient, medieval, and early modern periods, when religion and morality took an unquestioned place at center stage. However, when political

⁸⁸ Dochuk, Darren, “Tea Party America and the Born Again Politics of the Populist Right,” *New Labor Forum* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 15–21.

⁸⁹ Roxanne Euben’s description of comparative political theory: “...many of our descriptive and theoretical tools for understanding are inadequate to the task of studying foundationalist political practices. Whether we seek to explain practices of Islamic fundamentalists in Algeria or Christian fundamentalists in America.” *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 8.

⁹⁰ *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2004); *Enemy in the Mirror; Manhood and Politics: A Feminist Reading in Political Theory*, New Feminist Perspectives Series (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988).

⁹¹ For discussion of religion in the contemporary political theory literature, see Joanna Tice-Jen, “Religion in Contemporary Political Thought” (Oxford Bibliographies in Political Science, Oxford University Press, Forthcoming 2016), http://oxfordbibliographies.com/browse?module_0=obo-9780199756223.

science was being institutionalized as a discipline in the early 1900's, secularism was in the process of changing the tenor of political thought. Theories of secularization—and advocacy for it—were at their peak, having gradually risen on the tide of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and subsequent intellectual currents such as humanism, deism, and Darwinism. The dominance of theories of secularization in academia was so great in the early and mid-20th century that the question of religion's proper role in politics seemed answered, and secularization seemed inevitable—relegating the study of religious and political thought to a niche in the political theory sub-field.⁹²

Even today, the majority of mainstream writing on religion and politics in the social sciences focuses on the “problem” of religion and politics or on the status of minority religious groups in democratic states—both perspectives that see religion and democracy as antagonistic to each other – which understand religion as a problem to be solved through secularization.⁹³ However, a series of historiographical shifts in the late 20th and early 21st centuries contributed to the current renaissance of scholarship attending to religion and secularism in political thought. Two particularly fruitful components of this discourse, which have influenced the orientation of this project, are post-secularism and comparative political thought.

Post-secularism is a series of interrelated debates emerging out of the humanities and social sciences, with roots in Critical Theory and feminist political thought, among other schools of thought.⁹⁴ Post-secularism shares some common work and orientations with other current

⁹² E.g., Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).

⁹³ E.g., Christopher Callaway, “Religion and Politics,” ed. Bradley Dowden and James Fieser, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.d., <http://www.iep.utm.edu/rel-poli/#H6>; Chris Eberle and Terence Cuneo, “Religion and Political Theory,” ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.d., <http://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=religion-politics>.

⁹⁴ E.g., Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*; e.g., Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Talal Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, 2nd Revised Edition, 2013; Craig J. Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002); Jane Bennett, *The*

discourses and literatures, including cosmopolitan thought, comparative political thought, and Islamic political thought.⁹⁵ On the one hand, post-secularism is a sociological and anthropological account of contemporary state secularism wherein a greater public awareness of and tolerance for religious voices is coming into being alongside a global rise in religiosity.⁹⁶ As Luhmann notes, such scholarly work is important because it is one way to begin to address the rift of the culture wars, to create a bridge over the cultural abyss that has halted policy progress and kept anger bubbling for decades.

On the other hand, the post-secular is the normative demand that claims of faith must be treated respectfully next to claims of secular reason. In this way, post-secularists challenge the Weber's thesis through new genealogies of the secular which suggest that secularization is not only not entirely successful, but is often ethically problematic.⁹⁷ These genealogies more accurately reflect the co-constitutive histories and current representations of religion and secularity by depicting secularism as a religious practice, culture, and theory in its own right and contemporary religious practices as deeply imbued with rationalistic and secularist modes of thought. Thus, this discourse focuses more on relations between secular and religious movements, theories, and ways of being than on secularism overcoming religion.⁹⁸ If political theory—especially theorists invested in the post-secular or comparative political theory literatures—seeks to demythologize secularism, it must come to know the “other” of secular progressive politics in

Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001); Wendy Brown and Rainer Forst, *The Power of Tolerance: A Debate*, ed. Luca Di Blasi and Christoph Holzhey, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Judith Butler, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011)..

⁹⁵ E.g., Andrew F March, *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for an Overlapping Consensus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012)..

⁹⁶ Craig J. Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds., *Habermas and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

⁹⁷ E.g., Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁹⁸ Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*.

the United States by seriously engaging with evangelical thought qua political thought, as this project does. Furthermore, the fact of deep links between evangelicalism and American political thought makes it an even more suitable candidate for post-secular analysis.⁹⁹

Alongside the advent of post-secular thought there is also a wellspring of political thought returning to classical questions of ethics and advocacy for a pre-modern view of the individual subject. This renewed interest in political ethics is also often elaborated as a critique of modernity, liberalism, and the Enlightenment's focus on laws and rules, as opposed to practices that contribute to the development of individual character, and enhance democratic practice with engaging enchantments.¹⁰⁰ Michel Foucault is one of the figures whose work reflects this ethical turn. Like much of the material studied in Foucault's late work, devotional texts are not directly works of ethics and morality, but practical works, dealing with everyday life, which have potential ethical and moral implications.¹⁰¹ Evangelical sermons, bible study classes, devotional literature, and Christian periodicals all regularly examine issues of the self, the good life, and the relationship between the individual and the community. Study of these practices forms a natural complement to the contemporary interest in Aristotelian virtue ethics¹⁰² and personal ethical practices generally.¹⁰³ Evangelicals are not only asking, "what sort of person am I to become?"¹⁰⁴ but they elaborate a set of beliefs and practices in answer to that question. In this way, evangelicalism develops a "rival moral scheme" vis-à-vis contemporary secular

⁹⁹ For comparative political thought, see: Fred R. Dallmayr, *Border Crossings: Toward a Comparative Political Theory*, (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 1999); Michael Freeden and Andrew Vincent, eds., *Comparative Political Thought: Theorizing Practices*, Routledge Studies in Comparative Political Thought (New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁰⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2, The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988); Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 3*; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*; Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*.

¹⁰¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 3*, 3.

¹⁰² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

¹⁰³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 3: The Care of the Self*.

¹⁰⁴ MacIntyre claims that liberalism and modernity fail to answer this essential question *After Virtue*, 118–119.

liberalism¹⁰⁵—an enactment that is not being produced by a cultish fringe movement, but by the largest religious group in America.

Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* provides one of the theoretical frameworks this project follows re this question of religion, ethics, and politics. One of the key themes of post-secularism is that the spiritual and religious tradition that individuals are embedded in, and the practices they perform, are more crucial to the development of the self than is conceived of by liberalism and other modern philosophical traditions.¹⁰⁶ In Taylor view, when religious and ethical goods are expunged from political thought through the process of secularization, the connections between the self, the good, narrative, and community are erased—making the formation of political subjects and movements difficult to trace. In his alternative conception of individual development, there is “a connection between (a) our notions of the good, (b) our understandings of self, (c) the kinds of narrative in which we make sense of our lives, and (d) conceptions of society.”¹⁰⁷ For Taylor, personal ethical and religious orientations are fused to political ones by the connective tissue of personal identity and narrative. When an individual sees herself and her story differently, she is oriented differently to the good and to her own community—not to mention communities of difference. Taylor argues that these developments are accompanied by “new understandings of social bonds and relations.”¹⁰⁸

Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* provides a concrete example of Taylor's theorization that also attends to the question of how ideological shift can generate activism on the most basic level, even as this evangelical positioning appears less openly political from the outside.

Working at the intersection of post-secularism, comparative political thought, and feminist

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., x.

¹⁰⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 105.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

theory, *Politics of Piety* is a model for my work here, as it explores the relationship between faith and the political subject. Although Mahmood's account of the Egyptian women's mosque movement uses an ethnographic method, its work of detailing the difference between humanism and Islamic pietists' views of the subject is similar to my work showcasing the subjectivity of American evangelicals, as separated from, although cross-pollinated with, secular Americans.¹⁰⁹

In fact, there is a parallel between Mahmood's subjects and my own. Mahmood outlines how the mosque movement consists of two types of actors: 1) the pietists, whose primary goal is to act with a habituated religiosity; and 2) the Islamists, for whom religion is integral to a more political project.¹¹⁰ Just as she focuses on the pietists, I focus on evangelical devotional writers and practitioners within the larger political and cultural project of the evangelical movement. Her analysis focuses on the pietists internal goal of piety—rather than the external one of gender equity.¹¹¹ I attend to a subset of evangelicals who are most focused on living “biblical” lives, themselves—rather than on those concerned with cultural reform. As she explains:

[*Politics of Piety*] seek[s] to analyze the conceptions of self, moral agency, and politics that undergird the practices of this nonliberal movement, in order to come to an understanding of the historical projects that animate it.¹¹²

Similarly, my interest lies in analyzing concepts of time, being, and personhood undergirding the larger cultural and political project of evangelicalism. Perhaps most crucially, *Politics of Piety* provides a model for my view that spiritual and religious practices both provide support for the formation of the subject. While there is not necessarily a direct link between devotional practices and evangelical politics, understanding the former may help us understand the ability of the

¹⁰⁹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 17–25.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

evangelical movement to attract supporters for a variety of causes. Mahmood clarifies how affective-spiritual topics can and should be included in the purview of political scholarship:

Despite the self-avowedly apolitical stance of the pietists, their practices [the cultivation of submission to what is interpreted as God’s will] have a profound affect in the social and political fields, transform[ing] the very ground on which nationalist, statist, and other kinds of secular-liberal projects can be envisioned and practiced. To ignore the transformative potential of the movement is to fail to understand its power and force. [P]olitical projects are not only the result of coalitional organizing, ideological mobilization, and critical deliberation. They are predicated upon affective, ethical, and sensible capacities that are often ignored as consequential to the analysis of politics.¹¹³

Similarly, U.S. evangelicalism has long been noted—by thinkers from Tocqueville to Weber¹¹⁴

— as a major influence on the political and cultural development of the nation. Perhaps G.K.

Chesterton said it best, when he described America as “a nation with the soul of a church.”¹¹⁵

Just as Mahmood recognizes that spiritual practices shape the ground upon which Egyptian political projects form, this dissertation recognizes that the specific spiritual practices that shape evangelicals work similarly to shape the ground upon which American political projects form.

The retreat of a major religious group into political quietism is to be noticed and analyzed by political scientists; and not only for its absence, but for the content of that absence, which may be a portent of changes to come that would be more fruitfully anticipated than ignored. I share Mahmood’s contention that spiritual movements that seem—or declare themselves to be—apolitical are actually actively at work creating the political habits and attitudes of subjects.

Following from Mahmood’s contention that politics is “predicated upon affective, ethical, and sensible capacities,”¹¹⁶ this work strives to show how it is especially essential to include

Pentecostalized Christian religious movements—which place an emotional connection with God

¹¹³ Ibid., xi–xiii.

¹¹⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Knopf, 1994), Volume II, Chapter 5; “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” in Hans Heinrich Gerth, C. Mills, and Max Weber, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Oxford University Press paperback, [Nachdr.] (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959).

¹¹⁵ “On American Morals” in G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Chesterton: The Best Essays, Stories, Poems and Writings of G.K. Chesterton* (New York: Mead, 1937), 54.

¹¹⁶ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xiii.

at the center of their worship practices—within the study of politics. Mahmood shows that for religious people, the source of agency is often located within the religious structure of power, within the norms and practices that would seem to confine them. Similarly, in my view, the success and longevity of the evangelical movement is not only found in its adaptability,¹¹⁷ but in the theological tensions that would seem to weaken it. For Mahmood, different modalities of moral and ethical action contribute to the construction of particular kinds of subjects.¹¹⁸ From this viewpoint, the ambivalence, unpredictability, contradictions, ambiguities, multidirectional, and tension-fueled political thought of evangelicalism has a possible source in the theology that makes itself known in evangelical devotional texts and practices.

Mahmood tracks the process of subject formation—through pedagogy, training, and argumentation¹¹⁹—to understand the moral and ethical rather than political reasons for what are seen as religious obligations such as veiling and ritual prayer. In this dissertation, I track the devotional narratives of time, practice of meditation, and conceptualization of personhood in an effort to reveal the devotional basis of views and behaviors that are also normally viewed as only political. Examples from this dissertation include the retroactive rhetoric of virginity pledging, political quietism arising from the virtues of gratitude and patience, and the view that poverty and sickness are states that nurture closeness to God.

Despite the return of political thought to religious and ethical themes—and attention to Islamic and Catholic political thought—there is a notable lack of theorization of evangelicalism, even with the movement's continuing dominance in the United States, record growth globally, and a burgeoning revival among the next generation of evangelicals. Perhaps most surprisingly, given

¹¹⁷ Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001; Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 2006.

¹¹⁸ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 24.

¹¹⁹ E.g., *ibid.*, 79–83.

this interests contemporary ethics, theorists rarely consider the ways contemporary evangelical practices embody a quotidian political Aristotelianism in the 21st century.¹²⁰ While contemporary Americans take less time to discuss what qualifies us as good individuals and good citizens—as we no longer sit in the men’s clubs of the early 20th century nor enjoy the philosophical leisure of the ancient Athenian agora—there are groups in America that do so regularly. Evangelicals are one such group.

Furthermore, these topics are crucial to contemporary political science more generally. The American Political Science Association’s task force on inequality and American democracy highlight the significance of religious ideas in a moment when civic participation is ebbing,¹²¹

Religious organizations continue to be a kind of coral reef pulsating with democratic life. They instill basic skills and habits necessary for political participation and advocacy and help to offset much of the bias in favor of the affluent and well-educated that is common in American politics. Simply attending religious services enhances turnout for elections. Helping to run a church soup kitchen, organizing a youth group’s visit to another religious institution, or serving on a congregational committee can all be bridges to wider community and political involvement.¹²²

This finding—that religious association is one of the last surviving bastions of civic involvement—demands an understanding of the specific type of political orientation being developed in religious communities, especially the evangelical community, which is the largest in the United States and a rapidly growing force globally. Thus, this study is tightly bound to a number of essential questions and discourses in both political theory and political science.

In addition to being the first study to systematically examine evangelicalism as political thought in its own right, this dissertation contributes to a range of literatures. First, it addresses

¹²⁰ Stanley Hauerwas’ is a notable exception: *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf And Stock, 2010); *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

¹²¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

¹²² Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, American Political Science Association, “American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality,” 2004, 19, <http://www.apsanet.org/PUBLICATIONS/Reports/Task-Force-on-Inequality-and-American-Democracy>.

the dearth of work on evangelical thought in political theory, which in turn provides theoretical grounding for empirical scholarship in American and comparative politics and for empirical policy and behavioral studies of evangelicals across the social sciences. Second, it contributes a significant chapter to the intellectual history of the new millennium. Third, it address the lack of work on evangelical thought in gender and sexuality studies and in the study of religion, where other forms of religious thought are experiencing a renaissance and where much quantitative work on evangelicalism exists that doesn't consider the larger theoretical and political landscape.

Case Selection

Source material for the dissertation consists primarily of devotional texts from four 21st century evangelical thinkers: Rick Warren, Sarah Young, Rob Bell, and Sarah Bessey. The devotional genre is part of what Luhrmann calls the “long tradition of spiritual literature” that begins with the Bible and continues through Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther.¹²³

Warren, Young, Bell, and Bessey distinguish themselves from the leadership of the Christian right by: expressing distaste for formal organizations and authority; focusing on metaphysics in their writing; emphasizing spiritual renewal over explicit political and normative directives; and exhibiting a comparatively high level of intellectual rigor following from advanced theological training. Thus, they are in many ways antithetical to a Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell, who epitomized the flamboyantly conservative Christian right. The thinkers in this constellation largely work independently, eschewing connections to established Christian right organizations and leadership. Ed Dobson celebrates the approach of this new vanguard:

There's a whole new generation—Rick Warren, for example—whose list of issues includes poverty, HIV-AIDS, caring for creation, and are much more nonpolitical in their

¹²³ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xiii.

passion and are working to solve issues at a grassroots level. In retrospect, I wish the Moral Majority had chosen that route.¹²⁴

While they differ in style and commitments, their devotional texts—which include books, videos, social media and other web content—are significant due to both their acclaim and their ingenuity. One of the most important innovations is their acceptance of biblical interpretation over straight biblical literalism. While not necessarily acknowledged as such, this is a step that shifts evangelicalism beyond Noll’s crisis of the evangelical mind,¹²⁵ as well as echoing the emergence of liberal Protestantism in the early 20th century—those churches known as mainline today.¹²⁶ Whether or not this shift away from literalism remains popular in the long term—a development that would change evangelicalism radically and definitionally—remains to be seen.

These four thinkers were selected based on three criteria: 1) massive popularity among evangelicals, 2) discussion of their work in the evangelical discourse, and 3) writings that lend themselves to analysis of both spiritual and political content (especially focused on questions of existence, purpose, self, and the good life). Each thinker has published several books in the “Christian life” and devotional literature genres since the year 2000, from which I develop the themes of time, being, and personhood.

Sarah Young is an American author, missionary, and Christian counselor who has worked for the Presbyterian Church in America’s missions to Japanese communities in both Japan and Australia since the late 1970’s. Converted at Francis Schaeffer’s L’Abri Fellowship in Huémoz, Switzerland, Young holds a BA in Philosophy from Wellesley College,¹²⁷ and graduate degrees in counseling psychology from Tufts University, Covenant Theological Seminary, and

¹²⁴ Dobson, *God in America*, Public Broadcasting Station.

¹²⁵ Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.

¹²⁶ Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, 104–129; and “Errand in the Wilderness” in Worthen, *The Apostles of Reason*, 15–35.

¹²⁷ Sarah Young, *Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence: Devotions for Every Day of the Year* (Nashville, TN: Integrity Publishers, 2004), 20.

Georgia State University. She currently resides in Perth, Western Australia. Young's 2004 book, *Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence*, is comprised of writings that Young believes are direct communications from God.¹²⁸ This prophetic approach is controversial within of the evangelical community but has proven wildly popular among her large readership. Young's books are mostly written for audiences of women and children. *Jesus Calling* was still ranked first among Amazon sales of Christian devotionals ten years after its initial publication, having sold more than 5 million copies worldwide. It was still ranked ninth on the Nielsen Top 20 list in 2014, and was the highest-ranking nonfiction title on the Nielson print list. Despite her massive book sales, Young is something of a recluse, declining to do book tours and most interviews.¹²⁹

Rick Warren is a Southern Baptist evangelical pastor and author, famous for his 2002 bestseller *The Purpose Driven Life*.¹³⁰ Warren views human life as imbued with divine purpose—which he believes is communicated through an intimate and conversational friendship with God. Based out of the Saddleback Church he founded in Lake Forest California, Warren teaches from a conservative theological viewpoint and holds conservative political views on issues from abortion to stem cell research. However, he encourages his parishioners to shift their attention to less controversial issues like fighting poverty, AIDS in Africa, and environmentalism. But most significantly, his writing began the shift of evangelical discourse to spiritual questions. Warren holds a Doctor of Ministry from Fuller Theological Seminary. *The Purpose Driven Life* has been translated into at least eleven languages and sold 32 million copies worldwide in its first ten

¹²⁸ Ibid., 23–25.

¹²⁹ Andy Butcher, "Sarah Young: Amid Suffering, Devotion," *Publishers Weekly*, November 14, 2012; Melissa Steffan, "Sarah Young Still Hears Jesus Calling," *Christianity Today*, October 1, 2013.

¹³⁰ *The Purpose Driven Life*.

years.¹³¹ In a report on their survey of American pastors, The Barna Group described Warren’s work as incredibly influential to evangelicalism, essentially without peer.¹³²

Rob Bell is an American pastor, author, “Christian teacher,” and former leader of the emergent church movement¹³³ who gained notoriety for his six books and NOOMA video-series on evangelical belief, life, and cultural position—all released since the year 2000. Unlike Young, he has enjoyed the spotlight, appearing on Oprah and working to launch his own TV-series. The editor of *Christianity Today* describes him as a Romantic in the tradition of 19th century liberal Protestantism.¹³⁴ His first book, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, advocates for a continual revival in the spirit of Luther,¹³⁵ which is emblematic of the type of theological and political shift this dissertation describes. While he holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary (the premier evangelical seminary) and was the founding pastor of Mars Hill mega-church in Michigan, he has stepped down from that post and now lives and works in Los Angeles as a Christian “teacher,” devoting himself to book tours and an independent ministry outside of a church affiliation. Bell openly rejects the Christian right, and hopes to replace it with a love-centered doctrine. Most notoriously, he argues for removing hell from evangelical theology. Despite that controversial view, even his critics think he is representative of evangelicalism today.¹³⁶ While Bell has undergone quite a transition in his self-identity to date

¹³¹ George Mair, *A Life with Purpose: Reverend Rick Warren, the Most Inspiring Pastor of Our Time*, 1st ed (New York: Berkley Books, 2005).

¹³² “Survey Reveals the Books and Authors That Have Most Influenced Pastors,” May 30, 2005, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/178-survey-reveals-the-books-and-authors-that-have-most-influenced-pastors#.VFz0pfTF8vc>.

¹³³ Sanneh, “The Hell-Raiser.”

¹³⁴ *Christianity Today* is the foremost evangelical newspaper. Mark Galli, “Rob Bell’s ‘Ginormous’ Mirror,” *Christianity Today*, May 15, 2013.

¹³⁵ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*.

¹³⁶ Mark Galli, “Rob Bell’s ‘Ginormous’ Mirror,” *Christianity Today*, May 15, 2013.

(evangelical, to emergent church, and beyond), *Velvet Elvis*—the main focus of my analysis of his thought—largely pre-dates this transition.¹³⁷

Sarah Bessey is a Canadian author whose 2013 book, *Jesus Feminist: An Invitation to Revisit the Bible's View of Women*, brings an unlikely combination of viewpoints to her work as an evangelical blogger and author.¹³⁸ After growing up in a small, charismatic community in Western Canada,¹³⁹ Bessey attended a Christian liberal arts university in Oklahoma, married an American pastor, spent some time working in marketing while her husband worked for a church in Texas, and is now working as a blogger and author in Vancouver, British Columbia where her husband found a pastoral post.¹⁴⁰ She previously identified with the emergent church movement¹⁴¹ and is involved with Regent College in Vancouver, a graduate school of theology that advertises itself as “an innovative school where evangelical faith meets rigorous academics.”¹⁴² Bessey also contributes and edits for *A Deeper Story: Tales of Christ and Culture*, a prominent evangelical blog, and is a contributing writer for the online evangelical community, publication, and movement, *SheLoves Magazine*.¹⁴³ While neither Bell nor Bessey have comparable publishing numbers to Young and Warren, they have both become the focus of substantial discussion and sometimes controversy in major evangelical publications.¹⁴⁴

Although these four thinkers are unified by a shift away from the politics of the Christian right—they vary in the specifics of their revival message. Thus, this study describes the beliefs

¹³⁷ Biographical information drawn from: James K. Wellman, *Rob Bell and a New American Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012); Carol Kuruvilla, “Former Megachurch Pastor Rob Bell: A Church That Doesn’t Support Gay Marriage Is ‘Irrelevant,’” *The Huffington Post*, February 20, 2015; Mark Galli, “Rob Bell’s Bridge Too Far,” *Christianity Today*, March 14, 2011; Bell, *Velvet Elvis*.

¹³⁸ *Jesus Feminist: An Invitation to Revisit the Bible's View of Women* (New York: Howard Books, 2013).

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, note 1, page 223.

¹⁴⁰ Katelyn Beaty, “I’m a Feminist Because I Love Jesus So Much”: Popular Blogger Sarah Bessey Says the Arc of Scripture Reveals a Liberating Vision for Women,” *Christianity Today*, November 4, 2013; Bessey, “In Which I Have Discovered That I Don’t Care about the Emerging Church Anymore”; Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*.

¹⁴¹ Bessey, “In Which I Have Discovered That I Don’t Care about the Emerging Church Anymore.”

¹⁴² “Regent College Webpage,” accessed May 22, 2015, <http://www.regent-college.edu/>.

¹⁴³ *She Loves Magazine*, <http://shelovesmagazine.com/>.

¹⁴⁴ E.g., Galli, “Rob Bell’s Bridge Too Far”; Beaty, “I’m a Feminist Because I Love Jesus So Much.”

and practices of evangelicalism since the turn of the 21st century, using these thinkers as a prism through which to render more clearly the “wildly veering” imagination of evangelicalism.¹⁴⁵

Structure of the Dissertation

The three main sections of the dissertation are organized around the three conceptual themes that emerged in my research: time, being, and personhood. These themes explicate contemporary evangelicalism’s distinctiveness from both the larger culture and evangelical movements of the past.

Part I, on evangelical time, begins by tracing the atypical shape and behavior of evangelical temporality. Chapter 1 outlines the concepts of a teleological eternity and a retroactive re-birth, which form a productive tension that strengthens both individual belief and the power of the movement. Chapter 2 focuses on the devotional practices designed to change the believer’s understanding of time, aligning it with eternity. Chapter 3 describes the experience of being born again, and Chapter 4 analyzes the ways that rhetoric in the “True Love Waits” 2010-2013 youth abstinence campaign reflects this conceptualization of evangelical time.

Part II posits an evangelical theory of being in which a process of emotional self-regulation leads to a simultaneous being and doing of “the Word”¹⁴⁶—providing comfort, life purpose, and reassurances of perfection as well as a glimpse into divine “reality.” Chapter 5 discusses the role of emotion in contemporary devotional practices, dealing specifically with meditation as a disciplinary and devotional process. Chapter 6 advances a new theory of belief, that builds on the analysis of emotion in the previous chapter and engages the work of Sara

¹⁴⁵ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 13.

¹⁴⁶ “Word,” when capitalized, usually refers to the Bible as “the Word of God.”

Ahmed and Saba Mahmood.¹⁴⁷ Chapter 7 describes the dualism between essence and action in evangelical conceptions of being.

Part III outlines the evangelical theory and practice of personhood, in which embodied identities are depoliticized through narratives of disembodiment. The resulting personhood is produced through a nexus of evangelicalism and the ethos of tolerance, equality, diversity, and multiculturalism present in current (neo)liberal and cosmopolitan worldviews. Chapter 8 explains how the wretched-blessed of the Beatitudes form the basis of evangelical identity along the axes of class, disability/disease, immigration, and global missionary work. Chapter 9 discusses the role of the dualisms and tensions seen throughout Parts I, II, and III.

The concluding chapter provides final statements of my arguments about the nature of the evangelical politick, the 21st century revival, and the transcendence of the Christian right. In addition, the conclusion discusses current political developments in the evangelical movement, including the evangelical response to Black Lives Matter and Donald Trump's campaign for president. The final pages of the conclusion outline several possible trajectories for the evangelical movement in the decades to come.

¹⁴⁷ *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2004; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*. *Ibid.*

PART I:

EVANGELICAL TIME

Chapter 1: Temporal Tensions

While devotional texts are rooted in individual experience and the promotion of specific bodily practices and habits of mind, cosmological and metaphysical points often emerge from between the lines. Time is a prominent motif in contemporary evangelicalism and a clear example of a productive tension within evangelical thought that allows for theological shift while maintaining cultural and political power. While no political movement or ideology is without internal tensions and contradictions, evangelicalism is unique in the celebration of its myriad dualisms, tensions, and contradictions.

Contemporary evangelical narratives of eternity and retroactivity form this productive tension through opposing claims about the nature of time. On the one hand, claims of eternity mark time as unchanging and stable; something that is eternal lasts forever. On the other hand, retroactivity marks time as flowing, malleable, and capable of bending back on itself. The eternal creates the foundational, reverential, and devoted character of evangelicalism—linking it to the long history and tradition of Judeo-Christianity, in all its institutional prowess. Wrinkled or retroactive time provides evangelicalism with its revivifying, revivalistic power—linking it to a tradition of audacious, innovative, and rebellious thinking that has characterized not only Protestantism hailing back to Martin Luther, but also to the Jewish and Christian thinkers of the Bible. This tension produces a lasting cultural bedrock in evangelicalism, which underlies an extremely malleable surface layer.

The pliant permanence found in the combination of these two modes of time is indispensable to evangelicalism, both as a body of thought and as a movement. Both are key capabilities for successful social movements generally. The tension between eternity and retroactivity works at both the individual and movement level; the political identity of individual

believers is re-connected and recommitted to the evangelical subculture while that subculture itself adapts to the changing needs and desires of its adherents as they are influenced by the larger culture. In other words, the staying power of the movement relies on both the adaptability and changelessness of evangelical time, as well as the tension between the two. Devotional texts are especially important vehicles for propelling revivalism, because they replace a slow-moving central authority (like the papacy) with a constantly shifting and adapting discourse written by both ordained and non-ordained members of the evangelical community.

The creative, productive tension of evangelical time is drawn from an enduring tradition in the Abrahamic religions. In the Bible, there are two main conceptions of time. Temporal themes of tradition, history, and ancestry are found principally in the Old Testament, while motifs of re-birth, transcendence, and apocalypse are found primarily in the New Testament. Thus, biblical time diverges from itself—pulling the reader backwards and forwards simultaneously—long before contemporary evangelical thinkers began redeploying that tension in their 21st century devotional writing. Claims of eternity mark time as linear and predictable; something that is eternal was created perfectly to last forever. Retroactivity marks time as, changeable; rebirth is the ultimate act of self-reformation.

Of all the concepts in the belief system, evangelical time is the most ubiquitous and unreflective, working in the background as a medium of discourse. Although the details may be debated, evangelical time itself is not—it is presumed. Evangelical thinkers often base their descriptions of God, humans, and the workings of the universe on atypical views of time that explode the movement of everyday secular chronology. The norms that arise from evangelical interpretations of the creation story—the hope for heaven, the fear of hell, and the teleology

inspired by Christian discipleship—all take part as temporal phenomena that play a weighty role in evangelical thought.

By directing the reader’s gaze on the world and their own self through this prism of sacred time, evangelical authors draw on their reader’s fears and hopes about the passage of chronological time. Whether readers hope for personal development and fulfillment or fear aging and death, divine time is used to offer a reassuring perspective. Furthermore, the reader’s own personal experience with and feelings about time are supplemented by, and intermingled with, temporal ideas found in the biblical narrative.

The texts analyzed in Part I—emanating from the ministries of Rob Bell, Sarah Bessey, Rick Warren, and Sarah Young—consistently use temporal themes in an effort to influence how their readers understand the world and act in it. Furthermore, the authors often base their descriptions of God, humans, and the workings of the universe on atypical views of time that explode the movements of ordinary chronology. The atypical shape and operation of evangelical time—the surety of predestination, the retroactivity of being “born again,” the eternity of salvation—provide a narrative upon which evangelical ontology, ethics, and politics can rest. The way devotional authors represent the relationship with God, and the ways they instruct their readers to mold their life purpose, outlook, and political and social identities are all explained and filtered through this temporal vocabulary.

How is it that a religious and social movement can exist for over 500 years and still continue to adapt itself to the needs of the day? A significant part of the staying (yet changing) power of evangelicalism comes from the evangelical conception of time with its dual groundings in eternity and retroactivity.

Atypical beliefs about time are not unique to evangelicalism. In fact, many of them are shared by Catholics and mainline Protestants—and to a lesser extent by Jews, Muslims, and adherents of non-Abrahamic religions. But these interpretations of time are particularly conspicuous, central, and literal in the evangelical discourse. Thus, they tend to have significant effects on the ways evangelical authors write about human existence on an abstract level and how they recommend that their readers make choices and act in life.

Furthermore, there are hints throughout the social science literature of ways that deviant temporal thought spans not only the boundaries of diverse religious faiths, but also actively impacts culture as a whole. As we've established, the frequent occurrence and heavy reliance on motifs of time in evangelicalism is significant for a study of evangelical political thought, but these patterned theological-temporal themes are also key for contextualizing secular theories of time—re-writing secularism's genealogy. While many scholars of evangelicalism emphasize that there is symbiotic relationship between evangelical and secular cultures,¹⁴⁸ the mechanisms of that relationship are not established or theorized.

To demonstrate evangelical influences on secular culture and how they continue to permeate that culture today I use Daniel T. Rodgers' concept of wrinkled time from his intellectual history of the 1980's and 1990's, *Age of Fracture*.¹⁴⁹ While Rodgers elegantly analyzes the workings of wrinkled temporality across the political spectrum from 1980 through the first term of the Obama administration (covered in his epilogue), his discussion of wrinkled time omits a major cultural player in the form of evangelicalism. Had Rodgers made this connection between evangelicals and secular actors more explicit and explored it more

¹⁴⁸ Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 2006.; Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001.

¹⁴⁹ (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

thoroughly, his account of both the age of fracture and the reformulation of concepts of society after September 11th would be more substantive.¹⁵⁰

Despite the prominent position of evangelicals in party politics—especially Presidents Carter, Reagan, and George W. Bush—and the peak involvement of evangelical-based political organizations such as the Christian Coalition and the Moral Majority in the late 20th century, Rodgers mostly skims over the cross-pollinations between culture, politics, and religion—only connecting evangelicalism directly to his argument in a chapter on gender roles. This omission is especially surprising in parts of the book where strong Christian themes and rhetoric run through the key texts of Rodgers archive, but go unmentioned in his analysis.

As an addition to Rodgers's thesis, I argue that the concept of wrinkled time is compelling to Americans—in the texts of the presidential speeches, academic treatise, and the best-selling books that Rodgers cites—because of the high percentage of evangelicals in their midst and, perhaps more importantly, because of the evangelical influences that have always pulsed within American political thought. Furthermore, by looking at foreshortened, wrinkled time through the lens of evangelicalism we are going to the source—to understand this time as the transcendence of mortal time. Through this process we gain a richer understanding of not only the connections between religion, politics, and cultural conceptions of time, but also of the dynamics, movements, and expansive scope of evangelical time from creation, to rebirth, to apocalypse.

So what is evangelical time? Evangelical time is best described as atypical, knotted, multi-directional, heterogeneous and inconsistent—at least when compared to the normative, fluid, homogenous, forward-moving, linear time assumed in popular everyday chronologies. Although

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 4.

scientific models are purportedly the basis for secular, mainstream conceptions of time, post-secularists argue that secular, scientific, and religious conceptions of time are more mutually intertwined than we might guess.

The atypicality of evangelical time is manifested in a number of central features of 21st century devotional texts, including the beliefs that: human time and aging are illusory; both human and divine lifespans are eternal, immortal, and infinite; the future is already planned and predetermined down to the smallest detail; predestination applies to individuals, the human race, the planet earth, and the cosmos as a whole; sin can be retroactively expunged through being born again; human history is on a “trajectory of redemption”;¹⁵¹ scheduling the future or planning major social change should be resisted in order to show faith in God’s plan; one should live with the expectation of a sudden transformation of space-time (such as apocalypse, the second coming of Christ, or physical death followed by final judgment and heaven); and lastly that through these various wrinkles in time God can simultaneously be a comforting “presence in the present,” a careful creator in the past and the link to salvation in the future.¹⁵²

Thus, time plays another key role in evangelical thought by imbuing God with his godliness. By traversing, transcending, and manipulating time—in a manner humans desire for themselves—God becomes divine. For evangelicals, then, the main significance of time is threefold in their lives: a time transcending deity; their relationship with that deity that enables them to develop an understanding of their own abilities of time travel (re-birth); and coming to believe that reality is not ordered by chronological time, but by sacred time (eternity).

It’s easy to see how essential time is with respect to the elements of the evangelical cosmos when we look for temporal themes in devotional writings. God, humans, and the human

¹⁵¹ Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, 26.

¹⁵² Young, *Jesus Calling*, 85.

experience are all described vis-à-vis their atemporality or atypical chronology. For example, the most important evangelical claim about the essence of God and his creation is that they are immortal, ageless, and eternal; the most important claim about the past, present, and future is that they are collapsible into one another; and the most important claim about human experience is that time is no obstacle to God's omniscience or omnipresence. Furthermore, not only do atypical chronologies play a central role in the contemporary devotional texts, but they are also a key feature in each of the four standard elements of the Bebbington-Noll definition of evangelicalism: conversionism, biblicalism, activism, and crucicentrism.¹⁵³

It is not possible to believe in being born again—the Bebbington-Noll ‘new birth’—without believing in retroactivity. Similarly, an adherent cannot truly rely on the Bible as the only source of religious (and general) authority if she sees its books as mere historical documents—as opposed to a living and ongoing story that plays itself out in the lives of contemporary evangelicals. There is no point to evangelizing—being an “activist” Christian—if one does not believe that an omniscient God is watching over believers and will reward them at final judgment for “spreading his Word.” There is no salience to Jesus’ “redeeming work” on the cross—“crucicentrism”—if an evangelical does not believe that humans are beings with the capacity for eternal life (the atemporal capacity to enjoy the salvation Jesus ‘worked’ for). That is to say, evangelical time—or the metaphysical temporality behind evangelicalism—is generally assumed in both ministerial texts and scholarly descriptions and definitions of evangelicalism, but remains undeveloped as a significant pattern of the movement’s thought.

Thus, to fill that lacuna, the remainder of Part I analyzes the temporal beliefs and practices at the heart of evangelicalism today. While all of the interlocking temporal elements discussed in the last few pages are important to evangelical time and will be developed to some

¹⁵³ Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001, 13.

extent in what follows, the discussion of time in the next two chapters focuses on eternity and retroactivity. These components of evangelical time, as they are found in the rhetorical patterns of devotional texts, are most vital for political analysis because of their mutual and productive tensions. Chapters 2 and 3 also use the temporal beliefs and experiences that evangelicals promote in devotional texts to understand evangelical time as compared to the presumptively secular, humanist, and Enlightenment views of time held more broadly. My case study in Chapter 4 focuses on the evangelical abstinence movement, which demonstrates how retroactivity is found in the rhetoric of the movement and the concept of “born-again virginity.”

