

INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF MEDIA: EXPLORING THE  
INTERCONNECTION OF COMMERCIAL ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA, IDENTITY  
AND FAITH IN THE AMERICAN SPIRITUAL MARKETPLACE

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation is an assessment of the relationship between commercial entertainment media, religion and identity in the American spiritual marketplace. Using ethnographic observations of evangelical prayer groups and church sermons, pastor interviews, focus groups, and email surveys, this research examines the myriad aspects of commercial entertainment media use by American evangelical churches, including how Hollywood movies and popular television shows are used in religious messages; what reasons pastors provide for choosing to bring mainstream entertainment media formations into their churches; what evangelical churchgoers themselves think of commercial media texts both inside and outside the space of the church; and how this immersion in commercial entertainment media culture influences the formation of identity and the development of faith. Using the instrumentalist/substantive theoretical debate as general a point of orientation the research assesses how churchgoers redefine themselves in the new mediated spiritual marketplace, focusing specifically on the potential and tension between the development of identity as a person of faith versus an individual consumer of religious products.

To my parents: Leslie Gillett and Michael Moore

To Aunt Sharon

And to my sister Samantha

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: CONCLUSION (BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION): EXPLORING THE INTRODUCTION BETWEEN FAITH, IDENTITY AND MEDIA IN THE AMERICAN SPIRITUAL MARKETPLACE.....	1
CHAPTER 2: METHODS.....	42
CHAPTER 3: <i>INDIANA JONES</i> AND THE TEMPLE OF MEDIA: HOW HOLLYWOOD FILMS AND POPULAR TELEVISION SHOWS ARE USED IN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES .....	64
CHAPTER 4: PARABLES OF <i>TALLADEGA NIGHTS</i> : PASTOR INTERVIEWS .....	103
CHAPTER 5: THE GOSPEL OF TOM (HANKS): AMERICAN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES AND <i>THE DA VINCI CODE</i> .....	143
CHAPTER 6: SACRED HEART, <i>BRAVEHEART</i> : THE INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN EVANGELICAL FAITH AND COMMERCIAL ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA .....	172
CHAPTER 7: THE DANGER OF <i>THE LONE RANGER</i> : INDIVIDUALISM AND CONSUMPTION IN AMERICAN EVANGELICAL FAITH .....	227
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF RESEARCH IN THE AMERICAN SPIRITUAL MARKETPLACE .....	261
REFERENCES.....	272
APPENDIX A: PASTOR INTERVIEWS: SCHEDULES AND LOCATIONS.....	296
APPENDIX B: EMAIL SURVEY QUESTION FOR CHOICES CHURCH MEMBERS .....	297
APPENDIX C: MEDIA USE IN SUNRISE CHURCH: 2007-2008.....	298
APPENDIX D: MEDIA USE IN RIVER ROCK CHURCH: 2007-2008 .....	299
APPENDIX E: MEDIA USE IN CHOICES CHURCH: 2007-2008.....	300
APPENDIX F: MEDIA USE IN HARVEST CHURCH: 2007-2008.....	301
APPENDIX G: CHURCHGOERS' BELIEFS ABOUT PATRIARCHY .....	302
APPENDIX H: CHURCHGOERS' BELIEFS ABOUT WAR.....	334

AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY .....	371
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## CHAPTER 1

### CHAPTER 1: CONCLUSION (BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION): EXPLORING THE INTRODUCTION BETWEEN FAITH, IDENTITY AND MEDIA IN THE AMERICAN SPIRITUAL MARKETPLACE

#### *Introduction*

In an Afterword to Lynn Schofield Clark's (2007) edited volume *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace*, Stewart Hoover succinctly notes that there is a gap in the literature when studying the relationship between American religion and media:

...It is no longer adequate to simply point out that religion is increasingly subject to the media marketplace. What is needed, and what scholarship can provide, is an explanation of... precisely how these processes are taking place (2007. 309).

It is this recognition of the need for in-depth research on the relationship between media, religion and every day, lived faith that is the foundation of this research. This research fills an opening in media and religion scholarship by examining commercial entertainment media use in evangelical churches in the context of recent changes in the American religious landscape. Within the scope of the research is an assessment of how mainstream entertainment media are used in evangelical church sermons, including a description of how they are woven into church sermons and rituals. In addition, the research probes the reasons evangelical leaders have chosen to use commercial entertainment media in their sermons, in the process understanding their reasons for use and the intended benefits. Integral to this research is an exploration of not only the views of church leaders but how evangelical churchgoers receive these messages, and what potential tension lies in either the transmission and/or the reception of the discourses in



commercial entertainment media. Finally, the consequences for media use are researched, including the following questions: How do media change, if at all, the development of faith and identity in the new spiritual marketplace?; What are potential consequences of the introduction of commercial entertainment media for faith and identity?; How is meaning created in the new spiritual marketplace?; How are churchgoers redefined and repositioned in their religious institutions as a result of this shift to highly mediated worship?<sup>1</sup>

The questions posed and addressed by this research highlight an established theoretical debate regarding technology and religion, namely how technology impacts the practice of faith. This research steps into the instrumentalist/substantive debate to ask how both evangelical leaders and their constituents attempt to negotiate meaning, faith, and identity in a spiritual marketplace that has incorporated not only the forms of mainstream secular culture (new technologies for disseminating the message) but the actual secular media texts themselves. By way of introduction to the topic, the research begins with an ethnographic vignette from one of the churches in this study:

*I walked into River Rock Church, a brown, one-story building one morning in August, 2007. A man inside glass double doors who was wearing a plastic, brightly-colored lei saw me coming and opened the door for me, smiling and greeting me with an energetic "good morning!" I smiled and returned the greeting, shaking his hand and*

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<sup>1</sup> This research builds from an earlier, unpublished pilot study by Moore and Press on American politics that noted the use of commercial entertainment media in evangelical churches, including the way in which media texts are used in church sermons and the significance of this use in terms of inviting identities related to commercialism, patriarchy, individualism, and militarism. The two bodies of research differ significantly in both scope as well as direction of research: while the shorter, earlier study focused on more top-down collective identity formation from the media texts, this research challenges the notion of a collective identity by observing evangelical churchgoers' individual beliefs in their everyday lives outside of church.

walking through the doors, feeling a rush of cool air on my face that was in sharp contrast to the hot, heavy summer air outside. Once inside, I could see another set of glass doors leading to a large room where hundreds of people were seated and being seated. I walked up to the doors and was greeted again, this time by a woman holding a set of papers while she held the door open. She smiled and handed one of them to me, which I took and walked inside. There were several seats available to choose from and I selected one close to the door and to the center aisle. As I seated myself I became aware of people making their way to the stage in front of me, all wearing brown t-shirts that had "I Took the Plunge" in white lettering on the front, and all wearing different-colored plastic leis. They began singing as a young man, enclosed in a plexiglass structure, played the drums. Another young man with a goatee stood at an electric keyboard, moving to the rhythm of the music and nodding his head and pressing his fingers to the keys with speed and skill. I looked around the room, seeing a racial mix: white people, African-Americans, and what I thought were Africans (the church offered a francophone service for African French speakers, I had noticed). There weren't any Asians in the audience but I did see one singing on stage. Some people were wearing jeans, some dresses and suits, and some kente cloth.

I looked across the room at the clear plexiglass podium on the stage, noticing a small shelf with a glass of water on it. Directly underneath the glass and resting against the base of the podium was a large, white, round lifesaver. There was an inflatable green palm tree to the left of the podium with multi-colored beach balls at its base. The lights dimmed then and our attention was focused on the two elevated screens to the right and left of the stage. I saw that it was a scene from the movie Transformers (2007). As the

*images of robots and humans moved in front of us on the screens I looked down at the paper the woman had handed me: it was a pamphlet listing the sermon topic for the day: “transformation” through baptism. The scene ended, the lights came back on, and Pastor Steven, a vigorous, energetic Caucasian man in his late 50s jogged up onto the stage, smiling. He explained that many of us would be undergoing transformation this day, and that the theme was “more than meets the eye” (a well-known quote from Transformers). As he spoke, the screens were re-illuminated with PowerPoint slides to illustrate his points. The background imagery of the slides was the movie’s metallic, grey robot eye watching over the world. Bible quotes were placed in light relief against the dark Transformer eye. The pastor then introduced the next film clip, which he said exemplified his point regarding the need for baptism.*

*The room darkened once again as the screens depicted a scene of two men in a small room. One man with dark hair and skin who spoke with a Spanish accent was seated, eating a bowl of food, while the other man, Caucasian, overweight and naked from the waist up, was wearing a superman-style outfit of blue tights and red underwear. The man wearing tights who, pacing the room, was arguing with the other man in favor of baptism, while the seated man rejected the notion, saying it wasn’t necessary. The standing man, still talking, approached the seated man from behind, placed a bowl with water in front of him, grabbed the man’s hair, and dunked his face in the bowl of water, thereby “baptizing” him. The scene was from the film Nacho Libre (2006) that starred comedian and actor Jack Black, who played the baptizer. At the humorous depiction of the “baptism” the audience roared with laughter, some shaking their heads while smiling and others talking to their friends and family in the seats next to them.*

*Once everyone had quieted down, the pastor continued speaking about the importance of baptism, holding up one of the “I Took the Plunge” t-shirts and telling the congregation the location of the baptism, which was on church grounds in the parking lot. He called the baptism a “party,” and after encouraging everyone to get baptized, ended his sermon. As we filed out of the room, the pastor, laughing, asked us rhetorically, “Isn’t this fun? Who said church was boring?”*

*Eager to see where churchgoers would be baptized, I walked to the section of the parking lot the pastor specified and saw a giant blue fiberglass hot tub resting on the asphalt. The hot tub was surrounded by the same plastic palm trees that were in the sanctuary and church volunteers, waiting to baptize others, were wearing the baptismal “I Took the Plunge” t-shirts and were also wearing plastic leis. There was reggae music pumping out of the large speakers that flanked the hot tub. As I left, I saw people begin to line up to receive baptism.*

Scenes like the one above, which occurred at River Rock, an evangelical Assembly of God Church in the Midwest, are striking for several reasons, but not necessarily due to the focus on entertainment during a church sermon. The idea of drawing churchgoers into church by entertaining them is not a new or unusual strategy in evangelical churches in the U.S. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the energetic and popular Reverend Billy Sunday, a former professional baseball player, would draw crowds to his church in dramatic ways, including preaching from on top of (and not behind) the pulpit and mesmerizing churchgoers with dramatic stories from his former baseball days (Martin, 2005). Bendroth (2001) notes that Preacher Sunday “scandalized some, and delighted others, by spicing his sermons with slangy expressions; he threw

chairs at the devil and stomped on liquor. His sermons were athletic as much as spiritual events and, even more scandalous, he did not shy away from mentioning the specifics of sin, in all their lurid array” (51). Perhaps an even better example of using drama and entertainment in church sermons is Aimee Semple MacPherson, founder and pastor of the immensely popular Angelus Temple, who drove motorcycles through the aisles, brought livestock on stage, and took a then-novel plane flight as a publicity stunt in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Los Angeles (Sutton, 2007). As Sutton (2007) notes, MacPherson engaged contemporary culture and used modern technology to evangelize, quite clearly with great success as indicated by the thousands of individuals that flocked to her church. Other examples exist in different contexts, including the dramatic performances of Evangeline Booth, the head of the U.S. section of the Salvation Army in the early 1900s. As Diane Winston (2002) notes, Booth performed dramatic pieces (also known as “sermon pageants”) like “Commander in Rags,” a tale of “love, service and salvation” at culturally elite public places such as the New York Metropolitan Opera house in the hopes of turning secular into sacred spaces and evangelizing unbelievers (113).

These examples of well-known American religious figures using entertainment to evangelize almost 100 years ago indicate that this strategy is not necessarily is not a new one in the U.S. What is new at River Rock Church and other churches like it is the degree to which commercial culture is engaged and *how* it is engaged, which is through the use of mainstream entertainment media. This research chronicles the relatively recent phenomenon of the incorporation of entertainment media – including Hollywood movies, popular television shows, and commercials – into American evangelical church services and rituals. Examples are numerous and include pastors' use of imagery from companies

like the telecommunications corporation Onstar (a General Motors' company) to discuss how to create a strong family life; showing a clip from the Hollywood movie *Spiderman 2* to demonstrate the nature of spiritual calling; incorporating the Starbucks' logo into a sermon about bringing the sacred into everyday life; and hosting American Idol contestants to sing during church sermons about the importance of accepting Jesus Christ into one's life. It is this media use – and the implications of it for how evangelicals understand their faith and construct their identities – that is the focus of this dissertation. This research situates this media practice by evangelical churches within changes in contemporary American religion; specifically, within the spiritual marketplace.

### *Evangelical Churches and the Spiritual Marketplace*

In recent decades, American evangelicalism has undergone a significant shift that has been recognized and described by several scholars. While some of the some central tenets of evangelicalism – including a belief in the authority and inerrancy of the Bible, an emphasis on developing a personal relationship with Jesus, and the perceived need to evangelize, or “spread the good news” – remain, there is a new kind of approach to evangelicalism characterized by what has been described as the spiritual marketplace. This new religious marketplace has been described by numerous scholars (Einstein, 2008; Hoover, 2007; Schofield Clark, 2007; Finke and Stark, 2005; Wolfe, 2003; Cimino and Lattin, 1998; Moore and Press, unpub). The phrase *spiritual marketplace* was coined by Wade Clark Roof (1999), who was describing what he saw as a fundamental realignment of religion and culture. The basis of Roof's observations is that

The boundaries of popular religious communities are now being redrawn, encouraged by the quests of the large, post-World War II generations, and facilitated by the rise of an expanded spiritual marketplace. The notion of a “spiritual marketplace” is itself captivating, with the image of a quest culture shaped by forces of supply and demand, and of a remaking of religious and institutional loyalties (10).

What Roof describes is a new religious environment that is more closely influenced by a market mentality of supply and demand, one where religious institutions are redefined as a business and churchgoers are repositioned as consumers with personal choice. Since Roof’s description of the spiritual marketplace, other scholars have turned their attention to describing this phenomenon. Cimino and Lattin (1998), in their exploration of how evangelical churches market themselves to churchgoers, state that evangelical church leaders have now shifted to a business model of worship that redefines the individual churchgoer as the “customer” and the church as the business (57). Specifically, they state that

In the new millennium, more and more American congregations will take this market-based approach to find new members and keep the ones they have. Megachurches embody the consumerism, eclecticism, and the conservatism shaping the religious future. They are the evangelical answer to Home Depot (p. 56).

The idea of competition between religious institutions is also recognized by Mara Einstein (2008), who in *Brands of Faith* states it succinctly: contemporary American religion is packaged as just another branded product in the American “consumer-focused

environment,” one that can be advertised by companies (churches) and purchased by consumers (churchgoers) (10)<sup>2</sup>. In *The Churching of America*, Finke and Stark (2006) also address changes in American religion. Restating the central tenets of the spiritual marketplace, they note that “religious economies are like commercial economies in that they consist of a market made up of a set of current and potential customers and a set of firms seeking to serve that market” (9). Roof (1993) has made a similar observation, noting that “Deeply influenced by a culture of consumption, boomers have grown up with religion made into a commodity and have looked on it in much the same way as other purchasable goods” (1993a: 195 in Einstein, 78). Emerson and Smith (2000) also have addressed the spiritual marketplace, noting that “With only slight exaggeration, the United States can be characterized as the ‘mega mall’ of religious consumerism (and) wherever one finds a marketplace, full of consumers looking to make choices and purchases, one finds competition” (139-140).

In addition to describing the transformation of the American religious landscape, scholars also have sought the potential causes of this. For Roof (1999), the rise of the spiritual marketplace was precipitated by several factors, including the post-war “baby boomer” generation, whose members rebelled against their parents’ choices and traditions, and for whom individual choice was paramount. Building from Roof’s conception of causation, Einstein (2008) states that the shift to a religious market mentality is due to two primary antecedents. The first potential cause involves a change in the perception of how faith is chosen versus ascribed. Previously, religion was seen as

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<sup>2</sup> Einstein does not limit her observations to evangelical institutions, recognizing the marketing phenomenon in other religions such as the (previously) esoteric offshoot of the Jewish faith known as Kabbalah.



something assigned to an individual by tradition, namely that one simply followed into the faith tradition of their parents. This perception has shifted to more of a consumer-oriented approach, in which churches are chosen based upon individual preference, the phenomenon initially remarked upon by Roof (1999, 1993). Specifically, Einstein observes that, in the cessation of framing religion as a “social mandate,” religion has been redefined as a product freely chosen according to individual needs (19).

The second cause for the rise of a religious marketplace that Einstein identifies concerns the level of media saturation in American society within the last few decades, which she states “has reached a height never imagined” (7). Hoover (2001) has also recognized this, noting that the recent proliferation of the mass media and the resulting diversity of information and symbolic resources in the United States have changed the American cultural and religious landscape significantly. As a result of these changes, Hoover (2006) states that “it no longer makes sense to look for religion in received, formal, inductive, or essentialized categories” (149).

According to Hoover (2006), the media have become more interactive (meaning one is consuming while also producing – via podcast, gaming, instant messaging, and the like) as well as proliferating (as manifested in the thousands of new websites dedicated to religion and/or spirituality). Hoover claims that these developments have had two primary effects on the relationship between religion and media. First, with the invention of cable television and satellites, televangelism has been pushed from the margins to the mainstream. Many of these evangelicals are innovators in using media, Hoover notes, who have been “particularly interested in exploring the implications of new media of communication” (48). The second impact of changes in media was in the way “secular”

media began to think about religion. Hoover observes that before media proliferation religion was an issue difficult to address, especially from a journalistic standpoint. This changed as the structure and diversity of channels in the media began to change. Hoover identifies the “signal event” as the 1994 premiere of *Touched by an Angel*, which brought religion into everyone’s homes via television.

In *Divided by Faith*, Emerson and Smith (2000) also discuss potential causes of the recent changes in American religion. Similar to other scholars, they see that the organization of American religion is roughly represented by the metaphor of a religious marketplace. However, they locate the ultimate origin of a religious market mentality not in a generational shift or changes in the media marketplace but instead to the earlier, initial separation of church and state, which they believe led to religious pluralism, increased competition, and ultimately to a growing emphasis on personal choice. As a result of disestablishment, then, Emerson and Smith (2000) submit that religious congregations need to specialize and market their services in order to survive and grow:

As religion scholars such as historian Nathan Hatch and sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark note, when religion becomes disestablished, it opens the doors for creative religious entrepreneurs to market their alternative faiths to religious consumers. The general public... is freed... to choose among options. Disestablishment in the context of a new, pluralistic nation led to a religious marketplace (139).

Finke and Stark (2006), as Emerson and Smith note, also perceive an early origin for the rise of the spiritual marketplace, claiming that the notion of religious freedom and

choice in the U.S. had a great influence on how American churchgoers perceived religious practice:

Some... may shudder at the use of market terminology in discussions of religion, but we see nothing inappropriate in acknowledging that where religious affiliation is a matter of choice, religious organizations must compete for members and that the “invisible hand” of the marketplace is as unforgiving of ineffective religious firms as it is of their commercial counterparts. We are not the first to use an explicit market model to explore the interplay among religious organizations. Indeed... Adam Smith did so very persuasively back in 1776 (8-9).

In recalling Scottish philosopher Smith’s (1776) *Wealth of Nations* based on conceptions of a free market economy, Finke and Stark make a clear claim for an early foundation of a religious market mentality based on the concept known as the voluntary principle<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the religious pluralism that Finke and Stark perceive in the separation of church and state, and the resulting emphasis on individual choice, can be seen to lay the foundation for later trends, such as the Baby Boomer generation and the proliferation of the media discussed by other scholars in the creation of the spiritual marketplace.

There are numerous scholarly descriptions that have emerged of evangelical churches within the new American religious economy. According to Roof (1993, 1999), one primary manifestation of the spiritual marketplace are “seeker” churches, namely

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<sup>3</sup> Finke and Stark (2006) observe that European scholars and religious leaders who traveled to the United States in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century used clear market terms to describe religious choice in America: “In 1834, when Andrew Reed was sent by the Congregational Union of England and Wales to assess American churches, he offered strong views about America’s ‘Religious Economy’: ‘Deliberately, but without hesitation, I say *the result is in every thing and every where most favorable to the voluntary, and against the compulsory principle*’ (Reed and Matheson, 1835b. 141, in Finke and Stark, 2006. 4).

those churches that try to appeal to individuals who are either unfamiliar or uncomfortable with traditional forms of religion and who are seeking some form of spiritual connection. Roof (1999) describes in detail the modern “seeker” church experience:

Seeker churches' work at developing forms of worship, and most especially utilizing music, that convey a sense of authenticity and reality about contemporary life. Above all, they try not to be boring.... Praise music and extensive sound systems create an inspirational context. Overhead projectors and large screens making possible visual connection with lyrics, cartoons, and Bible verses add to the overall experience. Drama and clips from film and television – mininarratives describing the joys and dilemmas of life - communicate effectively and relate to common, everyday experiences. Meeting in auditoriums... where there are few religious symbols and no stained glass plays down the 'churchy' atmosphere and sends the message that persons are accepted for who they are... (pp. 95-96).

One defining characteristic of evangelical churches in the new spiritual marketplace, Roof (1999) notes, is the shift away from traditional forms of worship, including strictly bible-based sermons and overt religious markers such as crosses, bibles, and pews and towards an entertaining and dramatic style in the attempt to provide the best religious product, one that will attract the most new members (80). Similar to Roof, Cimino and Lattin (1998) observe that evangelical megachurches have few “ecclesiastical trappings” – including crucifixes and stained glass windows – in an attempt to appear unintimidating and culturally relevant (p. 57). Mark Shibley (1996), who conducted

research in a Midwest Vineyard church through ethnographic observation of Sunday sermons, made the following observation that “Worship this morning seemed more like a rock concert than a religious gathering” based upon the music, style of dress of churchgoers and pastors, and the overall informal yet electrified atmosphere (94). Kimon Sergeant (2000) has chronicled what he calls seeker churches’ “Disney approach” to worship (so named because one of the churches in his study sent its staff to Disneyland to learn about managing large crowds and providing seamless entertainment), where “fun, lively, and contemporary services... provide new forms of worshipping God” (55).

This strategy – to attract new churchgoers through entertainment – as manifested in the new religious economy has been described by Wolfe (2003) in the following way: “Instead of building a church around worship and then attracting an audience, they want to attract an audience and then find the appropriate forms of worship that will keep them in their seats (26).

In sum, the relatively new spiritual marketplace, or religious economy, in the United States has a few defining characteristics. The first is a market mentality, in which churches have become branded products that compete for churchgoers’ faith, time and money. The second aspect of the market mentality is a redefinition of churchgoers into specific type of consumer, one who makes a choice of where and how to practice faith based upon individual needs and preferences. These types of religious followers are often referred to as “seekers,” those unchurched or “dechurched” individuals who are curious about religion but are wary of traditional religious organizations, and also for whom personal choice and fulfillment are paramount. It is the churches that cater to

these choices, as well as the churchgoers who do the choosing, that are the focus of this research.

### *Scope of Research*

In the emerging scholarly portrait of evangelical churches in the new religious marketplace, some of the researchers who address these recent changes in American religion allude to an engagement with media culture. Hoover (2006) states that what he calls “the new religiosity” is experiencing significant changes that are characterized by an engagement with media culture (147). Roof (1999), in his detailed description of seeker churches above, notes that part of the way in which these churches compete with one another is through the use of secular entertainment media – “drama and clips from film and television” – in sermons as a way to attract the unchurched (95). David Morgan (2002), in his assessment of Protestant visual piety, also recognizes Christianity’s often-close association with media, noting that “evangelical Protestants two hundred years ago were in no doubt about the rhetorical effectiveness of images at the very moment when modern mass culture was coming into being” (37).

Little research, however, has been done that examines how evangelicals use mainstream entertainment media, especially in the spaces of evangelical churches. Existing scholarship on the topic includes Kenneth Loomis (2004), who explores how college-age evangelicals use entertainment media outside of church, in the process finding that in individuals’ everyday lives they draw from the content of numerous Hollywood films to grow personally and spiritually. In her interesting ethnographic work *From Angels to Aliens*, Lynn Schofield Clark (2003) describes American teenagers’

engagement with mainstream media and also identifies the ways in which parents of teenage children approach spiritual issues using narratives drawn from mainstream media texts.

These studies on evangelicals and media described above approaches the relationship between media use and religion from *outside* the space of the church: no published research has been conducted on mainstream entertainment media use inside the spaces of these churches. While studies such as Moore and Press (unpub) and Draper and Park (forthcoming)<sup>4</sup> have briefly examined the use of commercial entertainment media in evangelical churches and recognized the use of mainstream media like Hollywood movies and television shows in American churches, these projects have not explored what the use of these media in church mean to evangelical churchgoers themselves. As noted in the beginning of this introduction, this omission represents a gap in the literature.

For Hoover (2007), filling the gap means exploring “the question of how religion is expressed and represented in the marketplace, and the question of how religion... might be changing as a result” (309). In earlier work, Hoover (2006) poses the question of what the role is of media in the project of the self. Specifically, what he is concerned with is identity “formation and maintenance as a central object of meaning around the self” (39). Following Hoover’s guidelines, this dissertation steps into the instrumentalist/substantive theoretical debate to assess the potential influence of these media, when intertwined with the sermons and activities of evangelical churches, to

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<sup>4</sup> Specifically, Draper and Park (forthcoming) from Baylor University have begun to examine the interconnection between “non-religious” media and evangelicalism through an internet survey of two churches – one politically liberal and the other conservative – to examine how mainstream entertainment media are used by church leaders to establish political boundaries. Their focus is rhetorical, analyzing verbal references to mainstream films made available in online sermons. Draper and Park do not conduct interviews with pastors or observe the reception of this media use by churchgoers.

influence the way churchgoers define themselves and their institutions, as well as shape the way faith is created and maintained.

### Theoretical Framework: the Instrumentalist/Substantive Debate on Religion and Media

In *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, an assessment of Christian churches' use of modern technology, Shane Hipps (2005) observes that "media are much more than neutral purveyors of information. They have the power to shape us regardless of content and thus cannot be evaluated solely upon their use" (38). Hipps agrees with commonly-held evaluations that the popular television show *Desperate Housewives* "with its overt extramarital affairs, homosexual references, drug use, and murder" is "bad" (morally speaking) in terms of content, but then counters that "we give little thought to the ways in which the *medium* of TV itself also impacts us" (38, emphasis added).

Christians (1990) makes a similar observation in his critique of evangelicals' use of media, stating that they "...typically focus on hardware, tools, and mechanical artifacts while largely ignoring the values embedded in the technological process. Contrary to popular opinion, technological products are particular, combining specific resources into distinctive entities with unique properties and capabilities" (338). To illustrate this point, Christians (1990) recounts Jacob Bronowski's (1965) story of the Himalayan guides, or *sherpas*, in his book *Science and Human Values*, where it was shown that the *sherpas* only knew one side of their mountain: they hadn't realized that there was another<sup>5</sup>. So it

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<sup>5</sup> Bronowski (1990, originally 1965) notes that this story reveals a "model of truth," one that requires putting the two sides of the Himalayan mountain Everest together in one's mental map (29). The story is a good representation of how knowledge may become compartmentalized, highlighting the need for increased understanding of media's potential influence. As Bronowski notes, "the parts begin to fit



is, Christians states, with evangelicals, who see only one side to the media that they employ to evangelize, ignoring the possibility that “the mass media are not merely purveyors of information but more importantly creators and shapers of culture” (334)<sup>6</sup>.

William Romanowski (1996) also discusses the impact that the medium itself has using the specific example of Christian opposition to the violent and sexual content of Hollywood film. He notes that one solution offered by some vocal Christian critics to counteract the sexuality and violence inherent in Hollywood films was to increase the number of family-focused films. Romanowski, however, sees the potential harm in not just the violent or sexual content in films but in Hollywood itself, writing that these Christian media critics propose this potential resolution “as though the consumer economy does no harm to families... so much for ideological warfare in the movies” (291). For Romanowski, the consumerism inherent in the medium of commercial film has the potential to negate any positive changes in content.

Thus, according to scholars like Romanowski (1996), there is potential harm in the underlying messages that accompany commercial entertainment media. But can these media be redeemed for religious purposes? In his well-known work *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niehbur (1951) provides a thoughtful discussion of what is known as the Christ and culture paradox<sup>7</sup>. Niebuhr notes the seeming paradox that while “Christianity and Western culture are so inextricably intertwined” there is also substantial tension in this interconnection (4). He does not define *culture* narrowly (in the sense of linked to

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together; the puzzled man’s mind begins to build a map; and suddenly the pieced are snug, the map will turn around, and the two faces of the mountain are both Everest” (39).

<sup>6</sup> Christians (1990) does consider the content of the media important as well, illustrated in his in-depth discussion of certain television shows that have important redemptive themes.

<sup>7</sup> Other scholars have addressed this paradox, including Quentin Schultze (2001) who has described this paradox as a “love-hate relationship.” Heather Hendershot (2004) has also recognized this, noting that Christians have always lived with the edict to live “in” but not “of” the world.

any one civilization or country) but instead characterizes it more broadly, namely as an artificial environment created by “man” that encompasses “language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes and values” (32). Niebuhr states that *culture* as he defines it has certain key elements: it is social, oriented toward human achievement, and exhibits “a world of values,” especially those geared toward the “good of man” (34-35). According to Niebuhr, then, *culture* represents secular culture, including the values inherent in it as well as its artifacts.

Niebuhr provides a thorough exploration of the various relationships with culture that Christians have had, identifying five general patterns: 1) Christ *against* culture, essentially a Christian opposition to – and separation from – secular culture; 2) Christ *of* culture, which represents itself in general as an agreement between Christianity and culture, with Christianity accommodating in some senses to what is considered good in the larger secular culture; 3) Christ above culture, where Christ is seen as a fulfillment of cultural aspirations as well as being of and above culture; 4) Christ and culture as representing a dualism in paradox, where both have authority but are opposed and separate; and 5) Christ as the transformer of culture (Niebuhr, 1951). The pattern that Niebuhr seems to provide the most support for is the last one, which focuses on conversion. In this relationship between Christianity and culture, culture is seen as transmitting perversion, which leads to a potential opposition between Christianity and culture; however, this belief does not lead to Christian separation from the world because Jesus is seen as the “converter of man in his culture and society” (p. 43). This, Niebuhr notes, is the “conversionist answer to the problem of Christ and culture” (190). Niebuhr

finds the biblical basis for this perspective in the Fourth Gospel, which “thinks of Christ as the converter and transformer of human action” (190).