Chapter 2: Learning to Believe in Eternity

Evangelical time begins with the belief in eternity—that the universe, God, and human souls are everlasting and ageless. This belief is essential to evangelicalism because, on the one hand, it undergirds the belief in eternal life predicated on achieving salvation, and on the other hand, because it prescribes a course of spiritual study that will keep most adherents busy for the rest of their human lives—learning to sincerely believe in and trust the fact that their lives are eternal, despite material evidence to the contrary. The belief in eternity is a lynchpin of not only evangelical theology, but also of lifelong spiritual discipleship.

Harold Bloom describes the radical eternity of American religion thus:

the American self is no part of the Creation, or of evolution through the ages. The American self is not the Adam of Genesis but is a more primordial Adam, a Man before there were men or women. Higher and earlier than the angels, this true Adam is as old as God, older than the Bible, and is free of time, unstained by mortality.¹⁵⁴

Although Bloom is describing a broader swath of American religious belief than I am—including Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism, Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witness, Pentecostalism, Southern Baptism, and fundamentalism (only the last three of could be counted as evangelical) —he sees an evangelical hubris not apparent or present in the pages of 21st century evangelical texts. While contemporary evangelicals certainly strive to be “free of time, unstained by mortality,”¹⁵⁵ they base that pursuit on being part of God’s Creation. They certainly do not believe themselves to be higher than the angels or as old as God. If the evangelical conception of time contains a single chronological claim, it is that God precedes humans who he creates.

¹⁵⁴ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 15.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Twenty-first century devotional texts repeat that God and humans are eternal beings with a spiritual essence that defies the limitations and strictures of physical bodies and chronological time. Once created, the spiritual essence of humans will continue forever. Creation is a key juncture that Bloom underestimates—at least for the evangelical case. In evangelicalism, God and humans live on an eternal plane of existence—the materially limited lives of human beings are an illusion, which evangelicals spend their lives overcoming or learning to unbelieve. While the former premise is expected of evangelicalism, Rick Warren’s accompanying argument, that the belief in eternity should “radically alter your values” is more remarkable and relevant for this study of evangelicalism as political thought.¹⁵⁶

When you fully comprehend that there is more to life than just here and now, and you realize that life is just preparation for eternity, you will begin to live differently. The closer you live to God, the smaller everything else appears. When you live in light of eternity, your values change. You use your time and money more wisely. You place a higher premium on relationships and character instead of fame or wealth or achievements or even fun. Your priorities are reordered. Keeping up with trends, fashions, and popular values just doesn't matter as much anymore.¹⁵⁷

For personal values to be transformed by belief in the way Warren describes, readers must undergo a socialization or learning process to shift eternity from an abstract belief to one that is folded into their everyday behaviors and decision-making processes. In order to encourage this evolution in their readers, devotional writers often begin with the ageless nature of God as an easily accepted premise before moving on to the spiritual essence and capacities of human beings, which are apparently seen as harder to grasp.

In a post-Nietzsche age we might assume that God would be the hardest thing to believe in or to learn to believe in, but these texts consistency start with God’s eternity and build towards a belief in human eternity. The offhand style these authors use with claims about God’s eternity

¹⁵⁶ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 33.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

signals that the belief in God is taken for granted and is widely—if not universally—accepted among the readership. For example, Sarah Bessey casually refers to the evangelical deity as “the ageless God” in a paragraph about a phase of her life when she was disenchanted by the Church as an institution and culture.¹⁵⁸ God’s agelessness was irrelevant to her point, but the fact that she retained this belief even in a moment of religious questioning underscores its fundamental role in evangelical theology.

Perhaps this confidence of belief can be explained by the fact that the claim of an eternal God is not only part of Evangelicalism 101, but is also far from unique to evangelicalism. The central deity of most religious faiths is worshipped for its supernatural eternity and power. A part of this power is often the ability to move between widely dispersed moments in time and geographic location. In Molly Worthen’s words, the remarkable thing about God is the “divine crow’s nest peering over space and time.”¹⁵⁹

The eternal nature of human souls is a central proposition for evangelicals but one that is clearly a harder sell even to those committed enough to buy and read “Christian life” and devotional books. While God’s agelessness can easily be imagined, there is a bounty of everyday evidence—aging, disease, and death—against an ageless humanity. For this reason, devotional authors spend a good deal of effort pivoting from the brief explanations they offer of the eternal essence of God to the claim of human eternity—a lesson which is repeated over and over, with many different types of evidence and arguments rallied for the purpose. It is clear from this style of writing that they assume their readers already believe in the eternal God, but convincing them that humans also possess eternal life requires more learning and socialization.

¹⁵⁸ Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, 45.

¹⁵⁹ Worthen, *The Apostles of Reason*, 53.

Thus, all the thinkers in this study treat the issue of human eternity as a life-long learning process; not a proposition to accept, but a practice to develop. If humans also possess eternal life, they should not plan for retirement, but for eternal salvation; they should not work to develop their career, but their ministry; they should not prioritize their romantic relationships, but their relationship with God. Because there are so many obstacles—science, medicine, popular culture, everyday experience—to believing that humans are eternal beings, much of evangelical time and prayer is devoted to eroding the belief in mortality. Warren spends several of the early chapters of *A Purpose Driven Life* on that topic. In the first of these chapters, “Made to Last Forever,” Warren uses a quotation from Abraham Lincoln to illustrate his point about human eternity. “Surely God would not have created such a being as man to exist only for a day! No, no, man was made for immortality.”¹⁶⁰ With this quotation, Warren begins the long process of socialization by appealing not only to human exceptionalism or vanity for his support in the claim of human eternity, but also appealing to an American political hero.

Next, he turns to the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes 3:11, where he finds an emotional appeal: “God has planted eternity in the human heart.” Warren interprets the Solomonic scripture to mean that “The reason we feel we should live forever is that God wired our brains with that desire!”¹⁶¹ With each of these successive quotations and interpretations, Warren illustrates that he is building a case for a belief that is difficult to support, a belief that is not obvious to his reader.

Of course, the accompaniment of the claim that the human spirit is eternal is that the material life on earth is temporary. Warren emphasizes the temporary nature of material human

¹⁶⁰ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 37.

¹⁶¹ Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NLT) in *Ibid.* The Bible translations that are most popular with the contemporary evangelical writers in this study include: The Amplified Bible (AMP), The King James Version (KJV), The Message (MSG), The New International Version (NIV), The New King James Version (NKJV), and The New Living Translation (NLT). Warren often uses a blend of several translations at once, but if it’s clear which translation it’s from, I note it.

life in order to encourage the reader to focus on her spiritual development—instead of the earthly achievements that he says will pass with material death. It is certainly easier to convince the reader that human life is short and temporary—most individuals have ample experience of that reality—than to give them unshakable proof that their lives after death are eternal. But he also hedges this claim by explaining to his reader that believing in one’s own eternity and the temporariness of one’s earthly life takes practice, that it is a learning process that will likely take an entire lifetime. In this way, Warren’s devotional text not only instructs the reader in worshipful practices, but also works to justify the necessity of worship in the first place and prescribes its continuation throughout the reader’s life. His readers already view God as timeless, but the reader herself achieves timelessness through discipleship (devotional practice). After appealing to secular political figures, and his reader’s vanity, he draws on their fears about the shortness of human life—even going so far as to cite the average human lifespan—by employing biblical descriptions of earthly life as temporary and short:

The Bible is full of metaphors that teach about the brief, temporary, transient nature of life on earth. Life is described as a mist, a fast runner, a breath, and a wisp of smoke. The Bible says, ‘For we were born but yesterday. Our days on earth are as transient as a shadow.’ The Bible uses terms like alien, pilgrim, foreigner, stranger, visitor, and traveler to describe our brief stay on earth.¹⁶²

From these biblical origins, Warren derives another perspective that he claims will help his readers make the most of life. Previously, we saw how he emphasizes the shortness of life—especially compared to eternity. Now, he illustrates that point further through the perspective of geographic impermanence. He wants his readers to remember that earth is only a temporary residence, making material life like a short visit to a foreign country. The bottom line message here seems to be encouraging his readers not to associate themselves with the traditions, beliefs,

¹⁶² Job 8:9 in *ibid.*, 31.

and constraints of human life on earth and to discourage them from getting too comfortable or attached.¹⁶³

Similarly, Rob Bell's discussion of salvation describes the transformation that occurs when his reader gains the knowledge of and belief in eternity.

For Jesus, [salvation] is far more comprehensive—it is a way of life. *To be saved or redeemed or free is to enter into a totally new way of living in harmony with God.* The rabbis called harmony with God *olam haba*, which translates 'life in the world to come.' *Salvation is living more and more in harmony with God, a process that will go on forever.*¹⁶⁴

Like Warren, Bell describes a process of learning about eternity, but with a different outcome: the believer transcends time through a transformation that occurs when his reader gains the knowledge of and belief in eternity—as opposed to being prepared for that transformation at death. In Bell's description, salvation is not a status achieved after some future moment of judgment, but it is the act, choice, and sensation of living in heaven now, living "life in the world to come," right here and now.¹⁶⁵ Salvation is described as living outside of one's time—inhabiting behavior, experiences, and feelings that Warren and most of Christian theology designate to the futurity of heaven. In other words, Bell is encouraging his reader to find paradise and peace in this life and this moment, rather than looking ahead and waiting for some future salvation. However, for Bell, the process of building a relationship with God in which a believer can make that choice and experience heaven in her earthly life "goes on forever,"¹⁶⁶ stretching even further than Warren's lifelong discipleship. Just as Warren's text is rooted in atypical time as value-altering, so Bell affirms that being saved means being transported out of typical chronological time—out of the typical teleological path where salvation is a future destination. It

¹⁶³ Ibid., 31–34.

¹⁶⁴ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004), 107, emphasis added.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 107.

is a journey that opens into “a new way of life,” or “a new way of living.”¹⁶⁷ For Warren, it is a process to get to heaven, for Bell, the process is heaven itself.

Importantly, these are not just new perspectives on typical human time or a new way to approach and live life in that time, but they are illustrating how life should be conducted if you sincerely believe in eternity. Here, the conceptualization of eternity and the practices that follow from that it are what make evangelical time different from secular time. Evangelical time is not a new approach to living in time, but a conceptualization of time that allows believers to step out of chronological time and into eternity. Within eternity, devotional authors see salvation not as a singular event but as a very long process.

Bell’s claim that the process of harmonizing with God goes on forever is in tension with more traditional evangelical conceptions of heaven, whereby perfection is achieved in a moment—when the end times arrive or when the believer successfully passes from final judgment to heaven. In this way, Bell opens a discussion of whether heaven and salvation are available now or if they are attained only after death. Traditionally, evangelicals do get glimpses of what heaven will feel like when a believer is born again, but these experiences are rare across years of devotional study and practice. Bell has been fiercely criticized for this view, but the criticism only brings his boundary-pushing thesis deeper into the evangelical discourse.¹⁶⁸

Young’s focus on the present—and the comforting potential of a relationship with God in the present—echoes Bell’s view of heaven not as a place but as a continuous process of harmonization. Young and Bell’s conception of paradise fulfilled now opposes the traditional evangelical view of heaven as something to be strived for and attained in the future, which Warren and Bessey both cleave to. Warren is clear that heaven is not a state of mind achieved by

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Mark Galli, “Rob Bell’s Bridge Too Far,” *Christianity Today*, March 14, 2011.

the spiritually proficient. Concerning his reader's spiritual maturation, he writes, "[Your spiritual transformation] will only be finished when you get to heaven or when Jesus returns. At that point, whatever unfinished work on your character is left will be wrapped up."¹⁶⁹ For Warren, earth-bound humans can only get brief glimpses of heaven because it is a future location. For Bell and Young, believers can hold the peace of heaven in their hands each time they communicate with God.

This contrast between Bell and Young's more Pentecostalized account of an accessible heaven on the one hand, and Bessey and Warren's view of a future reward in heaven, on the other hand is a key fissure in the evangelical discourse that illustrates just how important evangelical time is to the belief system as a whole. In describing cosmic futurity, Warren writes:

From the book of Revelation we know that God's global mission *will* be accomplished. Someday the Great Commission will be the Great Completion. In heaven an enormous crowd of people from 'every race, tribe, nation, and language' [Revelation 7:9] will one day stand before Jesus Christ to worship him. Getting involved as a world-class Christian will allow you to experience a little of what heaven will be like in *advance*.¹⁷⁰

Warren's vision of heaven is similar to that of his predecessors in the Christian right, but his slide towards universal salvation of God's plan coming to fruition for all of humanity makes him something of a transitional figure. However, the key aspect of Warren's view of heaven for this account is his focus on the future—as opposed to Young and Bell's focus on the present moment.

Bessey's account is similar, although her focus is more on the work of individuals in evangelical discipleship, which she describes in a metaphor of practicing scales on a piano. This individual pursuit of virtue connects to the work of contemporary virtue ethicists, like Alasdair MacIntyre.¹⁷¹ In Bessey's account, a practitioner reaches virtuosity by:

¹⁶⁹ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 114.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 189–190, original emphasis.

¹⁷¹ *After Virtue*.

Practice[ing] the ways of Jesus, over and over. And someday, I believe, our fingers will be flying over the keys in old hymns and new songs, and when we look up, I bet there will be a field full of people dancing, beside the water, whirling, stomping their feet and laughing, and babies will be bouncing, and we will be singing the song we were always and ever meant to sing. The rocks will be crying out, and the trees will be clapping their hands, and the banquet table will be groaning with the weight of apples and wine and bread, and we will all sing until the stars come down.¹⁷²

Unlike Bell and Young's view of salvation as both a past and presently occurring experience that also stretches into the future, Warren and Bessey's accounts of heaven are almost exclusively future-directed and largely instantaneously achieved. They are described as happening or existing "someday," a vision of heaven that is written in the most distant of future tenses.

However, Warren and Bessey's attention to the future finds footing in the present through their descriptions of the struggles to achieve "goodness and truth,"¹⁷³ strengthening faith through repetition. Devotional texts are designed to accompany a believer through this process of repetition, practice, and norming. Bessey writes of her years of practice:

I was clumsy and awkward, learning to practice goodness and truth, like scales [on the piano] all over again. Someday perhaps my fingers will find those keys without thought. I am learning to fill my ears with the repetitions of wide eyes and open hands and innocent fun. And when my fingers fumble, when I sound flat or sharp, I will simply try again.¹⁷⁴

As novice evangelicals become more proficient, they turn to ministry, whether as an official pastor, like Warren, a Christian teacher, like Bell, a counselor, like Young, or a layperson with a message to share, like Bessey. As Bessey explains in *Jesus Feminist*, it's a long road to the mastery of evangelicalism, and when a disciple has an audience, her practice is communicated through her mastery of the evangelical idioms. One of the key idioms I've demonstrated here is the evangelical conception of time.

¹⁷² Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, 6–7.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

In sum, for evangelicals, God and humans are eternal—timeless, ageless, deathless—entities who interact by virtue of a non-chronological conception of the cosmos and who grow in harmony with one another through knowledge of eternity and ultimately through inter-temporal exchanges like salvation. The difference between God and human beings—vis-à-vis time—is that God fully understands his eternal nature and thus fully occupies it and acts by virtue of it—being all powerful, knowing everything, and being everywhere and everytime. In contrast, humans are not yet aware of their eternity and are thus not yet capable of understanding, knowing, or acting outside of the material restrictions of their physical bodies. The key evangelical exception to this rule is the spiritual “born again” experiences believers have through an intimate relationship with God—which are actually glimpses into their own future transcendent abilities. Or, if a believer is part of a more Pentecostal strain of evangelicalism—like Young and Bell—spiritual healing, signs, miracles, prophesy, speaking in tongues, and other forms of direct communication with God provide more regular experiences of heaven. Human life is a limiting condition that evangelical thinkers promise to help their readers overcome, whether here or hereafter. So, eternity works to give evangelicals a sense of significance, a feeling that their lives have meaning, and an emotional connection to the stories of Jewish and Christian characters in the Bible.

This transcendent sense, feeling, or emotion—specifically the transcendence of vaulting over space and time—is one that exists in a number of nonevangelical contexts as well. Thomas Mann describes a similar affective experience in *The Magic Mountain* when Hans Castorp observes the sensation he has when looking at an heirloom baptismal bowl—a sensation that demonstrates connections between time, religion, history, emotion, and family:

His father's name was there, as was his grandfather's, and his great-grandfather's. [H]e would listen to the great-great-great-great—that somber sound of the crypt and buried time, which nevertheless both expressed a reverently preserved connection of his own life in the present to things now sunk deep beneath the earth and simultaneously had a curious effect on him. The sound made him feel as if he were breathing the moldy, cool air of Saint Catherine's Church or the crypt in Saint Michael's, as if he could sense the gentle draft of places where you walked, hat in hand. At the sound of those somber syllables, *religious feelings* got mixed up with a sense of death and history, and all of it together somehow left the boy with a *pleasant sensation. A strange, half-dreamy, half-scary sense of standing there and yet being tugged away at the same time, a kind of fluctuating permanence, that meant both a return to something and a dizzying, everlasting sameness.*¹⁷⁵

Not only does Mann's description of Castorp's feelings mirror the religious sensations of evangelical rebirth, but this "fluctuating permanence"¹⁷⁶ might serve as a clear description of the role evangelical time plays within the theology and devotional practices of the movement. Mann's text hints at the connection in Western thought between atypical, playful time and religious feeling.

However, the time-transcendence narrative finds just as much purchase today, in the early 21st century, as it did when Mann was writing in 1924, or in the late 20th century period that Rodgers discusses in *Age of Fracture*, when *Back to the Future* made its blockbuster debut (1985). A number of current cultural texts bear witness to the ongoing appeal of wrinkly time among—at least—American audiences who have shown an obsessive devotion to narratives of time travel and apocalypse over the last 40 years: *Frequency*;¹⁷⁷ *The Time Traveler's Wife*;¹⁷⁸ *Star Trek*;¹⁷⁹ *Edge of Tomorrow*;¹⁸⁰ *Outlander*;¹⁸¹ *X-Men: Days of Future Past*;¹⁸²

¹⁷⁵ Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain: A Novel*, trans. John E Woods (New York: Vintage International, 1996), 21–22.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Gregory Hoblit, *Frequency*, 2000.

¹⁷⁸ Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, 1st Harvest ed, A Harvest Book (Orlando: Harcourt, 2003); Robert Schwentke, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, 2009.

¹⁷⁹ J.J. Abrams, *Star Trek*, 2009.

¹⁸⁰ Doug Liman, *Edge of Tomorrow*, 2014.

¹⁸¹ John Dahl, *Outlander* (Starz, August 9, 2014).

¹⁸² Bryan Singer, *Days of Future Past*, 2014.

Tomorrowland,¹⁸³ and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*,¹⁸⁴ to name just a few. While the self-awareness of these texts as narratives of transcendence varies widely, their prominence in the cultural discourse suggests the relevance and continuation of wrinkly time stories today at all levels: from television and action films to concert hall music performances, poetry, and creative fiction.

Speaking of a piece he performs with the Silk Road Ensemble (established in 2000), cellist Yo-Yo Ma recounts his own experience of time transcendence in a piece that gives him “a time, space, geography crossing moment that cognitively makes [him] aware of the vastness of what humans all over the world have been trying to express for millennia.”¹⁸⁵ Similarly, in describing the daily trials of a crystal meth addict, Victor Lodato’s short story, “Jack, July” mentions the desire to trick linear time. “Walking around the block to see if he could trick it. He’d done it before. Pull one over on time. Circle back and confuse it.”¹⁸⁶ Like Lodato and Ma, American poet Patrick Phillips’ poem “Heaven” captures the temporal gymnastics involved in the concept of afterlife:

It will be the past
and we'll live there together.
Not as it was to live
but as it is remembered.
It will be the past.
We'll all go back together.
Everyone we ever loved,
and lost, and must remember.
It will be the past.
And it will last forever.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Bird, Brad, *Tomorrowland*, 2015.

¹⁸⁴ Tina Fey and Robert Carlock, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, Internet Streaming (Netflix, 2015).

¹⁸⁵ Yo-Yo Ma interview by Krista Tippett, *Yo-Yo Ma: Music Happens Between the Notes, On Being*, accessed September 8, 2014, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/yo-yo-ma-music-happens-between-the-notes/6641>.

¹⁸⁶ “Jack, July,” *The New Yorker*, September 22, 2014, 91.

¹⁸⁷ *Boy* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

From Mann and Ma's descriptions of a spiritual overcoming of the body; to Lodato's embodied, drug-induced transcendence; to Phillips' vision of heaven, time and tense are used across the nonevangelical discourse to describe experiences of transcendence and disembodiment not that distant from the evangelical uses.

Evangelical discipleship is understood as a practice that will foster the understanding of eternity, experiences of eternity, and eventually usher in immortality through the second coming of Christ or the admission to heaven through final judgment. Likewise, the spiritual and emotionally charged experiences evangelicals have—such as being “born again” —serve to reinforce the understanding of eternity developed through discipleship. In this way, discipleship is a learning process which is deepened through the experiential “proof” of transcendent life occurrences.¹⁸⁸ In other words, when evangelicals feel God's presence in the room with them or hear his voice in their ear, their commitment to the hard work of lifelong, daily worship is reinforced.

Through their emphasis on this kind of learning discipleship, the view of eternity held by 21st century revival ministers turns out to be a value-laden, politically relevant concept after all. The quietistic evangelical positions last seen in the post-WWII era is well illustrated by a quotation from C.S. Lewis found in Warren's chapter “Life is a Temporary Assignment.” Lewis, who is back at the top of evangelical reading lists more than fifty years after his death,¹⁸⁹ famously writes, “All that is not eternal is eternally useless.”¹⁹⁰ No earthly pursuit—career, wealth, or politics—could possibly be considered important under that type of scrutiny. It is

¹⁸⁸ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*.

¹⁸⁹ “The Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals: Landmark Titles That Changed the Way We Think, Talk, Witness, Worship, and Live.,” *Christianity Today*, October 6, 2006, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/october/23.51.html?paging=off>.

¹⁹⁰ Clive Staples Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, 1st paperback ed (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) in Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 57.

Lewis' premise about eternity and the popularity it enjoys in early 21st century evangelicalism that heralds the return of a spirituality-centered, quietistic evangelicalism.

This unrushed, eternity-to-get-it-right attitude contrasts sharply with the rushed, apocalyptic terror of the Christian right political style that preceded it. Certainly, the constituents of the Christian right, who spent so much energy on politics in the late 20th century, would not agree with Lewis and Warren's philosophy of history, as they threw their lives into the earthly pursuit of politics.¹⁹¹ Christian right apocalyptic activism focused its energy on the present moment—the time of now—whereas today's movement focuses on eternity and rebirth, which allow for the luxury of a quiet inward turn that lacks the political urgency of the Christian right. Thus, despite the apparent quietism of the 21st century evangelical vanguard, it is a political quietism that contains a spiritual activism, which will not stay hidden forever, especially when there is no isolated private sphere and when the evangelical subculture is so proficient at permeating the larger culture.

¹⁹¹ Although, Falwell did describe his involvement in politics as a "reluctant calling," taken up in self-defense. See: Ed Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and Edward E Hindson, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 144.

Chapter 3: Wrinkled Time: Retroactivity, Rebirth, and Transcendence

The phrase “God allows U-Turns” can be seen on bumper stickers across America; it’s the title of an edited volume of evangelical stories of being born again;¹⁹² and it’s a comical reference to the most identifiable tenet of evangelicalism—the the ability of any believer to start over with a clean slate, no matter how sinful they are, by simply acknowledging “Jesus Christ as their Lord and savior.”

The concept of forgiveness for sin is central to almost all stripes of Christianity across almost all periods of its history. Furthermore, the concept of being born again as a way to erase previous sin while undergoing conversion has been an integral part of evangelicalism since its roots in the 17th century—when particular biblical passages about being “born again” began to be emphasized by ministers in the pietistic movement.¹⁹³ Harold Bloom writes that “[o]ther religions have promised us Eternity; only the American Religion promises what Freud tells us we cannot have: ‘an improved infancy.’”¹⁹⁴ However, while most of the history of rebirth has focused strictly on conversion and forgiveness, I argue that being born again takes on a more literal, retroactive nature in 21st century evangelical writing.

The editor of *Christianity Today*, Mark Galli, describes being born again thus:

The stereotypical evangelical expression of this is found in the born-again experience, which first became a phenomenon during the Great Awakening in the 1740s, when it was called ‘the new birth.’ It was rationalized—meaning, it was reduced to mere technique—by Charles Finney, and it has become a stock technique of revivalists ever since. The preacher works up in his audience feelings of shame, guilt, and impending doom (judgment), only to release them with the promise of forgiveness if people repent of their sins and accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. This results in an extraordinary psychological experience for individuals, many of whom look back to this occasion as the moment they were ‘saved.’ (I do not question the authenticity of all such experiences, nor God’s ability

¹⁹² Allison Bottke, Cheryll Hutchings, and Ellen Regan, eds., *God Allows U-Turns: True Stories of Hope and Healing* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Promise Press, 2001).

¹⁹³ E.g., John 3:3 (KJV): “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

¹⁹⁴ Bloom, *The American Religion*, 31.

to use them even when they are emotionally manipulative. I went forward at such an altar call as a teenager, weeping uncontrollably as I repeated the Sinner's Prayer. God apparently is willing to use even tainted means to awaken us to his grace.)¹⁹⁵

The Retroactivity of Rebirth

In the centuries-old schema of spiritual rebirth, sin is indeed erased—from the reader's past, her identity, and her "record" for final judgment—but sin and forgiveness are not the emphasized elements of being born again in today's devotional discourse. Instead, for the 21st century evangelical vanguard, being born again is about restoring an individual to the person that God created, it's not about erasing sin or humanity's sinful nature, but about going back to the beginning. In this return to creation, the reader must recognize that the beginning is at hand now.

A large part of the spiritual work prescribed by these evangelical writers is intended to shift their readers' self-evaluation from wretch to God's perfect creation. The reader is told she is perfect. Her perfection is explained by a great leap in time, by the claim that she is as close to the way God created her as the day she was born, or even the day—long before birth—when she was created. By being born again, evangelicals gain access to the ontological condition of humanity before the fall. That "truth"—achieved by vaulting across time—is the essence of the born again experience in 21st century evangelicalism.

This conception of being born again is a retroactive process in both the temporal sense of being retroactively directed backwards in time and in the legal sense of legislation that takes effect from a date in the past.¹⁹⁶ This form of rebirth is the restoration of an individual's "true" nature; it is the process of restoring the God-created essence by submitting to the divine law that

¹⁹⁵ Galli, "Rob Bell's 'Ginormous' Mirror."

¹⁹⁶ Retroactive: "Having an effect or impact in a backward direction; moving or driving back. . . 2a Retrospective; spec (of a regulation, enactment, etc.) extending in scope or effect to matters or actions which have occurred in the past. In predicative use freq. with *to* and a date. . . b. Directed backwards in time. . . 4. Psychol. Affecting or relating to memory of what has been learned or experienced. . ." New Oxford American Dictionary: "(esp. of legislation) taking effect from a date in the past. . ."

was enacted at creation. In this sense, the divine law is more like the law of gravity than any human legislation. From the evangelical perspective, perfect divine planning and creation is “the way things are,”¹⁹⁷ rather than the way they should be. Thus, the understanding of rebirth as a retroactive process works to connect evangelical time with evangelical truth.

On this point, Rob Bell provides a clear synthesis for ideas only hinted at by the other thinkers. In describing the spiritual work of evangelicals as an ongoing practice, he explains that Jesus’ “work on the cross”¹⁹⁸—dying for human sins—is work that is also “in us.”¹⁹⁹ Bell is concerned that evangelicals have come to see their salvation as a “transaction” that took place in the past, at the moment when Jesus died on the cross. This traditional mentality is partially captured in Sarah Young’s view of salvation as forgiveness. In her signature God-as-first-person-narrator voice she writes: “This great gift, which cost Me My Life, is yours for all eternity.”²⁰⁰ And yet, for Young, that forgiveness is also an ongoing process, which brings her closer to Bell’s view: “Forgiveness is at the very core of My abiding Presence. Trust Me enough to accept the full forgiveness that I offer you *continually*.”²⁰¹ However, along with the faint resonance with Bell in this passage, we also hear Young’s traditionalism—making her also a transitional figure between 20th century evangelicalism and the evangelicalism being developed in the early 21st century.

¹⁹⁷ “For a Christian, Jesus’ teachings aren’t to be followed because they are a nice way to live a moral life. They are to be followed because they are the best possible insight into how the world really works. They teach us how things are. I follow Jesus because he leads me to into ultimate reality. *He teaches me to live in tune with how reality is.* When Jesus said, ‘No one comes to the Father except through me’¹⁹⁷, he was saying that *his way, his words, his life is our connection to how things truly are at the deepest level of existence. For Jesus then, the point of religion is to help us connect with ultimate reality, God.* These religious acts and rituals are shadows of the reality. ‘The reality is found in Christ.’ [Colossians 2:17 (NIV)]” “Rob Bell’s ‘Ginormous’ Mirror.”

¹⁹⁸ David Bebbington in Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001, 13.

¹⁹⁹ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 108.

²⁰⁰ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 105.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, original emphasis.

Bell critiques the traditional evangelical view of salvation by explaining that its central claim—that Jesus already died for our sins—results in spiritual apathy. For Bell, the traditional view encourages believers to regard the sacrifice and forgiveness of Christ as occurring in the unreachable past—leaving no more spiritual work to be done today. Bell sees this as a strictly legal interpretation of salvation—a forgiveness and salvation that are trapped in the past. Instead of forgiveness, Bell emphasizes the restorative work of moving backward towards creation—the backward-directed element of retroactivity:

The point of the cross isn't forgiveness. Forgiveness leads to something much bigger: *restoration*. God isn't just interested in the covering over of our sins; *God wants to make us into the people we were originally created to be*. It is not just the removal of what's being held against us [sin]; *it is God pulling us into the people he originally had in mind when he made us.*²⁰²

For Bell, the beliefs and practices of evangelicalism revolve not around sin, salvation, and the hope of eventually achieving heaven in the afterlife, but instead revolve around the work of fulfillment—which is described as the realization of a God-given nature here and now. This view of salvation as terrestrial restoration requires a retroactive view of the biblical narrative—where humans have active access to God and Jesus—an access that paves the way for the heaven-on-earth that contemporary devotional writers allude to.

Restoration, in the way Bell uses it, refers to “the action of restoring a person to a former state or position,”²⁰³ or, returning to the condition of holiness, truth, and ‘ultimate reality.’²⁰⁴ So retroactivity is a central component of Bell’s devotional theology in the both the backwards moving and legal senses. This double retroactive action allows the reader to see herself, even in that moment of sin, as God’s beloved and perfect child, actually incapable of the sin because of a

²⁰² Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 108, emphasis added.

²⁰³ “Restoration,” *Oxford English Dictionary (Online)*, 2010, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/view/Entry/163986?redirectedFrom=restoration#eid>.

²⁰⁴ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 83.

law about human existence that was written at creation. However, while Bell describes traditional views of salvation as a misplaced legal view, his own retroactivity is legalistic as well, except that, as we saw above, it is a scientific legalism (as in a law of nature, like gravity), rather than a statutory one.

While Bell’s understanding of reconciliation and salvation is the most explicitly temporal, the other evangelical thinkers in my constellation also make repeated reference to the transformation that occurs when we understand the time-transcending truth of our own creation—when we understand the atemporal law that governs the universe. In this sense, they all agree that reconciliation and salvation depend on a law or plan crafted in the past, but active in the present. For Rick Warren, when the reader comes to understand the truth of her creation she is reconciled or restored to her divine essence by returning to the past and reenacting a law of the past:

‘The Good News shows *how God makes people right with himself*—that it begins and ends with faith’ [Romans 1:17, NCV]. ‘For God was in Christ, *reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them*’ [2 Corinthians 5:19, NLT]. The Good News is that when we trust God’s grace to *save us through what Jesus did*, our sins are forgiven, we get a purpose for living, and we are promised a future home in heaven.”²⁰⁵

At first, Warren’s view seems to be the traditional view of salvation that Bell critiques. It appears that Warren sees being born again as just a realization of the reader’s own salvation through Jesus’ work on the cross. This again points to Warren as a transitional figure, and yet, his view does pave the way for Bell’s restorative view, which was written three years later. The action of “reconciling” generally refers to restoring something to a rightness that was previously right, so there is a backward-directedness here as well. Furthermore, while Warren emphasizes Jesus’ work on the cross in the past—and Bell emphasizes the work of the cross inside us in the

²⁰⁵ Richard Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 187, emphasis added.

present²⁰⁶—they are both referring to the way that evangelical belief and practice reinstates the perfection of a divinely conceived humanity.

Warren calls this process “reconciliation,”²⁰⁷ while Bell calls it “restoration,”²⁰⁸ but they both refer to the ways that God’s plan is being worked out in an individual’s reality today, how divine power operates in conjunction with conceptions of the self, how the operation of divine power is aided by human belief in that power. Ultimately, both thinkers desire to reinstate the past—creation—to make a new future for their readers. In this sense, the trajectory of their thought is retroactive, but they also encourage their readers to embrace the retroactive potential of Christ in their daily lives through continual rebirth.

Furthermore, this conceptualization of rebirth shows up in all four evangelical thinkers: where Bell sees restoration and Warren sees reconciliation, Sarah Bessey sees “renewal.”²⁰⁹ In recounting her family’s story of being born again, she writes of “the familiar tale—lost to found, blindness to sight, wretch to born again.”²¹⁰ However, in her formulation of the “trajectory of redemption,” or a “redemptive movement,”²¹¹ she develops her own version of regaining humanity’s perfection through God’s law:

Throughout Scripture, we see this redemptive movement of the Spirit in operation. Jesus often practiced the redemptive movement himself in the Gospels, showing how the Spirit moves the people of God (and therefore, eventually [all of] humanity) further along toward his full intention. *Jesus would teach or quote a portion of the Law and then move us forward from our current place towards God’s original intent.*²¹²

²⁰⁶ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 108.

²⁰⁷ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 187.

²⁰⁸ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 108.

²⁰⁹ Ephesians 4:21-24: NLT Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, 67.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii–xiv.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27–28.

²¹² *Ibid.*

In this formulation, humanity is moving “forwards” into the past: “Jesus move[s] us forward towards God’s *original* intent,”²¹³ through a wrinkled, retroactive understanding of time. In this passage, Bessey is explaining how progress (usually depicted as forward movement) requires retroactivity (reaching into the past)—a notion that resonates with the political symbolism of the French Revolution’s “year one” and the Khmer Rouge’s “Year Zero.” Furthermore, her discussion of the women’s role in the church and women’s work as evangelicals provides a third formulation of Bell and Warren’s concept of retroactive salvation: “renewal.”²¹⁴ In her account of Pauline views on women, she quotes a passage from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians.

Since you have heard about Jesus and have *learned the truth that comes from him*, throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, *let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly Righteous and holy.*²¹⁵

Even the passage itself jumps across time and tense, from the past tense in “have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth,” to the future perfect in “throw off your old sinful nature,” and “let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature,” to the present, “which is corrupted by lust and deception” to the past in, “created to be like God.”²¹⁶ In this sense, the Pauline instruction requires retroactivity to deliver the truth that shapes the lives of evangelicals.

The Truth of Retroactivity

For these thinkers, then, being born again is an encounter with truth that is ushered in through a retroactive process. They see, understand, and believe, leading them towards restoration, reconciliation, renewal, and redemption. In their accounts truth refers to human perfection, God’s existence and power, and Jesus as the primary guide towards this human

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, 66–67.

²¹⁵ Ephesians 4:21-24 NLT in *ibid*, emphasis added.

²¹⁶ Ephesians 4:21-24: NLT, in *ibid.*, 67.

perfection—a trilogy of truths that are bound up with, and made possible through, the permutations of evangelical time discussed so far: eternity and retroactivity.

Contemporary evangelicals often write of rebirth or lifelong discipleship as a spiritual and/or bodily transformation that occurs through an encounter with truth. Warren writes that, “the truth transforms us. Spiritual growth is the process of replacing lies with truth.”²¹⁷ Similarly, Young encourages her readers to “be transformed by the truth that [God/Jesus] live[s] within you.”²¹⁸ This truth, that plays such a prominent role in the ministry of Warren and Young, refers to humanity’s wholeness before the fall and Jesus’ restoration of that wholeness with his “work on the cross.”²¹⁹ In this way, evangelicals can access retroactive salvation even after sinning because sin only happens when an individual is not in contact with God—and thus not aware of her identity as a perfect creation. The elements of evangelical time—eternity, retroactivity, and wrinkles—allow for the possibility of constant divine contact, and thus the possibility of avoiding sin.

In these writings on truth, evangelical thinkers emphasize that human perfection is most easily attainable when it is sought selflessly. The retroactive ability to restore, reconcile, and renew is most accessible when the reader sees the truth, rather than merely seeking an escape hatch from sin or pain. Ultimately, Bell writes that this approach—seeking truth, not self-directed comfort—works to return the cosmos to the way it was at creation. He warns that the evangelical focus on personal salvation risks missing this larger picture; personal salvation becomes an individualistic forward gaze, while he claims that Jesus and the Gospel writers wanted it to be a backward-looking gaze, a restoration, a returning of things to their original order. Bell, once again depicting himself in opposition to generic Christianity, writes:

²¹⁷ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 120.

²¹⁸ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 107.

²¹⁹ David Bebbington in Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001, 13.

The problems come when salvation becomes all about me. Me being saved. Me having my sins forgiven. Me *being reconciled with God*. The Bible paints a much larger picture of salvation. It describes *all of creation being restored*. The author of Ephesians writes that all things will be brought together under Jesus. Salvation is the entire universe being *brought back into harmony* with its maker.²²⁰

Notably, Bell also refers to reconciliation—as Warren does—when he is critiquing the self-centered approach to personal salvation. But we see again the backward-oriented terms he uses to describe what salvation does. Salvation reconciles, restores, and “brings back into harmony.”²²¹ In this sense, Bell is also insistent that salvation is not only a future destination, but is an achievable reality today. Heaven is not a future promise, but a contemporary haven of comfort, found by going back to the future. For Bell, it is possible to find life in the deathly experience of the human condition.