Building from Niebuhr’s exploration of the Christ and culture paradox, Clifford Christians addresses the potential for Christian conversion of culture. In *Redeeming the Media: the Evangelical’s Cultural Task*, Christians (1990) notes that evangelicals, in not having a clear definition of culture, are limited in their ability to convert the media that they use for religious purposes. Christians sees that having a theory of culture would mean that culture should be accurately recognized as a “value-laden human construction” (332). Not to see this, Christians claims, is disastrous for evangelicals: the importance of media cannot be overstated: “...the media sketch out our world for us, organize our conversations, determine our decisions, and influence our self-identity...” (336).

To illustrate his point, Christians turns to visual media specifically, noting that they convey immanence in a way that print culture does not. He observes that “Visual media such as television, cinema, and photography encourage a sensate worldview. They promote a closed, nontranscendent universe where an upper story does not exist” (342). Following Christians’ observations, it is clear that to have a clearly-developed philosophy of technology is to see the value-laden nature of visual media and technology.

An example of the value-laden nature of technology comes from Vincent Miller (2003), who discusses the interesting example of the decision by the Catholic Church, under the leadership of Pope John Paul II, to increase the use media as a tool for reformation. Partly as a result of this, Miller observes, the pope was shown celebrating mass on television in famous places, including Yankee Stadium and Camden Yards. Miller notes that Joaquin Navarro-Valls, the first lay leader of the Holy See press office

to readily embrace the mass media, cited the example of a young boy in Bogota, Columbia calling out to the Pope during his visit to the country, that, “I know you; you’re the pope. You’re the same one I saw on television” (100). While leaders within the Catholic Church, including Navarro-Valls, clearly saw this as an advantage for the Catholic Church, Miller notes that “the boy may recognize him as the same pope, but in what context? Who does he associate him with?” If the boy saw the pope associated with his local church leaders, Miller reasons, he might get a sense of the Catholic Church as it related to his own parish. Clearly this would be one of the benefits intended by leaders of the Catholic Church. However, Miller then makes the rather wry observation that the nature of television as a medium might place the pope “in other constellations as well. On North American television, he would share the company of Oprah and Barney. This would certainly confer status, but would give the boy a very interesting ecclesiology to say the least” (105).<sup>8 9</sup> Miller’s example of the boy who saw the pope on television is a good example of Christians’ point that “Every medium has its own grammar, that is, the elements enabling it to communicate. Even in the hands of evangelicals, there is no changing the inherent biases of a medium” (1990. 340).

Applying the substantive arguments regarding the values inherent in media to the use of secular entertainment media in the evangelical churches in this study, the question

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<sup>8</sup> In considering the power of a medium one the case of the magician Richard Cardini is also relevant. As New York Times contributor Ricky Jay (2009) observes, the Great Cardini, who worked in the 1950s and was a “headline attraction” and one of the best known magicians of his time. Although he was aware of the power of television, he was also wary of it, recognizing that, although putting his show onto the new medium could give him greater exposure, there were also disadvantages, such as losing control of his image, exposure of his magic techniques, and would-be imitators could more easily copy his tricks. Most important, perhaps, was the fact that, through the medium of television, the “extraordinary might instead become commonplace.”

<sup>9</sup> Another interesting example of the Catholic Church using television to serve its needs was when the Roman Catholic Diocese of Scranton, Pennsylvania purchased commercial spots on MTV and VH-1 to attract men to the priesthood. As Romanowski (1996) recounts, Jay Leno on the *Tonight Show* responded to this attempt with, “Just think, a future Pope could be watching *Beavis and Butthead* right now!” (34).

can be asked as to whether evangelicals could be redeeming media in the way that substantive theorist Christians (1990) proposes. This can be answered in two ways: examining the content of the media texts themselves and also by examining how the content of the media is delivered (*eg*, through visual media), a distinction that Christians makes when evaluating evangelicals use of media. In terms of content, Christians cites the neo-Marxist emphasis on the dominant, or preferred, message in a media text that serves the ideological interests of the socioeconomic elite. Christians writes that “redemptive media would communicate alternative discourses or offer subversive texts” (1990. 344). In so doing, Christians notes, evangelicals could “open windows on the moral landscape by engaging the conscience” (345). Examples that Christians provides include shows like Ted Koppel’s *Nightline* and the “ethnic press,” which are uniquely situated to offer subversive readings (346). Christians is looking for moral literacy – he finds it in documentaries that raise our awareness, as well as literature such as Ken Auletta’s *Underclass*, which represents the redemptive motif. Christians does not limit the potentiality of redemption to non-fiction, however. He also cites examples of dramas like the film *Chariots of Fire* and *Elephant Man* as well as television shows like *M\*A\*S\*H* and *Cagney and Lacey*. For Christians, “television redeems its peculiar capacity for intimacy when it seriously wrestles with our humanness, provides glimpses of mature realism, and pushed toward greater variety and sagacity” (348). From the examples Christians’ supplies for us, it is clear that the redemptive potential of media is linked to a critical, or subversive, interpretation of media texts as well as the potential these texts offer to raise our level of awareness and engage our consciousness. In part, to

be critical of media from Christians' perspective is to address issues of poverty, of war, of inequitable social relationships such as gender.

Statements like these reflect not only the substantive view of media and technology but do so on a level that challenges the view that the content of a medium has more of an influence and “impact” than the vehicle used to deliver it. As McLuhan and Zingrone (1996) assert, “The content or message of any particular medium has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb” (in Hipps, 2005. 39). Although this research does not adopt the extreme end of the spectrum of McLuhan’s adage that “the medium is the message,” it does provide a new way to think about the mainstream entertainment media shown in these churches. For instance, the question can be asked, does the scene from the animated movie *The Emperor’s New Groove* only send a message about how to become a disciple for Christ (as the pastor intended) and how to avoid selfishness, or are there other, messages in the movie that churchgoers are exposed to in the space of their church? Does a clip shown during a sermon from *Minority Report* about Tom Cruise running through a mall speak to churchgoers just about how to follow the Holy Spirit, and does the pre-battle scene from *Braveheart* simply convey a message about personal transformation? What other, potentially contradictory, messages are there in these media that come from the method of delivery itself?

Postman (1985) has argued that the shift from the medium of print to visually-based media has significantly changed religion in the U.S. in a negative direction. He notes that the format of television (or, more broadly speaking, visual media) requires everything – including religion and politics – to be entertaining, a shift that changes

religious discourse in fundamental ways. One way in which entertainment-based media change the content of religious sermons is that it puts the focus even more firmly on individual needs and desires.

### Individualism and the Instrumentalist/Substantive Debate

Roof (1999) has noted that, in the new spiritual marketplace, the strategy of attracting new members – and keeping existing ones – through entertainment fundamentally shifts the focus to the individual and highlights personal choice and fulfillment:

From a traditional point of view, the reason [to be involved in religious organizations] should be obvious: if people are committed to faith and have convictions, they usually feel some sense of duty and obligation connected with their religious belonging. The traditional religious script prescribes loyalty to a religious community. But how well does this hold in a consumer culture that emphasizes the personal rewards that should go with religious attachment? (pp. 85-86).

Roof's observations bring up an important point, which is the focus on the individual in the new spiritual marketplace. Integral to the new seeker style of worship, as several scholars have noted, is a focus on the individual (Einstein, 2008; Hoover, 2006; Wolfe, 2003; Roof, 1999). Hoover (2006) has defined seeking in the following way: "...that it is about the self; that it results from self-conscious autonomous action on the part of individuals, and that is inherently distrustful of received clerical or institutional authority, combine to support a new religious sensibility that has come to be

called “seeking” (52). Einstein (2008), in her observation of evangelical Alpha courses, notes that the treatment of guests who attend these introductory courses (designed to usher people into Christianity) “is a prime example of creating individualized programs for individual consumers” (116).

In this research, which is framed by the instrumentalist/substantive theoretical debate as it progresses, individualism is a key pivot when considering church leaders’ and churchgoers’ beliefs about the mainstream entertainment media woven into church sermons and rituals. In his book *Eyes Wide Open* (2007), Romanowski provides an in-depth exploration into what he calls the “Wizard of Oz” syndrome, namely a conception, promoted by Hollywood films, where “humans are at the center” of everything, and where God or any other higher power is not needed for survival, salvation, or happiness. Romanowski sees that many films, including *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Cast Away* (both of which were shown in the churches in this study) feature “rugged individuals who live by a code of self-reliance” (169). According to Romanowski, this portrayal of individuals who do not need any power beyond themselves directly contradicts Christianity’s call for people to not be self-reliant individualists but instead members of a community. Roof (1999) also discusses the relationship between media and religion, noting that visual media create the idea of “an expansive self, if not an empty self, in need of constant filling” that exists in tension with Christianity for the individualism it promotes (69). The question addressed in this research is what happens to identity construction and maintenance in regards to faith in everyday life with the introduction of mainstream media into evangelical religious practices?



The focus on the nature and consequences of individuality in contemporary evangelical organizations reveals an interesting potential paradox. In discussing the cultivation of individualism in the churchgoer on the one hand, and the strong emphasis on community in religious organizations on the other, it is clear that there is significant potential tension in the introduction of commercial media into evangelical sermons. It is important to ask in what ways religious individuals attempt to resolve this tension, and to what effect. In exploring this question, it is also important to trouble the conceptualization of evangelicals as a uniform group, whose members will always respond in similar ways to similar problems.

#### Content versus Context: Research Focus on Media Use

In considering relationship between the *content* of media texts shown in churches versus the *context* of their usage in evangelical churches (as well as in churchgoers' everyday lives), Hall's theoretical concept of articulation is useful in guiding the general scope and intent of research. According to Hall (1996), his concept of articulation includes not one but two meanings, both drawing from conventional definitions and usage of the English word itself in the sense that articulation refers to both expression as well as connection (141).

In *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*, John Storey (2003) observes that *articulation* as developed by Hall can be considered within the processes of ideological struggle, noting that

...first, it is an 'articulation' in that meaning has to be expressed (the 'text' has to be made to signify); second, it is an 'articulation' in that meaning is

always expressed in a specific context (connected to another context and the ‘text’ could be made to signify something quite different) (4).

Slack (1996) also recognizes the emphasis placed on context by *articulation*.

From a theoretical standpoint, articulation provides a crucial way to avoid “the twin traps of reductionism and essentialism” and instead highlights the theoretical importance of context (113). Applied to this research, Hall’s conceptual framework of articulation offers a way (as both method and theory) to consider media use within the American spiritual marketplace.

Following Hall’s articulation framework, when exploring the use of commercial entertainment media in evangelical churches the focus is less on the *content* of the media (although there is articulation between media texts and churchgoers as described in Chapter Six) and more on the *context* of usage within the spaces of the churches. Although this research does not address the direct connection, or articulation, between media text and individual reception of those texts, it does allow for individual churchgoers’ expressions and voices as they navigate the new mediated religious landscape. James Carey (2007, originally 1989) has observed that there have been two different ideas regarding communication in American culture. The first conception, called the transmission perspective, views communication as the act of “sending” or “transmitting” information or messages from sender to receiver (38). As Carey puts it, “the center of this idea of communication is the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control” (38). Communication, from a transmission standpoint, thus is seen as a relatively simple, linear process that transmits and disseminates knowledge and information for the purposes of control. This view of

communication is fairly limited in manifold ways, including the way in which the “message” itself is defined as well as the focus on “effects.”

According to Carey (2007), the ritual view of communication, which is older than transmission, is closely linked to concepts such as *community* and *sharing*. Carey contrasts ritual and transmission models of communication, noting that “a ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time” (40). Where the transmission perspective would see communication as the sending of messages across space, ritual would see instead the importance of ceremony. An even clearer way to put it would be to say that a ritual perspective would downplay

the role of the sermon, the instruction, and the admonition, in order to highlight the role of the prayer, the chant, and the ceremony. It sees the original... manifestation of communication not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of a... meaningful cultural world (2007. 40).

Moving away from what he perceives as the religious origins of the two terms, Carey turns to the relatively secular act of reading the newspaper. If one considers a newspaper under the transmission model one would focus on the content of the medium and the information it contains; if one, however adopts a ritual perspective of communication, the *act* of reading the newspaper is highlighted. In the act of reading the newspaper one may be hailed as a patriot, a supporter (or opponent) of women’s rights, as a Democrat or Republican, and so forth. It is in the habitual consumption of a form of media (such as a newspaper) that the ritual perspective becomes the clearest.

Applied to this research, what is “transmitted” (via content) to churchgoers in the movies and television shown in their churches is important, especially when considering how churchgoers receive these mediated messages. From this perspective, identifying the various ideologies – regarding individualism, gender, militarism, class, sexuality, and the like – in church sermons is important in order to explore potential moments of resistance or incorporation by churchgoers. Carey’s recognition of the second definition of communication, however, provide the necessary augmentation to considering content alone. It is one thing to be exposed to certain messages from the media while in a movie theatre or in front of the television screen within one’s home. But what is the significance of churchgoers coming into the space of their churches to watch blockbuster comedies, dramas, military/action films, and television shows? What is being communicated to churchgoers by including in the church ritual an aspect of entertainment and consumption? In the act of attending church and watching movies as part of a sacred ritual and ceremony, how is one hailed? As an individual seeking greater faith, or as a consumer for whom entertainment and individual fulfillment is paramount? Carey notes that a ritual view of communication will focus less on the information sent or gained and instead would see communication “more as attending a mass, a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed” (41). The question asked in this research is, What particular view of the world is portrayed to evangelicals in the act of watching movies in church?

With Carey’s perspective of ritual communication in mind, this research has as its focus the context for the media use in church, focusing on the ritual aspect, and less on content. This is not to say that the ideological content of media texts – as well as the

potential reception and resistance to the media texts by individuals – is not important.

Many scholars have commented on the role that particular types of media play as agents of acculturation in the development of worldviews, including how visual media can be significant socializing agents, inviting certain identities and normative ideals of gender, race, the role of authority, and the like (Kellner, 2000, 1995; Ewen and Ewen, 1994, Benshoff and Griffin, 2009; Warshow, 2002; Martin and Ostwalt, 1995; Kellner, 1995; Cormack, 1993; Kaplan, 1990; Ryan and Kellner, 1990; Marchetti, 1989; Dorfman, 1983; Mulvey, 1975). As Hall (2003) notes,

Institutions like the media are peculiarly central to the matter since they are, by definition, part of the dominant means of ideological production. What they ‘produce’ is, precisely, representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations, and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work” (90).

Seen from a Gramscian perspective of the implicit power of ideological hegemony, the media shown in the spaces of the churches in this study have the potential to encourage certain normative views of society, including views about morality, race, gender, homosexuality, war, and so forth. More specifically, the films shown in these churches have the potential to invite evangelical churchgoers, who are immersed in secular entertainment media both inside and outside the space of the church, into a particular subjectivity, one that is defined by a militaristic stance, whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality. From this perspective, I could have analyzed the movie and television clips shown in these churches in order to gauge their reception in individual churchgoers.

However, there are several problems with an analysis of the ideology in the media texts shown in churches in the context of this research. First, I am not searching for clear “cause-and-effect” in regards to media texts and beliefs in the churchgoers I observed. In “Deconstructing the Popular,” Hall (2006) makes an observation regarding the perceived passivity of the audience when it comes to the reception of cultural products, noting that

If the forms and relationships on which participation in this story of commercially provided 'culture' depend are purely manipulative and debase, then the people who consume and enjoy them must either be themselves debased by these activities or else living in a permanent state of 'false consciousness.' They must be 'cultural dopes' who can't tell that what they are being fed is an updated form of the opium of the people. That judgment may make us feel right, decent and self-satisfied about our denunciations of the agents of mass manipulation and deception - the capitalist cultural industries: but I don't know that it is a view which can survive for long as an adequate account of cultural relationships.... Ultimately, the notion of the people as a purely passive, outline force is a deeply unsocialist perspective (481).

Indeed, as I began this research I had an idea that I could find a link between the ideologies present in the media texts to which churchgoers were exposed in their churches and their individual views on certain issues, a mindset reflected in earlier work that considered the link between these media texts and the formation of collective identity (Moore and Press, unpub). When I began this doctoral research I was specifically looking at beliefs about war and thought I might find a correlation between the

militaristic movies shown in these churches – including *Braveheart*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *A Few Good Men*, *Lord of the Rings* – in a church sermon (which the churches in this study did) and pro-war beliefs in churchgoers. Not only did I not find this, but in the process I found that evangelicals were more heterogeneous than I had expected. Instead of finding homogeneity and predictability, my observation of evangelicals in small prayer groups indicated substantial divergence in churchgoers' beliefs on many topics, including gender, war and electoral politics<sup>10</sup>. It is for this reason that this introductory chapter is labeled “Conclusion” instead of “Introduction,” so labeled as a way to recognize the preconceived notions I had as a researcher before I entered the field.

Having made this point, however, even if I expected to find heterogeneous reception of the media texts shown in churches by evangelicals, the method precluded a direct assessment along the lines of Hall's (1973) encoding-decoding model (in terms of dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings), as evangelicals rarely directly discussed the media texts their pastors showed in Sunday sermons. If I had done focus groups with these churchgoers, such as other researchers like Rendleman (1999)<sup>11</sup> have done, I may have been able to answer specific questions; however, it would not have been in a natural

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<sup>10</sup> It also revealed my own biases and preconceptions regarding not only evangelicals but also gender roles in one example in particular. On my last visit to a group – the Murray Group from Sunrise Church – I had come to say goodbye and bring cookies to thank the group for letting me participate. The group had always been particularly calm, very Bible based, and very structured: every prayer group was marked by breakfast first then bible study after. Although the religious books we studied changed every week the group dynamic did not: group members were always respectful and polite. During this last visit I was saying “goodbye” I did not bring my notebook. It was then that I was finally told what Roy, the only male member of the group and a union laborer with a thick moustache and calloused hands, had done before entering construction: he had been a male belly dancer. In fact, so had his wife, Amy, who was also a member of the group. In this last visit they revealed that they used to do “Belly Grams” for the local area and used to be in a belly dance troupe. Roy even brought his purple sequined belly dancing outfit from storage for me to see. It was then I realized that even though I thought I knew this group well, I had only begun to understand.

<sup>11</sup> In his dissertation *Breaking the Sound Barrier, Breaking Faith*, Rendleman (1999) asked evangelicals to watch several mainstream films, including *The Apostle* and *Dead Man Walking* to ascertain how evangelicals felt the Christian faith was represented in these films.

setting in which the normal interactions of evangelicals could be observed and discerned. Instead, the ethnographic observations permitted an in-depth, complex portrait of evangelicals' media use in their everyday lives. The evangelicals in this study are indeed immersed in mainstream commercial media culture both inside and outside the spaces of their churches, not only consuming media inside and outside the spaces of their churches, but also incorporating them into their daily lives as they negotiate faith and identity. As immersed as they were, they did not reference explicit texts shown in Sunday sermons, nor did I directly ask. Instead, what I have focused on is evangelicals' everyday use of media, how they talk about the media, and the integration of that media into individuals' lives.

In considering the context for media use I am following in the footsteps of researchers like David Morley, who recognized after completing *Nationwide* (1980), his well-known assessment of Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model, that it is important not only to examine media messages and their subsequent interpretation by audiences but to study media consumption as it occurs in a natural context. In *Family Television* (1988), eight years after the original *Nationwide* study, Morley writes:

While I would, of course, argue that the findings in that project remain of considerable interest, I had subsequently come to feel that it was vital to pursue finally the question of *how* people watched television in its more natural setting, at home with their families. In short, my focus of interest has thus shifted from the analysis of the patterns of different audience "readings" of particular programme materials, to the analysis of the domestic viewing context itself (14, *emphasis mine*).



Stuart Hall observes that in this new focus “Morley very suggestively brings together two lines of critical inquiry which have tended to be kept in strict isolation – questions of interpretation and questions of use” (1988. 9). In his work, Morley doesn’t address the ritual perspective explicitly, but it seems that in exploring how families watch television together, he is enabling the opportunity to look at ritual communication in terms of how meanings are created in the process of sharing and community.

In looking at the context for media use – and not just the messages sent by the media used in church and subsequent reception of the texts – I am also pulling from the results of Janice Radway’s (1984) seminal work *Reading the Romance*. Radway found in the course of her research that she couldn’t simply look at the content of romance novels and how they were received by women readers; instead she needed to examine the act of reading itself:

I soon realized I would have to give up my obsession with textual features and narrative details if I wanted to understand their [women readers’] view of romance reading. Once I recognized this it became clear that romance reading was important... because the simple act of picking up a book enabled them to deal with the particular pressures and tensions encountered in their daily round of activities (86).

In focusing on the act of reading itself, Radway encountered findings that were interesting in their potential contradictions: while women romance readers may have accepted to some degree the gender discourses (regarding men as emotional and perhaps

financial caretakers)<sup>12</sup> within the romance novel texts themselves, the act of reading represented direct resistance to patriarchal relationships in their personal lives by allowing them to “escape the present,” which for many of the readers was a world in which domestic duties and the needs of family were emphasized (89).

Drawing from substantive theorists who frame this work, as well as previous cultural studies scholarship on media consumption, this research focuses on the context of media use in the churches. In this study, attention is given to what media texts are used in individual churches and to the content of those texts. The most in-depth assessments of media use in these churches, however, come from how these texts are used in evangelical sermons.

### *Evangelicals, Defined*

When using the term ‘evangelical’ in this research I do not mean to imply either that this sample of churches is representative of evangelicalism as a whole or that evangelicals are homogeneous. In fact, evangelicals as a group have been remarkably difficult to define. Mark Noll (1995) provides an interesting and insightful definition, stating that “‘Evangelicalism’ is not, and never has been, an ‘ism’ like other Christianisms – for example, Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Presbyterianism, Anglicanism, or even Pentecostalism.... Rather, ‘evangelicalism’ has always been made up of shifting movements, temporary alliances, and the lengthened shadows of individuals” (8).

Schultze and Woods (2008) note that the term *evangelical* has become so vague that the

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<sup>12</sup> Radway’s argument regarding the gender discourses in romance novels – as well as why women chose to read them - was slightly more complex than this. Specifically, in drawing from the theoretical work of Nancy Chodorow, Radway believed that women readers were able to envision a reversal of gender roles in the sense that the male heroes in romance novels often serve as emotional nurturers.

even the “world’s most famous evangelical,” Billy Graham, cannot define the term (21). As Hoover (2006) has noted, contemporary religious practice does not have to be seen as monolithic:

...we should expect there to be differences between individuals and interpretive communities within the whole field, defined by social and religious demographics as well as by different life trajectories and histories (77).

Seen from this perspective, evangelicalism can be defined as a coherent unit in a broad sense only. However, Marsden (1991) provides one way to consider the group as a whole, stating that essential evangelical beliefs include an idea of the final authority of the Bible, the concept of salvation, the need to evangelize, and “the importance of a spiritually transformed life” (pp. 4-5). Thus there are some broad similarities, including a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, the emphasis on cultivating a personal relationship with Jesus, and the need to evangelize. In this sense, all four churches chosen for this research are evangelical.

However, for the purposes of this research on religion and media, it is useful to adopt Wade Clark Roof’s (1999) definition of evangelicalism as that which includes engagement with the wider secular culture and consumer culture. Specifically, Roof’s definition is based in part on his recognition of American evangelicals’ adoption of an explicitly consumerist, marketing-driven style of operation (1999, 147). What my research in the churches indicates is that the embrace of secular media and a concomitant consumerist philosophy is one of the singular defining characteristics of the contemporary evangelical churches in this study. In this sense I have studied evangelical

seekers and their churches. As a result, the definition of evangelicalism used for this research – similar to Roof's – includes not only the Protestant religious tradition and beliefs about the inerrancy of Bible, but in the seeker tradition also incorporates a sense of evangelicals' engagement with secular media and American consumer culture.

### *Why Study American Evangelicals?*

American evangelicals are important to study for several reasons, including that they are an increasingly influential group in U.S. society and thus are an integral part of the changing face of U.S. politics. In *Shaking the World for Jesus*, Heather Hendershot (2004) notes that events in the 1970s and 1980s paved the way for the increasing role of Christianity in contemporary American politics, including the formation of the "Moral Majority" by Jerry Falwell, which laid claim to the success of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1988<sup>13</sup>. Einstein observes that evangelicals' size alone is enough to make them the "900-pound gorilla in the election booth" (190)<sup>14</sup>.

Evangelical churches are widely recognized as powerful social and political institutions in the U.S., shaping Americans' beliefs and influencing actions on myriad issues. Many scholars have commented on the prominent role that American evangelicals played in the 2004 presidential election, attributing President Bush's election victory to the role evangelical churches played in mobilizing support for the Republican party (Frank, 2005; Phillips, 2005; Jelen, 1993). According to a report on CBS' *60 Minutes*, approximately 70 million Americans identify as evangelical, and in the

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<sup>13</sup> It is argued, however, that Reagan did not press actively for a Christian agenda (Frank, 2004; Lasch, 1991). The Bush administration, however, was arguably different in this regard (Phillips, 2006; Martin, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> According to Smidt and colleagues (forthcoming) in *The Disappearing God Gap?*, American evangelicals' political influence as popularly understood may be on the wane.

2004 presidential election, “40 percent of the votes for George W. Bush came from their ranks” (2004). This is supported by Green et al.’s (2005) study of the Fourth National Survey of Religion and Politics, where Bush received 40% of votes from “traditional,” “centrist,” and “modernist” evangelical Protestants. In the 2008 presidential election this trend did not change significantly: although 5% more evangelicals voted in favor of the Democratic party in the last election than in 2004, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2008) reports a 47 percentage point spread between evangelical preference for the two political parties, heavily favoring Republicans at 73%-26%. When these data are compared to other religious groups, such as Catholics, for instance, the evangelical numbers stand out even more: Catholics were more evenly distributed in their voting behavior, with a 54%-45% point spread favoring democratic candidate Barack Obama.

In terms of political affiliation, then, evangelicals are often thought of as politically conservative (Phillips, 2006; Bacevich, 2005; Martin, 1997; Page, 2004; Pew Internet Project, 2008, 2004), and “moral issues” – including abortion, the right to die, and homosexuality – are usually high on evangelicals’ political and social agenda. These concerns continued to be significant issues in the 2008 presidential campaign, with 71% of committed McCain voters indicating that “moral values” were important to their vote (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008). The persistence of these issues indicates the continuing influential role that religion has in contemporary American politics. Evangelicals also are a highly mobilized group, providing a stable and consistent voting population (Pew Internet Project, 2004). As a result of this significant influence wielded by American evangelicals as a whole, it is important to understand what shapes

evangelicals' views and identities, and what influences how they understand the world around them.

### *Chapter Organization*

With the description of the spiritual marketplace provided in this introductory chapter, Chapter Two describes the methods used to explore the various facets of the phenomenon. Chapter Three continues this thread by going inside the spaces of evangelical churches to describe the commercial entertainment media as used during Sunday sermons. The chapter includes some attention to the content of the films, noting in general certain trends regarding maleness, whiteness, and militarism, but this section of the research is largely focused on how Hollywood movies and television shows are used within pastors' speeches, including when they are used and in what context.

Chapters Four and Five consider media use in evangelical churches from the perspective of church leaders. Chapter Four consists of interviews with pastors regarding media use in their churches, their reasons for including them in their sermons, and what benefits they believe are derived from the practice. What emerges from these interviews is that pastors take an instrumental approach to the media they use, seeing it as a value neutral tool that they can employ without tension or disadvantage. Chapter Five takes a closer look at church leaders' reactions when a media text – in this case, *The Da Vinci Code* movie – goes directly against the teachings of the church, and what church leaders attempt to do to control churchgoers' reception of it when they themselves have encouraged a close relationship with commercial media culture.

Chapter Six examines, using ethnographic observations, how the evangelicals from these four churches feel about mainstream entertainment media and how they use films and television shows in their everyday lives both inside and outside of their churches. Drawing from the ethnographic research, as well as the email survey of Choices, this section indicates that, similar to their pastors, churchgoers' themselves take a very instrumental approach to media, seeing it as something they can enjoy, and draw meaning from, but one that does not impact them negatively.

Chapter Seven addresses the instrumentalist views held by churchgoers and church leaders, drawing from the instrumentalist/substantive theoretical debate to address individualism and consumerism observed in the members of evangelical prayer groups.

Chapter Eight, the conclusion, summarizes the chapters and provides directions for further research.

### *Conclusion: Interrogation of the Concept of Homogeneity in Evangelicals*

In his book *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*, Kellner (1995) makes an interesting critique of the Frankfurt School, noting that the school of thought "was excellent at tracing the lines of domination within media culture, but was less adept at ferreting out moments of resistance and opposition" (41). In discussing the relationship between individualism, media, and religion, then, it is important to keep in mind that evangelicals are not a homogenous mass, but instead may have conflicting subjectivities and identities that may alter the way in which messages, mediated or otherwise, are received.

In choosing this focus, this research interrogates the concept of evangelicals as an undifferentiated mass, one that thinks and votes in unison with very little discord or tension. Evangelicals are a diverse group of individuals: instead of treating them as a passive type of audience that simply internalizes a specific ideology from church leaders (as the well-known hypodermic model of audience effects would conceptualize it), this research allows for the possibility of multiple identities and subjectivities (Hennessey, 1993; Weedon, 1987), ones that may provide resistance or tension to church messages that come in myriad forms. It is therefore important to examine how these individuals get the resources to construct their identity and interpretations of the world, specifically how they use mass media – both in the space of their church as well as outside of it – and how these meanings get taken up in everyday life.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **METHODS**

#### *Introduction*

In order to explore the implications of the interconnection between faith, individual identity, and commercial entertainment media in evangelical seeker churches in the U.S., this dissertation incorporates multiple research methods, including participant observation of small evangelical prayer groups, in-depth interviews with evangelical church leaders, observation of church sermons, and email surveys. Observing the churches in this research over a span of a few years has permitted an in-depth, methodical assessment of the secular, commercial, entertainment media used in evangelical churches, including how they are used in sermons and what discourses churchgoers are exposed to in the process. The benefit of “triangulation” through use of complementing methodologies and approaches is noted by several scholars, including Lunt and Livingstone (1996) and Fontana and Frey (2005), among others. Fontana and Frey (2005) in particular note that well-known researcher Paul Lazarsfeld “not only implemented survey research but also triangulated his work by relying on unstructured interviews and ethnological observations” (p. 700). As such, each method utilized in this dissertation research is meant to complement and build upon other methods. However, the method that provides the primary empirical material for this research is ethnographic observation, since it is in the natural setting that the most detailed observations can be made regarding individuals’ beliefs about media, faith, identity, and the everyday world in which they live.