If we only have a legal-transaction understanding of salvation in which we are forgiven of our sins so we can go to heaven, then salvation essentially becomes a ticket to somewhere else. In this understanding, eternity is something that kicks in when we die. But Jesus did not teach this. *Jesus said that when we believe, we have crossed over from death to life.*²²²

Bell’s footnote supporting this claim references John 5:24, which in the King James Version reads “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.” The temporal sequence of events in this passage is interesting too. Both the way Bell writes about salvation and the way he interprets John 5 refers to it not as the transition from physical death to a spiritual afterlife—with a reward in heaven when the individual has successfully passed final judgment—but as a comfort in the present life. This is a strong theme in contemporary evangelicalism that divides it somewhat from historical Christian interpretations, especially from the Christian right’s, which focused much more on the fire and brimstone

²²⁰ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 109.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid., 108–109, emphasis added.

narrative that relies on fears of sin, final judgment, and hell. That narrative revolved around the future, sin, and punishment, while the contemporary narrative revolves around truth, provided by the past as comfort in the present. In other words, atypical time was also essential to Christian right thought, but the way that evangelical time operated was markedly different.

Furthermore, the message of all four writers confirms that being born again, finding salvation is not a one shot deal. Young is clear that comfort is available whenever it is needed. Warren is explicit that spiritual maturity requires a lifelong process of learning and training.²²³ Bell is insistent that the need for God is constant and his assistance is always available, while Bessey writes that the beloved church of her youth was, “a band full of misfits, finding Jesus and being born again over and over.”²²⁴ In that sense, evangelicalism of the new century focuses on the therapeutic and universal promises of the Christian message, where the Christian right focused on the division between sinner and saved and the punishments dolled out by the wrath of God, where the only hope granted by evangelical time was the hope of apocalypse—a dark hope full of uncertainty.

How does a revival find the energy and innovation to move beyond the touchstones of its past? By deploying retroactive and wrinkly time, I argue that these thinkers are pivoting away the Christian right both by reawakening traditional evangelical spirituality and by experimenting with its outer limits. In this view, revival is both an act of “returning to”—in the sense of reaffirming and revitalizing—and an act of “beginning again”—in the sense of reconstruction and replacement. Views of time as possibly wrinkled provide loopholes in teleological eternity that fuel creativity, innovation, and expansion of the domain and diversity of evangelical

²²³ “Time is a trainer, teaching you to wait upon Me, to trust Me in the dark.” Young, *Jesus Calling*, 32.

²²⁴ Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*.

expression. Thus, in the careful balance between tradition and transformation, evangelicalism has certain thematic advantages over other social movements. By accepting both eternity and retroactive transcendence, evangelicalism maintains both an emotional attachment to past traditions and the desire for innovation within such movements.

While the retroactivity of being born again is clearly identified as a hallmark of evangelicalism, contemporary devotional texts contain other contortions of chronological time that I identify and address for the remainder of this chapter. In the Book of Revelation, the author prophesies Jesus' second coming, writing, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last."²²⁵ This is perhaps the most famous of the many biblical references to the divine time and space transcendence that is essential for contemporary evangelicalism to take the form it does today. The components of wrinkled evangelical time I emphasize in the remainder of the chapter include: 1) readings of the Bible as both an inerrant historical document and a living channel of divine communication; 2) the merging of tenses in devotional writings; 3) the jump straight from creation to salvation in contemporary accounts of the evangelical lifecycle; 4) Bell and Young's Pentecostalized easy access to salvation; 5) divine simultaneity; 6) the temporal elements of Bell's "Big Jesus"; Young's distinction between time and eternity; and 7) the political implications of the evangelical virtues of patience and submission, as seen in Bessey's construction of Jesus feminism.

²²⁵ Revelation 22:13 in Robert P. Carroll and Stephen Prickett, eds., *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Biblical Interpretations and Mixing Tenses

Evangelicals read the Bible as both inerrant and evolving, or “living,” at the same time. They understand themselves as continuing to act out the Bible story in their own lives. In their view, playing a part in the Biblical narrative does not contradict the accompanying claim of the Scriptures as an absolutely inerrant account. This double characterization of their holy book relies on a flexible sense of time that accompanies the surety of eternal perfection discussed in the previous chapter.

For contemporary evangelicals, it is not only God and humans that are eternal and non-chronological, but also the cosmos and the lifeworlds of evangelicals. God is capable of collapsing the past, present, and future into one – stretching, bending, and otherwise contorting the linear path of time, wrinkling it. To reflect these divine capacities, evangelical writing often creatively mixes tenses. As we saw in Bessey’s writing above, basic claims are frequently written about in both the present and past tense: “Jesus died on the cross” or “God planned our lives” alternate with phrases like “Jesus suffers for our sins” or “God is planning our lives.” This merging of tenses creates a biblical story that is read as both historical and ongoing. Bell writes that “the story of David and Goliath continues to speak to us because we know the David part of the story—we have lived it.”²²⁶

While this may not seem different from the metaphorical ways biblical stories are employed in other Christian traditions, evangelicals who see the Bible this way see it as just one more way of communicating with God. Evangelicals often treat God like an “imaginary friend”²²⁷—an intensely personal God “who not only cares about your welfare but worries with

²²⁶ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 61.

²²⁷ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 74–78.

you about whether to paint the kitchen table.”²²⁸ In this type of relationship, the Bible may be used as one more medium of communication through which answers about the kitchen table or what outfit to wear that day may appear by opening to a random page or may jump out at the reader while studying a verse for her Bible study group. In this scenario, a literal interpretation of God’s words in the Bible is used as guidance for what moves to make. In some devotional texts, using the biblical narrative as a set of instructions—albeit coded instructions—does not contradict the accompanying claim of the scriptures as inerrant.

The atypical use of tense and time can also be seen in descriptions of the five phases of the spiritual life cycle evangelicals have historically identified in their interpretation of the biblical narrative—creation, fall, redemption, restoration, and consummation. These five steps are concisely and comically summarized in a recruitment video for Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. “God made it, we broke it, Jesus fixes it, we live it, kaboom!”²²⁹ In this sentence, “Jesus fixes it,” is in the present tense, flagging the evangelical belief that the spirit of Christ is as present today as his body was in biblical times. Furthermore, these five phases chart a strict teleological trajectory for evangelicals that echoes the eternity of the last chapter, even while many of the devotional practices highlighted in this chapter encourage a wrinkly, scrambled sense of time.

Jumping from Creation to Salvation

The stages of the evangelical lifecycle, as devotional authors discuss them today, illustrate the ways that even a linear teleology can operate in defiance of chronological time. I turn to the two stages of the lifecycle that are most emphasized in contemporary devotional texts:

²²⁸ Ibid., xv.

²²⁹ *Why Covenant*, <https://www.covenantseminary.edu/why-covenant/>.

creation and salvation. (Note that redemption, restoration, and consummation are not mentioned in this formulation.) These two stages of the lifecycle draw on the comforting mode of evangelicalism that is emphasized by the contemporary movement, which make almost no mention of the fall stage and the accompanying themes of sin, punishment, apocalypse and hell, which were more often deployed by the Christian right.

Warren is the only thinker who discusses creation at length, while the other evangelical authors focus on the individual evangelical experience today. The contrast between Warren's heavy reliance on ideas about creation and the other thinkers' focus on the present situation of their reader suggests once again that Warren, like Young, is transitioning between 20th century evangelicalism and the evangelicalism being developed in the early 21st century. However, his view also works to frame the other 21st century texts by describing how the reader can find her life purpose through an understanding of her past (creation) and her future (salvation). The following verses, in which Warren locates the seeds of his argument, are crucial for this framing:

You saw me before I was born and scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe. Every day was recorded in your book!

I have carried you since you were born; I have taken care of you from your birth. Even when you are old, I will be the same. Even when your hair has turned gray, I will take care of you. I made you and will take care of you.

I am your creator. You were in my care even before you were born.²³⁰

Instead of focusing on the narrative of Adam and Eve found in Genesis, Warren chooses to draw a connection between creation and the details of his readers' lives today. He grounds this connection in broadly applicable phrases discussing the theme of creation, as it was developed in the Old Testament outside of Genesis. He supports his major claims in the book—about purpose and a divine plan—on these passages.

²³⁰ Psalm 139:16 TLB in Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 15; Isaiah 46:3-4 NCV in *ibid.*, 16; Isaiah 44:2a CEV in *ibid.*, 18.

Next, today's evangelical vanguard uses a particular reading of predestination to skip from creation to restoration—avoiding a discussion of the fall altogether and breezing past redemption. Not only is there a skipping of steps, but there is a slippage in the stages of the Christian lifecycle: redemption, restoration, and consummation are not strictly separated. This shift is accomplished in part by a slide in the way evangelicals talk about predestination. While previous iterations of evangelicalism focused much more on those who were predestined as sinners being “left-behind” during the apocalypse or going to hell after death, today's evangelicalism is infused with hints of free will and emphasizes the ease of obtaining salvation.

For these devotional writers, there is often an emphasis on God pre-planning everything down to the second—through a schedule that was crafted before a single human was born. However, a space for free will is carved out using the loopholes of wrinkled time and retroactivity. Namely, the reader chooses whether or not she will be saved based on whether or not she “accepts Jesus as her Lord and savior” and lives out her life in service to him. While the essential belief in predestination remains intact, everyone has the potential to be preordained for salvation. This is a potential the believer can choose to tap into, or not, by being open to a spiritually transforming life experience. This may well be an instance where contemporary evangelical theology is influenced by popular contemporary Catholic theology, as some scholars have pointed out.²³¹ In a 1990 encyclical, Pope John Paul II wrote:

Salvation in Christ is Offered to All. The Universality of salvation means it is granted not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church. Since salvation is offered to all, it must be made concretely available to all. Grace comes from

²³¹ Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990); Neuhaus, Richard John, “The Persistence of the Catholic Moment,” *First Things*, February 2003, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2003/02/001-the-persistence-of-the-catholic-moment>; Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Christ; it is the result of his Sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. It enables each person to attain salvation through his or her free cooperation.²³²

This view flirts with the highly contentious theological position of “universal reconciliation,” which claims that every human is already saved, or is capable of salvation. Through these loopholes, contemporary evangelicalism has become so wrinkly that believers can reach back through time and alter their own destiny through choices made at a prayer meeting next Tuesday. In other words, salvation is a choice—not a predestined path—because everyone is predestined for salvation. Instead of focusing on the choice God has already made to grant salvation (or not), the emphasis of these contemporary writings is on the believer’s choice to elect Jesus and thereby choose salvation. In this conceptualization, every believer is potentially predestined for perfection and salvation as God’s creation, representing a massive shift in emphasis. In some ways, these shifts towards universal salvation represent a reversal of the historical message of evangelicalism, a shift that has a lot to do with the centrality of love in the newest devotional texts and ministerial teachings.²³³ However, without the ability to bend, stretch, manipulate, and ultimately transcend time, this shift would not be legible within the broader established framework of evangelicalism.

A Pentecostalized Salvation

While Warren emphasizes the ability to skip from creation to salvation and contemporary evangelicals are generally hinting at universal salvation through their reading of predestination, Bell describes the practice of Christianity as breaking out of time altogether—overcoming time itself is the thing that is comforting. Where Warren seeks to buoy his reader’s hopes through the

²³² Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio (Mission of the Redeemer)* (Vatican: The Holy See, 1990), Chapter 1, section 10.

²³³ One example of this trend is: Bell, *Love Wins*.

eternal surety of God's plan, Bell sees accessible transcendence as Christianity's real spiritual contribution: "[W]e have experienced Jesus in a way that transcends space and time. And this gives us hope. We were in darkness and God brought us out into the light. The Word is living and active and it happens. Today. [sic]"²³⁴ Thus, Bell's conception of evangelical time shifts the focus from the past and future (creation and heaven) to the present (the moment of simultaneous conversion and salvation—an eternal present that may last a lifetime as the believer battles doubt, skepticism, and wavering). For Bell, the act of conversion or being born again is itself a moment of salvation. When the peace and inspiration of God's presence is seen as accessible, rather than locked away in the unreachable future of heaven, Bell sees hope for the future of Christianity. Like his process of harmonization,²³⁵ time transcendence is a method of salvation today that brings comfort and joy.

Thus, there are three central elements of salvation that are emphasized by contemporary devotional texts: first, the suggestion that every human being is capable of attaining salvation; second, the willful decision humans can make to choose salvation; and third, the open receptivity necessary to have an encounter with God and interpret it as such. This open receptivity means listening and paying attention for communication from God by being present in the moment. This theme is most clearly seen in Young's encouragement of meditation as a conversation with God and in Bell's continuous focus on being present,²³⁶ which he further elaborates in his newest book, *How to Be Here*.²³⁷ In this devotional narrative God chooses everyone, but humans have the option of whether or not to choose God in return and whether or not to train themselves to be

²³⁴ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 61.

²³⁵ Discussed and quoted in the previous chapter: "For Jesus, [salvation] is far more comprehensive – *it is a way of life*. To be saved or redeemed or free is to *enter into a totally new way of living in harmony with God*. The rabbis called harmony with God *olam haba*, which translates [sic] '*life in the world to come*.' Salvation is *living more and more in harmony with God, a process that will go on forever*." Ibid., 107, emphasis added.

²³⁶ The practice of meditation will be discussed at length in Part II.

²³⁷ Rob Bell, *How to Be Here: A Guide to Creating a Life Worth Living*, First Edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016).

open to encounters with God. Of course, the implications of not choosing God are presumably grave—although sin and hell are rarely even alluded to—but the choice to step onto the path towards salvation or to be stuck in the unmoving or painful path ultimately belongs to the reader.

In this new evangelical universe, there are no sinners, and everyone is predestined for bliss—as long as they choose it. All that’s necessary is for the believer to see, understand, and accept this truth for themselves. In this formulation, Christianity is a therapeutic practice concerned with correcting the reader’s false beliefs about themselves as fallen sinners. Through this process of self-discovery, evangelicals are born again—reversing sin and bad self-esteem over and over.

Divine Simultaneity

As we’ve seen above, Warren’s account describes God as seated in the past—acting onto the present as creator and planner. In contrast, Young, Bessey, and Bell, see God primarily in the present and future. For Young, not only is the human experience of the divine described mostly through the theme of God’s “presence in the present,”²³⁸ but those moments spent with God also take on a transcendent quality. Describing the act of worship Young writes: “Let my love enfold you in the radiance of my glory. Sit still in the Light of My Presence, and receive My Peace. *These quiet moments with Me transcend time, accomplishing far more than you can imagine.*”²³⁹ For Young, the act of meditating in God’s presence is one of the spiritual habits that can encourage belief in the accessibility of transcendence—unlike Warren’s view that transcendence and salvation can only occur in the next life. The devotional practices that Young encourages for

²³⁸ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 85.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 51, emphasis added.

her readers are essentially a training in her version of evangelical time. Another passage emphasizes the simultaneity of divine power (simultaneously in the past, present, and future):

I am always before you, as well as alongside you. See Me beckoning to you: Come! Follow Me. The One who goes ahead of you, opening up the way, is the same One who stays close and never lets go of your hand. *I am not subject to limitations of time or space. I am everywhere and every time, ceaselessly working on your behalf.* That is why your best efforts are trusting Me and living close to Me.²⁴⁰

The way she describes God’s presence allows her reader to simultaneously feel the teleological eternity and wrinkled retroactivity of evangelical being. She encourages her readers to trust God’s plan for their future (in eternity), while receiving comfort from his presence in their present, prayerful moment (reaching across that eternity to provide succor). Bessey echoes this theme in *Jesus Feminist*: “God is both here with us, and ahead, moving us onward to fullness.”²⁴¹

Bell’s “Big Jesus”

Uniting Warren’s eternity and creation-oriented view with Young’s emphasis the divine “presence in the present”²⁴² is Bell’s discussion of why evangelicals should “believe in a big Jesus.”²⁴³ Like many other components of the devotional discourse described above, this version of salvation once again marks a shift away from the sin-oriented view of the Christian right. Bell’s account provides the clearest description of salvation as the new generation of evangelical thinkers sees it—as a kind of spiritual maturation or even transcendence that is available to some extent within the earthly experience. Bell provides a clear statement of this new type of salvation through his criticism of the “Jesus died for our sins” view typical to evangelicalism historically.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 94, emphasis added.

²⁴¹ Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, 27–28.

²⁴² Young, *Jesus Calling*, 85.

²⁴³ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 82.

After stating his critique,²⁴⁴ Bell suggests a modification to the narrative of sinner-to-saved that has prevailed over evangelicalism in the recent past. In a chapter on “Christian Truth” he writes:

For many, Jesus was presented as the solution to a problem. In fact, this has been the dominant way of explaining the story of the Bible in Western culture for the past several hundred years. *It's not that it's wrong; it's just that Jesus is so much more.* The presentation often begins with sin and the condition of human beings, separated from God and without hope in the world. God then came up with a way to fix the problem by sending Jesus, who came to the world to give us a way out of the mess we find ourselves in. *So if we were to draw a continuum of the story of the Bible, Jesus essentially shows up late in the game.* But the first Christians didn't see Jesus this way, *as if God were somewhere else* and then cooked up some way to solve the sin problem at the last minute by getting involved as Jesus. *They believed that Jesus was somehow more, that Jesus had actually been present since before creation and had been a part of the story all along.*²⁴⁵

In this excerpt, Bell provides a clear picture of the contemporary view of salvation that other evangelical thinkers usually only allude to. This account, which is Bell's normative explanation of what salvation should be and what significance Jesus' death should have, provides a concise explanation of the shift that evangelicalism has been undergoing over the last fifteen years compared with the movement as it existed during the Christian right. In his explanation, sin and Jesus as redeemer are important parts of the story, but far from all of it. For Bell, sin, wretchedness, and separation from God are not solved through Jesus “dying for our sins,” but through Jesus' very being, which is equally present, as he writes, “before creation,” at creation, in one's everyday life today, and at salvation. It is important to note that this account also pivots away from the Bebbington-Noll definition of evangelicalism, that values “crucicentrism,” or “a focus on Christ's redeeming work on the cross, usually pictured as the only way to salvation”²⁴⁶ as a central tenet of the belief system.

²⁴⁴ This critique is explained on pages 66-69.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, emphasis added.

²⁴⁶ My usage of “evangelical” follows David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1995), 2–17. The in-text quotation is Mark Noll's paraphrase of Bebbington's canonical work, which renders Bebbington's conceptualization clear, accessible, and concise. Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 13. “Activism,” in Noll's definition refers to evangelism or proselytizing – not to “political activism.”

Bell's point is that focusing Christianity on the events of Jesus' mortal life is misunderstanding the objective of a divine presence that exists in equal share before those events, after those events, and even before creation. Similar to Bloom's suggestion that adherents of the American Religion believe themselves to be, "higher and earlier than the angels, [a] true Adam, as old as God, older than the Bible, and free of time, unstained by mortality,"²⁴⁷ Bell's description of Jesus existing "before creation," seeks to link his readers to something out of time, something free of time. By making Jesus (or God)²⁴⁸ precede creation, Jesus becomes the ultimate reality, and thus Jesus' followers have access to something sacred, a reality that is made sacred by virtue of its removal from time. Through this interpretation of Bell and Bloom, my argument is confirmed: themes of temporality and atemporality in all their forms (timelessness, transcendence, wrinkling time, retroactivity, rebirth, etc) are one of the signals or definitions of sacredness in evangelical thought.

For contemporary evangelicals specifically, Jesus is sacred not only by virtue of his sacrifice at the crucifixion, but by virtue of his operation across a wrinkled temporality that folds together the past, present, and future of God, Jesus, and the believer. Bell continues by explaining that Christianity (the "big Jesus") is not about sin and redemption, but about reality or ontology:

In the first line of the gospel, John calls Jesus the 'Word.' 'Word' here [is the] Greek word *logos*, which is where we get the English word *logic*. *Logic*, intelligence, design [sic]. The blueprint for creation [sic]. When we speak of these concepts, what we are describing is the way the world is arranged. There is some sort of order under the chaos. The Bible keeps insisting that Jesus is how God holds all things together. The Bible points us to a Jesus who is in some mysterious way behind it all. Jesus is the arrangement. Jesus is the design. Jesus is the intelligence. For a Christian, Jesus' teachings aren't to be followed because they are a nice way to live a moral life. They are to be followed because they are the best possible insight into how the world really works. They teach us how things are. I don't follow Jesus because I think Christianity is the best

²⁴⁷ Bloom, *The American Religion*, 15.

²⁴⁸ There is a lot of blending of Jesus and God in evangelical texts that I won't go into here.

religion. *I follow Jesus because he leads me into ultimate reality. He teaches me to live in tune with how reality is.* When Jesus said, ‘No one comes to the Father except through me,’ [John 14:6 (NIV)] he was saying that *his way, his words, his life is our connection to how things truly are at the deepest level of existence. For Jesus then, the point of religion is to help us connect with ultimate reality, God.* These religious acts and rituals are shadows of the reality. ‘The reality is found in Christ’ [Colossians 2:17 (NIV)].²⁴⁹

Bell’s point—that Jesus is the Word, the logos, the design, the blueprint, the ultimate reality—does not initially seem to be a point about time. The idea that Jesus is all of these things simultaneously—while also appearing as a mortal human for 33 years in the first century AD and as a presence in the room in the 21st century—is one more example of how vital the motif of non-chronological time is to evangelicalism. It is through this space and time transcendence that Bell suggests his readers, “live in tune with reality,” connect “to how things truly are at the deepest level,” to “the ultimate reality,” and to God.²⁵⁰ Bell’s construction of Jesus demonstrates the import of divine time transcendence—God’s ability to overcome chronological time—in evangelicalism as a belief system and way of life. However, the significance of Bell’s formulation that, “the reality is found in Christ,”²⁵¹ is that his theology is primarily an ontological, rather than an ethical or moral, system. In other words, Bell’s devotion to Christianity is more invested in “truth” than it is in moral directives.

Young’s Distinction Between Time and Eternity

Young’s account distinguishes eternity from time in such a way that it seems her eternity isn’t a type of time at all; it is a sacred space, a divine plane beyond any of the forms of temporality humans understand. When using the word eternity, Young is careful to separate it out from time, to distinguish the two concepts. Channeling God’s voice, she writes: “You are

²⁴⁹ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 83, emphasis added.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

mine for all time—and beyond time, into eternity.”²⁵² Here eternity is established as something discrete from time, a more final destination for the human soul that must be listed among the things that are filled by God’s love. “There is no force in the universe as powerful as My Love. You are constantly aware of limitations: your own and others. But there is no limit to My Love; it fills all of space, *time, and eternity*.”²⁵³ This marked separation of eternity and time in Young’s devotional writing is amplified by the fact that they are both godly phenomena. Time and eternity are both filled with God’s love, but they are distinct. On the one hand, Young’s eternity is an unchanging spatial-temporal zone of sacredness that is also an experience or feeling of sacredness. On the other hand, Young’s time is the malleable medium of both human chronological time and divine eternity through which God and Jesus operate in order to accommodate the human experience and the human need to start over, again and again.

The Political Implications of Patience and Submission

An example of the kind of hybrid political identities that can emerge from the wrinkly innovations documented in this chapter is Bessey’s “Jesus feminist.”²⁵⁴ In Bessey’s teleological account of human history and futurity she develops an account of the “trajectory of redemption,”²⁵⁵ taking the claim of universal perfection even further than the other writers. In her chapter on Christian feminism as “A Redemptive Movement,” she writes:

Whenever there is injustice or oppression, anything less than God’s intended purposes from the dawn of Creation, our God has always set his people on *the trajectory of redemption*. For instance, instead of the familiar and accepted law of ‘an eye for an eye,’ *Jesus moved the arc of redemption forward* with, ‘But I tell you, love your enemies and

²⁵² Young, *Jesus Calling*, 98.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 82, emphasis added.

²⁵⁴ Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

pray for those who persecute you' [Matthew 5:44]. *God is both here with us, and ahead, moving us onward to fullness.*²⁵⁶

Bessey describes the “trajectory of redemption” as slow progress towards eventual fulfillment, not unlike Martin Luther’s practice of reformation. For Bessey, this is not only the movement of “God’s people,” or even of humanity, it is the movement of the individual towards perfection, always being ushered forward by an omnipresent divinity.

At times in *Jesus Feminist*, Bessey seems to be advocating for active human engagement with the “trajectory of redemption,” explaining that God-given teleologies must be helped along by human action:

Patriarchy is not God’s dream for humanity. Instead, in Christ, and because of Christ, we are invited to participate in the Kingdom of God through a redemptive movement—for both men and women—towards equality and freedom. We can choose to move with God, further into justice and wholeness, or we can choose to prop up the world’s dead systems, baptizing injustice and power in sacred language. Feminism is just one way to participate in this redemptive movement.²⁵⁷

“Participation” and “choosing justice” sound like active political engagement, but there are other elements of the evangelical belief system that result in a less active vision of feminism. In explaining how evangelical feminism works, Bessey writes: “God’s vision is a call to *move forward into the future* in the full operation of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control, with a fearlessness that could only come from him.”²⁵⁸

These individual qualities of willpower and perseverance required to move God’s trajectory forward is a key feature of devotionals and Christian life books. However, while the call for patience and the tension between God’s plan and human action are mostly directed at the personal life of the reader, the implications for the reader’s political tendencies are clear. When patience and submission are prime evangelical virtues and when the reader cannot know God’s

²⁵⁶ Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, 26–27, emphasis added.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

plan nor understand the eternal view point God is operating from, action would seem to be discouraged.

However, even if Bessey's view of a trajectory of redemption may be as conservative as the Christian right that preceded her, the manner of expressing that conservatism has swung wildly from activist to quietist. Whenever religious leaders incite patience—as a group of Alabama ministers did in 1963 when they wrote “A Call for Unity,”²⁵⁹ to which Martin Luther King Jr. responded with “A Letter from Birmingham Jail”²⁶⁰—it seeks to create a climate of hesitation and ultimately quietism.²⁶¹ In a similarly circumspect vein, Young writes:

Remember that I can fit everything into *a pattern for good*, including the things you wish were different. Start with where you are *at this point in time and space, accepting that this is where I intend you to be*. Your desire to live in My Presence goes against the grain of *‘the world, the flesh, and the devil.’*²⁶²

This call for acceptance of your current situation could indeed have a very conservative effect on political activism. Bessey writes that following God's call to move forward—against the assumed resistance or torpor of human nature—requires “patience, self-control, and fearlessness,” and Young echoes that following the call requires acceptance of God and resistance to “the world, the flesh, and the devil.”²⁶³ Thus, both writers characterize their readers as desirous of change, while cautioning them to be patient. However, when the most important character trait of the good disciple is patience—because God's time horizon is described as vastly longer than humans are willing to accept—the attraction of manipulating and foreshortening time through re-

²⁵⁹ “Appendix 1 The White Ministers' Law and Order Statement, January 16, 1963: ‘An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense’ and Appendix 2 The White Ministers' Good Friday Statement, April 12, 1963” in: S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the Letter from Birmingham Jail* (Baton Rouge, La. London: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 235–256.

²⁶⁰ “Letter from Birmingham City Jail (1963)” in: Martin Luther King, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington, 1st HarperCollins pbk. ed (San Francisco: Harper One, 1991), 289.

²⁶¹ Need citation for both Letters

²⁶² Young, *Jesus Calling*, 65, emphasis added.

²⁶³ Ibid.

birth, apocalypse, or the wrinkling of time only increases.²⁶⁴ Warren writes that even the most patient disciple will struggle with the long wait:

One of life's frustrations is that *God's timetable is rarely the same as ours*. We are often in a hurry when God isn't. You may feel frustrated with the seemingly slow progress you're making. Remember that *God is never in a hurry, but he is always on time*²⁶⁵

Regardless of what trial of human life evangelical thinkers are describing, they emphasize the fact that the experience of pain and suffering is not God's purpose. Warren describes how God doesn't make mistakes and that "God's motive for creating you was his love."²⁶⁶ In this way, the thinkers conclude that a loving God would not punish his creation on earth or in the afterlife. If anyone is doling out punishments, it is the believer herself. By choosing to ignore her relationship with God or dwelling so fully in the suffering of the human experience (as evangelicalism sees it), devotional texts suggest that the reader is not only punishing herself, but causing pain to God, who does not enjoy seeing his creation suffering. For these evangelical thinkers, human suffering is explained not by a wrathful, apathetic, or punishing God, but by human misunderstanding of divine time. If humans could see eternity through God's eyes, from that "divine crows nest,"²⁶⁷ they would understand the meaning, purpose, and significance of every experience in their lives, the good and the bad.

²⁶⁴ The inconsistent movement of time and human progress is also mentioned by secular writers such as Thomas Mann, in his novel *The Magic Mountain*, where he writes of how "time passes slowly or quickly or not at all" Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, 14. Similarly, Rodgers points out the way time moves inconsistently in the secular imaginary: "History worked sometimes with glacial slowness, at other times with revolutionary and unpredictable swiftness. But it was not an empty chasm that could be leaped. It could not be folded upon itself or short-circuited. In thinking so, however, shock therapy's prescribers had tapped a contagious intellectual metaphor of the age. For a moment, time itself had seemed almost infinitely thin and pliable" (Rodgers, 254).

²⁶⁵ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 144, emphasis added.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁶⁷ Worthen, *The Apostles of Reason*, 53.

Chapter 4: Temporal Effects: The Abstinence Movement as Case Study

How might this reading of evangelical time apply more directly to policy analysis? While the politicality of time in the evangelical discourse should be clear by now, I want to give an example of how this framework might be applied to understanding and analyzing specific political behaviors. This chapter highlights the “born again virgin” and the way retroactive time is deployed by the evangelical abstinence movement as a salve for the sinful soul, a call to the movement, and possibly even an instigator of sexual relationships.

Hannah Brückner and Peter Bearman’s 2005 study demonstrating the ineffectiveness of abstinence programs from a public health perspective represents a scholarly consensus on abstinence and public health.²⁶⁸ According to the study—entitled “After the Promise: The STD Consequences of Adolescent Virginity Pledges”—abstinence programs slightly delay the beginning of sexual activity, with pledgers first having sex an average of 18 months later than the general, non-pledging population. However, because of a total focus on abstinence, the lack of education about contraception, and the stigma against abortion in the community, when abstinence pledgers do become sexually active about a third do not use contraception, meaning that they have a higher incidence of STD’s and teen pregnancy, compared to the general population.²⁶⁹

Brückner and Bearman’s study, which surveyed 12,000 American adolescents from age 12 to 18, showed that 88% of pledgers have sex before marriage (compared with 99% percent of non-pledgers). In addition, more than half of those who abstain from vaginal intercourse admitted to participating in oral sex, usually without protection against STDs.²⁷⁰ On average,

²⁶⁸ Hannah Brückner and Peter S. Bearman, “After the Promise: The STD Consequences of Adolescent Virginity Pledges,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 36 (2005): 271–78.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

white evangelical Protestants make their “sexual début” at age 16 and are sexually active earlier than all other religious populations, with the exception of Black Protestants.²⁷¹ Over 2.5 million people have taken an abstinence pledge—otherwise known as “purity pledging” or “the silver ring thing”²⁷²—representing one in eight teens or 12% percent of the U.S. adolescent population.²⁷³ About half of those pledged have sex before marriage, typically not with their future spouse, resulting in both higher levels of STD transmission and teen-pregnancy.²⁷⁴

The sexually fallen (along with alcoholics and drug addicts) are one of the most common (and/or stereotyped) categories of those who have born again experiences.²⁷⁵ Devotional texts and evangelical periodicals make regular reference to these experiences. President George W. Bush’s rebirth after years of alcoholism provides perhaps the most visible example of the wide acceptance of these behaviors in the U.S. Given that there is a higher demand for forgiveness from a sin already committed than for the prevention of sins as yet unexplored (because of the trauma and physical consequences of sexual activity that is unwanted and unplanned), as well as the fact that the sexually fallen majority of evangelical adolescents is a bigger market than the upright minority of abstinence pledgers (88% compared with 12%) the rhetoric of the abstinence movement is, at times, more about retroactive forgiveness than about purity pledging.

While there are a number of important scholarly analyses of the abstinence movement established in the social science literature—primarily from the fields of public health, sociology, and feminist, gender, and sexuality studies—this chapter explores another method for

²⁷¹ Margaret Talbot, “Red Sex, Blue Sex,” *The New Yorker*, November 3, 2008, 65–66.

²⁷² See: The Silver Ring Thing: <http://www.silverringthing.com/>

²⁷³ Olga Khazan, “The Unintended Consequences of Purity Pledges,” *The Atlantic*, May 4, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/05/the-unintended-consequences-of-purity-pledges/481059/>; Talbot, “Red Sex, Blue Sex.”

²⁷⁴ Khazan, “The Unintended Consequences of Purity Pledges”; Talbot, “Red Sex, Blue Sex.”

²⁷⁵ Luhrmann discusses how a personal crisis is often the beginning of the story of conversion or a believer’s “coming to accept Jesus into their life” *When God Talks Back*, 7..

understanding abstinence, by reading the movement through the lens of evangelical thought—to understand abstinence culture and virginity pledging by way of the worldview and ontological assumptions it is rooted in. Furthermore, a new reading is necessary, given those aspects of abstinence that “secular” audiences find dizzying such as “born-again virginity” and most importantly, the continuation of abstinence practices altogether—despite the 88% failure rate and the higher STD and teen pregnancy rates it has produced in the evangelical population.²⁷⁶ The retroactive logic discussed in the beginning of Chapter 3 is on display in the popular discourse surrounding the figure of the “born-again virgin,” and in the public prayers of families and communities during “crisis pregnancies.”

Margaret Talbot provides one interpretation of the intertwined phenomena of crisis pregnancies and born-again virgins, writing: “virginity [is presented] as the cornerstone of a virtuous life. In certain evangelical circles, the concept is so emphasized that a girl who regrets having been sexually active is encouraged to declare herself a ‘secondary’ or ‘born-again’ virgin.”²⁷⁷ However, I propose that this mono-causal interpretation places too much emphasis on purity and virginity, without accounting for the other mechanism at play—retroactivity. Most analyses of abstinence pledging overlook the temporal gymnastics of ‘secondary’ virginity. On the one hand, it is undoubtedly true that virginity is emphasized, but on the other hand, there is also a tacit acceptance of adolescent sexuality in the evangelical community.

One example of this logic in practice is found in the rhetoric of True Love Waits, an abstinence youth campaign. At the center of my analysis is a promotional video that appeared on the homepage of the campaign’s website from 2010 to 2013, as part of their True Love Waits

²⁷⁶ Brückner and Bearman, “After the Promise: The STD Consequences of Adolescent Virginity Pledges.”

²⁷⁷ Talbot, “Red Sex, Blue Sex,” 71.

“3.0” campaign.²⁷⁸ True Love Waits describes itself as an “international Christian group that promotes sexual abstinence outside of marriage for teenagers and college students.”²⁷⁹ The group was founded in 1993 by Southern Baptists and is now sponsored by LifeWay Christian Resources, one of the biggest corporations that supplies evangelical books and videos as well as other promotional materials like the silver “purity” pledge rings themselves.²⁸⁰ The entire abstinence movement is backed by a number of internet-based Christian companies that sell rings, pledge cards, and other merchandise related to the movement’s activities.

During the True Love Waits “3.0” campaign, their homepage featured a picture of a young woman being kissed on the head by a young man.²⁸¹ The young woman looks straight into the camera, through heavily mascaraed lashes. In contrast, the young man’s expression is erased, as his hair obscures his face and eyes, and the photo is cropped across his forehead. The target audience of the campaign thus seems to be young women and adolescent girls, although there was male-targeted jewelry available on the site during the “3.0” campaign—one “Boy’s Sterling Silver Ring” next to five options for rings and necklaces targeted at “girls.”²⁸²

Similarly, the books advertised on the site—with titles like *Living Pure Inside Out*, and *Pure Joy: God’s Formula for Passionate Living*²⁸³—feature covers with pictures of women alone, with their mothers, or in a protective stance against a male posing in a predatory position nearby.

²⁷⁸ Unfortunately, True Love Waits introduced a new campaign in 2014, so the links provided to the website are no longer live, however, the video – which is the central object of my analysis – is now viewable on youtube at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBFkVARaFa4>

²⁷⁹ “True Love Waits Website” (LifeWay Christian Resources, December 16, 2013), <http://www.lifeway.com/History/True-Love-Waits/c/N-1z0zq7rZ1z13wiu?intcmp=TLWMain-Hero-History-20131216>.

²⁸⁰ While the combination of moral campaigning with the selling of “Christian resources” would make True Love Waits an interesting case study from a political economy perspective, as has been done in books like Kintz’s *Between Jesus and the Market*, that kind of analysis falls outside the purview of this chapter. “Through a variety of resources, students will be encouraged towards moral purity by adhering to biblical principles” (TLW homepage).

²⁸¹ – a gesture that could alternatively be interpreted as affectionate, or distinctly patronizing and paternalistic.

²⁸² Shop Jewelry and Apparel webpage at: “True Love Waits Website.”

²⁸³ Bill Hughes, *Living Pure inside out* (Nashville, Tenn: Lifeway Press, 2002); Paul Turner, Matt Tullos, and Kristi Wyatt, *Pure Joy: God’s Formula for Passionate Living* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Christian Resources, 2001).

The young woman pictured on the homepage raises an eyebrow defiantly, as if to reject or question the viewer or possibly her male partner. All of these components of the site's design reinforce the impression that abstinence is primarily a female-driven campaign and a female virtue; leaving the viewer to wonder what message True Love Waits has for males and why that message is different.