The general methodological framework this research follows is based on the following premises as described by Lindlof and Taylor (2002), including that: natural settings are valuable and beneficial; the reduction of “bias” (in various forms) is desirable; both quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry are legitimate; and the use of multiple methods in general enhances understanding of complex phenomena (p. 9). Having noted this general guiding framework, however, it is important to qualify it to some degree. The reference to “bias” that Lindlof and Taylor (2002) make, for example, assumes by its very presence the existence of the opposite conceptions of “objectivity” or “truth.” The idea is that if bias in all forms is reduced we will be closer to attaining a real, definable, and knowable truth. This research, however, doesn’t presuppose any truth with a capital “T,” nor do I as a researcher pretend to have complete objectivity. Instead, my own position as the researcher is acknowledged here within this description of methods.

Related to this is what Denzin (1996) terms the *representational crisis*, which refers to questions of whether or not there can be a “world out there” which can be known and then whether or not that world can be accurately represented by author and text<sup>15</sup> (3). These types of questions were also addressed by Carey (2007), when he averred that “There is reality, and then, after the fact, there are our accounts of it” (43). Carey, however, is describing a world in which there *is* a reality, and thus he isn’t addressing ontological concerns as much as he does epistemological concerns, namely the nature of how we know the world and describe the phenomena within it.

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<sup>15</sup> Specifically, Denzin (1996) in writing of the representational crisis, states that “Any social text can be analyzed in terms of its treatment of four paired terms: (a) the “real” and its representation in the text; (b) the text and the author, (c) lived experience and its textual representations, and (d) the subject and his or her intentional meanings (4).

In discussing my role and positioning as a researcher of this study, and keeping in mind Denzin's (1997) observations regarding the subjective and often problematic relationship between the researcher and his/her observations and texts, it is important to note that I began this research as a "seeker" of religion and at the conclusion of it remain one, someone who is attracted to various aspects of religion but also wary of organized religion on a personal level. Like Mary Jo Neitz (1987) who studied charismatic prayer groups in a Catholic urban parish for three years but did not convert to the faith, I did not become an evangelical during this research. As a researcher, then, I write from a position as a non-believer but one who also remains profoundly curious about religion. At the same time, like Wolfe (2003), who writes about the transformation of American religion, I believe that I do not write from any position of hostility to religion.

Having stated my position, however, I cannot say that I have been objective in the text I have created here for several reasons. First, I avoid relying on a concept of objectivity (or truth), for to do so is to take away the relative nature of reality as it exists for different individuals (or groups, or nations, and so forth). In addition, however, the subject itself precludes a notion of objectivity: as Wolfe (2003) notes, "...religion – a subject that takes one simultaneously into the most private realms of the human heart and the most public – defies the social scientist's claim to objectivity" (vii). If I am not objective in the traditional sense, then, I have at the least attempted to be fair, allowing evangelicals' voices to be heard through the research.

I conducted research in four evangelical organizations in Illinois from 2007 to 2009. Although other churches were included in this research, including in the study of evangelicals' reaction to *The Da Vinci Code* movie in Chapter Three, the scope of

ethnographic observation was narrowed down to four churches. Working with a smaller number of churches permitted a more in-depth understanding of how media are used by evangelical leaders within their churches as well as allowing an exploration of how these media are received by individual churchgoers in their everyday lives inside and outside of church.

### *Field Site Access*

There were some challenges in my attempt to access the various field sites. Lofland et al. (2005) note that, generally speaking, there are several, often interrelated, factors that can influence the “ease or difficulty” of access to a site. These can include the type of setting, the status of the researcher (insider versus outsider, known versus unknown), as well as political or bureaucratic barriers. The settings and sites I hoped to gain access to were influenced by all of these factors.

In regards to the type of setting, Lofland et al. (2005) note that public settings usually contain the least barriers to research due to their relatively open nature. One example of a public setting in the context of this research were the church sermons, which always took place in portions of the church buildings that were open to the public. Small prayer groups, where I planned the ethnographic observation portion of the study, were more difficult to access because most often they took place in church members’ private homes.

One way to overcome the potential obstacle of access to more private sites originated partly in the method itself and partly in the approach. Kahn and Mann (1969, in Lindlof and Taylor, 2002), describe a procedure they refer to as “contingent

acceptance decisions,” whereby access to a field site is gained incrementally within an organization. Although Lindlof and Taylor (2002) describe this method as moving from the bottom up in an organization (*ie*, gaining permission first from the community and moving up through the hierarchy), my research design reversed this process, starting at the top and moving downward due to the hierarchical nature of some of the churches in this study. As a result, I conducted interviews with church leaders first, in the process learning from them about their organizations and members and then explaining to them the purpose and scope of my research. Lindlof and Taylor state that:

Ultimately, the success of most negotiations (of access) depends on whether the gatekeeper feels good about placing trust in the person asking for access. Researchers should give the gatekeeper every reason to think that they are competent, organized, true to their word individuals who will respect the culture of the group or organization (2002, 103).

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) also note that often researchers make the argument for access to a site using the justification of “social good.” In this case, I believe I was granted access to both church leaders as well as the smaller, more intimate prayer groups because I was able to convey to the pastors – and then to the churchgoers themselves – that I believed that this research could more accurately represent evangelicals’ views on faith and media than other organizations had in the past.

From what I understood in initial discussions with church leaders, evangelicals are guarded in how they talk with any individual doing research (be it an academic researcher or news reporter) due to how they have been portrayed in the media in the past. In conversations with me, pastors noted that they perceive that they have been

portrayed negatively, including being represented as uneducated, culturally obscure, and homogenous. This was made even clearer to me as I entered the field site, where churchgoers themselves cited their frustration with the news media portraying Christians as socially and intellectually backward.

Evangelicals' wariness about their public portrayal has some basis in reality (and history). Marsden (1991) notes that the famous Scopes Trial – which focused on whether or not to teach evolution in public schools in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – represented what was essentially a Pyrrhic victory for Christians. Although they technically won the battle against evolution being taught in schools, their image was temporarily ruined: they were seen as uneducated and out of touch with mainstream American culture in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (p. 61)<sup>16</sup>.

Echoing the frustrations of evangelicals more than 80 years ago, evangelical churchgoers in this study, like their pastors, continually expressed their concern to me with how they were portrayed in the media. One woman mentioned to me that the news media portrayed all evangelicals as “evil idiots.” Another churchgoer opined that professional news, which she saw as always representing two sides (ostensibly for objectivity's sake, she noted), consistently representing evangelicals as the “extreme” contingent.

One of the primary challenges in gaining access to the research site, then, was the wariness that evangelicals exhibit in regards to outside researchers. To mitigate this tension – and allay the apprehension many evangelicals may have felt about my presence

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<sup>16</sup> The late 1940s and 50s, however, saw the attempt by evangelicals to re-engage with American culture, both intellectually and socially (Bacevich, 2005; Marsden, 1991). This attempt at re-engagement has continued to the present, with the use of commercial media in churches as one avenue through which American culture is engaged (Einstein, 2007; Roof, 1999; Cimino and Lattin, 1998).

– when I first began observing groups I told the members from all churches that I considered this research to be a co-collaboration, meaning that it was their words and beliefs that would shape the research, and not just my own perceptions and beliefs. In this sense much of the research comes from the *emic* perspective<sup>17</sup>. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) note that

When we take the emic perspective, we see the scene through the meanings that the members attribute to their own communicative actions.... We not only take a walk in the [participants'] shoes but also understand what the shoes mean to them (80-81).

This perspective is especially important considering the people I observed. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note, even the seemingly value-neutral term “research” can have negative connotations regarding the “truth” of the observer and the subsequent impact on those studied, especially in a colonial context where questions of power and representation exist. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2000), in discussing the ethics of research on “the native,” writes that

For indigenous and other marginalized communities, research ethics is at a very basic level about establishing, maintaining, and nurturing reciprocal and respectful relationships, not just *among* people as individuals but also *with* people as individuals, as collectives, and as members of communities, and with humans who live in and with other entities in the environment....

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<sup>17</sup> The terms *emic* and *etic* have been used in a few different ways in large part due to the interests and fields of those who have used them. The linguist Ken Pike (1967) was the first to use the terms (derivatives of “phonemic” and “phonetic”), which were later adopted by anthropologist Marvin Harris (19980) in his theory of cultural materialism. The way the two terms are used in this research follow Lindlof and Taylor (2002), which appears to most closely resemble Pike (1967).

[this requires] critical sensitivity and reciprocity of spirit by a researcher (97, *emphasis added*).

Smith writes of indigenous cultures, but she is also discussing other marginalized communities. Although it is not necessarily true that secular Americans (and institutions such as the news media) would see middle-class, white evangelicals as a disadvantaged group, it is evident that evangelicals in this study thought of themselves that way. The evangelicals I worked with saw themselves in crucial ways as a type of marginalized community: they perceived of themselves as being persecuted in the workplace, misrepresented in the secular news media and often ridiculed in both entertainment and news media for adhering to their religious beliefs.

Given evangelical concerns over representation, it was important to address this when first asking church leaders to observe the groups. In conversations with pastors, and then with churchgoers, I made it clear that I considered the research to be a collaboration between myself and them, one in which their voices would be represented as clearly as possible. This co-creation between researcher and researched was facilitated by the method – participant observation – and thus uses church leaders’ and churchgoers’ own voices as much as possible. My ability to hear directly from evangelicals also allowed a more in-depth, nuanced depiction of evangelicals’ views on myriad topics: the media used in their churches, but also war, gender issues, and electoral politics. It also reveals the tensions and resistance that exist in these organizations that could not have been obtained from rhetorical analysis only.

Having noted the collaborative aspect of the research, there are some qualifications that include my position as a researcher. As a researcher coming to a



previously unknown site, it was clear to me that most of my observations would come from a decidedly outsider perspective. By *outsider*, I mean to say nonreligious. My outsider status, I felt, would be conveyed to the evangelicals I worked with by the fact that I wasn't a Christian as well as the fact that I was in my 30s and unmarried.

However, there was one personal aspect that helped, unexpectedly, to mitigate my outsider status: mentioned above, I am a "seeker," one who has always been curious about Christianity and religion in general but never part of an established church, one who is "spiritual" but uncomfortable with traditional forms of Christianity. As noted in earlier chapters, all of the churches in this study were evangelical seeker churches, those institutions that attempt to appeal to people like me (the unchurched or dechurched) who have spiritual inclinations but can be distrustful of traditional religious institutions, I did not define myself as a seeker when I first approached pastors to begin the study; instead, it was several of the pastors who identified me as such. I believe it was this aspect of my personal belief system that helped me to gain access to the pastors as well as to the evangelicals in small groups<sup>18</sup>.

For this reason, although I recognize that my own outsider (*etic*) perspective is and was always present during field research, as much as possible in these observations of small groups I tried to let churchgoers' own statements and actions speak for

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<sup>18</sup> My perspective – coming to the research as an unchurched person – worried me a bit: I was studying Christians yet at the time knew very little about the Bible. I was not raised by my parents to be religious. Would my lack of firsthand knowledge about the traditions of Christianity preclude me from doing research? When I began to attend prayer groups and to study the Bible, I found this was not necessarily the case. This became evident when, trying to ascertain where churchgoers from Sunrise (a United Methodist church) identified themselves on the religious landscape: did they consider themselves Mainline?, I wanted to know. To my surprise they answered me with shrugs and questions of their own about Mainline Protestantism. This lack of knowledge echoes Christian Smith's (1998) observation that many evangelicals have a difficult time placing themselves on religious "maps," a trend that I believe is encouraged by the tendency for seeker churches to hide their denomination from potential churchgoers in order to attract them.

themselves, as much as possible letting their own voices come through when exploring their perceptions of various issues. It is for this reason that, although I asked some questions in these prayer groups from time to time about things I was curious about, my intention as an ethnographic observer was to let the conversations and prayer flow naturally, unguided as much as possible by artificial outside influence. If I am not “objective,” then, I have at the minimum attempted to be fair and to avoid preconceived personal notions of how people should behave, or what they should believe in.

### *Observation Sites*

The four churches chosen for ethnographic study are the Rock River, Sunrise, Harvest, and Choices Community Church. All of these are located in or near the town of Smallville, a moderately-sized university town with a population of approximately 100,000 people in the Midwest. What follows is a brief description of each church, its members, denomination and history.

#### Harvest Church

Harvest is the largest church, claiming on its website that it has over 2,000 members and is part of a national and international megachurch denomination. Harvest, although it was created by a group of white Protestants that were politically and socially progressive in the 1970s (Smith, 1998), contains very few people of color within its congregation. Most churchgoers are white (with a small number of Asians and a lesser proportion of African Americans) and appear, from various external indicators (including mode of dress and cars in the parking lot on Sunday mornings), to be fairly affluent.

### Rock River

Rock River is the oldest and second largest church, having approximately 1,000 members, according to church leaders. The church's denomination, although not noted on the website, is Assembly of God<sup>19</sup>. The racial makeup of the congregation includes about equal numbers of African-Americans, Africans, and white Americans. I did not see any Asians in the congregation during my Sunday morning visits except one in the choir.

### Sunrise

Created in 1995, Sunrise Church has between 600 and 700 members and is part of the United Methodist group of churches. It is almost exclusively white, a point that has been a source of tension between church leaders and parishioners. Specifically, the church's pastor had publicly suggested bringing minority groups into the church to increase diversity. Although the congregation received this information quietly in the space of the church, many church members privately expressed strong resistance to this effort in the privacy of their homes during prayer groups. During the time of my observations, the pastor had started a bus service that ran between a local, all-black neighborhood, to the church, which was located in a largely white, rural area.

### Choices Community Church

Choices Church is the smallest organization, having a few hundred members, and is also the youngest, having been created in 2003 from a Baptist parent church in a nearby town. Choices represents the end of spectrum of this sample of churches in terms

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<sup>19</sup> During my observations, the church changed its name from one based on the denomination itself to a name based on a local neighborhood subdivision that gave no indication of denomination.

of ethnicity. The church is by far the youngest – and smallest – of the churches within this study. Like Sunrise, the church is almost exclusively white, which reflects the demographics of the town in which the church is located; unlike the other churches, however, the pastor of Choices stated that he had no interest in diversifying his congregation, providing as the reason his desire to accurately represent the demographics of his town (which was also almost exclusively white).

These four churches were chosen for the following reasons. First, they have identified themselves as evangelical (as discerned on their websites and also in pastor interviews). Sunrise Church is an unusual case, for it is United Methodist and thus not normally associated with evangelicalism; however, the church was considered to be a test of a United Methodist Church in that was also evangelical. In addition to being evangelical the churches are further defined as also being “seeker oriented,” in that they appeal to the unchurched and dechurched. The second reason these churches were chosen is that they have demonstrated heavy media use during sermons. Rock River uses imagery from the Coca Cola Company to announce its “Classic” (Coke) service and incorporates films and television shows like *Superman*, *Braveheart*, and *Leave it To Beaver* into sermons. Harvest Church uses the Starbucks logo in sermon material and also references myriad television shows and blockbuster films such as *Desperate Housewives*, *Deal or No Deal*, and *Remember the Titans*. Sunrise Church is similar to Rock River and Harvest in the use of media – using films such as *Batman Begins* and *National Treasure* in church – but also incorporates skits based upon commercials and television shows. Most notably, in 2008 it hosted contestants from the popular reality television show *American Idol* to sing and give interviews during church sermons.

Choices, like Sunrise, incorporates skits (performed by local church members) as well as numerous television shows and blockbuster films like *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *The Emperor's New Groove* into Sunday morning sermons.

To summarize the churches, they are all evangelical, and more specifically, seeker churches; they are mostly white (except for Rock River); located in the Midwest, and all use commercial entertainment media. Despite surface similarities, there are also very real differences, both between churches and within each church that are revealed as the description of this research progresses. What follows is a description of the individual methods used in the dissertation.

#### *Pastor Interviews*

Integral to understanding how evangelicals felt about faith and media were in-depth interviews with the pastors from each church. The interviews all fell under the category of “respondent interviews,” which Lindlof and Taylor (2002) note are designed to elicit open-ended responses. The pastors were interviewed most often in their church offices, although interviews with the pastor of Choices took place in a local coffee shop (see Appendix A for information on locations and time frame of interviews). With the exception of one pastor (from Sunrise Church), all church leaders were interviewed twice: once at the inception of the project and then once participant observation of small groups had begun. The reason for the timing was due to a few reasons, including that the pastors were providing approval of my research contingent upon meeting me. In addition, however, meeting with the pastors before ethnographic observations began, and then after observations had taken place, helped me to know what to expect, to some

degree, and then were able to answer some questions I had once I had observed prayer groups.

The interviews were semi-structured, in that I had a set of questions I wished to ask church leaders; however, I was also willing to follow the pastors' own lines of thought, allowing the interview to diverge from intended topics and questions as needed. In each instance the interviews centered on several themes. The first was commercial entertainment media use within the church. Specific questions included what media pastors showed, how the pastors chose the media they used in church, why they chose it, and then if they perceived any tension in the use of commercial, secular media for religious purposes. Interviews also included questions about politics, in large part because I knew I would be observing the prayer groups around the time of the U.S. presidential election and would encounter political issues. Questions along this line included their beliefs regarding certain political issues and if they thought politics and faith were – or should be – intertwined.

Interestingly, the interviews were not one-sided, where the researcher alone asked questions. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) describe this phenomenon as “interviewer self disclosures,” in which a researcher shares information about themselves to put the interviewee at ease and encourage participation (190). This is perhaps true for the interviews I conducted, where I shared much detail about my own background and religious beliefs. However, “self disclosure” was not a conscious decision I made *a priori* and I believe the reciprocal exchange to be a function of the research site itself: the pastors, being evangelical and wanting to “share the good news,” wanted to know about my own religious beliefs and upbringing. Thus, the majority of church leaders answered

my questions on a contingent basis: if they answered my questions, they wanted to know if I would answer theirs about my own background. Thus the interviews represented a give and take and an equal share of power, which seemed appropriate and fit within my conception of the research as a co-creation between participant and researcher.

### *Participant Observation of Prayer Groups*

The methodological foundation of this dissertation is ethnographic observation of small church groups, including co-ed and same-sex prayer groups as well as small, specialized “cell” groups discovered throughout the course of research. “Cell” groups, as they were called in most of the churches, were small groups that were not solely based in prayer and worship; instead, they were focused on other issues, such as the environment, healing, or race. I attended many of these in addition to the more formal prayer groups. I chose groups based upon the length of time they had been meeting and how regular their meetings were. I wanted groups to be as well established as possible, and there were a few reasons for this. First, I wanted to be able to get to know members well. It also allowed me to observe interactions over a consistent and regular period of time. In addition, it was fairly difficult to gain entry as a researcher. I could physically enter the small groups, as they always welcomed new members, but as a researcher I had to explain my intentions and formally ask permission to join. There was no time that I was refused from a group, although the vetting process could be at times humbling: during my initial visit to the Murray Group, a Sunrise group that met Saturday mornings, one of the members (an intelligent young woman with a cutting sense of humor) sat back, appraised me, and then said drily, “Ok, you’re in.”

To pastors and to the churchgoers in this study I was honest about my ambivalence with Christianity – my curiosity as well as trepidation – talking sometimes at length about this in groups and with pastors. Indeed, with some pastors it seemed as though we traded interviews for prayers, where I was given the opportunity to ask them research questions if they were given the chance to pray with (and for) me after. This pattern proved to be true with many of the prayer groups as well, whose members asked if – and, at times, insisted that – they could pray for me when I came to observe their groups. This didn't seem unusual to me, given that the people I was studying were evangelical. To “evangelize” means literally to spread the “good news”<sup>20</sup> (Hendershot, 2004), and it made sense to me that, being allowed the privilege of entering their private homes and having access to their at times deeply personal beliefs and statements, I open myself up to them as well to indicate my willingness to have a respectful, reciprocal relationship similar to that advocated by Smith (2000).

As a result of this implicitly understood exchange between myself and the churchgoers, I found myself in the middle of “healing” ceremonies, where prayer group members prayed for me for a variety of reasons: for help with my instruction of undergraduate students, to find a job after graduation, for stability in my life, and to find and develop “roots.” In order to do a healing ceremony, often church members would do a “laying on of hands,” which meant people standing in a circle around me who would touch my back, shoulders, knees, and sometimes head. Sometimes the groups would ask me if I wanted healing; at other times it was tacitly understood that I would be letting

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<sup>20</sup> Merriam-Webster's New Book of Word Histories (1999) notes that the word *evangelical* “comes from the Late Latin adjective *evangelicus*, which was taken from the Greek *evangelikos*, both meaning ‘of or related to or in agreement with the good news or gospel.’ The Greek elements are eu- ‘good’ and angelos ‘messenger.’” (98).



them do this in exchange for them letting me ask my own probing questions. Not all of the churches did this: one group (from Sunrise) would simply place an empty chair in the center of the group at the end of each meeting to pray for another person to join the group. The Choices Church prayer groups I observed did not do this at all.

In all, I participated in six prayer groups consistently in 2008 and 2009, although I observed more than 10 groups total. In the course of the ethnographic research, which was conducted from the spring 2008 to the summer of 2009, I observed evangelicals in a variety of settings: from the common prayer groups that met at members' houses on a weekly basis, to the less frequent (and more formal) church-sponsored religious "seminars" held on church grounds, to special, impromptu meetings held by certain subgroups within the church. On regular visits I sat in church members' homes, saw pictures of their families, talked about movies, politics, food, and pets; laughed over jokes (both good and bad), ate food with them, shared details about my life and listened to theirs. Other times we would meet in public spaces such as ice cream parlors, restaurants, and breakfast cafes but meeting in private homes was the typical practice. Since I was a stranger and not part of their church, as entree to the group when visiting homes I brought food that I had made myself. It was my way of telling the group members that I appreciated them opening up their homes and their lives to me. As a result I brought date bread that came from my mother's recipe box, peanut butter rice crispy treats, oatmeal and chocolate chip cookies, and apple pie. The food from my kitchen was almost always a conversation starter (about family recipes, traditions, and often, calories) and eased what might have otherwise been a tense or uncomfortable first encounter.

In sum, attending groups on a weekly basis permitted an in-depth view on the social dynamics of the small groups: how they changed over time; how they were – or were not – able to discuss sensitive issues within these spaces; and what factors – race, gender, or political affiliation – affected the cohesiveness of the groups themselves. Overall, observation of these social groups provided a great deal of information about how identities were constructed and maintained, and what sort of resistance – if any – existed to church leaders’ religious or political messages.

### *Focus Group Interviews*

Empirical material for this research also comes from focus groups conducted with evangelical individuals from several churches. The focus group research arose out of a desire to understand how ordinary evangelical individuals understood the mass mediated messages coming from their churches as well as ask specific questions that weren’t possible during participant observation. For instance, in focus groups it was possible to ask specific questions about how individuals felt about war or particular messages from their pastor. It was also possible to observe other potential tensions, including those along racial lines. Individuals in one group expressed significant resistance to the idea of including people of color into their congregation: when discussing race, the men and women said the word “tolerance” in unison, indicating that their pastor had emphasized the importance of a multicultural church but they as a congregation were resisting this. It was also possible to explore gender issues in the groups, especially in the sermons and discussions surrounding the movie *The Da Vinci Code*, which dealt with gender issues in the context of Christianity. An examination of both of these subjectivities is important

when assessing evangelicals as a homogenous group, or when considering the broader political implications in terms of affirmative action and women's civil rights. Along what lines is resistance drawn, and what is the role of conflicting subjectivities and identities in resistance and tension?

### *Email Survey*

During the participant observation there were some moments of frustration for me as a researcher that stemmed in part from the method itself. As noted, I had chosen not to do focus groups with evangelicals, wanting instead to observe evangelicals (and their exchanges and interactions) in a way that was more natural than bringing them together to answer my specific research questions in a controlled environment. However, it also created disappointment for me as a researcher at times since there were certain issues that I wished they would discuss. One of the topics I had hoped they would discuss was the media their pastors had shown in church the Sunday before. Although the churchgoers were very much immersed in commercial media culture – making jokes about recent movies, organizing group trips to the theatres to see new releases, drawing from a movie they had seen to apply to their own lives – they rarely discussed the specific media texts their pastors showed in sermons. As a result, I asked the pastor from Choices, who typically used a great deal of media in his sermons, if I could conduct a survey with some of his congregation. He agreed, and I created an email (Appendix B) explaining who I was and asking specific questions about the media churchgoers were exposed to in Sunday sermons. Questions included how churchgoers felt about the clips from Hollywood movies and television shows used in Sunday sermons by their pastors; if they

could provide specific examples of what they liked and what they didn't; and if they perceived of any tension in the use of the media.

The results would come back to me directly, I explained to churchgoers over email, and so their answers would not be shown to the pastor. The pastor agreed to this after I explained my reason: if any churchgoer wanted to be critical of the media, they might feel more comfortable if they didn't think the pastor would see their responses. The results from this survey are used to supplement ethnographic observations regarding churchgoers' beliefs about the media.

### *Observation of Media Use in Church Sermons*

The research also includes an examination of sermons as well as the media used within them. Between 2007 and 2009 I attended sermons from the churches on a weekly or monthly basis. Some churches, like Choices, were attended by me less frequently due to the distance, which was greater than the other churches. During observations, notes were taken on the type of media used, the content of the sermon, the behavior and speech of church leaders and churchgoers, and the physical environment. Research questions included an examination of what the function of the media was when used in the space of the church, and also what message was being sent with the media text.

### *Media Use Defined*

Integral to this ethnographic approach is defining *media use*. In the context of this research, this concept is necessarily broad and narrow at the same time. It is broad in that the focus is not simply the *content* of the media (eg, the type and title of specific

movies and television shows) that is examined but also how church leaders incorporate media into their sermons, including when it is used and in what context. However, the type of media included for consideration in this research is narrowly defined: although church leaders used a diverse mixture of media and technology in their sermons – including religious videos, music, commercial media and the Bible – the focus of this research is on how commercial entertainment media (including Hollywood films and popular television shows) are used in sermons. This is not to imply that other religious media are not important; however, some attention has already been paid to the implications of the production and use of myriad types of religious media, including Christian videos (Hendershot, 2004; Kintz and Lesage, 1998) and religious music (Schultze and Woods, 2008; Hipps, 2005; Shibley, 1996), comic books (Carmody, 2008), video games (Jindra, 2008; Wiarda, 2008). What has not been studied in any detail is the incorporation of Hollywood films and television shows into evangelical churches and how this practice may change the way faith is practiced inside and outside the space of the churches.

### *Conclusion*

The methods used in this research are meant to act in concert, supplementing and complementing each other to provide a detailed glimpse into the relationship between commercial entertainment media and contemporary evangelical faith. In particular, through observation of church sermons – of which commercial entertainment media are an integral part – this study reveals how clips from Hollywood films and popular television shows are woven into evangelical church sermons, fundamentally altering

church rituals. Pastor interviews provide insight into how and why evangelical church leaders have chosen to use commercial films and television shows in their sermons. Finally, participant observation of small groups reveals not only how individual churchgoers feel about the incorporation of commercial media texts into the space of their places of worship by assessing their reactions to specific media texts and examples, but also explores how entertainment media is woven into practices of faith outside of the church in evangelicals' everyday lives. In sum, the methods as a whole are meant to illustrate how commercial entertainment media not only become an instrument of evangelization and instruction to draw people into faith but also impact faith and identity in the American spiritual marketplace.

## CHAPTER 3

### **INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF MEDIA: HOW HOLLYWOOD FILMS AND POPULAR TELEVISION SHOWS ARE USED IN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES**

#### *Introduction*

As noted in Chapter One there is a relatively new strategy in the spiritual marketplace that is manifested in part in the incorporation of commercial entertainment media – including Hollywood movies and television shows – as a way to attract new church members and keep existing ones. The general purpose of this research is to explore these recent changes in the American religious landscape and examine how both evangelical leaders and their constituents attempt to negotiate meaning, faith, and identity in the new mediated spiritual marketplace. On the surface, these media appear to have great utility for evangelical churches as they may be used to evangelize and increase church numbers by attracting members who may be unfamiliar with biblical texts or uncomfortable with more traditional forms of worship (Roof, 1999). In addition, the use of secular media allows churches to stay connected with the larger, mainstream culture. Many scholars (notably Hendershot, 2004; Buddenbaum, 2001; Hoover, 2001; Schultze, 2001) have noted that while evangelicals feel the need to shun the outer world and its secular values, they simultaneously need to evangelize (literally, “spread the good news”) effectively, and secular media may be one way to accomplish this. Of course, as scholars (Schultze and Woods, 2008; Hengeveld, 2008; Letherer, 2008; Hipps, 2005; Hendershot, 2004) have noted, Christian organizations have also produced their own media (in the form of religious videos, Christian music, video games, books, magazines, and so forth); however, what this research describes is the adoption and incorporation of purely secular

entertainment media, most of which contains no explicit religious messages, into evangelical church sermons.

The research begins in this chapter by describing mainstream media use in detail within the churches in this study. Currently there is no published research on the relatively new phenomenon of incorporating Hollywood movies and television shows into evangelical church sermons, rituals, and practices<sup>21</sup>. This chapter steps into this gap in the literature (and into the spaces of evangelical churches) to discern how secular entertainment media are used in sermons, paying close attention to when they are used, how often they are used, and most importantly, in what context they are used, providing a foundation to understand church leaders' and churchgoers' views on media and how faith is practiced in everyday life and laying the foundation for the instrumentalist/substantive debate.

Before beginning this description of media use it is important to note, as was done in Chapter One, that the focus is less on the *content* of the media that churchgoers are exposed to during sermons and more on the *context* of the media use. This is not because the myriad ideologies – regarding race, gender, sexuality, class, and so forth – in the media texts shown in church are not important to study. On the contrary, the connotative messages – about whiteness, patriarchy, heterosexuality, class, and more – in the mainstream media texts that are woven into evangelical worship are important to acknowledge, following the lead of scholars such as Benshoff and Griffin (2009), Storey (2006a, 2006b, 2003) Hall (2003), Sturken and Cartwright (2001), Kellner (1995), and

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<sup>21</sup> The unpublished, earlier work on this is represented by Moore and Press.



Marchetti (1988). In particular, Hall (2003) notes the importance of examining media when considering ideology:

Institutions like the media are peculiarly central to the matter since they are, by definition, part of the dominant means of ideological production. What they ‘produce’ is, precisely, representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations, and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work (2003. 90).