Leaving that question aside for the time being, I want to turn to the centerpiece of the campaign, a video, entitled "I Wish"²⁸⁴ that was featured prominently on the home page. The video ostensibly explains why "teenagers" and "college students"—to use the language of the website—should take an abstinence pledge. A transcript of the video, which features thirty-five "wishes" from a range of speakers, follows below:

True Love Waits, "I Wish" Video Transcript

I wish our daughter was still a virgin.

I wish my parents didn't know.

I wish we'd had "the talk."

I wish I'd never crossed the line.

I wish we'd said no.

I wish I knew if I'd rather be with a guy or a girl.

I wish I didn't dream about what I saw on TV.

I wish my mind didn't go there.

I wish my Mom would have told me.

I wish I loved her.

I wish he'd stop texting me stuff like that.

I wish I'd known oral sex counted as sex.

I wish he didn't know me like that.

Sighing.

Many repetitions of "I wish, I wish."

I wish I would have waited.

True love waits.

Audio ends. Video closes with the following written message:

Purity. Talk about it. At every age, and every stage.

True Love Waits 3.0. A Path of Purity.

Lifeway Student Ministry. Helping Students Know God, own their faith, and make their faith known.

²⁸⁴ Now available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBFkVARaFa4>

The actors who appear in the montage represent adolescents and the parents of adolescents who apparently did not take a purity pledge—or failed to uphold it—and thus have regrets about their breach of evangelical sexual norms. Their faces appear ghostly on the screen as it fades from one face to the next, the images lit in somber but romantic colors over a black background—faces that are filled with hurt and regret.

The demographics of the speakers also bears analysis. The voices of regret provide an interesting display of evangelical views on sexual agency and responsibility— as they attach to age, race, gender, and sexuality. Twenty-three of the speakers in the video are performed as children, adolescents, or young adults harboring some kind of personal sexual regret, with a range between a young boy who says “I wish I didn’t dream about what I saw on TV,” to a young woman who says “I wish I’d known oral sex counted as sex.”²⁸⁵ Fifteen of the twenty-three speakers are performed as female, while only eight are performed as male—continuing the trend I mention above of the True Love Waits Campaign targeting the protection, discipline, and policing of female sexuality. There is clearly a focus on transmitting a strong message to—or about—women on the topic of sexual purity.

Unsurprisingly, the reverse is true with the gender of the parents who speak. Five male parents appear on the video, expressing regret for their children’s behavior, alongside only two female parents. The presumed message is that it is the father’s role to promote sexual purity and to “protect” his daughter from sexually aggressive men. This portrayal is fitting, given that many female adolescents pledge abstinence at “purity balls,” where they exchange rings with their fathers, who take a vow to help their daughters remain virgins until they marry.²⁸⁶ This is made even clearer when we listen for the gender of the child that the parents are referring to. Four of

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Talbot, “Red Sex, Blue Sex,” 66.

the references are to female offspring, while only one reference expresses regret for a male offspring's sexual acts/experiences.

The racial composition of the speakers is also telling. Of the thirty-five speakers, all of them appear to be white, except for three racially ambiguous and two black speakers. All of the non-white speakers are adolescent males, in other words, the party who is labeled—both by evangelicals and the broader society—as the “active” participant of the regretted sexual action. This casting choice provides a stark and almost caricatured message about not only the predatory nature of adolescent men, but about the hypersexuality of the black male. This message is further reinforced by the racial demographics of the evangelical movement—majority white—and the fact that evangelicals of color generally worship in separate congregations and communities. In that sense, the demographic makeup of American evangelicals is simply mirrored in the video's casting.²⁸⁷ One exception to that norm is the diversity found at evangelical colleges and universities, which may be one more underlying fear being aired in this video.

Interestingly, all of the speakers' faces come into focus at some point in the video, except for the adolescent male who says, “I wish I knew if I'd rather be with a guy or a girl.” The casting and editorial choices for this character are telling. The sexually-questioning young man is played by an actor whose ethnicity is not immediately recognizable, he has a hat pulled down over his eyes, and, unlike the other characters, when the camera pans to his face, it goes out of focus. These casting and editorial choices are presumably meant to erase and/or other the queer body, even after the decision to include his narrative.

The “I Wish” video is connected to the temporal theme of the previous chapters through the expression of regret. However, this regret is not only expressed as a feeling of sadness,

²⁸⁷ According to the Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project's “portrait” of U.S. evangelicals, they are 81% white (non-Hispanic), 7% Hispanic, 6% black (non-Hispanic), 2% Asian (non-Hispanic), and 4% Other/Mixed (non-Hispanic). Available at <http://religions.pewforum.org/portraits>

repentance, or disappointment, but also as a desire to turn back time or undo what was done. The video consists of a montage of faces interspersed with images, which work on multiple levels—symbolic, oral, musical, and tonal—to leave the viewer with a clear impression. Through the staged and scripted experiences of others—framed by the somber music, colors, and images—the viewer is introduced to the regret and pain she will feel if she or her child does not take the “path of purity,” to use the language of the movement. However, even as the video is a cautionary tale on one level, it works as an invitation on another—an invitation to return to purity retroactively.

While the transcript above airs the spoken messages of the video, the images speak just as loudly. There are four categories of images that appear between the actors’ faces, as a sort of punctuation to what is being spoken aloud. The first category is comprised of cropped shots, showing parts of adolescent bodies: female hands smoothing a dress over her abdomen, fingers fiddling with the frayed string on a pair of battered denim pant knees, untied shoe laces on a pair of fidgeting feet, a tear rolling down a pale cheek. These images convey the bodily discomfort of regret, the discomfort of adolescence in a body with conflicting emotions and drives.

The second and most prominent category of images is the recurring theme of clocks racing forwards or backwards, which symbolizes a number of the temporal aspects of the video’s message—“premature” sexuality, regrets of past actions, being on a life course that is “out of control,” a desire to “turn back the clock.” The last two categories of images are connected to this temporal theme in that some of the images move forward in time, generally representing mistakes or loss of innocence—a mirror shattering, a ripped condom wrapper, marbles scattering, flower petals falling from a bloom, a heart greeting card being burned, marbles spilling out of a bag, eggs being placed in a basket, and a wedding or promise ring being slipped off. These images are well suited to the cautionary tale that dominates the video’s foreground.

However, as the movie plays, the images are more and more often played in reverse: spilled milk going back into a bottle, a shattered clock's dispersed pieces coming back together and swooping backwards from the floor onto the nightstand from which it fell, a balloon unpopping, the broken mirror being put back together, the torn edges of a flower petal being matched back up and the stem being collected from the ground—order being restored through some retroactive force. These images, coupled with the various wishes of the characters on screen, mirror the retroactive process of being born-again—either as a simple conversion to evangelicalism, or as a conversion to evangelicalism that entails re-virginization.

These “retroactive” clips are used towards the end of the video as the music builds towards a hopeful crescendo. A crescendo that is embodied by the image of a delicate, white, pre-pubescent girl, who represents some sort of return to innocence—a striking and chronologically-jarring finale to the thematic focus on reversing regret. The small girl, no older than four or five years old, utters the last line of the audio portion of the video in a serene voice, “true love waits.” Upon initial viewing, the use of the small girl may be interpreted as a symbol of purity, or as a symbolic reference back to a time in the viewer's life before they were “made impure” against their will or before they choose a path of “impurity” through a consensual sexual encounter. This impression of a desired return to purity is reinforced by the image shown directly preceding the girl's face, when a flower that has lost its petals is gently picked up off the ground.

Ironically, the small girl as a symbol of purity is eroded by the fact that many children are sexually abused—or sexually active with themselves—at even younger ages than the girl depicted. But nonetheless, the hope and uplift at the end of the video is definitely meant to be provided by the voice and facial expression of this small, purportedly pure, girl. The image of the girl may also be interpreted as a reference to the general childlikeness that Christianity

encourages²⁸⁸ and the specifically evangelical claim that innocence and purity can be achieved through the practice of being born again—that a “life of sin” can be retroactively erased by “accepting Christ,” or more precisely for my interpretation here, by accepting evangelical time.

From the standpoint of evangelical time, abstinence pledging is not only preventative, but there are important ways in which it tries to speak to adolescents and young adults even after they have made their sexual debut. In this way, the retroactive component of evangelical time allows for the phenomena of “born again virginity.” Thus, abstinence pledging is simultaneously a preventative bid for sexual exceptionalism, a therapeutic intervention for healing the wounds of regret after the sexual and relational (mis)adventure has occurred, and a loophole that allows for continued movement towards salvation, despite the derailing sin.

Given the average age of evangelical sexual debut and the age ground the campaign is targeting (“teenagers and college students”), I suggest that purity pledging is more focused on therapeutic intervention for healing the wounds of regret and a loophole that prevents young evangelicals from leaving the church, even if their bid for sexual purity before marriage is lost. Using retroactive rhetoric that is already familiar to those raised in evangelicalism and their parents, the abstinence movement works to build evangelical movement cohesion through the power of shared emotional experiences. This process draws adolescents more tightly into the fold of evangelicalism by giving them a “way out” of sexual impurity and a way in to the evangelical culture that sees itself as countercultural and rebellious to a sexually free society. In this ways, born-again virginity provides a metaphorical safe-haven for the soul from the specters of STDs

²⁸⁸ A commonly cited biblical verse on this theme is Matthew 18: “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.” Matthew 18: 3-5.

and teen pregnancy that hover over the evangelical community, even as their very real medical and life outcomes affect bodies and lives.

However, this retroactive purity serves even more functions in evangelicalism—it is an opportunity for repentance, a call to marriage, and a call to the movement itself. In this vein, Talbot describes the “crisis-pregnancy” of Sarah Palin’s seventeen-year-old daughter, Bristol, which was announced just before the Republican National Convention in 2008. Talbot details the significance of this event in the evangelical community and among delegates at the Convention:

Palin’s family drama, delegates said, was similar to the experience of many socially conservative Christian families. As Marlys Popmas, the head of evangelical outreach for the McCain campaign, told *National Review*, ‘There hasn’t been one evangelical family that hasn’t gone through some sort of situation’[sic]. In fact, it was Popmas’ own ‘crisis pregnancy’ that brought her into the movement in the first place.²⁸⁹

In other words, in evangelical culture, the concomitant of purity is sinfulness and the concomitant of abstinence is all of the crises, traumas, abuse and neglect that are perceived to accompany the opening of a sexual relationship outside of marriage. The dualism between these aspects of abstinence pledgers’ experience conforms to the deep-seated nature of dualisms and internal tensions within evangelicalism more broadly.

The story of abstinence is about a lot more than purity. In fact, the failure of an abstinence pledge often produces success for the movement as “crisis pregnancies” simultaneously bring adolescents into the movement, nurture movement cohesion, and continue the narrative of progress. A breach of purity can be used as an opportunity to call the fallen into the forgiving bosom of the evangelical movement. So, the emphasis of abstinence is not placed on strict virginity, as Talbot and other observers suggest, but on limited sexual contact, followed by a process of grief, forgiveness, and retroactive renewal—as the woman declares herself a born-again virgin.

²⁸⁹ Talbot, “Red Sex, Blue Sex,” 65.

Rachel Held Evans writes that “evangelicalism is like [her] religious mother tongue,”²⁹⁰ and there are truly many ways that evangelical thought is like a foreign language and culture needing to be translated and parsed using its own grammar, idioms, and narratives. By comparing my conceptualization of evangelical time with the retroactive imagery of the True Love Waits video, this chapter has demonstrated how a deeper understanding of evangelical thought can help come to an understanding of a movement that is often puzzling to social scientists and media commentators alike—providing one example of how the theorization of the evangelical politik (the religious-spiritual-cultural-political thought of evangelicalism) helps with that process.

²⁹⁰ Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband “Master”* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), xviii.

PART II:

EVANGELICAL BEING

Chapter 5: Feeling God

Part II follows from Michel Foucault's approach in *The History of Sexuality Volume III: The Care of the Self*. In this work, Foucault begins by analyzing an ancient text by Artemidorus on the interpretation of dreams. Foucault describes Artemidorus' text as a "practical" work dealing with everyday life, not a work of moral reflection or prescription, [a book which] testifies to a perennality and exemplifies a common way of thinking."²⁹¹ Similarly, devotional texts are instructional manuals for nurturing a relationship with God, which, like Artemidorus' tract on dream interpretation, is, to evangelicals, one of the "techniques of existence a reasonable life could scarcely [do without]."²⁹²

My analysis of evangelical being asks how the believing subject comes into the world and who she is in that world. Specifically, I am investigating the technologies of the self encouraged and employed by contemporary evangelicalism; the ways emotions are used to socialize evangelicals in their daily devotional practices; the ways those technologies intermix symbiotically with "secular" discourses; and what political implications might arise from the process of emotional regulation. As devotional texts forge the image of an ideally virtuous individual that tries to separate herself from other contemporary systems of valuation, practices of evangelical emotional regulation provide a case study of sorts for the contemporary interest in Aristotelian virtue ethics²⁹³ and personal ethical practices more broadly.²⁹⁴

Through a close reading of Rick Warren and Sarah Young's discussion of meditation and other devotional practices, this chapter identifies patterns of how emotion is discussed in

²⁹¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 3: The Care of the Self*, 3.

²⁹² Ibid., 5. "Artemidorus is mainly concerned to show the reader precisely how to go about it... His book is thus a treatise on how to interpret. Almost entirely centered not on the prophetic marvels of dreams but on the technē that enables one to make them speak correctly. He offers the book as a manual for living, a tool that can be used over the course of one's existence and adapted to life's changing circumstances. [A] 'handbook-for-daily-living'" Ibid., 6.

²⁹³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

²⁹⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 3: The Care of the Self*.

evangelical texts—what work emotion does for evangelical thought. The chapter also documents the ways these books work as norming texts for evangelical emotions and the effects of that socialization process on the formation of “believing subjects.”²⁹⁵

Examining the political thought underpinning contemporary evangelical revival, I analyze ways affect operates in the spaces between theology, devotional practices, and born-again experience. The chapter begins by detailing the ways that these evangelical thinkers instruct their readers in techniques of both controlling emotions and reading emotions according to the evangelical worldview—a process that involving discipline, norming, and socialization.

I begin by documenting the ways devotional texts use emotional regulation to normalize, socialize, and discipline their readers. For example, devotional texts often instruct their readers to stop being anxious and provide techniques to achieve that goal. The negation of anxiety and the instruction in techniques to eliminate it are unsurprising, since it is a psychological state that is generally read as negative. However, there are other emotions and emotional states that have a specific, and surprising, evangelical interpretation. For example, joy, not happiness, is the emotional goal for evangelicals, who see happiness as created by earthly (and therefore ephemeral) causes, whereas joy can come only from God.

Practices of evangelical emotional regulation also have the potential to be liberating, as they allow believers to transcend unattainable societal demands and valuations placed on the individual. The emotional norms employed in this process are centered on the claim that God is a friend, whose friendship the believer must nurture in order to experience the good life (finding a purpose, being renewed, finding peace, and being restored). Through the emphasis on divine friendship and the emotions it produces, we get another glimpse of the ways that contemporary

²⁹⁵ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

evangelical devotional practices are focused on the present—as opposed to the future of apocalypse, second coming, heaven, or hell that was emphasized by the Christian right.

Devotional authors attempt to teach their readers what daily practices—such as prayer and meditation—are important in developing a relationship with God. However, in the process of describing and prescribing these practices, the authors praise some emotions, discourage others, and sometimes even reprimand their readers. In this sense, devotionals are not only instructional, as Luhrmann argues, but also disciplinary. Readers are given specific techniques for controlling their undesirable emotions, while the value of other emotions is promoted. But most intriguingly, the admonitions are focused not on acts that are considered sinful or praiseworthy—as has often been the focus of evangelical and fundamentalist tracts historically—but on attitudes, perspectives, and perceptions.

The focus of the believer’s awareness, her disposition, and her ability to feel God’s presence in her life (or not) are all evaluated. Furthermore, like any successful socialization process, the evaluative mechanisms are ideally transferred from the page into the reader’s consciousness, so that she may carry out future self-evaluations without the direct involvement of the devotional text or its author. In other words, evangelical thinkers are more concerned with developing their reader’s sense of self than with the actions their readers take. Or perhaps it is more apt to say that, like many Aristotelian virtue ethicists, the authors of these devotionals see mental and spiritual training as a necessary prerequisite to right action.

Twenty-first century evangelicalism places special importance on the believer’s personal, intimate connection with God—an experience that the believer must be trained to be ready to receive. There are a number of accepted ways of accessing God, but the most common practice

advised by contemporary devotionals is not prayer, church attendance, or song, but a practice referred to as “meditation.” For Warren and Young, the practice of “continual” meditation is an essential devotional tool, used specifically for bringing the devotee closer to God.²⁹⁶ Young writes that “this practice of listening to God [elsewhere referred to as “meditation”] has increased [her] intimacy with Him more than any other spiritual discipline,”²⁹⁷ while Warren writes that the reward for meditating on God’s Word is friendship with God and access to “God’s secrets and promises.”²⁹⁸

In their discussion of meditation, both Warren and Young are careful to distinguish it from prayer. In their conception, prayer is asking God for something, while meditation is listening to God and being receptive to his messages. The details of how one “listens” to God are slightly different for Warren and Young, but their meditative models share important features, which are nicely introduced in Warren’s chapter “Becoming Best Friends With God.”

While you cannot spend all day studying the Bible, you can think about it throughout the day, recalling verses you have read or memorized and mulling them over in your mind. Meditation is often misunderstood as some difficult, mysterious ritual practiced by isolated monks and mystics. But meditation is simply focused thinking—a skill anyone can learn and use anywhere. When you think about a problem over and over in your mind, that’s called worry. When you think about God’s Word over and over in your mind, that’s meditation. If you know how to worry, you already know how to meditate! You just need to switch your attention from your problems to Bible verses. The more you meditate on God’s Word, the less you will have to worry about. Prayer lets you speak to God; meditation lets God speak to you. Both are essential to becoming a friend of God.²⁹⁹

This passage tells us several basic things about meditation as Warren envisions it. First, meditation is not an emptying of the mind—as it is in the popular Western conception of

²⁹⁶ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 92.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁹⁸ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 101.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 100–101.

Buddhist, yogic, and therapeutic practices of meditation.³⁰⁰ Warren’s meditation practice is Bible-based, meaning that he encourages his reader to focus on a particular Bible verse while meditating. The reader is instructed to use memorized verses as a way to “let God speak to [her].”³⁰¹ Second, through his reference to misunderstandings of meditation as a “difficult, mysterious ritual practiced by isolated monks and mystics,”³⁰² Warren is attempting to mainstream the practice of meditation within his Christian readership. An attempt that is striking, given that meditation, as a Christian practice, dates back to the medieval era.³⁰³ But given evangelical anti-intellectualism,³⁰⁴ old practices can be introduced as new, which in turn becomes yet another technique for reinforcing the success of revival.

Third, the mode of this meditation is cognitive—focusing thought on a biblical passage—but the goal of the practice is emotional and spiritual. Fourth, for Warren, meditation can be done in conjunction with other activities, as a sort of multi-tasking devotional, “throughout the day.”³⁰⁵ Fifth, it is clear that whatever else meditation is, it is a form of communication with God, who is depicted as a friend and confidant. Thus, we see that there is some slippage between the elements of Warren’s description of meditation. On the one hand, meditation is framed as communication with God, while on the other hand, meditation refers to “mulling over” a biblical verse of your own choosing.³⁰⁶ This mulling seems closer to one of the secondary definitions of

³⁰⁰ “d. In Buddhism, Yoga, and other systems of religious or spiritual discipline: a practice of the mind (and body) aimed at achieving the eradication of rational or worldly mental activity.” “Meditation,” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/view/Entry/115756?redirectedFrom=meditation#eid37554672>.

³⁰¹ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 100-101.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ The first use of the term in an English text dates from the circa 1225 text *Ancrene Riwe* or *Ancrene Wisse*, an anonymously authored rulebook for women anchoresses who chose to seclude themselves from society to lives an ascetic, consecrated life withdrawn from the world. These women usually lived in cells adjoined to medieval churches, and thus, unlike hermits, took a vow of stability of place. “Meditation.”

³⁰⁴ Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Noll’s text testifies to the claim that the evangelical culture avoids intellectual engagement, even with their own history.

³⁰⁵ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 100..

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 59.

meditation, meaning the action of “continuous thought or musing upon one subject.”³⁰⁷ From the passage above, it is unclear whether the practice is purely cognitive for Warren, or if there is an emotional and/or experiential element. While the details of the subjective experience of meditation is vague, the importance of the practice to contemporary evangelicalism is clear. Warren writes that the “reward” for meditation is friendship with God, a relationship in which God will “share his secrets with you,” which will help you understand the “‘secrets’ of this life that most people miss,” and “the secrets of his promises.”³⁰⁸ Warren’s choice of words—concerning the rewards for meditation—explicitly communicates how essential meditation is in the evangelical universe.

Young certainly shares this high regard for the practice, as she bases her entire book—both method and message—on the communications she receives from God when spending hours meditating “in His Presence.”³⁰⁹ She describes taking up the practice of listening for God’s direct messages after reading the 1978 devotional book *God Calling*, written by two evangelical women, “two anonymous listeners.”³¹⁰ Young describes the meditative, communing practice used by the authors of *God Calling* as “waiting quietly in God’s Presence, pencils and paper in hand, recording the messages they received from him. The messages are written in the first person, with the ‘I’ designating God.”³¹¹ Reading this devotional led Young to take up the practice herself by starting a journal recording “God’s messages,” which she eventually developed into the manuscript of *Jesus Calling*.³¹²

I began to wonder if I, too, could receive messages during my times of communing with God. I had been writing in prayer journals for years, but that was one-way

³⁰⁷ “Meditation.”, definition b.

³⁰⁸ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 60.

³⁰⁹ The term “Presence,” capitalized out of respect, is used almost constantly in Young’s writing. E.g., “Awareness of My Presence fills your mind with Light and Peace, leaving no room for fear.” (92)

³¹⁰ A. J. Russell and Faith Annette Sand, eds., *God Calling*, (Pasadena, Calif: Hope Publishing House, 2012).

³¹¹ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 23.

³¹² Young’s *Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence Jesus Calling*.

communication: I did all the talking. I knew that God communicated with me through the Bible, but I yearned for more. Increasingly, I wanted to hear what God had to say to me personally on a given day. I decided to listen to God with pen in hand, writing down whatever I believed he was saying. I felt awkward the first time I tried this, but I received a message. It was short, biblical, and appropriate. It addressed topics that were current in my life: trust, fear, and closeness to God. I responded by writing in my prayer journal. My journaling had changed from monologue to dialogue. Soon, messages began to flow more freely. I knew these writings were not inspired as scripture is, but they were helping me grow closer to God. I have continued to receive personal messages from God as I meditate on Him. The more difficult my life circumstances, the more I need these encouraging directives from my Creator. Sitting quietly in God's Presence is just as important as the writings I glean from these meditative times. In fact, some days I simply sit with Him for a while and write nothing. During these times of focusing on God, I may experience 'fullness of joy' in His Presence [Psalm 16:11 NKJV], or I may simply enjoy His gentle company and receive his Peace.³¹³

Similar to Warren's primer on meditation, Young's account includes a number of differing descriptions of meditation. Even in this one passage, she refers to the practice alternatively as "listening," "communing," "communicating," and "dialogue[ing]"—a practice in which she receives "directives," or "personal messages."³¹⁴ Some of these words indicate a passive practice of meditation, while others indicate activity, and still others describe God as giving directions or even orders.

There is a certain amount of overlap with Warren's description of meditation, even as there are some equally significant departures. While Young also acknowledges the phenomenon of divine communication through the Bible, her practice begins where Warren's ends. In this sense, Warren represents a more mainstream or traditional evangelical method of contacting God. However, Young's departure from that tradition has proven wildly popular. When she writes, "I knew that God communicated with me through the Bible,"³¹⁵ she is tactfully acknowledging the standard way that evangelicals—as well as Christians of all stripes—expect to communicate with God, while also providing a tantalizing invitation to quench the

³¹³ Ibid., 23–24.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 23.

contemporary evangelical desire for a dialogue with God that is less intellectual—as the study of the Bible can be—and more experiential. Young’s careful wording in her introduction serves the double function of both planting the seed of the desire—introducing the concept of an intimate, experiential connection with God—while also providing the means to fulfill it. She writes of her own experience with that desire: “but I yearned for more [than biblical communication]. Increasingly, I wanted to hear what God had to say to me personally on a given day.”³¹⁶ While her desire is easily justified by the contemporary evangelical mandate to develop a relationship with God, her radical method is also deftly justified by the claim that the meditative writings “were helping me grow closer to God.”³¹⁷ In that one short phrase, Young congeals the purpose of many contemporary evangelicals’ lives. As long as a believer feels a growing connection to God, even unorthodox methods are justified and accepted.

In explaining how her radical method can be deemed acceptable to the Christian mainstream, Young clarifies that she is not comparing herself with biblical writers: “I knew these writings were not inspired as scripture is.”³¹⁸ By claiming that she receives messages directly from God, Young is not only playing with the boundary of mainstream evangelical epistemology which claims that the Bible is the only divinely inspired text. She goes even further, stating that, sometimes, the most important part of communing with God is the emotional release. In this way, her methodology departs from historical and mainstream conceptions of Christian worship, which see God’s glory as the primary purpose of worship, rather than the comfort of the worshipper. Extrapolating from her own practice, she advises her readers that the quiet time with God is often as significant as any communication that is achieved in that time.³¹⁹ Compared with

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 24.

Warren’s careful instructions that his reader should stick to biblical verses, filling the mind with memorized passages, Young’s method is rather free form and open-ended. But if the means are questionable, the purported result is just as clear as Warren’s outcome. Young’s meditation provides emotional comfort, an experiential connection to the divine that provides succor and “joy.”³²⁰

If Warren and Young’s texts are any indication, meditation is a key element of the exercise of evangelicalism today—a practice that involves both intellectual study and physiological responses to socialize readers to the evangelical ways of understanding, feeling, and ultimately believing. Regardless of whose method is used, the practice of treating God as a friend, with whom the believer converses daily is the cornerstone of contemporary evangelical practice. This practice puts emotional experience at the center of the evangelical belief system, both as a means to transcendence and the product of that transcendence. In other words, emotional exchange is a key part of the proposed method of contacting God, and the outcome of that exchange is a positive emotional response in the believer. The source of the believer’s emotions is not a chemical shift in the body or a cognitive response to outside stimuli, but rather a “gift” or a “message” from the creator—a reassurance that he is with her.

Given the burgeoning industry of devotional literature outlining techniques of devotion, this contact with God is presumed to take some practice, to require some skill or knowledge. The desire to contact God via meditation is not enough. In Luhrmann’s account, the proper receptivity must be taught—a discipline whose guise is care of the self. If this technology of the self is adequately developed, and the proper emotional attitudes are employed, the believer will “hear” God and the promised emotions will be produced. In their discussions of emotion, Young

³²⁰ Ibid.

and Warren each describe how bad emotions need to be corrected for and how good emotions—which come from God—need to be encouraged. While the terms “good” and “bad” aren’t actually used—the devotional writers’ classification of emotions into these binary normative categories is clear.

There are several particularly dangerous emotions—and emotional states—that the devotional writers warn against. We have already read Warren’s injunctions against “worry,” and how we should replace anxious thought patterns with biblical mental recitation and contemplation. This logic also appears regularly in Young’s text, where her solution to anxiety is to fill the mind with communication from God:

The temptation to be anxious is constantly with you, trying to work its way into your mind. *The best defense is continual communication with Me*, richly seasoned with thanksgiving. *Awareness of My Presence fills your mind with Light and Peace, leaving no room for fear.* This awareness lifts you up above your circumstances, enabling you to see problems from My perspective.³²¹

Young’s advice on coping with anxiety is to tune out this negative emotional state by training to eliminate fear and cultivate gratitude. Young’s discussion provides a road map for coping with anxiety—or transcending anxiety, as it is understood from the evangelical perspective. Young elaborates on what meditation does for her reader when she writes that communication with God is an “awareness of [God’s] Presence” that gives the reader a divine perspective on her earthly problems.³²² For Young, meditation allows the practitioner to enter an altered state of awareness that changes her perspective on life—a gratitude and openness to God’s plan that echoes the apolitical state of evangelical feminism discussed in Chapter 3.³²³ This alternative viewpoint and

³²¹ Ibid., 92. A similar thought on anxiety and worry can be found on Young, page 92: “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?” Luke 12: 25-26” in Young, 92.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ See pages 86-90.

“awareness” produces the emotional effect of “Light and Peace,”³²⁴ in contrast to the emotional weight and distress of anxiety, anger, and political engagement.

However, it seems unlikely that these meditative and prayerful practices are able to produce consistent emotional effects in the reader. Instead, it seems that they might only encourage a performance of practiced and studied emotional states. In other words, telling someone not to be anxious but to be grateful sometimes means that an outward show of gratitude hides a hidden, inner terror. Certainly, cracks in the façade of a socialized individual are not unique to evangelicalism.

This phenomenon of emotional self-regulation is seen in many Bible verses favored by contemporary evangelicals, verses where there is no “promise of happiness”³²⁵ flowing from the practices of Christianity, but rather a call for the individual to self-produce a certain emotional state and sustain it—regardless of exterior circumstances. Again, the recommended emotional state and the performance put on by the believer may mask a different internal state. Young’s choice of scriptural passages demonstrates this in several places where a disciplinary approach is taken to emotional states, normatively coding and valuing these states, and providing diverse justifications and incentives for doing so. Young quotes 1 Thessalonians to this end: “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”³²⁶ This verse provides clear support for her regime of joy and gratitude. Similarly, she quotes Proverbs, in a verse that promises good health to those who follow the mandate of high spirits: “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.”³²⁷ While it is unclear whether cheerfulness and joy meant the same thing to Solomon and Paul—the likely

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010).

³²⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18, in Young, *Jesus Calling*, 92.

³²⁷ Proverbs 17: 22, in *ibid.*, 104.

writers of these verses³²⁸—it is clear that Young is employing them to advocate for a particular emotional state. Solomon incentivizes “cheerfulness” with the promise of good health, while Paul merely asserts that “being joyful” is God’s will—this evangelical joy is an emotion that is commanded, a cheerfulness that is prescribed.

Unlike secular conceptions of emotion as a reaction to external circumstances or internal chemistry, Young and Warren mark emotion, as Aristotle did, as a studied condition. In a statement differentiating between happiness and joy, Warren himself highlights this difference between evangelical and secular notions of emotion: “God teaches us real joy in the midst of sorrow, when we turn to him. Happiness depends on external circumstances, but joy is based on your relationship to God.”³²⁹ As Warren makes clear—“God teaches us joy”³³⁰—the emotional/spiritual state of joy is learned, coached, and internalized. Unlike happiness, spiritual joy is immune to “sorrow.”³³¹ Despite the fact that the words “joy” and “happiness” share an etymology which refers to a feeling of pleasure in English, Warren marks happiness as worldly—dependent on “external circumstances”³³² while he characterizes joy as the appropriate emotional or spiritual state to be desired, generated, and upheld.³³³

Coupled with these instructions to maintain a cheerful state is the injunction against negative emotions and the causes of them. In one passage, Young seeks to regulate her reader’s self-critique:

³²⁸ The book of Proverbs is generally attributed to Solomon and 1 Thessalonians to Paul.

³²⁹ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 131.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Furthermore, the terms appear to be synonymous with one another in many verses in the New International Translation of the Bible, which is among the versions Warren uses. E.g., “For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor” (Esther 8:16) In another verse in the New International Translation, God is credited for giving happiness: “To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness...” (Ecclesiastes 2:26)

Stop judging and evaluating your self, for this is not your role. Above all, stop comparing yourself with other people. This produces feelings of pride and inferiority. I lead each of My children along a path that is uniquely tailor-made for him or her. Comparing is not only wrong; it is also meaningless.³³⁴

In this passage, Young's generally soothing tone takes on a stern edge as she not only discourages her readers from self-judgment, evaluation, and comparison, but also discredits their ability to do these practices of self-assessment at all. On the one hand, she is concerned with the emotional effects of such practices—the feelings of pride and inferiority that she marks as negative. On the other hand, she asserts that humans are not suited for the role of self-assessment and that any attempt to do so is insubordinate, wrong, and meaningless.

This is quite a radical position. She is asking her readers to avoid an activity—self-assessment—that is a constant daily affair. Yet, the extreme popularity of Young's writing may signal a desire for such de-activation in the lives of her readers. Perhaps that is because her message echoes some discourses of psychotherapy. For example, cognitive behavioral therapy shares many socializing principles with evangelicalism. In these therapeutic practices, the adherent is instructed to alter thought patterns in order to change unwanted behaviors.

When culture, religion, or psychotherapy plays a role in making normative judgments about which thought patterns and behaviors are negative—as opposed to just providing the socializing practices—they share a similar, if not exactly equivalent, ability to discipline and socialize the individual subject according to external markers of success, health, and the good life. In evangelical discourses these external markers are the product of biblical narratives about submission that can easily become cultural narratives of complacency that leave evangelicals less guarded against dominant cultural demands, such as neoliberalism's emphasis on productivity, efficiency, and biopower. While evangelicalism may sometimes operate as a countercultural

³³⁴ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 86.

force, defending believers from societal demands on them, it also has the potential to mute critical discourse that would allow the individual to escape these demands through other routes.

One of the key features of devotional practices—as they relate to the control of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors—is the belief that positive emotions (and thoughts and behaviors) come from God. While feeling good, thinking good thoughts, and producing “right” behaviors are all supplied by God, they require willpower and discipline to be accessed. In order to accomplish this, believers pivot their mind away from negative thoughts and feelings to a focus on God. Massive benefits accompany this shift. As Warren writes, “Your focus will determine your feelings.”³³⁵ Once again, we see that outside circumstances or internal chemistry are discounted in the face of God and an individual’s focus on that God. Young suggests that the best way to secure this cognitive attachment to thoughts of the divine is to focus on gratitude to God.

Thank me for the glorious gift of my spirit. This is like priming the pump of a well. As you bring Me the sacrifice of thanksgiving, regardless of your feelings, My Spirit is able to work more freely within you. This produces more thankfulness and more freedom, until you are overflowing with gratitude. I shower blessings on you daily, but sometimes you don’t perceive them. When your mind is stuck on a negative focus, you see neither Me nor My gifts. In faith, thank Me for whatever is preoccupying your mind. This will clear the blockage so that you can find Me.³³⁶

This explanation of emotional function from Young’s perspective is rich with the tensions and slippages generally found at the center of evangelical accounts of emotion. First of all, she is clear that an individual’s focus should be on gratitude for “the gift of God’s spirit”³³⁷—which according to Protestant doctrine may refer to creation, Jesus’s death on the cross as saving humanity, or simply to the signs, signals, gifts, and presence of God in daily life. That gratitude,

³³⁵ *The Purpose Driven Life*, 128.

³³⁶ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 108.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

as Young states, should be expressed, “regardless of [the reader’s] feelings.”³³⁸ Gratitude is tautological in this evangelical formulation. Gratitude is both the cause and consequence of good evangelical practice, which produces a fatalistic complacency or apathetic contentedness. Similarly to Warren’s distinction between happiness and joy, Young’s demand for gratitude demonstrates that she recognizes emotions outside of God, but disciplines her readers against expressing them. Repressing non-godly emotions is the sacrifice she speaks of.³³⁹ Being thankful, even when you don’t feel genuine gratitude, is a psychological sacrifice evangelicalism requires of its adherents.

Gratitude itself has long been called for by the Abrahamic religions, but this new pointed awareness of being grateful when gratitude is not felt highlights a certain dissonance between evangelical emotion and action, between feeling grateful and giving thanks.³⁴⁰ To support her statement, Young turns to Psalm 50:14: “Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High.”³⁴¹ It is clear that the call for gratitude is once again based on the double justification of authority and personal gain. On the one hand, Young encourages her readers’ thankfulness in order to respect and worship God—to fulfill a vow to him. On the other hand, she encourages this behavior with the promise that it will enable God’s spirit “to work more freely within [the reader].”³⁴² In this sense, this non-genuine, sacrificial gratitude can be

³³⁸ *Jesus Calling*, 108.

³³⁹ Definition of sacrifice: “1a... the surrender to God or a deity, for the purpose of propitiation or homage, of some object of possession. Also applied *fig.* to the offering of prayer, thanksgiving, penitence, submission, or the like... 2... anything (material or immaterial) offered to God or a deity as an act of propitiation or homage... 3... a. The offering by Christ of Himself to the Father as a propitiatory victim in his voluntary immolation upon the cross; the Crucifixion in its sacrificial character. b. Applied to the Eucharistic celebration: (a) in accordance with the view that regards it as a propitiatory offering of the body and blood of Christ, in perpetuation of the sacrifice offered by Him in His crucifixion; (b) in Protestant use, with reference to its character as an offering of thanksgiving (cf. sense 1).” (OED)

³⁴⁰ E.g., Psalms 100:4: “Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name”; 1 Thessalonians 5:18: “In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you”; Quran: 2:56: “Then we raised you up after your death that you may give thanks.”

³⁴¹ Psalm 50:14 in Young, *Jesus Calling*, 83.