Seen from this perspective, the clips from movies and television shows that are incorporated into evangelical church sermons have the potential to produce a vision of how the world is – or should be – for churchgoers and invite them into particular subjectivities. Given the importance of considering ideology, why does this research not evaluate the ideological patterns in the media shown in these churches? The reasons for the specific focus in this portion of the research are twofold. The first reason is practical, as the ethnographic method itself precluded an examination of the discourses within the films and then the potential reception of these texts: churchgoers, although immersed in mainstream secular media culture both inside and outside of the church, rarely made explicit mention of the media clips shown during Sunday sermons. As a result, there was no direct connection between, say, the patriarchal ideologies in the media texts shown in sermons and individuals’ direct reception of those texts.

The second – and primary – reason for the emphasis on context is that the intended focus is to explore what Carey (2007) has termed *ritual communication*, where what is communicated in the act of consuming media is seen as being just as important as what a media text may impart in terms of content. This focus on context and ritual also

fits within the instrumentalist/substantive theoretical framework, in which technology itself – the method of delivering certain media texts – is seen as being just as important as the content of a media text itself. Thus, the focal point of this segment of the research – the description of media use in evangelical churches – is on how church ritual changes as a result of the incorporation of commercial mainstream media and then (in succeeding chapters) how individual, everyday faith is practiced in conjunction with these changes.

Following this framework, there are two parts to this chapter. The first section, devoted to a description of commercial media use in the spiritual marketplace, is approached in two ways: first through a broad description of media use, including general media practices and what specific movies are shown in each church, and then through an in-depth, detailed description of one instance of media use in each church meant to complement the broader observations. The sermon observations highlight the church environment, what media are shown, the associated message accompanying the media clips, and what biblical principles and scripture are associated with the clips. Where possible the observations include churchgoers' reactions to the media, but often this was difficult to gauge in large auditoriums with often several hundred people in attendance. In including these observations, the intention is not to highlight any one media text in particular; instead, the emphasis in this section is to examine the context of the media use.

The final segment of the chapter shifts from a description of media use in the churches to an evaluation of it. In this section media use is assessed from an instrumentalist/substantive standpoint, in the process evaluating the potential contradictory messages sent to churchgoers from pastors' sermons, the media used, and

the method of delivering the message. In sum, this chapter should provide a portrait of media use in each church and then an evaluation of it, providing the foundation for the succeeding chapter, in which the pastors of these churches provide their thoughts on commercial entertainment media as well as their reasons for using them in their sermons.

### *Media Use by Church*

The following section includes a description of commercial entertainment media use by each church. Interestingly, there is some overlap in the movies and television shows incorporated into church services – including *Indiana Jones*, *Bruce Almighty*, *Braveheart*, *Spiderman 2*, and the *Lone Ranger* – even though each church is distinct from the others in terms of size, age (of the church itself and of the members), and denomination. For the most part, the media incorporated into church sermons are part of conventional Hollywood genres (including westerns, military/combat films, action-adventure, comedies, and dramas). Certain genres are not represented on the list, such as horror films or documentaries, although this is not surprising given the context. In addition, no independently-produced films are on the list: these are large, Hollywood studio, blockbuster productions produced for large audiences. Included as appendices A-D are specific media texts used in each church<sup>22</sup>. This overview is meant to provide a general picture of patterns of media use for each church as well as more detailed descriptions of both media text and sermon message to provide a glimpse into how media are used in these churches.

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<sup>22</sup> The lists in the appendices are not exhaustive, as I did not attend all four church sermons each Sunday. The lists are from my observations and from information pastors provided to me.

### Sunrise Media Use

During the time of my observations of church sermons from 2007 to 2009<sup>23</sup>, Sunrise Church incorporated a variety of visual media consistently into Sunday sermons (Appendix C). Sometimes the media pastor created in-house skits based on commercial movies and television shows that starred local church members. Examples include a homemade video based on *The Lone Ranger*, where a man from the local congregation dressed up as the television character – complete with mask and bandana – travels through the local Smallville community, visiting notable town landmarks in his search for community (which he finally finds by driving to Sunrise Church). Another video sketch used in a Sunrise sermon featured a local church member who posed as *Wonderwoman*, dressed in blue tights and a gold top, to perform “miraculous” feats like raising the couch to vacuum under it and picking the kids up at school. In one video sketch the pastor played *Indiana Jones* (complete with hat and whip) searching for the “Holy Grail,” which he found, after traveling the world, in his church. Sunrise also produced a video based on the popular Discovery cable network show “Mythbusters,” where local church members were shown testing the hypothesis that “real men don’t eat quiche.”

The appropriation of the style of secular commercial media texts but changing the content is recognized by Hendershot (2004) as one way for Christian organizations to engage with the wider, secular, American culture while imparting a religious message. Most often, however, the media clips were taken directly from Hollywood movies (and, less often, television shows) including *Bruce Almighty*, *The Bucket List*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Major League*. One Sunday the pastor showed a clip from Veggie Tales, the

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<sup>23</sup> For a list of movies and television shows used in churches in 2005 and 2006, see Moore and Press (unpub).

NBC network's popular children's cartoon that often has moral themes. This clip in particular – focused on a selfish vegetable king who spotted a rubber ducky used in the bath by one of his subjects (a male cucumber) and coveted it for himself – was incorporated into a sermon on the sin of greed, especially in terms of material objects. In another sermon a clip from the blockbuster film *Bruce Almighty* (2003) was shown – where the character, temporarily playing God, receives millions of prayer requests – as a way for the pastor to encourage churchgoers to let go of selfish desires and become an integral part of the larger church community.

In addition to creating in-house media clips and using scenes from Hollywood movies and television shows in sermons, Sunrise also created entire services based on popular media. During one weekend in 2008 the church hosted a contestant from the reality television show *American Idol* (a show in which singers compete to be named the best singer in the U.S.). The young woman came, performed songs, and then conducted a question and answer session during the sermon.

At Sunrise, media were almost always shown at the beginning of the sermons once churchgoers were seated and before the pastor began speaking. Interestingly, often the media clips were completely separate from the sermon and frequently were not referenced by the pastor once the sermon began. An example of this comes from a September 2007 sermon which began with a clip from the film *The Guardian* (2006) starring Ashton Kutcher. The clip showed Ashton Kutcher's character, a clean-cut young man, sitting with other candidates in a room listening to a military officer describe the hardships he and others were to endure if they chose to join the Coast Guard. Once the clip ended, the pastor began his sermon with a story about a friend who hadn't converted

to Christianity until on his death bed. As a researcher I had to consider why the movie clip was shown, as it wasn't clearly integrated into – or even directly referenced in – the pastor's message. Given the "conversion" experienced in *The Guardian* – namely, a troubled young man leaving his old life behind and transforming into a responsible adult in the U.S. military – it is possible that the pastor intended for the movie to reference religious conversion, complete with its hardships endured as well as benefits accrued. Showing commercial media texts in this way (standing apart from the sermon itself) was a common practice at Sunrise. Considering this usage, it seemed as though the media clips were meant to frame the message of the sermon, providing a broader story within mainstream culture as a way to relate a potentially esoteric or obscure biblical message to a contemporary one, a point made also by Moore and Press (unpub) when they write that "The use of media firmly embeds the church experience in American popular media culture, an experience to which previously "unchurched" individuals can relate" (np). This type of media usage in sermons was more unusual: although other churches at times followed this format, no other churches used media consistently in this way.

#### Sunrise: Media Use Vignette, March 2008

*The rock band – which included a few singers, a drummer, and two guitar players – was in full swing when I walked into the main auditorium at Sunrise Church. Churchgoers were standing and clapping to the music, some swaying gently, some lifting their hands up towards the stage with the band. I saw a young man with Down's syndrome standing next to what appeared to be his mother. I watched as he jumped up and down in excitement at the start of a new song, and also watched as his mother put*

her arm around him. He reciprocated the gesture and then they swayed to the music in unison. When I entered, a greeter had handed me a sermon pamphlet that outlined the sermon theme for the week and provided the latest church news. As I found a seat in the room, which had bare white walls, a few windows on the south side, and exposed pipes in the ceiling (which seemed to represent a self-conscious architectural style rather than lack of building completion), I glanced down at the paper in my hand. In the course of my research at several churches I had gotten used to striking images on these pamphlets: sometimes a photo taken directly from a blockbuster movie like *Transformers* or *Superman*; sometimes an image of a crown of thorns on a blood red background; and once a cartoon image of Jesus in the style of the tv comedy show “*South Park*.” Even being used to the variety – and shock value – of sermon images, this one stood out. It was a photo of a coiled wire fence on top of a high wall with tall buildings in the background. The photo was adjusted to look as though it was a film negative, with the wire fence in white relief and the sky and buildings bathed in dark red. The fence was a form of barbed wire known as “razor wire” used often for security purposes on prison buildings. Still, with the buildings framing the photo, it looked like it marked the edge of an urban war zone rather than a prison. I looked at the words embedded in the picture: “*Behind Enemy Lines: the Struggle with Self*.” As I looked at the images and words, the lights began to dim. I looked up to see, in the now-darkened room, a familiar image on the screen before us.

In the animated movie scene, a beautiful woman stood in front of a mirror, staring at the image of herself. The woman stared at herself in the reflection, then posed the now-familiar question, “Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?” The

*mirror changes from a reflection of the woman into a ghostly-looking face that responds that she is indeed fair. With this statement, the scene from Disney's Snow White ended and the lights came back, marking the beginning of the sermon.*

*As the young assistant pastor (a white man with short dark hair, appearing to be in his 20s, who spoke on a regular basis in the church) spoke on a stage in front of us, he emphasized the continual struggle between the individual and community. Specifically, he stated that people can worship the wrong things, namely the "individual," emphasizing that "when we worship ourselves we are behind enemy lines." He noted that when we don't worship God we end up worshiping ourselves and the spotlight inevitably turns inward, making us believe that we are "mini-Gods." The pastor stated that an appropriate passage could be found in Daniel 3:1-7, and the assistant pastor read this passage to the congregation while the PowerPoint screens reflected the passages as he progressed:*

*King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it. Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre,*



*harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up<sup>24</sup>.*

*Once the pastor finished reading the Bible quotes, he applied the scripture to a contemporary example. Bringing it to the present day, the pastor stated that it would be like going to a U2 concert and people worshipping a statue there. As he spoke, the screen above him changed from reflecting the biblical quotes to instead a sequence of incongruous images that did not seem to be related to the sermon content itself: falling water, several stones on a backdrop of white, a grove of trees in the mist, a child's hand in a larger one. The young pastor finished his sermon by posing the following questions to churchgoers: "What am I really worshipping? What's the statue in my life?" He encouraged individuals to fight against their individual desires and instead serve the "whole."*

There are several observations that can be made about this sermon. First, the pastor makes it clear how damaging he considers individualism – a “worship” of the self – to be. The sermon pamphlet itself was meant to visually suggest a potentially violent and dangerous battle scene, with barbed wire needed to keep a potentially deadly menace out (or in). In choosing an image like this – evocative of violence, danger, and death –

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<sup>24</sup> Retrieved from Bible Gateway: <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=daniel%203:1-7&version=NIV>

Sunrise Church leaders reveal a great deal about the threat they feel they face when it comes to churchgoers' individualistic focus: the fight against inwardly-focused individual desires is seen as a literal war that churchgoers must wage within themselves on a constant basis in their everyday lives.

In addition, as noted in the general observations of Sunrise's media use, the assistant pastor made no mention of the clip from *Snow White*. In general the clip seemed to fit the general theme of battling selfish desires, drawing attention to the battle by using imagery from a well-known Disney movie with which many people would be familiar. Interestingly, in this type of usage – showing the movie scene and then cutting directly into the sermon – the media text itself appears to provide the framework for the religious message: a contemporary, secular story as a way to understand an older, biblical one. However, it is also worth noting that in providing numerous Bible passages with which to think about one's inner struggle following the *Snow White* clip, the scripture itself may also work to reframe the commercial media as well. This concept is explored more from churchgoers' perspectives in Chapter Six.

#### River Rock Media Use

Similar to Sunrise, River Rock Church also created in-house videos; however, it did not imitate commercial media texts in homemade video sketches. Instead, the videos that were created by River Rock staff were of local church activities, including missions and recent events on church grounds. This was a common practice among all the churches, with in-house videos used as a way to keep churchgoers up to date on church events. Like Sunrise, River Rock Church also used commercial entertainment media

frequently in sermons, including blockbuster movies such as *Braveheart*, *Indiana Jones*, *Bruce Almighty*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Happy Gilmore*, *Schindler's List*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and the *Fast and the Furious*, among others (see Appendix D for a more detailed list). Specific instances of media use in sermons included a clip from *Leave it to Beaver*, where the Cleaver family discussed baseball and homework at the dinner table. The pastor noted that the clip illustrated the ideal family in an ideal world, one where families spend time with their kids. After the clip played the pastor concluded that “in the real world, we watch tv and play video games,” busy being self focused instead of spending time with each other and building relationships.

The church also included imagery from the television show *The Lone Ranger*. During one sermon, the pastor brought an image of the *Lone Ranger* character (from the black and white television show) up on the screens in front of the congregation to tell the congregation that “God made us to connect with other people. You were made for other people. We are supposed to help each other! We are not designed to go through this life alone.” He then referred to the image on the screens, encouraging those not familiar with the Lone Ranger to look him up when they got home. To the audiences’ amusement he made fun of the Lone Ranger’s clothing: “Look at the starched clothes – how can a cowboy have starched clothes? Look at that – what do you call that around the neck? – bandana there, doesn’t he look cute?” The pastor then started the famous quote from the Lone Ranger with the intent that the congregation members finish it: “Hi Ho Silver and.... [*he paused and the audience finished with “away!”*] The leader reiterated the story behind the Lone Ranger, namely that the character would ride in to all situations by himself with a gun and “whip all the bad guys.” Laughing, he said it sounded like the

plot of the CBS television police drama *Walker, Texas Ranger* and the crowd roared. Finally, he noted that the plot makes for good movies and great tv shows but “that ain’t the way life works. You can’t make it all by yourself. You get more done by working together.”

As in Sunrise Church, the imagery associated with the Lone Ranger television character was associated with how *not* to be (*eg*, an isolated individual living outside of community). The inclusion of the iconic image of the Lone Ranger – in the form of in-house videos, television clips, and pictures – as a way to discuss the pernicious influence of individualism was a pattern in these churches, with three of the four churches (Sunrise, River Rock, and Harvest) bringing the Lone Ranger into sermon message in some manner. It is an interesting trend in the churches, as well as an interesting potential contradiction, that is explored more in the Discussion section of this chapter.

As the example also shows, most often at River Rock visual media were interwoven into the message itself, with clear references to details of the media itself (in this case, the Lone Ranger’s clothing and actions). In this way, the movie and television clips often seemed to punctuate specific points and not necessarily frame the sermon as a whole. This way of using media is exemplified in the sermon vignette that follows.