³⁴² *Ibid*, 108.

described as submission. If the evangelical reader submits herself gratefully to God, no matter what the outcome, no matter how they she feels about it, she is giving the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate submission, allowing the spirit to “move” within her. Young argues tautologically that maintaining gratitude sets the stage for God’s work in the reader, which in turn produces more thankfulness and more of the “freedom” that is the result of submission in Young’s narrative.³⁴³ This is a sort of “fake it until you make it” approach wherein gratitude is both the tree and the fruit of evangelical devotion

However, if we continue to follow Young through this passage, she seems to also be making a connection between gratitude and powers of perception, connecting the reader’s ability to see God’s daily blessings with a mind freed from negative thoughts. “When your mind is stuck on a negative focus, you see neither Me nor My gifts. In faith, thank Me for whatever is preoccupying your mind.”³⁴⁴ This practice of gratitude in Young’s account once again relates to the claim that evangelical belief is achieved through a process of “learning to believe.”³⁴⁵

However, in Young’s explanation, emotional benefits do not merely arise from “priming the pump”³⁴⁶—from clearing the mind of negative thoughts and surrendering to God. Positive emotions actually come from God himself.

Do no hesitate to receive joy from me, for I bestow it on you abundantly. It is through spending time with Me that you realize how wide and long and high and deep is My Love for you. Sometimes the relationship I offer you seems too good to be true. I pour My very Life into you, and all you have to do is receive Me. In a world characterized by working and taking, the admonition to rest and receive seems too easy. There is an intricate connection between receiving and believing: As you trust Me more and more, you are able to receive Me and My blessings abundantly.³⁴⁷

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 108.

³⁴⁵ *When God Talks Back*, xvi.

³⁴⁶ *Jesus Calling*, 108.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 102.

Young describes God as giving joy and blessings, whether the reader realizes it or not. Elsewhere she writes, “I shower blessings on you daily, but sometimes you don’t perceive them,”³⁴⁸ explaining that, “there is an intricate connection between receiving and believing: As you trust Me more and more, you are able to receive Me and My blessings abundantly.”³⁴⁹ It seems that part of the evangelical epistemology is the expectation of a gap between the “reality” of God’s “abundant blessings” and the reader’s experience of those blessings. In other words, God provides more than the reader acknowledges. The more a believer trains and matures spiritually, the more she is prepared to see and experience those blessings (although Young and Warren both emphasize the ways that mature disciples can also face steeper challenges to their faith—life struggles that leave the believer feeling as forsaken as Job.)

However, the epistemological point is that there is a connection between belief and proper perception. The more you believe, the sharper your spiritual senses will be for signs and experiences of God. Warren expands on this point, relating it to how a reader knows that she is on God’s prepared path: “*It feels good to do what God made you to do.* When you minister in a manner consistent with the personality God gave you, you experience fulfillment, satisfaction, and fruitfulness.”³⁵⁰ Despite the many cautions elsewhere against being led by weak emotions into the wrong actions, in this passage Warren emphasizes that the reader can tell when she is doing God’s work because it “feels good.”³⁵¹ This system for interpreting emotions seems like a weak test of God’s plan that could easily lead to confusion between what God wants and what the reader wants.

³⁴⁸ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 108.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁵⁰ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 158, original emphasis.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

This chapter has discussed the specific ways that evangelical devotional literature operates as disciplinary and some of the specific potentialities these disciplinary processes have for shaping a certain type of believing subject. That believing subject is always, already a political subject—individuals who are produced by and for both political and religious discourses at the same time.³⁵² The matrix of thinkers and discourses that work to teach, normalize, and socialize evangelicals play in the space between emotions, histories, and rhetorical choices, to create norms that work to classify emotions. This socialization process identifies some emotions as acceptable—to be encouraged and nurtured—and other emotions as sinful or dangerous—to be discouraged and suppressed. In this way, emotions are controlled by, read, and interpreted through the lens of the evangelical worldview. The discourse for achieving the evangelical good life relies on the techniques outlined above, through which we can begin to conceptualize an ethics and politics of the evangelical subject we are exploring here.

However, feelings aren't the only thing evangelicals get from God. The reader's knowledge of the true cosmos is divinely derived as well. These authors explain repeatedly that meditating and spending time with God gives them knowledge—of the huge scope of his love, of the size and shape and reality of the world and eternity.³⁵³ In other words, both knowledge and emotion come from God via the same mechanism—meditation. All humans need to do in the human-divine relationship is receive, submit, be receptive, and rest in God's care. In this way, belief is linked to the receipt of “blessings,” whether that is joy (or other positive emotions) or

³⁵² For additional discussion of religious subjects as political subjects, see Mahmood 2012, x-xiii.

³⁵³ E.g., In his Christian life book, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*, Rob Bell writes, “I don't follow Jesus because I think Christianity is the best religion. I follow Jesus because he leads me to into ultimate reality. *He teaches me to live in tune with how reality is.* When Jesus said, ‘No one comes to the Father except through me’³⁵³, he was saying that *his way, his words, his life is our connection to how things truly are at the deepest level of existence. For Jesus then, the point of religion is to help us connect with ultimate reality, God...* These religious acts and rituals are shadows of the reality. ‘The reality ... is found in Christ.’ [Colossians 2:17 (NIV)]”Original emphasis Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 83..

knowledge. What does this blending of knowledge and emotion tell us about the link between religious belief and ethical-political views? A believer who is cognitively reshaped by her religious practices can be assumed to approach her social, political, and ethical engagements with the world around her differently too.

Chapter 6: Bodily or Cognitive Belief?

How does religious and spiritual belief arise and develop? Is faith mainly a product of bodily practices, mainly a product of study and intellect, or some combination of the two? From the starting point of evangelical emotion discussed in Chapter 5, this chapter explores the source of religiosity in the individual—both how one becomes religious in the first place and by what means faith grows.

Theories of religion in the social sciences and humanities generally fall into one of two typologies. On the one hand, there are bodily-centered theories of religion, favored by anthropologists like Talal Asad, Webb Keane, and Saba Mahmood—whose influence has grown markedly over the last twenty years.³⁵⁴ Their work, which bases religious identity on habitus-practice was inspired by the work of “French theoreticians of practice,” including Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, and Pierre Bourdieu (as well as those from other contexts and traditions, like Clifford Geertz).³⁵⁵ Perhaps the boldest statement of this perspective on religious formation comes from Bourdieu, who wrote that religious “belief is not a 'state of mind,' still less a kind of arbitrary adherence to a set of instituted dogmas and doctrine ('beliefs'), but rather a state of the body.”³⁵⁶ In this tradition, the believer learns to feel God through observation and mimicry of other believers bodily practices. In that regard, religion and

³⁵⁴ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*; Talal Asad, ed., *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, The Townsend Papers in the Humanities, no. 2 (Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California : Distributed by University of California Press, 2009); Webb Keane, “The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religions,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. Special Issue: The Objects of Evidence: Anthropological Approaches to the Production of Knowledge (2008): 110–27; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

³⁵⁵ Moshe Sluhovsky, “Practices of Belief in Early Modern Catholicism.” (Unpublished book manuscript, New York, 2013), 7; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2012); “Technologies of the Self,” in Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth Michel Foucault, Paul Rabinow, and James D Faubion, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984* (New York: New Press, 1997); “What We Do When We Believe” in: Marshall Blonsky, ed., *On Signs* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Reprinted (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 2008); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

³⁵⁶ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 68.

spirituality are primarily concerned with, arise from, and give way to feelings and emotions. From the account in Chapter 5, we can certainly see that evangelicalism involves feelings, but given the role of narrative and philosophies of time seen in chapters 1-4, and Luhmann's model of "learning to believe," emotion is clearly not an exhaustive description of the source of evangelicalism.

On the other hand, there are cognitively and theologically-centered theories of religion that focus more attention on the intellectual drivers of religious belief, which are favored by the generation of thinkers proceeding Merleau-Ponty and the other theoreticians of practice—such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Edward B. Taylor, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, and Ernst Cassirer.³⁵⁷ This approach is also beginning to reemerge in the work of diverse scholars of Christianity, including T.M. Luhmann and Moshe Sluhovsky.³⁵⁸ This more cognitive origin of religiosity would work to encompass more theological or study-based modes of religion, including my conceptualization of learning to believe in eternity. In this sense, the reading, Bible study, and discussion components of evangelicalism would be highlighted.

One of the key points in comparing these two typologies of belief is that many theorists' claims that the embodied practice model corresponds with diverse practices of religion across place and time, while the cognitive and theological models corresponds most closely with Protestant Christianity from the early modern era forward.³⁵⁹ However, on a basic level scholars of religion know that religious and ethical beliefs and practices from every tradition involve both

³⁵⁷ Sluhovsky, "Practices of Belief in Early Modern Catholicism," 7; Ludwig Wittgenstein and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations": Generally Known as the Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1965); Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, Cambridge Library Collection Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010); Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 12. print (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

³⁵⁸ Luhmann, *When God Talks Back*; Sluhovsky, "Practices of Belief in Early Modern Catholicism."

³⁵⁹ E.g., Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

intellectual and bodily elements, regardless of which type is emphasized by scholars of that tradition. In this chapter, I will argue against this dualism between bodily and cognition in theories of belief. Evangelicalism, and I would argue religion in general, is both a practice of the mind and the body at the same time, Furthermore, insistence on one model or the other alone not only diminishes and erases part of the account of a particular faith story and faith experience, but also instantiates a philosophy of mind that is harmful to human self-understanding. This chapter explores the inadequacies of theories of belief that claim either the body or the mind as the sole originator of religiosity and, following Sara Ahmed, develops a theory of belief that goes beyond the cognitive versus bodily duality.

The difficulty of maintaining this duality is found across many scholarly accounts of belief, some even questioning whether the term belief is, by itself, too cognitive a designation to encompass the embodied practices of religious rituals. Sluhovsky writes:

By emphasizing the importance of belief, I call into question a prevalent recent prioritizing in anthropology, sociology of religion, and religious studies of practice over belief, as well as the argument, which has gained increasing popularity over the last twenty years or so, that belief exists only as embodied practices and results from [bodily] practice.”³⁶⁰

While Sluhovsky acknowledges his indebtedness to theories of praxis, he is also concerned that the valuable concept of belief could be lost altogether: “I suggest, one has to also (and maybe first of all) comprehend the belief system that shaped and was shaped by these practices.”³⁶¹ Here we find a not so subtle slippage towards the cognitive in Sluhovsky’s writing when he prioritizes the belief system (the cognitive element of belief).³⁶²

Recently, evolutionary psychologists have taken up the body-based religion argument, claiming that humans believe in God because our “evolved intuitions” are “primed to be alert for

³⁶⁰ Sluhovsky, “Practices of Belief in Early Modern Catholicism.,” 5.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 6.

³⁶² Ibid.

presence.”³⁶³ In critiquing this claim, Luhrmann writes, “evolutionary psychology does not explain how God remains real for modern doubters. This takes faith, which is often the outcome of great intellectual struggle.”³⁶⁴ However, as Sluhovsky slides towards the cognitive, so does Luhrmann. Her support for cognitively based conceptualizations of faith leave the body behind.

Similarly to how Sluhovsky and Luhrmann separate belief systems and their corresponding bodily practices, prioritizing cognitive drivers of belief, Mahmood makes a similar separation, but places priority on the body. In the preface to *Politics of Piety*, she explains:

In contrast to [the Protestant] understanding of religion, the pious subjects of this book posit a very different relationship between outward bodily acts (including rituals, liturgies, and worship) and inward belief (state of the soul). Not only are the two inseparable in their conception, but, more importantly, belief is the product of outward practices, rituals, and acts of worship rather than simply an expression of them.³⁶⁵

For Mahmood, and other theorists of religion based on bodily practice, the very essence of belief is created by the repetition of “outward practices.”³⁶⁶ As Mahmood’s separation of Protestant and Muslim typologies shows, the other potential loss of separating out bodily and cognitive elements of belief is the threat that different religious practices become totally incomparable and thus even more alien to one another.

³⁶³ “Evolutionary psychology argues that many of the building blocks of our psyche were formed through a slow evolutionary process to adapt us to a dangerous, unpredictable world. When we hear a noise in the next room, we immediately wonder about an intruder even when we know the door is locked. That’s to our advantage: the cost of worrying when no one is there is nothing compared to the cost of not worrying when someone is. As a result, we are primed to be alert for presence, whether anyone is present or not. Faced with these findings, some are tempted to argue that the reason people believe in supernatural beings is that our evolved intuitions lead us to overinterpret the presence of intentional agents, and those quick, effortless intuitions are so powerful that they become, in effect, our default interpretations of the world. From this perspective, the idea of God arises out of this evolved tendency to attribute intention to an inanimate world. Religious belief would then be an accidental bi-product of the way our minds have evolved.” Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xii.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xv.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed employs a reading method—influenced by affect theory—that highlights the “emotionality of texts.”³⁶⁷ Using this method, Ahmed describes how texts change the reader affectively. As emotions are performed in devotional texts, they “do work” for that text, forming attachments with the reader, between the reader and the divine presence the text describes, as well as between the reader and the writer. These emotional connections are both political in their normative content and strategic in forming a cultural and social movement ethos. In this way, I take up Ahmed’s question of what political work emotion is doing and performing in the text.

Ahmed also traces two understandings of emotion through the western philosophical canon. These two theoretical positions bear some resemblance to the cognitive versus bodily divide in theories of religion. The “cognitivists,” which Ahmed traces back to Aristotle,³⁶⁸ maintain that, “emotions involve appraisals, judgments, attitudes or a ‘specific manner of apprehending the world,’ which are irreducible to bodily sensations.”³⁶⁹ In the other camp, Ahmed groups thinkers like Descartes, Hume and William James as characterizing emotion primarily as a bodily sensation.³⁷⁰

Through my reading of the devotional discourse on emotion in Chapter 5, we see that emotion is an important component of evangelicalism, but I want to argue further that emotion is key to understanding most religions. Furthermore, through Ahmed’s theory of emotion we find a

³⁶⁷ *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 13.

³⁶⁸ Aristotle “From Rhetoric” in: Robert C. Solomon, ed., *What Is an Emotion?: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³⁶⁹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2004, 4.

³⁷⁰ “The Passions of the Soul” in René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); David Hume, *The Philosophical Works of David Hume (Treatise of Human Nature Part 2, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion)*, vol. 2, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Adam Black and William Tait, 1826), <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1482>>; William James, *The Principles of Psychology:: In Two Volumes. Vol. 1: [...]*, Dover-Books on Biology, Psychology and Medicine (New York: Dover, 1995).

path to bridging the divine between theorists of religion who focus exclusively on body or exclusively on the mind as the driver of religious formation and maintenance.

Even though Luhrmann focuses on the “learning” and intellectual struggle component of religious formation while Mahmood focuses on bodily practice, through their discussions of emotion they each acknowledge the ways that the mind and the body are both implicated in the process of belief formation and development. For Luhrmann, this is found in her description of six “emotional practices” performed by members of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship congregation she studies.³⁷¹ This system of emotions allows believers to “practice the experience of feeling loved by God” until, through imitation they actually feel loved.³⁷² Similarly, Mahmood discusses the Muslim practice of *ṣalāt* (ritual prayer), which she was told by one of her ethnographic subjects is ideally performed with “all the feelings, concentration, and tenderness of the heart appropriate to the state of being in the presence of God.”³⁷³

For the evangelicals Luhrmann is observing, the “emotional practices” are performed to develop the feeling of being loved by God, while for the Muslims Mahmood observes, “these women pursued the process of honing and nurturing the desire to pray until that desire became part of their condition of being.”³⁷⁴ In both cases, a particular emotion (feeling loved, for Luhrmann and desiring prayer, for Mahmood) is seen as the goal, and both bodily and intellectual practices are used to reach those goals by shifting the believers’ sense of self or “condition of being.”³⁷⁵

³⁷¹ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 109–131. Luhrmann calls the six practices: 1) “crying in the presence of God,” 2) “seeing from God’s perspective,” 3) “practicing love, peace, and joy,” 4) “God the therapist,” 5) “reworking God the Father,” and 6) “emotional cascades.”

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 110–111.

³⁷³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 123.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

In a similar way to Ahmed's work of overcoming the body-mind split in her work on emotion, I suggest that the formation of religious belief is not strictly a material process that springs from the body, but that it develops from both the body and the intellectual pursuit of faith at the same time. Evolutionary psychology makes the argument that humans are preprogrammed to detect a presence in the room when none is there. However, as Luhmann points, evolution isn't the whole story.

In her study, many 21st century believers began as doubters or struggle with doubt across years of spiritual practice. Thus, Luhmann's work begins with a challenge to the body-based explanation of religion. The subsequent chapters of her ethnography describe how belief comes about through a learning process, not only through a hardwired, evolutionarily-beneficial impulse. In other words, she describes how hearing from God is something evangelicals learn to do. However, as my reading of Warren and Young in Chapter 5 shows, describing belief—even this specific kind of belief-practice—as beginning through a “learning process” is not quite accurate. I prefer the language of “training,” “socializing,” or “norming,” rather than Luhmann's “learning,” because the term, “learning” implies that knowledge or awareness of a phenomenon is increased through information or observation, when the process she describes often looks less like an intellectual endeavor than a cognitive behavioral restructuring or a mental habituation. The effects of this process changes the believing subject in terms of the epistemological techniques she employs in everyday life, not only in church or when she is praying or meditating.

What do we see when affect and emotion are factored into the process of training to believe? First, coming to believe is both a cognitive and a bodily process at the same time, demonstrated by the centrality of emotions in this process. Second, this coming to believe bears the markers of

socialization, not education, as Luhrmann's framing would have us believe. Third, this transformation of perceptual and interpretive techniques has consequences for the formation and maintenance of both the believing subject and the political subject.

In order to draw these conclusions, it is important to understand the role perception plays in Luhrmann's explanation. If "hearing God," or "seeing God," or "feeling God" are sensible or perceptual experiences that evangelicals can be trained to have, it implies that sensory experiences—sight, touch, hearing—are more closely linked to cognitive processes than is usually assumed. That is to say, the Christian experience is not strictly bodily and it is not strictly intellectual, but emotional. By emotional, I do not mean that it is strictly irrational or non-intellectual, I mean merely that it is an experience of living that encompasses both the bodily and cognitive realms simultaneously—the realm of feelings is strongly connected to both cognitive elements of human experience like memory and observation and to bodily elements like pain and pleasure.

To help make the leap from Mahmood to Luhrmann, I follow Sluhovsky's critique of the body based theory of belief. Sluhovsky argues that jettisoning cognitive belief from the formation of religiosity—in favor of practice and ritual—is highly problematic, as it risks dismantling the concept of belief completely. In describing the theoretical work of anthropologists like Asad, Keane, and Mahmood, Sluhovsky argues:

In the rush to prioritize embodied experiences over prescribed theologies, and practice over belief, and in the parallel (and closely related) move to 'provincialize Europe' and to move away from, or at least be aware and beware of using the Christian paradigm as a model for understanding religious phenomena in other contexts, some anthropologists, scholars of religion, and historians have been too quick to dismiss or diminish the notion of belief altogether.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁶ Sluhovsky, "Practices of Belief in Early Modern Catholicism.," 7.

While the move to provincialize Europe and bring bodily practices to the center of the study of religion are essential moves in the contemporary theorization of belief, I agree with Sluhovsky that attention to the body, practice, and post-colonial theoretical commitments need not come at the expense of the cognitive or intellectual elements of belief.

The cognitive and the intellectual are experiential too, and we risk obfuscating the very mechanisms of mind and body that accurately describe human experience and make it recognizable to students of the social sciences by trying to artificially divide human experience into separate cognitive and bodily spheres when no such separation exists. Instead, I argue—with Sluhovsky—that belief and practice are in a circular relationship. Sluhovsky describes how such a bodily-cognition might play out in religious belief. Drawing on his scholarship dealing with early modern European Catholic devotional practices, he suggests,

religion and belief involve mental, cognitive, emotive, perceptual, material, and performative processes at the very same time that they are conceptual and ideological, and they cannot be reduced to any one of these registers. They are always set within historical, cultural, and social parameters which, in turn, always generate and shape the bodily techniques and other exterior representations of these processes. These visualizations or actualizations include ritualized embodied and emotive practices, which, in their turn further condition and shape the mental and cognitive assumptions. It is this circularity between interiority and exteriority and among practices, linguistic statements, and mental and cognitive apprehensions that gives shape to both belief and practice. It is only by considering the interrelations among practice, imaginations, perceptions, emotions, cognition, sensory experiences, and, last but not least, individual agency, that we can account for the multi-faceted experience of acquiring self-awareness as a believer and of the process of fine-tuning oneself to recognize an interior essence (divine love) within the self. We are talking, then, about a complex state of comprehension that necessitated a process of learning.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 15–16. Sluhovsky cites: Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage, 2012); Arnaud Halloy and Vlad Naumescu, eds., *Learning Spirit Possession*, a special issue of *Ethnos* 77:2 (2012), especially the Introduction by Halloy and Naumescu, and Naumescu, "Learning the 'Science of Feelings': Religious Training in Eastern Christian Monasticism," 227-251. See also Naumescu, "The Case for Religious Transmission: Time and Transmission in the Anthropology of Christianity," *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 2 (2011): 54-71.

Sluhovsky rightly notes many of the varied “registers” that are involved in the experience of religious belief and the impossibility of condensing the experience of belief down to “any one of these registers.”³⁷⁸ He also takes care to touch on the historical, cultural, and social (to which I would add political) parameters that overdetermine the ways these experiences can appear at a given place and time. However, at the end of the passage he sides with Luhmann’s contention that belief is a learned, acquired skill that leads to the above-mentioned experience on many “registers.”

Even though he describes the cognitive and bodily drivers of religion as interrelated, occurring “at the very same time,” and explains how belief is a “multi-faceted experience,”³⁷⁹ he still comes down on the side of interiority. Thus, despite his gestures in the direction of a circular relationship between “interiority and exteriority,”³⁸⁰ as he calls mind and body, Sluhovsky ultimately agrees with Luhmann, on the side of the mind and a “process of learning”³⁸¹ as the source of religiosity.

I want to take Sluhovsky’s argument one step further by explaining how the circularity he describes operates, how learning belief and practicing belief might be conjoined, and in the process, argue that it is in fact not a circularity at all, but a singular system that is made accessible through our current conceptions of what emotions are and how emotions operate. While Sluhovsky does mention emotion in his theorization above, I want to expand upon his theorization of the role of emotion in religious belief using Ahmed’s theory developed in *Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 15.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 16.

How is it that reading a devotional text—a cognitive process—can inspire a rush of ecstasy or fear in the reader that works to rearrange those very cognitive processes? Ahmed’s political theorization of emotion claims that the physical sensations one experiences as emotions are at the same time cognitive, just as cognitive experiences are always already emotional and thus, physical. In other words, physical sensations share a mutually constitutive relationship with cognition. As Ahmed does in her analysis of texts, I understand physical and cognitive experiences as arising from one another in the texts of the contemporary evangelical movement. I read these experiences as neither purely physiological nor psychological states, but as “social and cultural practices.”³⁸² Thus, in building upon Sluhovsky’s critique of religion as bodily practice, I argue that the workings of emotion demonstrate an indissoluble circularity between habitus-practice and cognition in the formation of belief. In this emotional reading of belief, I maintain that if emotions are at the same time both cognitive and bodily processes, then they fit into the habitus model, while not eliminating the role of memories, histories, and associations—the cognitive components of belief—in the formation of religiosity. The formation of belief involves a cognitive process of learning, conjoined to the physical “symptoms” often associated with emotion—shrinking from fear, shaking with rage, and crying for joy, which are all common in evangelical conversions.

As theories of belief have trended towards the bodily (habitus-practice) in recent years, theories of emotion have tended towards the cognitive. Ahmed helpfully identifies the stakes of any theory that chooses the body over the mind and vice versa. As Ahmed explains, the basic shift towards cognitive theories of emotion come, “at the expense of bodily sensations. Or when

³⁸² Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2004, 9.

emotions are theorized as being about cognition as well as sensation, then these still tend to be presented as different aspects of emotion.”³⁸³ Not only does a shift towards one come at the expense of the other, but such theorizations erase the possibility that cognitive and bodily processes are one and the same. Ahmed explains that the separation of mind and body in Western philosophy is linked to colonialist and misogynistic discourses where emotion is seen as feminine and “uncivilized.”³⁸⁴ In resistance to these harmful narratives of emotion, Ahmed rereads Descartes’ “The Passion of the Soul” from his *Philosophical Writings*,³⁸⁵ to “open up a gap in the determination of feeling.”³⁸⁶

Descartes offers a critique of the idea that objects have properties, suggesting that we don’t have feelings for objects because of the nature of the objects. Feelings instead take the ‘shape’ of the contact we have with the objects. As he argues, we do not love and hate because objects are good or bad, but rather because they seem ‘beneficial’ or ‘harmful’ (Descartes 1985: 350). Whether I perceive something as beneficial or harmful clearly depends upon how I am affected by something. This dependence opens up a gap in the determination of feeling: *whether something is beneficial or harmful involves thought and evaluation, at the same time that it is ‘felt’ by the body.*³⁸⁷

Ahmed’s theorization of emotion here has important implications for the emotional content of religious belief—which both Luhrmann’s work and my own. If emotion is “felt by the body” as well as “involv[ing] thought and evaluation,”³⁸⁸ then the emotional norms “taught” by evangelical devotional writers are an intellectual struggle as well as a bodily feeling. The process of training the perceptions, emotions, and interpretations to see, hear, and feel God is both a bodily and a cognitive process simultaneously.

³⁸³ Spelman 1989: 170 and Jaggar 1996: 170) in *ibid.*, 5.

³⁸⁴ “Emotions are associated with women, who are represented as ‘closer’ to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgment. We can see from this language that evolutionary thinking has been crucial to how emotions are understood: emotions get narrated as a sign of ‘our’ pre-history, and as a sign of how the primitive persists in the present. The Darwinian model of emotions suggests that emotions are not only ‘beneath’ but ‘behind’ the man/human, as a sign of an earlier and more primitive time.” (Ahmed, 2-3).

³⁸⁵ Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*.

³⁸⁶ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 5–6.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

This explanation of emotion also opens up space to understand why evolutionary psychology's explanation of the process is so appealing. Ahmed continues her theorization by claiming that, not only does the process of interpreting the world as beneficial or harmful involve the cognitive-sensations of each individual subject, but also narratives and patterns of behavior that were established long before that subject was making or having such evaluative-sensations:

The process of attributing an object as being or not being beneficial or harmful, which may become translated into good or bad, clearly involves reading and the contact we have with objects in a certain way. Whether something feels good or bad already involves a process of reading, in the very attribution of significance. Contact involves the subject, *as well as histories that come before the subject.*³⁸⁹

It is appealing and comforting to think of something like belief as a hardwired phenomenon, in part because it is. But belief isn't just an impulse, it is also learned, trained, and habituated. However, evolutionary impulse isn't the only way for the body or for history to be part of the picture. The body of a former believer may still be emotionally touched by the physical act of kneeling, the ear of that believer may still turn to the chords of a hymn, the eye may still provoke a shiver of the spine as it takes in a depiction of Jesus on the cross long after skepticism has taken over the mental faculties. But the reverse, as Luhmann shows, is true as well. An individual who never believed before may unlearn their skepticism through the devotional practices prescribed by contemporary evangelical devotional writers, a cognitive process that also elicits the physical sensations of God's presence.

Perhaps it is largely because the experiential version of God is so encouraged in evangelicalism that the description of God as "a presence" is so popular. Although the experience of God as a presence might be more emphasized by the current cohort of evangelicals than it was by thinkers of the Christian right in the recent past, the devotional significance of presence is not new. The etymological root of the word presence goes back to English Christian

³⁸⁹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2004, 6.

writers in the fourteenth century, who used it to refer to Jesus or God's presence even then.³⁹⁰ However, the belief and experience of God existing in the present place and time is once again a core belief of Christianity that is interpreted more literally by evangelicals and which is more crucial and central to their theology and devotional practices. Likewise, the belief in God's presence in the room is one that contemporary evangelical thinkers develop even more than their predecessors in the Christian right.

I argue that the emotional exercises found in such evangelical literatures connects the text with the body in a powerful and permanent—although infinitely malleable and plastic—mutual constitutivity. In this reading of emotional religiosity, I maintain that if emotions are at the same time both cognitive processes and physical, bodily processes—as Ahmed's account makes clear—then they can occupy the space Asad carves out for habitus-practice as a creator of belief, while not eliminating the role of memories, histories, worldviews, and associations—cognitive-intellectual belief—in the formation of religiosity. In other words, the formation of belief involves a cognitive process of learning.³⁹¹ that is conjoined to physical “symptoms” that are often associated with emotions – shrinking from fear, shaking with rage, weeping from joy. In the last twenty years, religious studies has been dominated by Talal Asad's theory that everyday practice and ritual, or “habitus,” precede religious belief. While this project engages this view, I depart from it by emphasizing ontology formation and the process of “learning to believe.”³⁹² In other words, I agree with Luhmann that there is a cognitive dimension of habitus. In this sense, my project also follows Sluhovsky's critique that jettisoning cognition – in favor of

³⁹⁰ Use of the word presence by those authors indicates that this is a way of describing God that predates Protestantism. Certainly, we know that Catholic writers of the early modern period that wrote in parallel with the Protestant Reformation were heavily engaged with the concept of divine presence. For further detail, see Sluhovsky, “Practices of Belief in Early Modern Catholicism.”

³⁹¹ Luhmann, *When God Talks Back*.

³⁹² *Ibid.*

bodily practice and ritual – ignores the role of memories, histories, and associations in the formation of belief. Sluhovsky argues that the cognitive and physical dimensions of religious practice are in a circular relationship. In other words, neither the cognitive nor the bodily is primary; both elements are necessary and causal in the formation of belief. However, Sluhovsky does not explain how this circularity operates. In what way are one’s knowledge of God and one’s actions towards God mutually reinforcing phenomena? In this study, I see emotion as the link between these phenomena. While Sluhovsky does discuss emotion in his theorization of belief, he does not place the explanatory emphasis on a political reading of emotion, as I do. How is it that reading a devotional text – presumed to be a primarily cognitive process – can inspire a rush of ecstasy or fear in the reader that works to rearrange the cognitive processes from which they arose? Sara Ahmed’s political theorization of emotion claims that the physical sensations one experiences as emotions are at the same time cognitive, just as cognitive experiences are always already emotional and thus, physical. In other words, physical sensations share a mutually constitutive relationship with cognition. As Ahmed does for her texts, I understand physical and cognitive experiences as arising from one another in the texts of the contemporary evangelical movement. I read these experiences as neither physiological nor psychological states, but as “social and cultural practices”³⁹³ Thus, in building upon Sluhovsky’s critique of Asad, I argue that the workings of emotion demonstrate an indissoluble circularity between habitus-practice and cognition in the formation of belief. In this emotional reading of belief, I maintain that if emotions are at the same time both cognitive and bodily processes, then they fit into Asad’s habitus model, while not eliminating the role of memories, histories, and associations—the cognitive components of belief—in the formation of religiosity. Ultimately,

³⁹³ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2004, 9.

the formation of belief involves a cognitive process of learning,³⁹⁴ conjoined to the physical “symptoms” often associated with emotion—shrinking from fear, shaking with rage, and crying for joy, which are all common in evangelical conversions.

³⁹⁴ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*.

Chapter 7: Essence versus Action

In the Preface to the 2012 edition of *The Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood writes that her study's "primary preoccupation has less to do with the meaning of practices than with the work they perform in the making of subjects, in creating life worlds, attachments, and embodied capacities."³⁹⁵ Following Mahmood, this chapter examines evangelical being—through the simultaneously competing and complementary concepts of essence and action that are developed by contemporary evangelical writers in the devotional practices they prescribe for their readers. In Part I we became familiar with the way devotional texts work through narratives of evangelical time to draw readers closer to their own eternal essence, and in Chapter 5 we discovered the ways that devotional texts work through emotion to create an interior essence of divine love.³⁹⁶ However, in this chapter we discover that the turn towards spiritual and ontological concerns in the evangelical revival retains traces of the Christian right's concern with right action alongside divine essence.

The discussion of evangelical being is structured by the tensions between essence and action found in the texts in many forms—sometimes as predestination versus free will, sometimes as created perfection versus lived imperfection. This existential balancing act struggles between an identity of divinely authored perfection and the recognition of myriad human imperfections. This dualism yields surprising results for evangelical being, as the writers intersperse descriptions of their readers as pure and powerful alongside celebrations of their human weakness.

In order to illuminate a concept of evangelical being in terms of action, doing, and bodily experience—in Mahmood's words, "the making of subjects, creating [of] life worlds,

³⁹⁵ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, x–xi.

³⁹⁶ Sluhovskiy, "Practices of Belief in Early Modern Catholicism.," 15–16.

attachments, and embodied capacities”—it is necessary to look to prescriptive evangelical rhetoric. By sifting through discursive and rhetorical patterns that describe who an evangelical should be, what her relationship to God ought to be, and what right actions follow from that essence and that relationship, this chapter will locate the aspects of evangelical being that are emphasized by the contemporary revival.

In the analysis of evangelical being we find a fundamental intertwining of action and essence. This mutual formation of essence versus action of the self in the world represents a surprising break from the traditional western notion going back to Plato that essence precedes existence. While evangelicalism is not an existentialist world view of the type represented by the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, or Simone de Beauvoir, there is an interesting and surprising play between the evangelical conceptions of action and essence, where devotional writers are ambivalent about whether existence proceeds essence, or vice versa. Furthermore, existential questions do seem to trouble some in the movement, as seen in the subtitle of Rick Warren’s best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For*. In other words, evangelical being is more complicated than the orthodox, fundamentalist, conservative, and traditionalist labels it is usually described by, and these are complications worth understanding.

In a worldview where things “happen for a reason” and individuals are “created for a purpose,” essence and action are intertwining concepts leading towards a specifically Christian telos. Essence is an important topic for the discussion of evangelicalism as political thought because essential beliefs about human perfection or imperfection, sin or innocence, strength or weakness in turn have a lot to say about human action: what actions humans are capable of, what

they must rely on God for, what they can do outside of God's plan, as well as what actions they should take, given their own essence and capacities and those of God.

Evangelical being is shot through with a number of tensions that appear not only as disagreement between different authors across the evangelical discourse, but also as contradictions within single devotional texts. Perhaps the most common tension within evangelical essence is between perfection and imperfection; evangelical selfhood is thus produced in a space alive with the Christian narrative of perfect creation, the inevitability of imperfection (allusions to the fall), and the various routes to undo that imperfection—all found in Christian devotional practices. The tensions between perfection and imperfection reflect the significance of temporality and interpretation in evangelicalism, which are themselves contested concepts.

(Im)Perfection:

To observe this argument in operation, we turn first to the tension between evangelical narratives of perfection and imperfection. On the one hand, evangelical writers foster an identity of flawlessness among their readership—to comfort and reassure the reader of her divine birthright. This narrative works to build self-esteem, which strengthens not only the individual, but also her capacity as a member of the movement. This identity of perfection is carefully described as transcending any sense of personal sin or weakness the reader may have already developed—a faultless state based on the individual's essence as God's creation, not on her actions in this world. Rob Bell employs this essence-based conception of selfhood in his interpretation of Paul's letter to the Colossians:

God's view of me is Christ. And Christ is perfect. This is why Paul say[s], 'Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved.' [Colossians 3:12] Not 'going to be holy

someday.’ Not ‘wouldn’t it be nice if you were holy, but instead you’re a mess.’ But ‘holy.’ Holy means pure, without blemish, unstained. In these passages we’re being told *who we are*, now. The issue then isn’t my beating myself up over all of the things I am not doing or the things I am doing poorly; the issue is my learning who this person is who God keeps insisting I already am. There is this person who we already are in God’s eyes. And we are learning to live like it is true. This is an issue of identity. It is letting what God says about us shape what we believe about ourselves. This is why shame has no place whatsoever in the Christian experience. It is simply against all that Jesus is for. No list of what is being held against us. No record of wrongs. It has simply been done away with. It is no longer an issue. Bringing it up is pointless. Beating myself up is pointless. Beating others up about who and what they are not is going the wrong direction. It is working against the purposes of God. God is not interested in shaming people; God wants people to see who they really are.³⁹⁷

Bell acknowledges that a bit of magical, or at least imaginative, thinking is required to claim perfection for his readers, who come to evangelicalism looking for reassurance that all the ways they feel broken are healable and redeemable. Just as the narrative of evangelical time emphasizes the need to look through God’s eyes, to see from the perspective of eternity, the center of Bell’s argument here is aligning God’s perspective with the believer’s perspective, even if it requires a bit of make-believe at first. “There is this person who we already are in God’s eyes. And we are learning to live like it is true”³⁹⁸—the reader is learning to live as if God’s version of her were true. The slippage here between the present tense of “this person we already are” and the subjunctive “to live like it is true,”³⁹⁹ or “as if it were true” speaks to the tensions in the evangelical sense of self.

In order to build that selfhood, Bell’s reader is encouraged to transcend the assumption of a fall from grace, jumping either backwards to creation or forwards to reconciliation—to be “unstained *now*.”⁴⁰⁰ Employing the wrinkles and retroactivity of evangelical time enables Bell to make his next rhetorical move—to claim that human imperfection is merely a misunderstanding

³⁹⁷ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 141–142, original emphasis.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

or misinterpretation of the divine message found in the bible. Instead of the fall, Bell emphasizes the narrative of the chosen people that cannot see their own chosenness—a perfect divine creation who cannot see their own perfection. Being God’s perfect creation now, requires a game of make-believe, until pretending becomes being.⁴⁰¹ In that way, the perfection is found in human essence, but the slippage allows for skeptical readers to walk an action-based selfhood (as opposed to essence-based) until they believe it.

Sarah Young’s account of the perfection of her reader is similar, although it operates on a slightly different temporal logic. She writes, “No power can deny you your inheritance in heaven. I want you to realize how utterly secure you are! Knowing that your future is absolutely assured can free you to live abundantly today. It requires a deep level of trust, based on the knowledge that My way is perfect.”⁴⁰² For Young, the promise of perfection in the future—presumably in heaven—is liberating for the evangelical in daily life. However, her claim that God’s “way is perfect,” relies on a similar epistemological claim as Bell’s. Biblical knowledge of the human essence of perfection impacts the way Christians act in their daily lives. The tension between essential perfection and the flaws of action is bridged through temporal and epistemological explanations that are key to the appeal of evangelicalism for the individual and the power of the movement as a whole.

However, beyond these accounts of perfection, there are also diverse accounts of human imperfection. In many cases, these accounts celebrate human flaws. One example is found on the “About” page of the online SheLoves Magazine, where Sarah Bessey is a contributor: “What if we could be a welcoming place where our individual stories—not yet divinely perfect—are

⁴⁰¹ For more on how evangelical belief involves cognitive shifts through pretending, see Luhrmann 72-100.

⁴⁰² Young, *Jesus Calling*, 98.

honored and respected?”⁴⁰³ Here, the most common Christian narrative of future perfection is invoked. Being holy or perfect now—as opposed to in the past or in the future—completely changes the identity of evangelicals and their range of actions. For example, if humans are presently imperfect, but expected to actively engage in working towards divinely perfection, a theoretical mediation is required to release the tension and adjoin these two realities. Warren’s celebration of human weakness – which shows how weakness actually helps you serve God—provides just such a tension mediation that is most effective in producing compelling religious rhetoric:

God loves to use weak people. Everyone has weaknesses. In fact, you have a *bundle of* flaws and imperfections: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. You may also have uncontrollable circumstances that weaken you, such as financial or relational limitations. The more important issue is what you do with these. Usually we deny our weaknesses, defend them, excuse them, hide them, and resent them. This prevents God from using them the way he desires. God has a different perspective on your weaknesses. He says, ‘*My thoughts and my ways are higher than yours,*’ [Isaiah 55:8-9] so he often acts in ways that are the exact opposite of what we expect. We think that God only wants to use our strengths, but he also wants to use our weaknesses for his glory. The Bible says, ‘*God purposely chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful.*’ Your weaknesses are not an accident. God deliberately allowed them in your life for the purpose of demonstrating his power through you.⁴⁰⁴

The oft-cited biblical claim that “divine ways are higher than human ways”⁴⁰⁵ or that “God works in mysterious ways”⁴⁰⁶ is perhaps the ultimate mediation for all questioning believers of the evangelical narrative; any tension in the narrative of perfect creation and imperfect existence can be explained away by the inferior understanding of humans. In the case of human weakness serving as a boon to divine expression, Warren explains that God is using human flaws for purposes the reader cannot understand. This celebration of weakness can serve as a call to the

⁴⁰³ McVicker, “About Page: Welcome, from My Big, Global Mama Heart.”

⁴⁰⁴ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 174, original emphasis.

⁴⁰⁵ Isaiah 55:8.

⁴⁰⁶ The origin of this phrase is a line from a hymn by William Cowper: “God moves in a mysterious way.” “Hymn: Light Shining Out of Darkness,” 1773.

movement for any reader who feels outcast, abnormal, or otherwise imperfect—building the power of the movement by ennobling those that secular society marks as weak.

Warren's *Purpose Driven Life* followed on the heels of his first book, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission*.⁴⁰⁷ As *Purpose Driven Church* recommends strategies for church growth, *Purpose Driven Life* in many ways serves as a companion volume that directs the reader to become more active both inside and outside of the church community through service, leadership, and evangelism. While *Purpose Driven Life* is written as a devotional, and many aspects of the book do focus on individual spiritual growth, Warren's connection between individual and church growth is clear. The arc of the book demonstrates his view that individual growth must eventually mature into an active life of church service, leadership, evangelism, and missionary work. While Warren's writing includes some of the most obvious examples of this kind of connection between individual growth and church growth and activism, it is representative of a theme that flows within all devotional texts.

However, before Warren can convince his readers of the conclusion of activism, he must assure them that their weaknesses are not only acceptable, but also planned and valued by God. Instead of building people's confidence, Warren is building an identity of strength around his reader's inadequacies. This strategy promises results no matter the emotional state of the reader. If their self-esteem grows, that strength can be used, if it remains low, that perceived weakness can be deployed just as readily. To reinforce the acceptability of weakness, Warren establishes a very precise definition that differentiates weakness from sin.

A weakness, or 'thorn' as Paul called it, is not a sin or a vice or a character defect that you can change, such as overeating or impatience. A weakness is any limitation that you

⁴⁰⁷ Richard Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub, 1995).

inherited or have no power to change. It may be a *physical* limitation, like a handicap, a chronic illness, naturally low energy, or a disability. It may be an *emotional* limitation, such as a trauma scar, a hurtful memory, a personality quirk, or a hereditary disposition. Or it may be a *talent* or *intellectual* limitation. We're not all super bright or talented.⁴⁰⁸

Once again, while Warren's definition may seem confusing to many secular readers, it cleverly allows room to maintain evangelical narratives warning against sinful behavior, while also welcoming those who see themselves as defective, victimized, weak, or outcast and rallying them to action, initially for themselves, and later for the church. Perhaps Warren's strongest call to his army of "outcasts" is when he lists the defects of a long line of biblical protagonists:

If you're not involved in any service or ministry, what excuse have you been using? Abraham was old, Jacob was insecure, Leah was unattractive, Joseph was abused, Moses stuttered, Gideon was poor, Samson was codependent, Rahab was immoral, David had an affair and all kinds of family problems, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was reluctant, Naomi was a widow, John the Baptist was eccentric to say the least, Peter was impulsive and hot-tempered, Martha worried a lot, the Samaritan woman had several failed marriages, Zacchaeus was unpopular, Thomas had doubts, Paul had poor health, and Timothy was timid. That is quite a variety of misfits, but God used each of them in his service. He will use you, too, if you stop making excuses.⁴⁰⁹

Perhaps the most interesting element of this list is the cases that seem quite obviously sinful, according to historic evangelical definitions: Rahab's "immorality"—which refers to her profession as a sex worker—and David's extramarital affair with Bathsheba, whom he later married. These cases are especially curious, given the significance placed on sexual deviance particularly in the evangelical discourse of the last 30 years. But Warren has a response for that too: sin can be part of the plan.

Most amazing [sic], God decided how you would be born. Regardless of the circumstances of your birth or who your parents are, God had a plan in creating you. It doesn't matter whether your parents were good, bad, or indifferent. God knew that those two individuals possessed exactly the right genetic makeup to create the custom "you" he had in mind. They had the DNA God wanted to make you. While there are illegitimate parents, there are no illegitimate children. Many children are unplanned by their parents,

⁴⁰⁸ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 174, original emphasis.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

but they are not unplanned by God. God's purpose took into account human error, and even sin. God never does anything accidentally, and he never makes mistakes.⁴¹⁰

While the secondary function of this quote may be to reinforce evangelicals' work against abortion rights, its main purpose in the context of Warren's argument is to demonstrate a purpose for the existence of sin, relieving (or redirecting) a central tension in the Christian narrative.

While perfection (and the counter-narrative of imperfection) is a key theme for the development of the evangelical self, other tensions are also at play in that development. When these tensions are mediated, they are most often redirected. Warren's discussion of sin above is one example of redirecting the discourse. Another example is the tension between universal salvation and salvation of the chosen—those on the inside of the movement and those on the outside, the chosen versus the forsaken, the counterculture versus the culture—a topic that is troubling to many contemporary Christians' sense of political correctness and inclusiveness. (The failed inclusion of Warren's inaugural invocation from the dissertation's introduction is another example of that discomfort.) Bell's writing skirts this issue in his discussion of the condition of the early Christians:

Often communities of believers in the New Testament are identified as 'saints.' The word saints is a translation of the Greek word *hagios*, which means 'holy or set apart ones.' Those who are 'in Christ.' Not because of what they have done, but because of what God has done. There is nothing we can do, and there is nothing we ever could have done, to earn God's favor. We already have it.⁴¹¹

While Bell's narrative is aimed at reassuring his reader that they are already chosen by God, regardless of action, there is also a certain existential terror implied. If there are, "holy or set apart ones," it implies that there are unholy ones, individuals who are not "in Christ," and never will be, because there is nothing they can do to earn God's favor if they don't already have it—the terrifying flip side of predestination. On a related note, if sin can be part of the plan to create

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁴¹¹ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 144.

Warren's righteous human beings, what he calls "the custom 'you' [God] had in mind,"⁴¹² it begs the question if the sinful parents are just considered collateral damage? Just as the other tensions examined so far serve a function in the creation of individual believers and the strengthening of the movement, so too do these darker tensions. The fear of being unchosen, of being the cast aside sinful parents who produced a holy child works to keep the reader hard at spiritual work to prove their own chosenness—a labor that echoes Max Weber's Protestant work ethic.⁴¹³ However, the topics of sin and the forsaken are largely downplayed in contemporary devotional literature, favoring instead the narrative of the outcast with a "thorn."⁴¹⁴

However, the narrative of a misfit finding a purpose is not limited to Warren's interest in spiritual growth leading to church growth, it also appears in Young's text where no real trace of interest in building the movement comes through directly, despite the fact that she serves as a missionary among Japanese immigrants in Australia. Young describes how God can serve as a friend and confidant when the reader feels misunderstood. She writes, "When no one else seems to understand you, simply draw closer to Me. Rejoice in the One who understands you completely and loves you perfectly."⁴¹⁵ However, Young goes further. Not only does she nurture her reader's sense of being an outcast who is nonetheless loved by God, but she even finds perfection in disease and disability. In her account, illness provides opportunities to shut out the outside world and be close to God, doing his work.⁴¹⁶

Thank me for the conditions [disease] that are requiring you to be still. Do not spoil these quiet hours by wishing them away, waiting impatiently to be active again. Some of the greatest works in My kingdom have been done from sick beds and prison cells. Instead of resenting the limitations of a weakened body, search for My way in the midst of these very circumstances. Limitations can be liberating when your strongest desire is living

⁴¹² Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 20.

⁴¹³ Gerth, Mills, and Weber, *From Max Weber*, 302–322.

⁴¹⁴ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 174.

⁴¹⁵ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 105.

⁴¹⁶ For more on the evangelical discourse on disease and disability, see page 167–168.

close to Me. Consider it all joy whenever you are enveloped in various trials. These are gifts from Me, reminding you to rely on Me alone.⁴¹⁷

As Warren did with the concept of the “thorn,”⁴¹⁸ and the enhanced ability to serve God in weakness, Young discusses how “limitations [are] liberating”⁴¹⁹ when it comes to being close to God. Once the evangelical subject is produced (or transformed, as in the case of an adult convert) in line with these conceptions of perfection within imperfection, she dons a new essence altogether, starkly separated from the human that stood in her place before, retroactively “perfected” despite any sins or downfalls that may have disturbed her past. Similarly, in Bell’s explanation of what conversion does to the subject, he writes: “If we are having this new kind of transforming experience with Christ in which we are taking on a new identity, we are literally now a ‘new creation’ [2 Corinthians 5:17].”⁴²⁰ So powerful is the identity shift of the transformed selfhood that Bell is correct in describing the subject as “literally” someone new.

Conversion, that transformation of being and becoming evangelical, shifts the reader’s identity, performing work on what Mahmood calls “the making of subjects, in creating life worlds, attachments, and embodied capacities.”⁴²¹ The next section will discuss how “doing evangelicalism” plays a role in the production of these categories as well.

“Doers of the Word”: Evangelical Action⁴²²

In the evangelical discourse—as well as the scholarly and media discourse about evangelicals—the terms “evangelical” and “Christian” are not only used as a nouns, but also as adjectives. In this sense, “evangelical” or “Christian” is used as a descriptor of bookstores, media

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 74, 95.

⁴¹⁸ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 174.

⁴¹⁹ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 95.

⁴²⁰ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 140.

⁴²¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, x–xi.

⁴²² Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 195.

outlets, schools, and every other cultural institution and object imaginable. A persona can act evangelical or not, live a Christian lifestyle or not, and most of those ways of being involve doings: buying Christian books, reading evangelical newspapers, or sending children to a Christian school.

As I argue in the beginning of this chapter, the evangelical identity today is still very much wrapped up in right action, even as identifying right action gets more difficult for evangelicals living in a shifting movement where devotional texts are less explicit than they were under the Christian right. In the remainder of this chapter, I highlight what instructions devotional texts give in terms of being “doers of the Word.”⁴²³ Warren’s devotional ministry is perhaps the most action-oriented of the those included in this study, as he instructs his readers to develop an active, service, and mission-based Christian identity, founded on an explicitly stated purpose:

Living on purpose is the only way to really live. Everything else is just existing. Most people struggle with three basic issues in life. The first is identity: ‘Who am I?’ The second is importance: ‘Do I matter?’ The third is impact: ‘What is my place in life?’ The answers to all three questions are found in God’s five purposes for you.⁴²⁴

From Warren’s perspective, Christianity is an action-based – not a contemplative or emotional – religion. Living without actively acting Christian is mere existence. The root of human suffering (for Warren found in questions of identity, meaning, and significance) is resolved when an individual chooses a life of Christian action. As a first step, Warren defines “God’s five purposes” for human life as “bringing glory to God”⁴²⁵ by:

1. worshipping him
2. loving other believers
3. becoming like Christ
4. serving others with your gifts

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 199.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 62.

5. telling others about him⁴²⁶

These “five purposes,” (elsewhere summarized as: worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship, and discipleship)⁴²⁷ and his fuller articulation of them across the text, form the backbone of *Purpose Driven Life*. However, it is his account of how they should be applied that is the most telling.

In the penultimate chapter of *Purpose Driven Life*, titled “Balancing Your Life,” Warren emphasizes how the content of Christianity or what it means to be a good evangelical, is not found interpretation, divine comfort, or even attending church. In Warren’s telling, Christianity is a religion of directed action.⁴²⁸ As a guide for how to use the book, he writes, “Discuss the implications and the applications of each chapter. Ask ‘So what?’ and ‘What now?’ ‘What does this mean for me, my family, and our church?’ ‘What am I going to do about it?’ Paul said, ‘Put into practice what you learned.’”⁴²⁹ In other words, while Warren may leave the specific action items open to the interpretation of the reader, he is making it clear that Christianity is meant to be applied, acted, and accomplished—not merely meditated on.

Warren and Young’s focus is on what they might call Biblical action (“biblical” is another term, along with “evangelical” and “Christian” that is often used as an adjective to describe things or actions that comply with the evangelical belief system). Young’s book zeros in on everyday practical advice for what her readers should think, feel, and act on a daily basis, including what routines they should develop and how they should prioritize their time. Although Warren takes a wider view than Young’s day-to-day focus, prioritizing the lifelong goals of the

⁴²⁶ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 62–64.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 194–195.

⁴²⁸ This is the closest any of the devotional authors come to matching Christian Smith’s definition of the movement as, “an activist faith that tries to influence the surrounding world,” Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 242.

⁴²⁹ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 195.

reader, he also talks about “action steps.”⁴³⁰ For Warren, these action steps are the natural extension of Bible study and reflection:

The best way to become a ‘doer of the Word’ is to always write out an action step as a result of your reading or studying or reflecting on God's Word [the Bible]. Develop the habit of writing down exactly what you intend to do. This action step should be *personal* (involving *you*), *practical* (something you can *do*), and *provable* (with a *deadline* to do it). Every application will involve either your relationship to God, your relationship to others, or your personal character.⁴³¹

Warren couldn't be clearer on his hope that his readers will act on what they read, but his practical and provable approach is not consistent across contemporary devotional writing. For example, Bell's prescribed devotional techniques are in sharp contrast to Warren's. He is less focused on action than hermeneutics and the spiritual transformations that occur through the lifelong pursuit of Jesus as a source for truth, but not necessarily action. Bell also sees the Bible as an historical document in addition to timeless truth. In this way, he pivots away from Warren and Young who are focused on the timelessness and unchangeability of biblical Truth and on how the biblical narrative itself incites transformation, redemption, and reformation.

However, in exploring accounts of evangelical action, there are some common themes. In all of the accounts, there is the tension between essence and action—or rather a question about which one is primary when the reader is making normative evaluations in evangelicalism. The tension is highlighted in various slippages about whether the action makes the man or if the reader's spiritual essence of perfection trumps any behavioral issues. Warren's writing slides back and forth on this issue. Sometimes an individual's actions serve as proof of a good essence, while at other times, what actions she takes or doesn't take don't matter, because her essence

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 124.

⁴³¹ Ibid., original emphasis.

(created perfection predestined for salvation) is already guaranteed. In his discussion of his reader's daily practices Warren writes:

Your character is the sum total of your habits. You can't claim to be kind unless you are *habitually* kind – you show kindness without even thinking about it. You can't claim to have integrity unless it is your *habit* to always be honest. A husband who is faithful to his wife *most* of the time is not faithful at all! Your habits define your character.⁴³²

This quote takes an Aristotelian approach to the importance of action, where an individual is only a kind person if she is kind as a rule and doesn't have to think about it or make an effort to act that way. In this sense, there is a primacy of essence wrapped up in Warren's primacy of action: your character is the sum total of your habits, which Warren describes as those things that you do naturally.

The presence of natural laws and natural essence in the evangelical worldview (and the tensions therein) can be traced back to pre-Protestant Christian thinkers like Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, while the tension in human nature between action and essence can be traced back to the biblical story of the fall in Genesis and the interpretation of that story as a narrative explanation for the split human nature. Augustine writes about the creation of Adam and Eve's divine nature, followed by the fall, which fundamentally altered that nature:

That the whole human race has been condemned in its first origin, this life itself bears witness by the host of cruel ills with which it is filled. Is not this proved by the profound and dreadful ignorance which produces all the errors that enfold the children of Adam, and from which no man can be delivered without toil, pain, and fear? Is it not proved by his love of so many vain and hurtful things? But because God does not wholly desert those whom He condemns, nor shuts up in his anger his tender mercies, the human race is restrained by law and instruction, which keep guard against the ignorance that besets us and oppose the assaults of vice, but are themselves full of labor and sorrow.⁴³³

While it is clear from Augustine's text that the double nature of humans—the tension I describe here—is certainly not original to 21st century evangelicalism, it is clear that 21st century

⁴³² Ibid, 143, original emphasis.

⁴³³ Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, R.W. Dyson, ed. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Volume II, chapter 22.

evangelicalism is a moment of rhetorical gentleness compared to Augustine’s description of the “condemned” life of humans filled with a “host of cruel ills,” “errors,” “profound and dreadful ignorance,” and “toil, pain, and fear.”⁴³⁴

In the realm of “doing” and action, tension also manifests itself in the distinction between Christian service and other “less Christian” actions that may be necessary, such as laboring for an income. In a related discussion of God’s work versus earthly careers in Warren, the tension between essence and existence reemerges, and he is suddenly much less interested in action, per se: “What will be the character of my life? This is the question of discipleship. What kind of person will you be? *God is far more interested in what you are than what you do.* Remember, you will take your character into eternity, but not your career.”⁴³⁵ In this sense, Warren relies on a strict division between the public sphere of labor and the private sphere of religion—and places most activities in the public sphere outside of the realm of “Christ’s work.” This is significant because action in the early 21st century is often rendered synonymous with labor. When meeting new people at a social gathering, good neoliberal citizens often begin by asking, “what do you do?” which means “what career do you labor in?” It is an interesting, if not pointed, betrayal of that ethos that Warren’s reader is allowed to separate her essence from her career.

In fact, most of Warren’s discussion of action refers to Christian service (e.g., church work, philanthropy, evangelizing), as opposed to career. These “Christian” actions define their practitioners’ essence. They are good Christians because of the Christian actions they take every day and their orientation towards Christian goals. Other actions are not necessarily wrong or sinful, but are just worthless, not to be included as part of your essence that can be taken with

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 200–201, original emphasis.

you into eternity.⁴³⁶ Warren subtly shifts the message of evangelicalism away from the Christian right's chastisements for sin and towards an invitation into a life of Christian purpose. The same types of behavior are encouraged, but the emphasis is on positive prescriptions, rather than negative proscriptions; on how to pursue a “purpose-driven life,” rather than on how to avoid a sin-driven one.

The conceptualization of essence versus action takes a slightly different tack in Bell's writing, where he emphasizes universal redemption and the choice to see the world through Christian eyes. In this spirit, Bell prioritizes essence over action:

So this reality, this forgiveness, this reconciliation, is true for everybody. Paul insisted that when Jesus died on the cross, he was reconciling ‘all things, in heaven and on earth, to God.’ [Colossians 1:20] *This reality then isn't something we make true about ourselves by doing something. It is already true.* Our choice is to live in this new reality or cling to a reality of our own making.⁴³⁷

Bell is clear that we are already chosen by God and already saved by Jesus no matter what our actions or religious associations, and yet he is also firm that being a Christian is important. For him, becoming Christian is embracing “reality.”⁴³⁸ However, for both Warren and Bell, beginning on the Christian journey, whether it is about a purpose for action or an understanding of our true essence, it begins with the choice made at the moment the believer converts or is born-again. In that moment, the individual is not only choosing (implying free will), but is also coming to a decision that was pre-planned by God (implying predestination)—yet another productive tension employed by the discourse.

Furthermore, all of the themes that touch on evangelical being in this chapter rely heavily on the narrative of conversion. Conversion is essential to the tensions of evangelical being, since

⁴³⁶ “All that is not eternal is eternally useless.” Clive Staples Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, 1st paperback ed (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) in Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 57.

⁴³⁷ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 146, emphasis added.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

conversion is the first choice, the first act of that new self who is acknowledging her true essence (whether that self is a recent convert or a believer raised in the faith who is coming into her own as a follower of Jesus). Conversion narratives, or narratives of being born again, highlight the action-essence dualism running through contemporary evangelicalism, because conversion is described as both a watershed choice or act, as well as living proof of God's plan. Once the choice is made, the plan clicks into place and other things are taken care of through divine provision. Since he already considered himself a Christian, Bell's own conversion story is less about choosing Christ or finding his true essence than it is about finding his purpose, in Warren's sense. However, the same tensions run through the account:

What I heard was, 'Teach this book, and I will take care of everything else.' In that moment, my entire life changed forever. It was like a rebirth. I had been so restless and rebellious and unsettled and unfocused, and I had all this energy and passion but nowhere to channel it. Now I had something I could do with my life. In that moment by the side of the lake, barefoot, with my tongue tied and my heart on fire, I found something I could give my life to. Or it found me. It wasn't planned. No angels were involved that I know of—just a young, restless soul discovering a purpose.⁴³⁹

In the ways I've documented in this chapter, this passage also slides between free will and predestination, as Bell describes finding something to do with his life "Or it found me..."⁴⁴⁰ The ellipsis here contains and acknowledges the tension. Here he recognizes, but does not attempt to rectify, the contradiction between acting and being acted upon. For evangelicals, that contradiction is part of the divine mystery—the not knowing that is comforting, the Lord "working in mysterious ways."⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁹ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 40–41.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁴¹ The origin of this phrase is a line from a hymn by William Cowper: "God moves in a mysterious way." "Hymn: Light Shining Out of Darkness."

Bell continues this rhetorical wavering when he writes, “It wasn’t planned. No angels were involved *that I know of*—just a young, restless soul discovering a purpose.”⁴⁴² While he maintains enough human agency to please skeptical readers, he also references the divine intervention that the believing reader expects. Because the believer and the skeptic are often one in the same person,⁴⁴³ this ambivalence necessitates the use of creative tensions in evangelical rhetoric.⁴⁴⁴

The choice to convert, be born again, or find a purpose is also to accept comfort and admit dependence. Of the choice to accept Christ, Young writes that, “The challenges you face are far too great for you to handle alone. You are keenly aware of your helplessness in the scheme of events you face. This awareness opens up a choice: to doggedly go it alone or to walk with Me in humble steps of dependence.”⁴⁴⁵ There is much to evangelicalism beyond purposive action and biblicalism. There is the comfort—and the responsibility—of being a friend to God; cast in evangelical narratives as a more important version of the comfort and responsibility that come with any human relationship. Warren explains that evangelicalism requires relinquishing other commitments, making every life act and choice in the light of God’s will, warning that,

half-hearted commitments to competing values lead to frustration and mediocrity. Others make a full commitment to worldly goals, such as becoming wealthy or famous, and end up disappointed and bitter. Every choice has eternal consequences, so you had better choose wisely. Peter warns, ‘Since everything around us is going to melt away, what holy, godly lives you should be living!’ [2 Peter 3:1].⁴⁴⁶

Warren’s explanation of committing one’s life to Jesus encapsulates many of the tensions pulsing through evangelicalism: the tension between worldly necessities (or even aspirations)

⁴⁴² Ibid., 41, original emphasis.

⁴⁴³ T. M. Luhrmann argues that “God remains real for modern doubters” through “faith, which is often the outcome of great intellectual struggle.” *When God Talks Back*, xii.

⁴⁴⁴ Another example of these tensions is that between evangelical eternity and evangelical retroactivity, as seen in Part I.

⁴⁴⁵ *Jesus Calling*, 95.

⁴⁴⁶ *The Purpose Driven Life*, 116.

and the demand and desire to accomplish a divine purpose; the tension between the present and eternity; the tension between choice and predestination; the tension between the material and spiritual. These are the tensions that keep the evangelical movement—and perhaps many or most religious traditions—thriving, able to adapt, and convince.

PART III:
EVANGELICAL PERSONHOOD

Chapter 8: Belief (Dis)embodied

Parts I and II of this dissertation discussed the dualisms found in evangelical time and evangelical being. Rather than a destructive force of narrative chaos, creating schisms in devotional narratives, we saw how the tension between eternity and retroactivity on the one hand, and between essence and action on the other hand proved to be a dynamic, creative, and productive force in evangelical devotional writing. What type of believing subject do these dualisms produce? How do contemporary evangelical thinkers describe themselves and their readers in terms their embodied selves? This chapter proposes a theory and practice of evangelical personhood in which identity is produced through a nexus of the disembodied themes found in the Beatitudes and the ethos of tolerance, equality, diversity, and multiculturalism present in current (neo)liberal and cosmopolitan worldviews.

The majority of the chapter details a range of interpretations and applications of the themes from the Beatitudes and Paul's letters deployed by today's devotional writers—concentrating my analysis of evangelical personhood on the axes of class, disease/disability, citizenship versus immigration, and global missionary work. Finally, Chapter 9 focuses on the dualisms and tensions discussed throughout the dissertation on the ways these dualisms connect evangelical devotional texts to evangelical political life. In these ways, the remaining chapters focus more directly on the possible connection between the evangelical politik and evangelical politics, between the narrative themes found in evangelical devotional texts and the policy positions taken by evangelicals.

In this chapter, another evangelical narrative tension between embodiment and disembodiment emerges. As devotional writers explain that the body is inconsequential because its features are planned by God and will vanish in the next life, they draw attention to, on the one

hand, their reader's desire for answers about the body's pains and hungers, and on the other hand their reader's desire for the liberation of disembodiment. The responses devotional authors supply to these desires are largely prescriptions to focus on the disembodied self. Even when devotional writers discuss the body more directly, it is usually being leveraged as an explanation of the suspended state (disembodiment and dislocation) that allows evangelicals to be born again or for the predestination narrative that leads to disembodiment in heaven.

In the early pages of *Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren writes: "God prescribed every single detail of your body. He deliberately chose your race, the color of your skin, your hair, and every other feature. He custom made your body just the way he wanted it."⁴⁴⁷ This reading of identity is quite a shift from the overtly bigoted language of the Christian right around the politics of personal identity—especially the bodies of women and LGBT people. However, this explanation of bodily identity works to de-center the political issues of bodily identity by claiming they are part of the larger divine plan, albeit in a quietist style: "Your race and nationality are no accident. God left no detail to chance. He planned it all for *his* purpose."⁴⁴⁸ The body-oriented reading of the devotional texts in this chapter emphasizes the contrast between the political thought of the Christian right (a definitive position on the body, especially relating to LGBT and reproductive rights) and the ambivalences of the contemporary revival (which uses vague promises of God's plan to discuss the body.)

How do evangelicals see themselves? What types of narratives do they identify with? One traditional New Testament theme that often echoes in evangelical texts—and is certainly present

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 20 original emphasis.

in 21st century devotional narratives—is found in the Beatitudes.⁴⁴⁹ Namely, Jesus’ teaching that the downtrodden are, and will be, exalted. Part of that teaching reads:

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.⁴⁵⁰

The Beatitudes focus on God’s favor falling on those who are societally less favored and treated less justly.⁴⁵¹ While these biblical passages need not be interpreted as references to issues of justice—or of injustice due to class, race, disability, sexuality, gender, and other identity markers—the logic that the downtrodden are, and will be, exalted is a common theme that devotional writers take advantage of. This Beatitudinal identity allows evangelicals to embrace their status as victims, in contrast (or perhaps cooperation with) other accounts that cast Christians in the role of policing the status of victimhood.⁴⁵²

In contemporary devotional texts, justice is often achieved, by God’s intending, in the disembodied afterlife. Due to the de-centering and de-politicizing of issues of justice I highlight above, this claim could easily be argued to be the most politically conservative message devotional writers deliver. These teachings—emphasizing divine care of, and favor for those

⁴⁴⁹ The Beatitudes are the eight blessings listed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5, followed by a commentary. An abbreviated version – of four of the blessings and four woes – is listed in the Sermon on the Plain, found in Luke 6.

⁴⁵⁰ Luke 6: 20-21, New International Version.

⁴⁵¹ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled... Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Matthew 5: 3-12 (NIV).

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets” Luke 6: 20-26 (NIV).

⁴⁵² E.g., Alyson Manda Cole, *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2007).

who have been treated unjustly by society—are regularly used to attend to the political issues of identity, even in a revival that has otherwise softened and turned left from the Christian right.

However, while the Beatitudes teach that downtrodden are exalted by receiving justice in the afterlife, the devotional authors also draw on other Gospel sources that suggest earthly justice and equality as well, drawing out yet another dualism in evangelical thought: whether evangelical life should prioritize an active or passive conception of justice. A popular instantiation of this idea—cited in many contemporary devotional sources—is found in Paul’s message to the Galatians that there is “neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁴⁵³ Rob Bell’s interpretation of the Pauline letter amounts to pronouncement of a societal and cultural revolution:

[The early Christians] made claims about the whole way society was structured [Paul] is calling the entire culture into question, insisting that through this risen-from-the-dead Jesus, the whole world is being reorganized. And in this new reality, every person is equal. Everybody. Paul is the first person in the history of world literature to argue that all human beings are equal.⁴⁵⁴

In the American political thought context, where narratives of equality are central, this could also be interpreted as a political revolution. However, while the language recalls the revolutionary nature of the concept of equality in the 1st century Levant, it is important to question how revolutionary that idea is now, and whether it is critical of, or cooperative with the political practices of liberalism and neoliberalism in the 21st century Western. Was Paul advocating for actual political equality for slaves and women, or was he performing a similar move as Jesus did in the Beatitudes, by providing a disembodied solution to followers stuck in bodies and the lower social positions associated with those bodies? It is also unclear whether Bell is interested in

⁴⁵³ Galatians 3:28 (NIV)

⁴⁵⁴ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 163.

promoting the equality he speaks of in real time, or if he is providing a similar disembodied solution as was given in the Beatitudes.

Warren's meaning is easier to parse here than Bell's. On first reading, Warren's ministry includes some passages on equality that would seem to embrace the whole world:

We share the same salvation, the same life, the same future—factors far more important than any differences we could enumerate. These are the issues, not our personal differences, that we should concentrate on. We must remember that it was God who chose to give us different personalities, backgrounds, races, and preferences, so we should value and enjoy those differences, not merely tolerate them. God wants unity, not uniformity. But for unity's sake we must never let differences divide us. We must stay focused on what matters most—learning to love each other as Christ has loved us.⁴⁵⁵

However, like his inaugural invocation for President Obama, the universal-sounding passage excerpted above is actually premised on a less inclusive vision.⁴⁵⁶ He writes, “*As believers we share one Lord, one body, one purpose, one Father, one Spirit, one hope, one faith, one baptism, and one love.*”⁴⁵⁷ In other words, the unity and universalism he offers extends only so far as other Christian believers.

Socioeconomic class is a common theme in evangelical devotionals. In Bell's identification of Christians as society's forsaken, he refers back to the class and occupational standing of Jesus' disciples. The disciples were fishermen “because they [weren't officially] disciples [in the sense of boys being chosen for rabbinical training]. They weren't good enough; they didn't make the cut. Jesus calls the not-good-enoughs. Jesus took some boys who didn't make the cut and changed the course of human history.”⁴⁵⁸ While there is a certain Christian pride in having

⁴⁵⁵ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 106.

⁴⁵⁶ See page 1-2.

⁴⁵⁷ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 106., emphasis added.

⁴⁵⁸ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 131. This passage refers to the assessment and selection of young boys to go through rabbinical training process. Those who didn't “make the cut” pursued other professions.

founders who, despite modest beginnings, did transformative things, evangelicals also use this type of biblical reference to send a message to today's "fishermen disciples."

For example, Sarah Bessey quotes Paul's description of the Corinthians while recounting her family's conversion:

Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of 'the brightest and the best' among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'some-bodies?' Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ' [1 Corinthians 1:26-30, MSG].

After quoting the verses, Bessey recalls how she and her father laughed about how much they identified with the early Christian "nobodies" of Corinth, "That's us, all right."⁴⁵⁹

Being "called" because you are just an average person—or lower than an average person—is a theme that resonates with both historical and contemporary American political narratives, but for evangelicals this conceptualization goes a step further than bootstrap individualism. There is no presumed rise to greatness—except for greatness of the spiritual sort. There is no rising from below, but rather a pride of place in a static class position and the beautiful things that a lesser social stature does to the soul. In fact, for contemporary evangelicals, worldly success actually hampers one's growth as a follower of Christ. If an individual lives a comfortable life, she will not have to struggle or seek out divinity to be relieved from earthly toil and pain. There is no glory for God in a human life that needs no assistance, an individual who finds success all on her own. Solutions to the real bodily needs of individuals living in poverty are supposedly sated by what they will get in the next life.

This orientation sometimes leads evangelicals to challenges normative formulations of the self in surprising ways, such as training believers to step outside of the accepted practices of

⁴⁵⁹ Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, 40.

late capitalism. These countercultural impulses, eschew endeavors towards wealth, efficiency, and corporate or domestic productivity in favor of service to godly causes and forms of existence. This process can be seen in T.M. Luhrmann’s ethnographic work where she describes the choice made by some young evangelicals to quit their jobs and “live the mendicant, love-centered life, ‘depend[ing] on God’ rather than worry about getting a paying job. Dropping out of the workforce to staff the twenty-four hour ‘prayer furnace’; to volunteer at a shelter; to go on a mission.”⁴⁶⁰ We see a similar idealistic evangelical spirit in the devotional texts analyzed in this dissertation, as the authors encourage their readers to give up time spent on “earthly” projects to spend time with God, to worry less about financial savings and career goals, since God will provide everything that is needed.

In describing his own rise to fame as a young pastor, Bell insists that “no amount of success can heal a person’s soul. In fact, success makes it worse.”⁴⁶¹ In this anecdote, Bell’s confessional narrative tries to connect with the Christian Everyman—the evangelical who comes from a humble background and doesn’t aspire to anything above average. Bell maintains that even after his success as an influential young pastor—including being listed as one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* in June 2011⁴⁶²—the personal issues “surrounding [his] identity” were ever present.⁴⁶³ “Success doesn’t fix anything. We have the same problems and compulsions and addictions, only now we have *more* stress and *more* problems and *more*

⁴⁶⁰ *When God Talks Back*, 118–119.

⁴⁶¹ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 110.

⁴⁶² Jon Meacham, “The 2011 TIME 100,” *TIME*, April 21, 2011, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2066367_2066369_2066460,00.html.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

pressure.”⁴⁶⁴ Simultaneously employing these themes of relatability and humility, Bell finds the sweet spot where the virtue of humility overlaps in Christian and American narratives.⁴⁶⁵

However, there is an important difference in the Christian narrative that evangelical writers capitalize on in their devotional texts: success itself erodes one’s chances for spiritual greatness, and spiritual greatness arises out of poverty.⁴⁶⁶ Poverty draws people closer to God in their search for comfort and redemption, while the comfortable have no need to seek divine succor and thus rarely gain access to this spiritual renewal born of poverty.

For most of the last forty years, this argument has been aligned with American conservatism through a deft slight of hand, because the faithful believe that God favors the downtrodden, believers already have an explanation for poverty. It has no structural or economic causes and needs no economic solution. Poverty is a blessing—preparing one for riches in the next life. In an analysis of the George W. Bush administration, Daniel Rodgers comments that, thanks to this Christian conservative analysis, “the structural dimensions of poverty, sickness, and inequality [receded] almost into invisibility [during the Bush years].”⁴⁶⁷ Furthermore, the policies of “compassionate conservatism”⁴⁶⁸ provide Christian charity with an outlet while simultaneously drawing people to the Church for succor in an era of economic deprivation. In his Second Inaugural Address, George W. Bush advised:

In America’s ideal of freedom, the exercise of rights is ennobled by service, and mercy, and a heart for the weak. Liberty for all does not mean independence from one another. Our nation relies on men and women who look after a neighbor and surround the lost with love. Americans, at our best, value the life we see in one another, and must always remember that even the unwanted have worth. And our country must abandon all the

⁴⁶⁴ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 110–111, original emphasis.

⁴⁶⁵ As one recent example, the 2008 U.S. presidential race involved glorification of people from Main Street (versus Wall Street) and the valorization of candidates who could relate to “Joe Six Pack.”

⁴⁶⁶ The evangelical narrative also thinks that spiritual greatness arises when one is born again out of moral depravity. Narratives of being born again often entail stories of excess with money, power, sex, or substances.

⁴⁶⁷ *Age of Fracture*, 266.

⁴⁶⁸ The origins of compassionate conservatism are found in: Doug Wead, *The Compassionate Touch* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1977).

habits of racism, because we cannot carry the message of freedom and the baggage of bigotry at the same time.⁴⁶⁹

Through the language of Beatitude-infused evangelicalism (“a heart for the weak” and “even the unwanted have worth”⁴⁷⁰), Bush indicates that the solution to economic (and racial) injustice lies in individual acts of neighborliness rather than government policy. In this way, the deepest beliefs of evangelicalism, transmogrified as they are to the purposes of “compassionate conservatism,” take hold as a national policy that is widely supported. While the marriage of compassionate conservatism and evangelicalism in the last thirty-five years involves other factors, the connection to the Beatitudes is one explanation from the evangelical perspective that is rarely touched on. Evangelicals want to show mercy (also a characteristic celebrated in the Beatitudes),⁴⁷¹ but they do not want the government to play God, thus ridding citizens of the very struggle that will allow them to achieve the spiritual success developed through poverty. The bodily struggle (poverty) is valorized for the disembodied results (salvation) it produces.

Similar tropes occur in the citizenship narrative of Bush’s speeches. In his First Inaugural Address, Bush said, “I ask you to be citizens; citizens, not spectators: citizens, not subjects; responsible citizens, building communities of service and a nation of character.”⁴⁷² This quotation is another instance in which the evangelical underpinnings of the Bush administration worked in cooperation with a conservative agenda to erase the structural dimensions of poverty and inequality.⁴⁷³ In this Inaugural Address, Bush points to the church, the individual, and other service organizations—instead of the government—as a source of aid to “fellow citizens.” The domestic agenda of the Bush administration “open[ed] the way for more churches to provide

⁴⁶⁹ Doug Wead, *The Compassionate Touch* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1977).

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” Matthew 5: 3-12 (NIV).

⁴⁷² George W. Bush, “The First Inaugural Address of George W. Bush” (The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, January 20, 2001), http://avalon.law.yale.edu/21st_century/gbush1.asp.

⁴⁷³ Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 266.

social services, tapping more deeply the powers of faith and charity”⁴⁷⁴ in stark opposition to social science research and government policy that recognizes the structural ways that people of color, the working class, immigrants, and those with disabilities are at a disadvantage that can only be rectified through changes in policy that effect bodies, not souls.

In contrast to Bush’s narrative of citizenship, discussion of immigration in devotional texts emphasizes not the responsibility and community-building of citizenship, but the unreliability of immigrants in a country that is not their nation. Figurative use of immigrant narratives are common in both the Bible and evangelical devotional texts that rely heavily on it, appearing most centrally in Warren’s writing. The epigraph for his chapter, “A Place to Belong” includes an expansive embrace of everyone, as long as the person being embraced is a Christian: “You are members of God’s very own family, citizens of God’s country, and you belong in God’s household with every other Christian. [Ephesians 2:19 (TLV)].”⁴⁷⁵ Warren writes in such a way as to tie race and nationality together, which works within the confines of an assumedly white America, even as it stretches its arms to encompass “others”: “Your race and nationality are no accident. God left no detail to chance. He planned it all for *his* purpose.”⁴⁷⁶ So while members of different nations are part of God’s family and God plans a person’s nationality, Warren’s use of immigration as a metaphor assumes that immigrants are only meant to be, and only desire to be, temporary guests in a given society. This assumption is drawn out most strikingly in Warren’s discussion of Christians as “aliens” in the material plane, native only to heaven.

Repeatedly, the Bible compares life on earth to temporarily living in a foreign country. This is not your permanent home or final destination. You’re just passing through, just visiting earth. The Bible uses terms like alien, pilgrim, foreigner, stranger, visitor, and traveler to describe our brief stay on earth. David said, ‘I am but a foreigner here on

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 265–266.

⁴⁷⁵ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 146.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 20, original emphasis.

earth,’ and Peter explained, ‘If you call God your Father, live your time as temporary residents on earth.’ In California, where I live, many people have moved from other parts of the world to work here, but they keep their citizenship with their home country. They are required to carry a visitor registration card (called a ‘green card’), which allows them to work here even though they aren’t citizens. Christians should carry spiritual green cards to remind us that our citizenship is in heaven. God says his children are to think differently about life from the way unbelievers do. ‘All they think about is this life here on earth. But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives.’ Real believers understand that there is far more to life than just the few years we live on this planet.⁴⁷⁷

While there is a certain metaphorical usefulness to this comparison for the purposes of Warren’s devotional narrative that even includes an empathetic note comparing the immigrant experience to the Christian experience on earth, it also reveals a striking assumption on his part about the motivations for immigration.

Immigrants choose to come to the United States for a number of reasons, most of which cannot be encompassed by Warren’s swift explanation of “moving here to work.”⁴⁷⁸ Besides his misapprehensions about the reasons that immigrants settle in a new country, he also assumes that many immigrants keep their citizenship voluntarily based on some sort of overriding loyalty to their “home” country, when it usually has more to do with bureaucratic delays with U.S.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement or inability to qualify for U.S. citizenship at all. But devotional narratives don’t tend to deal with these types of intricacies and detail, instead depending on a storyline that is black and white—foreigner versus citizen. While immigrants feel the effects of the state apparatus on their bodies more than most groups—as their movement is

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 31–32.

⁴⁷⁸ The most common immigrant motivations historically have ranged from “religious freedom” and “freedom from oppression” to “economic motivation” based on events like the Irish potato famine and starvation and war in the regions of China where emigrants fled for the California Gold Rush. Contemporary motivations include “humanitarian protection”, “family reunification”, “better standard of living”, and “network-driven immigration” wherein the immigration “process continues to the point that it is normative” Patricia Hatch, “What Motivates Immigration in America?” (The League of Women Voters), accessed February 29, 2016, http://lwvdc.org/files/immigrationstudy_motivations_hatch.pdf. Generally speaking, immigrants are not moving just to make money.

controlled and their bodies and homes searched repeatedly—Warren focuses on the potential of this state to serve as a useful metaphor for his claims about the disembodied future of his readers.

The ideology of the Beatitudes also runs through evangelical narratives of disease and disability. Those who are disabled or constrained by a chronic disease, are often celebrated in evangelical texts as poised for the highest level of godliness. For example, Ed Dobson cites Romans 8:26 in his discussion of the intellectual and psychological weaknesses of humans striving to make a more Christian America: “Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us.”⁴⁷⁹ In these discussions of disease and disability, there is, on the one hand, the words of comfort we have come to expect from devotional texts—as in the passage from Romans above. But there is also the more extreme claim that devotees should thank God for an illness that requires them to sit and wait. Channeling the voice of God, Sarah Young writes:

Do not spoil these quiet hours by wishing them away, waiting impatiently to be active again. Some of the greatest works in My kingdom have been done from sick beds and prison cells. Instead of resenting the limitations of a weakened body, search for My way in the midst of these very circumstances. Limitations can be liberating when your strongest desire is living close to Me.⁴⁸⁰

For Young, illness is an opportunity for contemplation, prayer, and meditation, while for Warren there is no physical excuse that should prevent an evangelical from proselytizing around the globe. Regardless of the condition of the reader’s body, there is a biblical figure to inspire her service to God. This returns us to Warren’s list of the physical and emotional inadequacies of various biblical figures cited in Chapter 7. The list includes at least three conditions that fall

⁴⁷⁹ King James Bible.

⁴⁸⁰ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 74.

under the contemporary conception of disease and disability: “Moses stuttered... Jeremiah was depressed... Paul had poor health.”⁴⁸¹

Young’s assertion that “limitations can be liberating”⁴⁸² and Warren’s claim that no personal limitation provides an excuse for an individual to serve God both evidence an evangelical prioritization of the disembodied reader over her embodied reality. The celebration of evangelicals with major disabilities, such as Nick Vujicic—who ministers on the topic “Life without Limbs” in his book *Stand Strong*⁴⁸³—provides another example of the way this narrative of disease and disability functions. As we will continue to see in the following pages, any identity that is penalized by structural inequalities can be placated and depoliticized by the central argument of the Beatitudes.

In contrast to the many uses of Beatitudinal and disembodied narratives in devotional writing, there is one context in which devotional writers are interested in the physical body of their reader—beyond the elimination of its needs through narratives of future disembodiment which serve as present comfort. The end of *Purpose Driven Life* includes a somewhat surprising narrative twist. While the text is ostensibly devotional—providing a guide for worship to the individual—Warren takes that genre in a new direction with his chapter, “Becoming a World-Class Christian,” which focuses on global missionary work. (This ending re-connects with the use of the book as a companion to *Purpose Driven Church*.⁴⁸⁴) Warren argues that with the spread of communications technology and the ease of air travel, “the opportunities for normal,

⁴⁸¹ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 150.

⁴⁸² Young, *Jesus Calling*, 74.

⁴⁸³ Nick Vujicic, *Stand Strong: You Can Overcome Bullying (and Other Stuff That Keeps You Down)*, 2015.

⁴⁸⁴ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*.

everyday Christians to become involved in short-term international missions are now literally limitless. Every corner of the world is available to you.”⁴⁸⁵

While the requirement for evangelism (proselytizing) on a global scale may be surprising to a secular reader, Warren’s emphasis on global missionary work conforms to the scholarly definition of evangelicalism cited early in this dissertation.⁴⁸⁶ For the reader to live a “purpose driven life” she must organize it to fulfill Warren’s five purposes: worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship, and discipleship.⁴⁸⁷

While American religious discourse often describes religion as a private affair, three out of Warren’s five purposes are actually very public acts. American evangelicalism is indeed an activist, social, and community-oriented religion in the sense that “spreading the word,” ministering to others, and participating in a church community are deemed essential (both by Warren and the Bebbington-Noll definition of evangelicalism).

Thus, the extension of these values to the global stage is not the least bit surprising. When Warren incites his readers to, “Shift from local thinking to global thinking,”⁴⁸⁸ he is taking up a neoliberal cosmopolitan ethos of globalization not only in spirit, but with a litany of specific ways that readers can get involved with global missionary work, including: praying for a country by name; reading and watching the news with “Great Commission eyes”;⁴⁸⁹ “targeting” the

⁴⁸⁵ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 190.

⁴⁸⁶ Evangelicalism is defined as those Christians who believe in and practice, “...conversionism (an emphasis on the ‘new birth’ as a life-changing experience of God), biblicalism (a reliance on the Bible as the ultimate religious authority), activism (a concern for sharing the faith),⁴⁸⁶ and crucicentrism (a focus on Christ’s redeeming work on the cross, usually pictured as the only way to salvation)” (Bebbington paraphrased in Noll 2001, 13)

⁴⁸⁷ *The Purpose Driven Life*, 194–195.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁴⁸⁹ Having “Great Commission eyes” means that you interpret world events as part of God’s plan for global salvation. In Warren’s words: “*Wherever* there is change or conflict, you can be sure that God will use it to bring people to him. People are most receptive to God when they are under tension or in transition” (Warren, 191).

reader's community, her nation, other cultures, and other nations for evangelizing work;⁴⁹⁰ and using communication technology to the reader's advantage.⁴⁹¹

Furthermore, Warren marks this era as an especially fertile time for evangelizing, which is a narrative that corresponds to the story of evangelical growth in the last forty years—the concentration of evangelicals has shifted from North America, Europe, and Australia, to Africa, Latin America, and Asia, prompted by massive growth of the movement and evangelizing in those regions.⁴⁹² For Warren, this is a “critical point in history, when so many doors are opening wide like never before.”⁴⁹³

Despite this growth and the myriad missional opportunities Warren outlines, he also metaphorically describes the global evangelical mission as a war—using terms of military combat, and referring to “enemies” and “traitors.”⁴⁹⁴ In discussing strategies for becoming a “world-class Christian,” he notes that “People may refuse our love or reject our message, but they are defenseless against our prayers. Like an intercontinental missile, you can aim a prayer at a person's heart whether you are ten feet or 10,000 miles away.”⁴⁹⁵ The lack of consent and the militaristic metaphor openly supported in this passage reinforces the combative spirit of what Warren calls the “global harvest.”⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁰ “[Jesus’ followers were to reach out to their community (Jerusalem), to their country (Judea), to other cultures (Samaria), and to other nations (everywhere in the world). Note that our commission is simultaneous, not sequential. While not everyone has the missionary gift, every Christian is called to be on a mission to all four groups in some way. Set a goal to participate in a mission project to each of these four targets.” Warren, 191.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid. “We have no excuse not to spread the Good News... Even many remote villages get email, so you can now carry on ‘e-vangelistic’ conversations with people on the other side of the world, without even leaving your home! It has never been easier in history to fulfill your commission to go to the whole world” (Warren, 190).

⁴⁹² Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, “Report: Christianity in Its Global Context”, 1970-2020: Society, Religion, and Mission” 2013, 16).

⁴⁹³ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 193. “If you are tempted to say no, you ought to check out all the different ways and possibilities that are now available (this will surprise you), and you ought to seriously pray and ask God what he wants from you in the years ahead. Untold thousands of resident missionaries are desperately needed at this critical point in history, when so many doors are opening wide like never before.” Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 191.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

In his discussion of material, earthly life as similar to a brief visit to a foreign country (as opposed to a Christian's native home in heaven), he extends this metaphor:

Imagine if you were asked by your country to be an ambassador to an enemy nation. You would probably have to learn a new language and adapt to some customs and cultural differences in order to be polite and to accomplish your mission. As an ambassador you would not be able to isolate yourself from the enemy. To fulfill your mission, you would have to have contact and relate to them. But suppose you became so comfortable with this foreign country that you fell in love with it, preferring it to your homeland. Your loyalty and commitment would change. Your role as an ambassador would be compromised. Instead of representing your home country, you would start acting like the enemy. You'd be a traitor.⁴⁹⁷

It is in this language and these themes that we see a connection to American political goals of “exten[ding] freedom to every people in the world.”⁴⁹⁸ Daniel Rodgers’ analysis of Bush’s global strategy tracks the spread of other American values: “Individual liberties, market economics, and democracies—once stacked in time as the products of modernization—slipped out of history to become universal, global, immediate goals.”⁴⁹⁹ In my reading, both Bush’s values and American values—as defined both before and after Bush’s presidential tenure—reflect Christian values linked in many ways to the ones detailed in this dissertation.

While Warren’s “world-embracing” rhetoric—with its talk of enemies, traitors, and missile-like prayers⁵⁰⁰—takes this theme in devotional writing to an extreme, it appears elsewhere as well. Where Warren focuses on global missionary evangelizing, Bessey and Bell focus on a global embrace that sounds more like progressive social justice work—using Christianity as the motivation for political action. These discussions are largely empty of specific strategy or causes, but take up the global language and sprinkle global justice references

⁴⁹⁷ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 55.

⁴⁹⁸ Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 266..

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁵⁰⁰ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 55.

throughout.⁵⁰¹ For Bessey, becoming the type of Christian she advocates involves “[embracing] the glorious kaleidoscope of God at work in the global world.”⁵⁰² Similarly, her colleague at *She Loves Magazine*,⁵⁰³ Idelette McVicker declares part of their mission as a women’s faith internet magazine to be “informed and empowered.”⁵⁰⁴

When we know what is happening on earth, when we understand what goes on behind headlines or even hidden doors, we can become part of the solution. We want to be educated and informed and we want to think through what we believe, so we may each find our voice in the story God draws us into.⁵⁰⁵

For Bessey and her cohort, a global faith is not about proselytizing but about drawing strength from a diversity of global voices—an ethos that is very much the product of neoliberal cosmopolitanism colliding with an evangelical generational shift.

Bell fits into this schema as well, expanding the umbrella of possible inspirations and coconspirators to include not only religious leaders from other faiths but also political leaders. He seems to be inciting church reform within his readership when he writes, “I am learning that my tradition includes the rabbis and reformers and revolutionaries and monks and nuns and pastors and writers and philosophers and artists and every person everywhere who has asked big questions of a big God.”⁵⁰⁶ However, this embrace of all of humanity is haunted by the tension between a universal versus a Christian embrace as well.⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰¹ “I could spend my life telling the beautiful stories of ordinary radicals, of the normal people sitting right beside you in that wooden pew and in the movie theater-style seat at the megachurch, the living rooms and the back alleys, the *refugee camps* and the kitchen tables...” (Emphasis added, Bessey, 7).

⁵⁰² Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, 49. “A quiet shift is happening in my heart as I see and live and work and love with our sisters and brothers *all over the world*. It’s a shift toward hope and grace, toward freedom over fear, life over death.” (Bessey 2013, 5, emphasis added).

⁵⁰³ <http://shelovesmagazine.com/>

⁵⁰⁴ McVicker, “About Page: Welcome, from My Big, Global Mama Heart.”

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., “Let us Be Women Who Love. Let us be women willing to lay down our sword words, our sharp looks, our ignorant silence and towering stance and fill the earth now with extravagant Love. Let us speak to the injustices in our world. Let us not rest until every person is free and equal.” (McVicker)

⁵⁰⁶ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 14.

⁵⁰⁷ See page 164.

The Beatitudes are generally interpreted in one of two ways. The Christian left (composed of mainline Protestants and a growing group of leftist evangelicals) interprets them as a literal call to help your neighbor and respect the downtrodden (through a combination of philanthropy and structural change). This may be because the Christian left has been more attuned to the parts of the Beatitudes, less often mentioned in evangelical devotional texts, that celebrate not only the downtrodden, but also those who help the downtrodden and work to make a more perfect polity for protecting the rights of all.⁵⁰⁸ The other reading of the Beatitudes, more commonly embraced by the Christian right and by evangelicals historically, is a promise of divine aid in the disembodied future. Thus, the tension between Christian contemplation that awaits eternity to be blessed in heaven and the activist strain that seeks to actualize a bit of heavenly justice now, holds the potential for a variety of political interpretations in the future.

⁵⁰⁸ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” Matthew 5: 3-12 (NIV).

Chapter 9: Holy Contradictions

While no political movement or ideology is without internal tensions and dualisms, evangelicalism is unique in the celebration of its myriad dualisms, tensions, and contradictions. In Part I, the discussion of evangelical time is marked by the tension between the essential beliefs in eternity and rebirth; in Part II, the conceptualization of evangelical being is equally fraught by the pull between action and essence; and in Part III, the consideration of evangelical personhood is also caught between the freedom of disembodiment and the unavoidability of embodiment.

This chapter draws together the claims about dualisms made throughout the dissertation, argues that tensions help the evangelical movement's ability to revive and redefine itself. Tensions and dualisms are essential components of the evangelical faith that allow for theological shift while still retaining cultural and political power. Lastly, I show that the heavy reliance on tensions and dualisms in evangelical devotionals also leads to ambivalent policy positions among contemporary evangelicals. This chapter allows us to understand how innovations in the thought of the movement support a strategic revivalism; how, in Noll's words, evangelicalism produces its "persistent mix of innovation and tradition."⁵⁰⁹

On the one hand, tensions are innovative as they operate to strengthen religious belief as a catalyst for socio-political movements. On the other hand, the dualisms of revivals are not generally the emerging of "the new" per se, but rather the persistent redeployment of traditional Christian themes and practices, newly repackaged. However, there is still a large element of innovation involved in the act of reviving a faith to appeal to a new zeitgeist, and the tensions in evangelicalism's central concepts allows space and flexibility for that innovation.

⁵⁰⁹ Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001, 15.

As Chapters 1-8 have demonstrated, creative tensions work in evangelical time, being, and personhood to give evangelicalism both a foothold in a powerful tradition, as well as leverage to innovate. Here, I argue that these tensions also give evangelicalism the ability to contradict itself without losing legitimacy among its followers. As we've seen throughout Chapters 1-8, doubt, skepticism, and questioning are also central features of evangelical faith, which appear in all of these devotional texts, and serve to bolster the power of the tensions I describe throughout.⁵¹⁰ While secular interpretations of these tension often see them as invalidating religious arguments, evangelical interpretations see God “working in mysterious ways”⁵¹¹ that are not always understood by humans. Thus, tensions and contradictions are just things that are beyond human comprehension—signs of divine wonders, as opposed to disproof of them.

While evangelical power takes different forms in different eras, and sometimes more than one form simultaneously, the quantity of power remains stable, despite trends of secularization and a popular culture that has often seemed to stand in stark opposition to everything the church represents. In the crush of these opposing forces, evangelicalism has developed a noteworthy coping mechanism. The tensions of evangelicalism work productively to strengthen religious

⁵¹⁰ On the topic of doubt, Luhrmann writes, “and the fact of their [belief’s] improbability is not lost on those who accept them – particularly in a pluralistic, self-aware society like twenty-first century America. Many Christians come to their religious commitments slowly, carefully, and deliberately, as if the attitude they take toward life itself depends upon their judgment. And they doubt. They find it hard to believe in an invisible being – let alone an invisible being who is entirely good and overwhelmingly powerful. Many Christians struggle, at one point or another, with the fear that it all might be a sham. They have always struggled. In earlier centuries, before atheism became a real cultural possibility, they may have struggled more about the nature of the supernatural than about whether the supernatural existed at all, but they struggled. Augustine agonized. Anselm despaired. The long tradition of spiritual literature is full of intense uncertainty about the true nature of being that can be neither seen nor heard in the ordinary way. And whether or not people ever voice the fear that God himself is an empty fantasy, whether or not they tussle with theology, Christians of all ages have wrestled with the difficulty of believing that God is real for them in particular, for their own lives and every day. That is why one of the oldest stories in the Hebrew Bible has become iconic for the process of coming to commitment. [Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32].” Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xii–xiii.

⁵¹¹ The origin of this phrase is a line from a hymn by William Cowper: “God moves in a mysterious way.” “Hymn: Light Shining Out of Darkness.”

belief, support a strategic revivalism, and catalyze the next incarnation of the evangelical movement.

Furthermore, these tensions are a tradition in Protestant Christianity, which is very much acknowledged by devotional thinkers. Part of Rob Bell's justification of his own development as a Christian includes learning that, "what seems brand new is often the discovery of something that's been there all along—it just got lost somewhere and it needs to be picked up, dusted off, and reclaimed."⁵¹² In this way, questioning and internal tensions are normalized as an expected part of the evangelical experience. The tension between Protestant contemplation, worship, and staid faith, on the one hand, and the adventurous spirit of productivity, activism, and good works, on the other, creates a potent mix for potential political movements. Here, this innovation in the thought of the movement supports revivalism while turning away from the interpretations of the Christian right.

The ability for the evangelical discourse to contradict itself without eroding its own theology allows for a great deal of flexibility and disagreement. This malleability, reinforced by the Protestant discursive tradition, renews the conceptualization of the evangelical self and the evangelical collectivity, leading to revival. Each point of tension provides fissures with which to break away from the overt bigotry and inflexibility of the Christian right and repositions the movement for new forms of political engagement in the 21st century, whatever those may be. For example, one of the key themes that recur in these texts is an embarrassment about or apology for the politics of the Christian right. In *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, Rachel Held Evans writes,

We evangelicals have a nasty habit of throwing the word biblical around. We especially like to stick it in front of other loaded words, like economics, sexuality, politics, and

⁵¹² Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 14.

marriage to create the impression that God has definitive opinions about such things that just so happen to correspond with our own.⁵¹³

Held Evans represents a shifting view in biblical interpretation—shared by the devotional thinkers—that questions the link between the Bible and specific political positions.

Another prominent example of this tension is the strain in evangelicalism between their core beliefs (experiences of the divine, divine revelation in the Bible, etc) and reason. The Pentecostal and charismatic strains of the Church have highlighted the popularity of emotional experiences of God, and all evangelicals, by definition, give authority to divine revelation of the Bible, but appeals to modern rationality are also important in maintaining the legitimacy of the faith in both the wider culture and in the minds of believers. Sometimes this comes in the form of openly declaring that elements of the evangelical faith are defiant of rationality—a declaration that echoes Richard Hofstadter’s arguments about the conservative element of American politics as anti-intellectual and irrational.⁵¹⁴ In a book review essay of Rob Bell’s *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*,⁵¹⁵ the editor of *Christianity Today*, Mark Galli, writes that “God exists and can be experienced and yet cannot be contained by rational explanations.”⁵¹⁶

Sometimes this comes in the form of confusing statements that try to make divine revelation compatible with reason. On the “About Beliefs” page of Antioch Community Church’s website, the church authorities write:

We believe the Bible is the inspired, authoritative, living, eternally-reliable Word of God. We believe it is without error in its original manuscript, absolutely infallible and our source of supreme revelation from God, *superior to conscience and reason, though not contrary to reason*. It is therefore our infallible rule of faith and practice and necessary to our daily lives. [II Timothy 3:16-17; I Peter 1:23-25; Hebrews 4:12]⁵¹⁷

⁵¹³ Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, xx.

⁵¹⁴ *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963); *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).

⁵¹⁵ Rob Bell, *What We Talk about When We Talk about God*, Reprint edition (HarperOne, 2014).

⁵¹⁶ Galli, “Rob Bell’s ‘Ginormous’ Mirror.”

⁵¹⁷ “About Page: Beliefs: Bible” (Antioch Community Church), accessed June 22, 2016, antiochcc.com/about/beliefs/, emphasis added.

Most secular analysis of these two quotations—seeing evangelicalism as defiant of reason or attempting to appease reason—would assume that these are weaknesses within the movement that will eventually lose followers to secularization. For many secular readers, the statement that revelation is both superior to but not contrary to reason is confusing, but to many evangelicals, the essence of divine experiences and divine revelation is that it is supernatural, defying natural laws and human reason. If it didn't have this power to defy the ordinary, it would lose its ability to comfort and compel.

However, the tensions and dualisms of contemporary evangelicalism also extend beyond the devotional discourse. This acceptance of inconsistencies within the faith is taken for granted in the evangelical community and culture. For example, in a *Christianity Today* profile piece shortly after Jerry Falwell's death in 2007, the author contrasted the secular media's understanding of Falwell with the evangelical understanding: "Falwell's seeming contradictions stemmed from truths Christians hold in tension."⁵¹⁸

Secular readers see these evangelical contradictions as confusing, but evangelicals see them as everyday. My reading highlights how these tensions—whether between the supernatural and rational, between eternity and rebirth, between action and essence, or between embodiment and disembodiment—are actually an asset for evangelicalism. My reading expands upon and connects points about doubt and contradiction made by T. M. Luhrmann and Molly Worthen, showing that this point about the significance of tensions is agreed upon, whether the scope of evangelical study is historical or contemporary, and whether it is found in texts or ethnography.

⁵¹⁸ Ted Olsen, "The Quest for the Historical Jerry," *Christianity Today*, June 13, 2007, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/july/quest-for-historical-jerry.html>.

Worthen also sees tensions and dualisms as productive, an imaginative narrative device that she describes as

a source of energy: energy that propels evangelism, institution-building, activism, care for the suffering, and a sincere passion for intellectual inquiry. offers no clear path past the impasse of biblical authority, no firm discipline for the undecided mind, and no reconciliation with the intelligentsia of secular America. If the evangelical imagination harbors a potent and anti-intellectual strain, it has proven, over time, to be a kind of genius... [the evangelical imagination] offers no clear path past the impasse of biblical authority, no firm discipline for the undecided mind, and no reconciliation with the intelligentsia of secular America. But any crisis of authority is no longer such a crisis if it has become the status quo.”⁵¹⁹

Luhrmann cautions similarly that “[the evangelical] suspension of disbelief and embrace of the irrational makes skeptics deeply uneasy. But in fact, evangelical[s] are sharply aware of the logical contradictions that nonevangelicals observers see so clearly. What enables evangelicals to sustain their commitment is a learning process that changes their experience of mind.”⁵²⁰

My work in this dissertation has focused on just this set of contradictions, ambivalences, ambiguities, and tensions that I claim are productive, rather than destructive, for the movement, but with 21st century evangelical devotional texts as the cases. The imagination is a source for evangelical success, but that success is predicated on a series of tensions and conflicts that, as Worthen says, the imagination does not resolve,⁵²¹ but instead turns into a productive element of evangelical discourse by normalizing and celebrating such tensions.

Furthermore, the fact that there are internal tensions in both evangelicalism devotional literature and evangelical politics contradicts some scholarship on fundamentalism. In a book chapter titled “Fundamentalism and the Control of Women”⁵²² Karen McCarthy Brown argues that

⁵¹⁹ *The Apostles of Reason*, 264–265.

⁵²⁰ *When God Talks Back*, xv–xvi.

⁵²¹ *The Apostles of Reason*, 264–265.

⁵²² in John Stratton Hawley, ed., *Fundamentalism and Gender* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 175.

fundamentalists take the contemporary emphasis on control, particularly control of the body, very far and that they stress the kinds of order learned in childhood, including adult control of children and especially male control of females. She notes that fundamentalist views tend to stress rationally argued absolutes rather than the ambiguous myths and symbols of earlier religion.

Keeping women, about whom we have such deeply ambivalent feelings, clearly under the control of men makes the world seem more orderly and more comprehensible. With men at the helm, the power of the flesh is kept in its place. The clean, daylight powers of reason and spirit are in charge, and we all feel safer. It should not be surprising, then, that so much of the fundamentalist agenda focuses on defining the roles and monitoring the behavior of women and children.⁵²³

While it is certainly the case that ongoing activism against LGBTQ and reproductive rights demonstrates an evangelical desire to control bodies, the argument that, “fundamentalist views tend to stress rationally argued absolutes rather than the ambiguous myths and symbols of earlier religion,”⁵²⁴ is clearly questioned by the findings of this dissertation that evangelicalism thrives on dualism and tensions drawn from biblical myths and symbolism. In addition, it seems that if the cause of fundamentalist control of bodies in the past was their ambivalent feelings about bodies, today’s ambivalences manifest themselves in a wide variety of political topics, drawing from an ambivalence in the faith itself. The ambivalence towards gay rights exhibited in the Baylor Religion Survey, discussed in the introduction to the dissertation, is an example of that shift. Where the Christian right was absolutist in their stance against gay rights, today’s evangelicals are expressing ambivalence in surprising ways (such as supporting gay marriage while not supporting homosexuality itself).⁵²⁵

⁵²³ Karen McCarthy Brown, “Fundamentalism and the Control of Women” in Hawley, *Fundamentalism and Gender*.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ The 2010 Baylor Religion Survey shows that 35% of evangelicals have “consistently progressive attitudes about homosexuality” (believing that homosexual behavior is not wrong, and that homosexual partnerships should be afforded legal recognition.) However, the truly interesting finding is that an additional 24% of evangelicals support

Conclusion

At the December 2015 student missions conference of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, the keynote speaker, Michelle Higgins of the St. Louis-based Faith for Justice, sought to rally support for Black Lives Matter. InterVarsity, a college-based interdenominational evangelical ministry serving close to 700 college campuses nationwide since 1941, is “committ[ed] to multiethnic ministry.”⁵²⁶ True to that commitment, enrollment statistics show that students active in InterVarsity are as ethnically diverse as the overall college student population.⁵²⁷ The conference where Higgins took the stage—along with song-leaders wearing “Black Lives Matter” t-shirts—was attended by 16,000 evangelical college students.⁵²⁸

Student responses to Higgins were mixed, but this much-reported aspect of the conference was embraced by leftist evangelical organizations like Sojourners⁵²⁹ and Christian media outlets like *The Christian Century*.⁵³⁰ However, there was also a backlash against Higgins’ comments, which were perceived to be in support of abortion and LGBTQ rights.⁵³¹ The contrast between InterVarsity and the broader evangelical community’s reaction to the Black

legal recognition of gay partnerships, despite the fact that they think homosexuality is “always wrong/almost always wrong.” This finding is interesting: it not only shows that fully 59% of evangelicals supported gay marriage or gay civil unions in 2010, but that views on gay marriage and gay civil unions were moving towards acceptance, even as feelings about homosexuality remained static.⁵²⁵ Bean and Martinez, “Evangelical Ambivalence toward Gays and Lesbians.”

⁵²⁶ “InterVarsity’s History,” accessed June 6, 2016, <https://intervarsity.org/about/our/history>.

⁵²⁷ 36.7% of U.S. college enrollees self-identify as belonging to an ethnic minority. Susan Aud, Mary Ann Fox, and Angelina Kewal Ramani, “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Minorities” (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Education Statistics, July 2010), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010015.pdf>. InterVarsity self-reports that 38% of active InterVarsity students self-identify as belonging to an ethnic minority “Vital Statistics” (InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, U.S.A., 2014).

⁵²⁸ Mark Oppenheimer, “Some Evangelicals Struggle with Black Lives Matter Movement,” *The New York Times*, January 23, 2016.

⁵²⁹ Lisa Sharon Harper, “Open Letter to the Leadership of #Urbana15 and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship,” *Sojourners*, January 5, 2016.

⁵³⁰ Tobi Grant, “InterVarsity Leaders Back Black Lives Matter Efforts During Student Conference,” *The Christian Century*, December 31, 2015.

⁵³¹ D.G. Hart, “Does InterVarsity Endorse All of Black Lives Matter,” *Patheos*, January 5, 2016.

Lives Matter agenda is telling.⁵³² In the same month that Higgins spoke at the InterVarsity conference, political science professor Larycia Hawkins was put on administrative leave and subsequently dismissed from her position at the Illinois evangelical liberal arts college Wheaton for saying that Muslims and Christians worship the same God.⁵³³

In both of these cases, young evangelical leaders who are also women of color have been criticized and punished by the conservative evangelical establishment for their activism, even as others in the movement praise them. The fact that this proposed coalition with Black Lives Matter and the call for Muslim solidarity is coming from college campuses and young leaders corresponds to previously cited scholarship and survey data reporting a generational split among evangelicals, with many younger evangelicals supporting a range of left-leaning policies.

And when we look to the devotional texts this generation has been steeped in, those shifts begin to make sense. While the devotional writers in my study do not talk at length about race or ethnicity, the few comments they do make seem to go out of their way to demonstrate that they have embraced—at least in word, if not in spirit—the ethos of equality, diversity, and multiculturalism present in both neoliberal and cosmopolitan worldviews that profess to go beyond mere tolerance. For example, in a chapter section titled “Who we are now,” Rob Bell writes: “When Jesus died on the cross, he died for everybody everywhere. Every tribe, every nation, every tongue, every people group.”⁵³⁴ Bell feels compelled to include this point as an aside in a chapter about salvation’s role in personal identity, where it is inessential to his argument, perhaps in order to appeal to that younger cohort’s views on race.

⁵³² BLM’s core concerns include: “anti-Black racism, extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes; state violence (including structural poverty, genocide, disproportionate incarceration of blacks and Latinos, and police violence); as well as the limiting of minority leadership to cis men – to the exclusion of women, queer, trans, disabled, undocumented, and those with a criminal record. Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, “About Black Lives Matter Network” (Black Lives Matter Network), <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.

⁵³³ Ruth Graham, “The Professor Suspended for Saying Muslims and Christians Worship One God,” *The Atlantic*, December 17, 2015.

⁵³⁴ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 145.

Contemporary evangelicals often draw on passages from the New Testament, like Galatians 3:28, when discussing race or gender. In this verse, Paul insists that, “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁵³⁵ While Bell’s point above draws on this narrative of equality from the New Testament, there is also a distinct strain of American political thought running through his and other contemporary devotional writings.

In Rick Warren’s invocation for the 2009 Obama inauguration he asked for God’s help to “remember that we are Americans, united not by race, or religion, or blood, but by our commitment to freedom and justice for all.”⁵³⁶ Just as Warren invoked King at the inauguration,⁵³⁷ Rachel Held Evans begins her foreword to Sarah Bessey’s *Jesus Feminist* with a quotation from Maya Angelou: “There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you.”⁵³⁸

The choice to draw upon these canonical writers of America’s race and gender struggles is another clear bid to attract the younger generation. Of course, we see the tension between universal equality and Christian equality here—the question of whether God’s love applies to everyone, or only to Christians and potential converts, or even more narrowly, to Christians within one’s denomination. Any belief system that emphasizes service to the Christian community through evangelism (proselytizing), as evangelical devotionals often do, can be only so inclusive. As in the inaugural invocation, the unity and universalism offered by devotional writers often extends only so far as other believers.

⁵³⁵ Carroll and Prickett, *The Bible*.

⁵³⁶ Richard Warren, “Inaugural Invocation for Barack Obama,” *Speech* (Washington, D.C., January 20, 2009).

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁸ Held Evans in Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, xiii.

But the story of contemporary evangelical politics is even more complicated than the limits of their equality narratives. Even as some evangelicals move left, another subsection of the movement is currently defining themselves through their support for Donald Trump's presidential candidacy, which draws extensively on white supremacist rhetoric. The affinity of evangelicals for Trump was initially met with a great deal of surprise in the media, as the thrice-divorced king of casino capital courted the family values set. As Trump transitioned into the general election in June 2016, he began more openly courting evangelicals, causing one former Christian right leader to declare his movement's demise. Writing in the *Christian Post*, former Moral Majority leader Michael Farris⁵³⁹ contrasted the first meeting of the Moral Majority in 1980 with the Faith and Freedom Coalition's June 10, 2016 "Road to Majority" conference where Trump was a key speaker:

This meeting marks the end of the Christian right. The premise of the [Moral Majority founding] meeting in 1980 was that only candidates that reflected a biblical worldview and good character would gain our support. Today, a candidate whose worldview is greed and whose god is appetites [sic] is being tacitly endorsed by this throng. They are saying we are Republicans no matter what the candidate believes and no matter how vile and unrepentant his character. They are not a phalanx of God's prophets confronting a wicked leader, this is a parade of elephants. In 1980 I believed that Christians could dramatically influence politics. Today, we see politics fully influencing a thousand Christian leaders. This is a day of mourning.⁵⁴⁰

Not only does a member of the Christian right echo the media and scholarly eulogies of the Christian right here, but he also suggests that evangelicals independent of the Christian right are being corrupted.

⁵³⁹ Farris was the Washington State director of the Moral Majority in 1980 and a self-described leader of the Christian right ever since. He helped found the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) in 1983 and Patrick Henry College, a Christian college, which has been operating since 2000. "About Page: Staff Attorneys" (Home School Legal Defense Association), <http://www.hslda.org/about/staff/attorneys/Farris.asp>; Michael Farris, "Trump's Meeting with Evangelical Leaders Marks End of the Christian Right," *The Christian Post*, June 21, 2016.

⁵⁴⁰ Farris, "Trump's Meeting with Evangelical Leaders Marks the End of the Christian Right."

There are a number of theories about why a large number of evangelicals support Trump. In some cases, commentators say that the evangelicals supporting Trump are not religious but cultural evangelicals, who don't attend church.⁵⁴¹ Others point out that Trump does not have more support among evangelicals than among Republicans generally, but that their support, even in small numbers, is just more surprising.⁵⁴² Still others say that evangelicals are attracted to messianic figures who are decisive "liberators" or "defenders,"⁵⁴³ while still others see an alliance between Trump and those evangelicals enamored with the prosperity gospel.⁵⁴⁴ Just as the overall direction of evangelical politics has puzzled commentators for the last decade, so too does the phenomenon of the Trump-evangelical, especially in light of the leftward shifts of others in the movement.

The remainder of this conclusion summarizes the main arguments of the dissertation and the ways that the contradictions, ambiguities, multidirectional, and tension-fueled political thought of evangelicalism connect to today's unpredictable political landscape. Among evangelicals, that landscape is often riddled with an absence of decisiveness or commitment. Testifying to the existence of this ambivalence in the movement historically, Molly Worthen describes 20th century evangelicalism as a "nebulous community,"⁵⁴⁵ similarly scattered and mercurial.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴¹ Geoffrey Layman, "Where Is Trump's Evangelical Base? Not in Church," *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2016.

⁵⁴² Tobin Grant, "New Data on Trump, Evangelicals, and Racism," *Religion News Service*, March 24, 2016.

⁵⁴³ Steve Mitchell, "Why Evangelicals Support Trump," *Real Clear Politics*, March 6, 2016.

⁵⁴⁴ Sarah Posner, "Is This the End of the Religious Right?," *The New York Times*, May 10, 2016.

⁵⁴⁵ Worthen, *The Apostles of Reason*, 4.

⁵⁴⁶ *The Apostles of Reason*, 2014.

The Evangelical Politik

By reading popular devotional writings as political texts, this dissertation has distilled three elements in evangelical political thought: 1) a theory of time in which a teleological eternity complements a retroactive re-birth, creating the narrative backdrop for revival; 2) a theory of being in which the individual is encouraged to increase their intimacy with God through a process of emotional and spiritual self-regulation, which produces a self torn between perfect essence and thorny action, and 3) a theory of personhood wherein identity develops out of the wretched-blessed ethos of the Beatitudes, generating a tension between believers' sense of embodiment and disembodiment. Furthermore, Chapter 5 advanced a new theory of belief that proposes emotion as a bridge between cognitive and body-oriented theories of belief, and Chapter 9 discusses the productive role of dualism and tension in evangelicalism generally.

By focusing on the thought and culture of evangelicalism today—as it is taught to and normalized for evangelicals through popular devotional literature—this dissertation has made a substantial contribution to the literature on evangelical political thinking. That literature, as I have argued, is quite thin.⁵⁴⁷ But there may be a reason for that. As compared to the more rigorous and systematic modes of Catholic and Islamic thought, which are well studied by political theorists, evangelicalism promotes a kind of anti-intellectualism. The tensions and contradictions endemic to evangelical thought, which are celebrated and promoted by evangelicals, do not readily lend themselves to the systemic examination of social science.

While I build upon a number of studies in anthropology and history—which deal with evangelical thought as well as with the connection between religious and political thought

⁵⁴⁷ As outlined in the introduction, this dissertation addresses holes in a number of literatures, including: political theory, intellectual history of the new millennium, gender and sexuality studies, the study of religion, and especially the discourses of post-secular and comparative political thought. (See pages 33-34 of the introduction.)

respectively⁵⁴⁸—this dissertation goes beyond them. It is the first study to examine this particular topic, historical period, and the relationship between evangelicalism and the politics of the evangelical movement—going beyond former studies in both topical and theoretical scope. In addition to the tripartite evangelical political thought developed in Chapters 1-8, this dissertation has produced three arguments about evangelical thought in the 21st century. First, today’s evangelical revival transcends the Christian right. Second, the revival maintains evangelicalism’s cultural and political power while orchestrating a substantial shift in its devotional literature. Third, those shifts are connected to today’s ambivalent evangelical politics. They are also a portent of changes to come.

These arguments, in turn, correct for a general and scholarly misunderstanding about: 1) the relationship between the Christian right and evangelicalism; 2) the significance of shifts in the movement over the last fifteen years,⁵⁴⁹ and 3) the meaning of this relationship and these shifts for analyzing American evangelicals’ political positions today. In other words, my account of the evangelical politik can help us understand better the politics of the evangelical movement—in the more traditional sense of voting behavior, party affiliation, and policy positions.

Transcending the Christian Right

Today’s evangelical revival transcends the Christian right, in part, by emphasizing different aspects of time, being, and personhood than were highlighted during the 1980s and 1990’s. As this dissertation has shown, today’s evangelical time is oriented towards a reading of

⁵⁴⁸ Worthen and Luhrmann work on evangelical thought, but not related to politics, while Mahmood works on the connection between religion and politics among an Egyptian Muslim community. Worthen, *The Apostles of Reason*; Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

⁵⁴⁹ Contrasts to both point 1 and 2 can be readily found in: E.g., Wilcox and Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers?*; Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism*.

eternity and retroactivity that focuses on a perfect creation and a universal and accessible salvation, rather than on the apocalypse, sin, and hell favored by the Christian right. With regard to evangelical being, 21st century devotional texts emphasize a Pentecostalized, emotional version of the faith that nonetheless exhibits tensions between essence and a more Christian right emphasis on action. In discussions of evangelical personhood, the new vanguard of evangelical thinkers often incorporates the language, if not the spirit, of diversity, cosmopolitanism, and tolerance by emphasizing spiritual themes that might be read as more compatible with progressivism. While there is no simple or clean connection between those ideas and politics, this shift is quite a change from the rabidly conservative language of the Christian right in the late 20th century. The next generation of evangelicals are no longer interested in being identified with the multifaceted bigotries around the politics of personal identity, subjectivity, and the body so long associated with the Christian right. It seems that evangelical devotional writers are responding to that shift and choosing appropriate appeals to their new audience, even as they are themselves one of the forces responsible for creating that new audience.

By carefully defining the Christian right as a manifestation of evangelicalism that thrived during a particular age, but that is not synonymous with evangelicalism, I have qualified in an important way the claim that the Christian right—and by implication, evangelicalism—is dead.⁵⁵⁰ In my argument, evangelicalism continues as strong as ever, even as the leaders and organizations of the Christian right era fade away and a new kind of evangelical political style emerges. Contemporary evangelical devotionals emphasize: eternal perfection and rebirth over sinful fallenness and impending apocalypse;⁵⁵¹ deepening closeness with God allowing for a heavenly spiritual maturity, as opposed to political and cultural activism fulfilling a divine

⁵⁵⁰ Wilcox and Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers?*; Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism*.

⁵⁵¹ An example of the popularity of these themes in the 1990's is: Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995).

mission on earth;⁵⁵² and the celebration of the downtrodden over a focus on unwavering moral discipline, which attempted to raise evangelicals to a stature above the “non-believers” around them (a lofty position often proving too much for even its staunchest advocates to attain.⁵⁵³)

However, this shift should not be understood as a political retreat, so much as one phase in the ongoing cycle of renewal,⁵⁵⁴ whereby ontological questions have come to the fore, displacing policy questions as the primary focus. Adam Laats and Joel Carpenter describe the era following the Scopes Monkey trial as an important gestation period, in which evangelicalism gathered the exiles into its subculture to regenerate itself and gather strength.⁵⁵⁵ The quietism of contemporary devotional authors mirrors the quietism and inward-focus of that period, suggesting that today’s focus on individual spiritual development, over group political development, may signal a similar era of gestation.

In the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, many evangelicals bemoaned the fact that their long-time leader, Jerry Falwell, was better known for outrageous and bigoted comments than he was for his pastoral and political work. Falwell’s outing of a fictional character on the children’s *Teletubbies* TV program and his incendiary comments against LBGQTQ people in the days following the September 11 terrorist attacks are infamous reminders of this story.⁵⁵⁶ Christian right leaders

⁵⁵² Christian right thought leaders often doubled as political figureheads: e.g., *The Moral Majority* (Jerry Falwell); *Focus on the Family* (James Dobson); the Christian Broadcasting Network (Pat Robertson). Falwell’s books and television appearances, and their popularity in the 1980’s and 1990’s are testament to this trend: Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America!*, Bantam ed (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1981).

⁵⁵³ Examples of those who preached straight monogamous marriage, traditional gender roles, and strict discipline of children, but who were later engulfed in scandals – often related to the very acts they reviled most in their ministries were, most famously: Jim and Tammy Bakker (sex scandal and accounting fraud), Jimmy Swaggart (sex scandal), Ted Haggard (sex and drug scandal),

⁵⁵⁴ Lienesch, *Redeeming America*; Morone, *Hellfire Nation the Politics of Sin in American History*.

⁵⁵⁵ *Fundamentalism and Education in the Scopes Era: God, Darwin, and the Roots of America’s Culture Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); *Revive Us Again*.

⁵⁵⁶ Ted Olsen, “The Quest for the Historical Jerry,” *Christianity Today*, June 13, 2007.

were either becoming tone-deaf to their followers political appetite, like Falwell, or becoming disillusioned themselves, like Ed Dobson.⁵⁵⁷

Despite continued conservative evangelical activism against LGBTQ and reproductive rights—including such extreme tactics as domestic terrorism against abortion clinics and abortion providers, as well as the anti-gay funeral protests of Westboro Baptist Church—the evangelical mainstream has moderated their tone considerably and the most powerful and popular pastors are now not necessarily as conservative or vocal. As we have seen through the close readings of evangelical devotional texts, it seems that political quietism and spiritual activism are operating hand-in-hand.

The 21st Century Revival: Stability, Hermeneutics, and Epistemology

My second argument—that evangelical cultural and political power is maintained, while orchestrating a shift in the interpretive techniques and theological content of devotional literature—corrects misunderstandings about the significance of shifts in the movement over the last fifteen years. From 2007 to 2014 the percent of people in the United States who are identified as evangelical went down less than a percentage point (from 26.3% to 25.4%), while Catholics dropped 3.1% (from 23.9% to 20.8%), mainline Protestants dropped 3.4% (from 18.1 to 14.7), and non-Christian faiths and the unaffiliated grew by 1.2% (from 4.7 to 5.9%) and 6.7% (from 16.1 to 22.8%) respectively.⁵⁵⁸ Despite losses across the board in American Christianity, evangelicals remained the most stable of any group while also maintaining the position as largest religious group in the United States.⁵⁵⁹ If this 21st century stability and that which Worthen describes in the 20th century are any indication, ambiguity seems to lend power to the evangelical

⁵⁵⁷ Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might*.

⁵⁵⁸ The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, "The U.S. Religious Landscape Study."

⁵⁵⁹ Sarah Zylstra, "Evangelicals Stay Strong as Christianity Crumbles in America," *Christianity Today*, May, 2015.

political consensus, or lack of it, much as internal tensions seem to lend power to evangelical devotional narratives.

In a 2009 interview, a PBS broadcaster asked former Moral Majority leader Ed Dobson what he would do differently if he were starting his career with the Moral Majority over again. Dobson replied, “If we had to do it all over, I would have argued for thinking through a more detailed political philosophy, understanding the limits of religion and the limits of politics.”⁵⁶⁰ Although it is impossible to know exactly what Dobson has in mind in that interview, this dissertation suggests that the 21st century evangelical revival has in many ways fulfilled both of his wishes. On the one hand, evangelical thought leaders have withdrawn from overt political involvement of the type that Dobson criticized in *Blinded by Might: Why the Religious Right Can't Save America*⁵⁶¹—which has also allowed them to draw a more precise demarcation between religion and politics, or at least the appearance of such a demarcation. This approach clearly acknowledges the limitations of politics and instead favors an expansive role for religious, spiritual, and cultural influence on society. On the other hand, as Chapters 1-9 demonstrate, the evangelical politik has definitive political content. An adjusted philosophy of time (from apocalypticism to eternity and rebirth) certainly influences political thinking among evangelicals, as does the shift away from an orientation on sin and punishment. Although a definitive position on the political spectrum may not be located through the observation that fire and brimstone have been traded in for an intimate and loving relationship with the divine, or overt bigotry and inflexibility for words of tolerance and even acceptance, they are certainly developments with strong political valence.

⁵⁶⁰ Dobson, God in America, Public Broadcasting Station.

⁵⁶¹ *Blinded by Might*, 1999.

T.M. Luhrmann writes that “each generation meets God in its own manner,”⁵⁶² and Bell notes similarly that “every generation has to ask the difficult questions of what it means to be a Christian here and now, in this place, at this time.”⁵⁶³ Certainly evangelical millennials have found their own way of meeting God and being Christians. The survey data discussed in the introduction makes clear the political shifts of millennials, and Chapters 1-9 verify that the devotional guides of the early 21st century are written in a similar mood of redefinition. Bell, Dobson’s intellectual protégé, is keenly interested in how to craft evangelicalism to meet the needs of this new generation. In his view, his job is to reshape evangelicalism so that “faith that was stale and dying is now alive.”⁵⁶⁴ The interrelated themes of revival and reformation, and their central and historical role in both biblical and Protestant Christianity are spelled out clearly by Bell as a clarion call for today’s evangelicals.

Luther was taking his place in a long line of people who never stopped rethinking and repainting the faith. Shedding unnecessary layers and at the same time rediscovering essentials that had been lost. And this process hasn’t stopped. It can’t. In fact, Luther’s contemporaries used a very specific word for this endless, absolutely necessary process of change and growth. They didn’t use the word reformed; they used the word *reforming*. This distinction is crucial. They knew that they and others hadn’t gotten it perfect forever. They knew that the things they said and did and wrote and decided would need to be revisited. Rethought. Reworked. By [reforming] I do not mean cosmetic, superficial changes like better lights and music, sharper graphics, and new methods with easy-to-follow steps. I mean theology: the beliefs about God, Jesus, the Bible, salvation, the future. We must keep reforming the way the Christian faith is defined, lived, and explained.⁵⁶⁵

This discussion of the “reforming” tradition shapes criticism of past generations of evangelicals into its most benign form, leaving specifics out of the picture until later, even as he indicates that the changes are not superficial, but as substantive as possible—changes that will touch the very essentials of evangelical life, practice, and self-definition.

⁵⁶² Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xv.

⁵⁶³ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 13.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 11–12. Bell writes that “[he himself is] part of [Luther’s reforming] tradition.” Ibid., 12.

In addition to content and tone, contemporary evangelicalism is more concerned with hermeneutics than its predecessors in the Christian right. Among evangelicals, there is a growing emphasis on biblical interpretation, which is a significant pivot away from the strict biblicalism of the Bebbington-Noll definition.⁵⁶⁶ Contemporary devotional authors now acknowledge the role that translation and church politics have played in arriving at the Bible Americans read today, and they utilize interpretive tools—like concordances and theological texts—in their writing.

Each of the thinkers in my constellation acknowledges the importance of interpretation in their own way. Warren explicitly uses fourteen different translations of the Bible because “no matter how wonderful a translation is, it has limitations. The Bible was originally written using 11,280 Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words, but the typical English translation uses only around 6,000 words. Obviously, nuances and shades of meaning can be missed, so it is always helpful to compare translations.”⁵⁶⁷ Similarly, Bessey relies heavily on biblical interpretations by feminist theologians throughout her writing,⁵⁶⁸ and Bell writes, “If we don’t read the Bible in its original Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic, then we are reading someone’s interpretation of the Bible. In order to bind and loose [reform], we must understand that the Bible did not drop out of the sky. It was written by people.”⁵⁶⁹ Bell goes the furthest in promoting awareness of the Bible as a historical text and promoting reform of sola scriptura (biblical literalism):

⁵⁶⁶ Biblicalism, or biblical literalism is also known as “sola scriptura,” (Latin: by scripture alone) in the Christian tradition. The definition of “evangelicalism” in this dissertation began by following David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1995), 2–17. The in-text quotation is Mark Noll’s paraphrasal of Bebbington’s canonical work, which renders Bebbington’s conceptualization clear, accessible, and concise. Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 13.

⁵⁶⁷ Appendix 3 in Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 208–209.

⁵⁶⁸ Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*.

⁵⁶⁹ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 56, 61.

This is part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that ‘Scripture alone’ is our guide. It sounds nice, but it is not true. I understand the need to ground all that we say and do in the Bible, which is my life’s work. It is the belief that creeps in sometimes that this book dropped out of the sky that is dangerous. The Bible has come to us out of actual communities of people, journeying in real time and space. Guided by a real Spirit.”⁵⁷⁰

In many ways, this shift resembles the emergence of liberal Protestantism at the turn of the 20th century, a theological position that now grounds the mainline Protestant church.⁵⁷¹ Warren, Bell, and Bessey’s modes of interpretation come closer to a liberal Protestant mode of interpretation than to that of most evangelicals of the recent past. Bell’s assertion that Bible verses are historical documents first and timeless truths second is representative of this shift:

To take [biblical] statements out of their context and apply them to today without first understanding their original context sucks the life right out of them. They aren’t isolated statements that float, unattached, out in space. They aren’t first and foremost timeless truths. We may, and usually do, find timeless truths present in the Bible, but it is because they were true in real places for real people at real times.⁵⁷²

According to the Bebbington-Noll definition, and the others I cited in the introduction,⁵⁷³ one of the defining qualities of evangelicals is their devotion to an unvarnished reading of the Bible, without the history, without thinking of it as a translation, without needing interpretive tools. Bell and Bessey’s interpretive mode, and to a lesser extent Warren’s, seem to be flying in the face of that understanding of evangelicalism. Meanwhile, Bell has been called “not only an evangelical, but an evangelical’s evangelical, the evangelical par excellence” by the editor of

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 67–68 and note 64.

⁵⁷¹ For an explanation of the emergence of liberal (mainline) Protestantism, see: “Faith and Science: The Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy” in Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, 104–129; and “Errand in the Wilderness” in Worthen, *The Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*, 15–35.

⁵⁷² Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 62.

⁵⁷³ Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001; Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 242; Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xx, 11–12.

Christianity Today.⁵⁷⁴ It seems that crises of authority and definition are still a way of life in the evangelical community.⁵⁷⁵

In Sarah Young's interpretive technique we see another source of the shift. Young's entire book is composed of her own interpretations of scripture, which she believes are delivered to her directly from God through her meditative practice.⁵⁷⁶ This prophetic interpretive technique departs from accepted standards, both among the thinkers in my constellation and evangelical theology and devotional literature as a whole. While her interpretive approach is radical, it is at the opposite pole from the other thinkers where no scholarly or authoritative text is deemed necessary in order for her to make her (God's) interpretation. She is representative of a well-acknowledged schism in contemporary evangelical interpretation that divides Pentecostals and charismatics (and their emphasis on divine experiences) from the rest of the spiritual tradition. In a review of Bell's *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*,⁵⁷⁷ Mark Galli, the current editor of *Christianity Today*, explains the schism from the non-Pentecostal viewpoint:

I mostly stumble over his epistemology—his understanding of how we come to know what is true, and by what method we determine how to live authentic lives. This is precisely my concern about evangelical faith as a whole. I'll use Bell's latest book as [an] example because it so perfectly represents what's going on in large segments of Christianity today: 'When I talk about God, I'm talking about a reality known, *felt, and experienced* (62). God is *something seen [and] experienced*' (89). When we talk about God, we're talking about our brushes with spirit, *our awareness* of the reverence humming within us, *our sense* of the nearness and the farness, that which we know and that which is unknown (91)' In other words, Bell believes our knowledge of God is grounded not in doctrine, the Bible, the preached Word, the sacraments, our institutions, or even what Jesus revealed, but in our experiences and our intuitions – especially that sense many have that there is a deeper reality in, with, and under this life. This is an appeal to general revelation, how God makes himself known naturally to the world. Classically understood, these intuitions also include an awareness that we stand under divine judgment for our sin, but Bell does not go there. Nor does he hint that we might ever doubt our intuitions—he assumes we can trust them. Until recently, this sort of

⁵⁷⁴ Mark Galli, "Rob Bell's 'Ginormous' Mirror," *Christianity Today*, May 15, 2013.

⁵⁷⁵ Worthen, *The Apostles of Reason*, 264–265.

⁵⁷⁶ Young, *Jesus Calling*, 23–25.

⁵⁷⁷ Bell, *What We Talk about When We Talk about God*.

experience was understood to be unusual, perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime experience. There was no expectation that this sort of event would repeat itself. It was assumed that these were extraordinary visitations of the Spirit, and that one would expect to live the rest of life without such experiences. That understanding has changed radically in the past couple of decades, and again, Bell expresses this in ways that are representative of much of evangelical teaching today: ‘Gaining *a living, breathing awareness* of the love of God and sharing it with others (148). I believe that you are *already experiencing* the presence of God with you in countless ways every single day (122).’ The implicit promise is that we can experience God 24/7/365, if only we open our eyes to God’s presence all around us.⁵⁷⁸

While Warren and Bessey’s hermeneutics look more liberal than evangelical thinking in the past, and Young’s epistemology looks more charismatic and Pentecostal, Bell manages to craft a style that bridges both innovations. The impulses that animate liberal interpretation and Pentecostal epistemology have historically been at odds and are certainly opposed in spirit. And yet, the tension between the two may just be, like the tensions recounted across this dissertation, the force needed to maintain evangelical power and influence into the future.

An Ambivalent Politics

The question that now remains is whether there is a relationship between the shifting devotional discourse I chronicle in this dissertation and the shifting political one we see in survey data. Framed more broadly, is there a relationship between spiritual and political revivals? The short answer is: yes.

While a definitive connection between the evangelical devotional revival and recent political shifts in the evangelical movement may be difficult to trace, it’s clear that the revival mostly developed in reaction to the Christian right. For example, Bessey writes, “the more I learned about Jesus, the more I struggled with the iterations of Christianity around me. Much of what I saw or experienced [in the Christian right] didn’t match up with what I thought I knew

⁵⁷⁸ “Rob Bell’s ‘Ginormous’ Mirror,” original emphasis.

about God.”⁵⁷⁹ The questioning of the institution and culture of the Christian right reflected in Bessey here—not to mention the questioning of gender roles in her larger project—is an example of the type of connective tissue between evangelical devotional writing and evangelical politics we’ve seen throughout the study.

As we saw in Chapter 9, Bell justifies his turn to revival through invocations of a tradition of Protestant “reforming.”⁵⁸⁰ While he seems to speak initially of theological reformation, he also invokes terms that are laden with political valence today, seeming to hint at a broader political movement:

I am learning that I come from a tradition that has wrestled with the deepest questions of human existence for thousands of years. I am learning that my tradition includes the rabbis and *reformers* and *revolutionaries* and monks and nuns and pastors and writers and philosophers and artists and every person everywhere who has asked big questions of a big God. When people stepped forward and said, ‘You have heard it interpreted this way, but I tell you it really means this,’ it was *progressive* for their day. They were making new claims about what it means to be true to the Bible. What is accepted today as tradition was at one point in time a break from tradition.⁵⁸¹

Bell encourages his readers to consider the important role that reformation and revolution have played in the life of Christians across the ages, encouraging political and theological transformation today. And the hints Bell gives here were concretized when, for example, he began allowing women into leadership roles in his church or when he said that “the church would be irrelevant” if they didn’t shift their position on gay marriage.⁵⁸²

Of course, as Bell is well aware, the entire history of the Abrahamic religions is mixed up with the politics of ancient tribes and empires, the medieval church, and the modern state. The Lord’s Prayer, which was read by Warren at the 2009 inauguration of President Barack Obama

⁵⁷⁹ Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, 45.

⁵⁸⁰ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 12.

⁵⁸¹ Emphasis added *ibid.*, 14, 56.

⁵⁸² Sanneh, “The Hell-Raiser: A Megachurch Pastor’s Search for a More Forgiving Faith”; Owen Strachan, “Dear Rob Bell: The Church Isn’t Giving an Inch on Gay Marriage,” *Patheos*, March 4, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/thoughtlife/2015/03/dear-rob-bell-the-church-isnt-giving-an-inch-on-gay-marriage/>.

and the inauguration of many presidents before that, alludes to this long-lived connection between politics and religion: “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.”⁵⁸³ Power and politics have never needed to reach far to touch the very heart of religion, and vice versa.

However, the verse in Matthew that precedes this worship of kingdoms and power and glory gives instructions on how to practice prayer:

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.⁵⁸⁴

So it would seem that the connection between politics and Christianity is meant to be found in private spaces, quietism, and internal reflection, not in the public sphere. As Dobson discusses the way that Christian right leaders were “seduced by power,” he connects this call for a private religion to the Beatitudinal ethos discussed in Chapter 8:

In God’s economy everything is reversed. Weakness is strength. The last shall be the first. How many times do the words need to be said before we see the picture, understand the message, and obey the commands? And when will we learn from previous failed efforts of the church to change society exclusively through political power?⁵⁸⁵

For Bell and his mentor, Dobson, Christianity is an essentially political act, but one that must be done in private and oriented to God and not the “ways of the world.” Otherwise, Christians are claiming that they don’t need God. Dobson explains:

In Romans 8, the apostle Paul writes that God has built ‘futility’ and frustration into his creation ‘in hope’ that the creation will turn to him. Instead, we ask God to bless our tactics, our techniques, and our zeal for him. He will have none of it, because to succeed in our strength would mean we don’t need God. We would be as guilty of self-

⁵⁸³ Carroll and Prickett, *The Bible*, Matthew 6:13.

⁵⁸⁴ Matthew 6: 5-6 in: Carroll and Prickett, *The Bible*.

⁵⁸⁵ Thomas and Dobson, *Blinded by Might*, 86–87.

enhancement as those people who built the ancient tower of Babel, which God destroyed on the grounds that if they accomplished this, they would have no need of him.⁵⁸⁶

Thus, the strain in Christianity between the impulse to make a better world and to submit to the world that God has provided produces alternating movements of political action and political quietism—movements that are actively working to change the world and movements that are actively suppressing their own instinct to intervene.

There is an expectation among evangelicals that God’s will is moving history forward in a linear, progressive, and teleological fashion. Bessey is the biggest champion of this narrative, claiming that

God has a global dream for his daughters and his sons, and it is bigger than our narrow interpretations or small box constructions of ‘biblical manhood and womanhood’ or feminism; it’s bigger than our frozen-in-time arguments or cultural biases, bigger than marital status, bigger than all of us—bigger than any one of us.⁵⁸⁷

As we’ve discussed, this type of argument has the potential to be apolitical, as it describes politics not only as verboten for evangelicals, but also as attempts to peer into the divine crow’s nest,⁵⁸⁸ beyond the human ability to understand. This claim, that humans should not attempt to intervene in what they cannot possibly understand, is the ultimate deflation of politics.

And yet, even the validity and virtue (or invalidity and sin) of peering into the divine nest is in question, depending on the reader’s interpretation of the point of Christianity. Bell writes:

The point is the God who is at work in and through the early church to change the world. The authority is God who is acting in and through those people at that time and now these people at this time. The point is to ask, *what is God up to here, now? What in the world is God doing today? How should we respond?* How did they respond? What can we learn from them that will help us now? The Bible tells a story. A story that isn’t over. A story that is still being told. *A story that we have a part to play in.*⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., 66–67.

⁵⁸⁷ Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, 26.

⁵⁸⁸ Worthen, *The Apostles of Reason*, 52.

⁵⁸⁹ Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 66.

Bell encourages his readers to make an active attempt to understand God's work to change the world, and to respond, and to play a part. Likewise, Warren encourages his readers to come to an understanding of God's purpose for their lives so they can follow along as actively as possible. And Bessey begins her book by quoting a poem by the founder of the online Christian women's magazine she writes for *She Loves Magazine*, which incites the reader to, "rise to the questions of our time," which she apparently interprets as the need for an evangelical feminism.⁵⁹⁰

Evangelical Futures

According to my reading of evangelicalism in this dissertation, evangelicalism can take any one of a number of paths in the future. First, it's possible that the revival I identify here is more a fad than a revival. In 2014 sociologist Brad Vermurlen wrote:

Ten years ago, everyone was talking about the 'emergent church,' and five years ago, people were talking about the 'missional church.' And now 'new Calvinism.' I don't want to say the new Calvinism is a fad, but I'm wondering if this is one of those things American evangelicals want to talk about for five years, and then they'll go on living their lives and planting their churches. Or is this something we'll see 10 or 20 years from now?⁵⁹¹

I have attempted to insulate this project from this question by exploring a revival moment that spans even more time than all three of these possible fads combined. However, there is always the possibility that the texts analyzed in this dissertation will have little long term effect on the future of evangelicalism, as unlikely as that seems, given the sales history of especially Warren and Young's books.⁵⁹²

⁵⁹⁰ Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, xvi.

⁵⁹¹ Mark Oppenheimer, "Evangelicals Find Themselves in the Midst of a Calvinist Revival," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2014; For more on new Calvinism, see: Molly Worthen, "Who Would Jesus Smack Down?," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/magazine/11punk-t.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁵⁹² Young's *Jesus Calling* was still ranked first among Amazon sales of Christian devotionals ten years after its initial publication, having sold more than 5 million copies worldwide. As of June 2014, it was still ranked ninth on the Nielsen Top 20 list, and was the highest-ranking nonfiction title on the Nielson print list for the first half of 2014. *The Purpose Driven Life*, has been translated into at least eleven languages and sold 32 million copies

Second, this revival may usher in a quietistic age of evangelical retreat. The devotional literature surely includes many inspirations for turning away from the political. Evangelical time, being, and personhood all work to diminish political concerns. If the reader believes that her life is eternal, that she is created for a specific purpose, and that her life path was designed by God before she was born, other concerns—such as a considered approach to career, personal, and political choices—become far less relevant. She is encouraged to prioritize spending time with God over any other activity, to check her anger and impatience at the door, and not to forge an identity around her embodied experience as a woman, the member of a minority group, working class, sexual minority, or any other affiliation that could lead to political activism.

The promise of being born again works to delegitimize such worldly concerns. If the reader's career, life choices, class position, racial identity, gender identity, or sexual preferences leave the reader feeling worthless, purposeless, or questioning, it need not concern her, because God has a plan for her life and she has an eternity to fulfill it. In Luhrmann's conceptualization, the evangelical faith requires believers to look at the world as an essentially benevolent place, which in her account is not an intellectual judgment, but an orientation towards the world:

In various ways, and in varying degrees, faith asks that people believe that reality is good and justice triumphant. These are fantastic claims. Faith is hard because it is the decision to live as if a set of claims are real, even when one doubts: in the Christian case, that the world is good; that love endures; that you should live your life as if the promise of joy were at least a possibility. These aren't intellectual judgments. They are ways of experiencing life, attitudes we take towards living in the world.⁵⁹³

worldwide in its first ten years.⁵⁹² In a report on their survey of American pastors, The Barna Group described Warren's work as incredibly influential, essentially without peer. Andy Butcher, "Sarah Young: Amid Suffering, Devotion," *Publishers Weekly*, November 14, 2012; Melissa Steffan, "Sarah Young Still Hears Jesus Calling," *Christianity Today*, October 1, 2013.

George Mair, *A Life with Purpose: Reverend Rick Warren, the Most Inspiring Pastor of Our Time*, 1st ed (New York: Berkley Books, 2005).; Survey Reveals the Books and Authors That Have Most Influenced Pastors," May 30, 2005, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/178-survey-reveals-the-books-and-authors-that-have-most-influenced-pastors#.VFz0pTF8vc>.

⁵⁹³ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xii–xiv.

When one believes that the world is essentially benevolent and one's life is essentially joyful, there is only one thing that matters in the present: "accepting Jesus as your personal savior" is the most pressing obligation because that is the only route to salvation. Thus, the evangelical politik de-politicizes the personal, where feminism and other progressive social movements politicize it.

In other words, the political thought of contemporary evangelicalism is not a political strategy, but a normative order that is both political in and of itself and that has political consequences. This thought does not contain a promise of happiness, but a promised comfort through the travails of human life. It is not the prosperity gospel of the 1990's, but a gospel of contentment. Bliss comes not from worldly success, but from a successful and thriving relationship with God, from an individual's habit of meditating on his love, and one's perfectibility through that love. For contemporary evangelicalism, God *is* love. The evangelical understanding of this love is reflected in an expectation of perfectibility and idealism that in turn creates a contemporary evangelical style that is individualistic, purposive, buoyant, optimistic, and full of hope. This evangelicalism reconciles itself easily with the neoliberal insistence that everything in modern life can be made more productive—or happier, or more successful—through the quantification and privatization of every element of human life. Similarly, the ways that evangelicalism works to manage life and death, health and disease, bodies and spirits, make is compatible with biopolitical regimes, in Michel Foucault's sense.⁵⁹⁴ This evangelicalism is also more comfortable in an apolitical, apathetic, or moderate political stance because of the belief—derived from evangelical time, being, and personhood—that the common good and individual good are already realized through God's plan.

⁵⁹⁴ *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, 1st Picador pbk. ed (New York: Picador, 2003).

Third, my theorization of evangelical time—as both a stabilizing and a reviving force for the movement—might suggest a resurgent “Christian left” in the coming decades. Similarly, Rogers Smith’s argument about the fragility of the connection between Christianity and political liberalism in the early 20th century may replay itself now,⁵⁹⁵ but in the opposite direction—as evangelicalism switches its allegiances once again. The recurrent cycle of evangelical political power and orientation may be restarting.⁵⁹⁶ In addition to the previously discussed ways that young evangelicals are showing interest in issues usually associated with the American Left—environmentalism, global poverty, the AIDS epidemic, and a more moderate approach to gay rights⁵⁹⁷—there are also ways in which class and race are beginning to be addressed by the larger evangelical discourse, as we saw in Chapter 8 and the beginning of this conclusion.

Furthermore, given that race and class—resurfacing in Black Lives Matter and the Occupy Movement in the last decade—are two political issues that have been greatly touched by American evangelical alliances in the past,⁵⁹⁸ the next decade may be a ripe moment for evangelical development along these lines. Evangelicalism may become an imaginative force for radical social expression, as it was during abolition, “the old fashioned gospel” of the Gilded Age, the “social gospel” of the Progressive Era, and the political preaching (and religiously-infused activism) of black evangelical pastors during the Civil Rights era. For example, Frank Lambert demonstrates the shifting political orientation of evangelicalism in his discussion of the

⁵⁹⁵ Smith, “‘Our Republican Example’: The Significance of the American Experiments in Government in the Twenty-First Century,” 118.

⁵⁹⁶ See, e.g., Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*; Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*; Morone, *Hellfire Nation the Politics of Sin in American History*; Martin, *With God on Our Side*; Laats, *Fundamentalism and Education in the Scopes Era: God, Darwin, and the Roots of America’s Culture Wars*; Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*; Wilcox and Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers?*; Williams, *God’s Own Party*; Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*; Self, *All in the Family*; Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism*..

⁵⁹⁷ Wilcox and Robinson, *Onward Christian Soldiers?*, 54.

⁵⁹⁸ E.g., “The old fashioned gospel” of the Gilded Age, the “social gospel” of the Progressive Era, and the political preaching (and religiously-infused activism) of black evangelical pastors during the Civil Rights era. Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, 87–103, 160–183.

connection between progressive politics and the evangelical “social gospel” at the turn of the 20th century:

Religion is often a conservative force in society, calling on men and women to return to traditional mores. But it can also be a force urging radical change, envisioning a future social order based on spiritual ideals heretofore unattained. The [evangelical] social gospel qualified as a radical expression of Christianity, imagining the United States as a redeemed nation dedicated to a just society for all its citizens rather than a land of opportunity for a few rich individuals.⁵⁹⁹

Fourth, it is also possible to read these shifts in orientation towards race and class as mere gestures in the direction of political correctness and tolerance for the sake of evangelism—as opposed to genuine norm shift or reorientation of politics in the movement. By dressing conservatism in a progressive cloak, evangelicals stand a better chance of attracting churchgoers and partisans. After all, while the new vanguard of evangelical thinkers often emphasizes spiritual themes that might be read as more compatible with progressivism, they retain some of the conservative policy aims of the Christian right such as activism against reproductive rights.

Regardless of which direction evangelicalism moves, the internal tensions of their devotional texts provide any one of a number of narratives to support that cause. Discussing the changes brought on by the shifting demographics of the 21st century, Mark Noll draws a similar conclusion about the possible directions of evangelical politics in the future. Faced with “the end of Christian America,” Noll suggests that evangelicals may respond with “strategies of integrity [such as] a new Protestant monasticism; or a Lincoln-esque statesmanship transcending merely partisan rivalry.” Or they may also respond with a “Lebanese or Northern Irish escalation toward cultural Civil War.”⁶⁰⁰ Worthen also agrees that there are both potentialities and dangers of an ambivalent evangelicalism, which can equally inspire radical acts of service or “plunge” the

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., 94.

⁶⁰⁰ *American Evangelical Christianity*, 2001, 285.

believer into “egocentric delusion,”⁶⁰¹ which many identify with the political rhetoric of the newest face of American conservatism—Donald Trump. Regardless of the evangelical politics that come to pass, the theoretical innovations of contemporary evangelicalism are a powerful portent of change to come. Ultimately, these ambivalent political orientations have the potential to shape the movement’s direct political engagement for decades into the future. All we know for sure is that the next chapter will be filled, as always, with both “old hymns and new songs”,⁶⁰² with the traditions of eternity and the innovations of rebirth.

⁶⁰¹ Worthen, *The Apostles of Reason*, 264.

⁶⁰² *Jesus Feminist*, 6–7.

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