#### River Rock: Media Use Vignette, July 2007

*I walked into the River Rock church auditorium on Sunday morning, escaping the already sweltering July heat. A greeter handing out sermon pamphlets smiled at me, handing me one, and I smiled back, taking it. I found my way to an empty space on one of the long, curved pews that form multiple rows within the crowded church auditorium,*

*a low-ceilinged room with white walls and wooden accents. As I sat down, Pastor Steven, a 57-year old Caucasian man with short-cropped salt and pepper hair wearing a short-sleeved, untucked collared shirt, came to the front of the room, quickly climbing the shallow, curved steps to reach the clear podium. There was a small glass of water on the small shelf within the podium, and I noticed the pastor leaned down to grab the glass and take a sip from it. He made some introductory remarks, including telling the church that it was his birthday, which was met with clapping and some cheers. He took out a birthday card given to him and opened it with the inside of the card facing the congregation. It was an audio greeting card, and when he opened it the card played the popular rock song "You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet" by Bachman-Turner Overdrive. I noticed that everyone laughed and some clapped as I looked around the room.*

*Pastor Steven noted that River Rock was at the end of a four-week series that had addressed, in the span of three weeks, the topics of Faith, Finances and Friendships. This week we were continuing, he noted, with the concept of Freedom, and there was a clip he thought exemplified what freedom was. The lights in the room dimmed then and the two screens on either side of the stage were illuminated. I recognized the film clip immediately: it was the pre-battle scene from the movie Braveheart starring Mel Gibson. The scene unfolded on the screens before us.*

*Mel Gibson's character, the Scot William Wallace, rode back and forth on his horse in front of a long line of men who were preparing to fight the English on the other side of a battlefield on a grassy knoll. Many of the Scottish soldiers wore woad, the blue face paint sometimes worn during battle, as did the character Wallace. Several of the soldiers wanted to leave, believing that they did not want to fight a battle against the*

*stronger English enemy. Rallying the troops, Wallace told the men standing before him: "I am William Wallace, and I see a whole army of my countrymen, here in defiance of tyranny. You've come to fight as free men, and free men you are. What will you do with that freedom? Will you fight?" At this, some Scottish soldiers yelled "no!" and one stated that he would run and live to fight another day. Some soldiers began to walk off the battlefield. Wallace attempted to keep the men, shouting that "Fight, and you may die. Run, and you'll live. At least a while. And dying in your beds, many years from now, would you be willing, to trade all the days, from this day to that, for one chance, just one chance, to come back here, and tell our enemies, that they may take our lives, but they'll never take... our freedom! At his words the Scottish soldiers returned to the battlefield, cheering as Wallace rode up and down the line of men, arm in the air, victorious before the battle had even begun.*

*With the ending of the scene from Braveheart, Pastor Steven returned to the podium and turned to the Bible by discussing John 8:32, reading the passage out loud for us while it was displayed on the overhead screens in PowerPoint: "And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Stemming from this quote, he stated that one of the results of living for Christ was freedom. He told us that "When Jesus is in control of your life, in all of these areas you will experience real freedom in your life." He noted that people are in "bondage" and that to free oneself is to develop a relationship with Jesus: "Here's my point: to be happy and to be satisfied we have to experience the truth of what we say we believe." Pastor Steven also read to the congregation from I Corinthians 1:30, which was also displayed on the screens above: "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our*

*righteousness, holiness and redemption.” The pastor interpreted this biblical passage to mean that “God alone made it possible for you to be in Christ Jesus. He is the one who made us acceptable to God. He made us pure and holy and He gave Himself to purchase our freedom.” The pastor noted people’s sinful natures, which he saw as leading to addiction, pain, and hunger. What we needed, he concluded, was to experience the freedom “to serve one another.”*

*Once he finished speaking, the pastor invited congregants to take communion, which was available at the front of the auditorium. Congregation members left their seats and lined up to take communion from the pastor and assistant pastors, where they were handed small clear plastic cups filled with either grape juice or wine (I couldn’t tell which as I did not participate in the ceremony) and given a wafer. When the congregation had finished communion, Pastor Steven discussed the following week’s baptism, noting that it would happen “in a place that looks a lot like a hot tub<sup>25</sup>. He held up one of the t-shirts that one would get if they were baptized, which read on the front: “I took the plunge at River Rock Church.” The congregation bowed their heads for a final prayer, and the sermon convened.*

The sermon at River Rock provides several interesting avenues to explore in terms of commercial media use. From the River Rock pastor’s statements it seemed as though the bondage that churchgoers needed to free themselves from was that of “addictions” and “hunger.” The way to gain that freedom was through a relationship with Jesus, which would help people find peace as well as the freedom “to help each other.” The way in which this struggle against bondage would occur would be on the

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<sup>25</sup> As noted in Chapter One it was, in fact, a hot tub placed in the parking lot of the church, surrounded by large plastic inflatable palm trees.

same level as the epic battle fought by William Wallace against the better-equipped English army. Thus, the literal war on the battlefield in Braveheart seemed to provide a metaphor for the struggle that churchgoers would have within them to resist bondage and fight for freedom. In framing the struggle with the self as a battle, River Rock's sermon was strikingly similar to that from Sunrise, in which the pastor noted that individuals were behind enemy lines when it came to fighting their own selfish wants and desires.

Similar to Sunrise, the commercial media clip was associated with various passages in the Bible. The significance of this may lie in a dual framing, in which the Braveheart scene was used to help churchgoers understand the nature of religious freedom, while Mel Gibson's on-screen battle was recast as a religious – and not a political, cultural, or economic – battle. The relationship between media text and scripture, and between media narratives and biblical ones, is an interesting point to consider in the other churches in this study as well.

#### Choices Community Church Media Use

Choices Church, like the others in this study, used a great deal of visual media, both religious and secular, in its sermons. Like Sunrise and River Rock, Choices produced video sketches that starred local congregation members, including a particularly humorous one in which two churchgoers, posing as “Butch and Patty Cakebakersmen” went to a local home improvement store to film a skit in which Butch spent much of the time on the store toilet<sup>26</sup>. Choices also used commercial movies and television shows in

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<sup>26</sup> According to the pastor and some prayer group members, the inclusion of a toilet in the Choices sketch created some controversy in the church as several members complained of seeing a toilet during a church sermon.



its Sunday services, including *Bruce Almighty*, *Indiana Jones*, *Braveheart*, *Spiderman 2*, *A Few Good Men*, and *Batman Begins* (Appendix E). It is important to note that commercial entertainment media were not always used in sermons, and there were instances in which no movies or television shows were used for weeks at a time. When media were used, however, they were used in a variety of ways, both at the beginning of the sermons as well as interspersed throughout the message, and often in conjunction with other types of visual media, both religious and secular.

One example of media use comes from May 2009 during Choices' service, which was dedicated to the topic of Mother's Day. During the sermon, which discussed the problem (and inevitability) of "messed up families," the pastor augmented his message with a humorous clip from the popular CBS television show *Everybody Loves Raymond*. The clip included a family sitting around the dinner table while comically discussing good and bad mothers. When the clip concluded, the pastor asked churchgoers to consider the difference that Jesus made in their own troubled families. The pastor noted that sin "messes up" families, including the "sin of selfishness, which is that 'it's all about me.'" He then exhorted churchgoers to not neglect others and to not put entertainment first, including dancing, recreational clubs, and the like: "These things are fine as long as they're in second place." He then finished the service by showing a video from comedian Anita Renfroe<sup>27</sup>, who humorously performed a song called "Momisms" to the tune of the William Tell Overture, while the congregation, watching the taped show on the screens, laughed and clapped.

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<sup>27</sup> According to a New York Times article, titled, "Did you Hear the One About the Christian Comedian?" Renfroe is Christian. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/24/magazine/24renfroe-t.html?pagewanted=all>

Another example of commercial media use includes one sermon when the pastor played a scene from the film comedy *Groundhog Day*, where the main character, played by actor Bill Murray, sat with other men in a coffee shop discussing his meaningless, repetitive life<sup>28</sup>. As he recounted his misery to others, one downcast man, overhearing this, comically said, “That sounds about right.” The pastor’s sermon, which was about how to live a “life with purpose,”<sup>29</sup> included imagery from the game show *Jeopardy!* after this movie clip. As the following media use vignette indicates, often at Choices the movement between the sermon message and entertainment media were seamless, with the pastor using multiple media texts to frame the message, illustrate a particular point, or end a sermon.

#### Choices Church: Media Use Vignette, September 2007

*I walked into Choices Church, which was held at that time in the auditorium of a local middle school, on a cool fall morning. Folding chairs had been set up in the school’s gymnasium and, after I got the coffee that the church provided during the service, I walked down the makeshift aisle created by rows of folding chairs, looking for an empty seat. I found one next to a couple and their children and sat down. The band was playing and I listened to the music as members of the congregation did a variety of things: sit, stand, raise hands in prayer, greet each other, and find seats. When the band finished its song, a member of the church made some announcements regarding administrative duties and upcoming events. The announcements included a call for help to work on the new building that was being constructed as a permanent home for*

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<sup>28</sup> This example was initially described in Moore and Press (unpub manuscript).

<sup>29</sup> Following Rick Warren’s book “40 Days of Purpose” (2002).

*Choices. There was general laughter as delays in construction and preparation jokingly were discussed. I was aware that the church had raised funds to build their own church and would not be in the middle school for much longer. I looked around the room, wondering how long it would take to set up all of the chairs and prepare the room for service. The lights dimmed just then and an animated scene emerged on the screen in front of us. It was not a movie I had seen before (I was told later by the pastor that it was "The Emperor's New Groove"). In the scene, a young man with light brown skin and dark hair sat, looking bored, on a throne attended by hundreds of servants. He sang about himself and his life during a montage showing his day-to-day life as he attended a ribbon-cutting ceremony, christened a ship, and "kissed" babies foreheads (with a stamp). A movie about a young Aztec ruler who can have whatever he wants, he sang that "The perfect world begins and ends with me!" As the scene began to draw to a close, I saw Pastor Wilhelm pass me while headed up the aisle to the front. One of the younger pastors in this study (appearing to be in his mid-thirties but in reality in his early forties), he was tanned, wore a Hawaiian shirt and a tight-necked shell necklace and was dancing up the aisle to the song that the emperor in the movie was singing, turning sideways, bending his elbows, and laughing while he moved to the rhythm. By the time the clip ended, the pastor had reached the podium at the front of the auditorium and faced the congregation, smiling.*

*Pastor Wilhelm began to tell the story of Jesus and the disciple Peter as described in John 21:15-17. In this passage Jesus challenges one of his disciples, Peter, by asking him three times if he loves him. When Peter says "yes," Jesus repeatedly tells him to prove it by demanding that Peter "Feed my sheep." Pastor Wilhelm explained the*

*meaning of Jesus' request, which was to feed people spiritually and help them to come to God<sup>30</sup>. The Pastor then introduced another comical video, this time of two men wearing ill-fitting wigs who were discussing the nature of "teamwork." The two-minute video began with the two men sitting on barstools with a white background. Their humorous conversation, augmented as the skit progressed with duplicate versions of themselves, went as follows<sup>31</sup>:*

*Johnny #1: Hi I'm Johnny*

*Chachi #1: And I'm Chachi*

*Johnny #1: We're "Get In Here Ministries." And you know, Chachi and I, we couldn't be more excited about the idea of teamwork.*

*Chachi #1: And today we're going to take the idea of Teamwork, and paint you a beautiful picture through the medium of music.*

*(Johnny #1 begins humming the tune to Greensleeves)*

*Chachi #1 (to camera): You know, hearing Johnny sing by himself is rather putrid and boring. It's amazing what happens when you add others to the mix (begins to sing comically in unison with Johnny)*

*Johnny #2 (the same man as Johnny #1, entering from right, wearing different clothing): You know through modern technology we're even able to do this. I'll tell you though about teamwork. You know, it's less about "me" and more about*

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<sup>30</sup> In my later conversations with Pastor Wilhelm, he explained his interpretation of the passage, noting that Jesus didn't specify in what sense Peter should 'feed' his sheep. The pastor's interpretation of 'feed' was that the primary emphasis is on spiritual care and physical care of others, especially those in need, instead of a focus solely on the self.

<sup>31</sup> The video, Pastor Wilhelm informed me later, is from the Igniter Media Group and is available at [http://www.ignitermedia.com/products/iv/singles/573/Teamwork?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=Teamwork&utm\\_campaign=day8\\_deal](http://www.ignitermedia.com/products/iv/singles/573/Teamwork?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Teamwork&utm_campaign=day8_deal).

*“we.” Let me kick it harmony (begins to sing the harmony of the melody with the other two)*

*Chachi #2 (duplicate of Chachi #1, entering from left): Hi there. We all know the old saying that there’s no “I” in team. But there’s also no “selfish hypocrisy” in team either. Let me through a “datto” in the mix (begins to sing “datto” over and over again).*

*Johnny #3 (entering from left): You know, when people say “No man is an island, I used to think, ‘Of course no man is a piece of land surrounded by a body of water.’ But then I realized what they mean. I think I get it (adds to the chorus of singing as the others have).*

*Chachi #3 (entering from right, in bright red Hawaiian shirt): Somebody once said that ‘None of us is as smart as all of us.’ And I don’t really know what that means, but I like it. Now watch me break out something special (begins to sing ‘la la la’ with the rest).*

*Johnny #1 (while everyone continues singing): You know, I think we’ve made some pretty good points about teamwork. And the value therein of it.*

*Chachi #1 And if teamwork was a person, I’d love him as all get out.*

*(The song ends and “TEAMWORK” in capital letters is written across the screen.)*

*During the comical clip the churchgoers laughed continuously. The video ended with everyone, including the pastor, laughing. The media show was not yet over, as Pastor Wilhelm put up on the PowerPoint screen spoofs of the popular “Teamwork”*

*posters<sup>32</sup> that emphasized the nature of community and working with others. These humorous Teamwork spoofs turned the idea of teamwork on its head and instead emphasized the importance of the individual and seeming to privilege isolation from others. Churchgoers chuckled again as various slides were shown to them on the overhead PowerPoint screen of the individualism versus community theme. The show ended here, with Pastor Wilhelm telling the congregation that, although many people have chosen to isolate themselves from community, it was essential that churchgoers see themselves as part of something larger, as part of a caring community. The congregation was encouraged to demonstrate selflessness in caring for others and grow in faith with Jesus.*

As the sermon vignette reveals, Choices Church, when it does use media, uses a great deal of different types to illustrate a point: in the course of the service we moved from a secular commercial movie clip (*The Emperor's New Groove*) to a Christian video (by *Get In Here* ministries) to humorous de-motivational teamwork PowerPoint slides. In this service, the sheer saturation of the message with myriad forms of media is striking, as it has been in other Choices services. The point of the message, overwhelmingly made with visual media, was to avoid selfishness and embrace community.

Like the other churches' sermons, stories from the commercial movies shown in church were framed by stories from the Bible. In this case, the biblical story was Jesus asking Simon Peter to feed his sheep. Also similar to the other churches, the commercial

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<sup>32</sup> These are motivational posters with the (now often spoofed) sayings like "There is no 'I' in teamwork." The spoof posters, often referred to as "demotivationals," change this statement to, "There is no 'I' in team; but there is a 'me.'"

media texts were used to both frame the sermon message as well as punctuate it with specific examples.

### Harvest Media Use

Harvest Church, the largest organization and the only megachurch in this study, stands out somewhat from the other churches in this study in a few key ways. First, although church leaders used similar types of movies and television shows – including *Spiderman 2*, *Bruce Almighty*, *Spiderman 2*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Remember the Titans* – to the other churches, secular entertainment media texts on the whole were used by Harvest far less frequently than the other churches (see Appendix F). Within any three-month period there may have been only two to four commercial entertainment media clips, far lower in frequency than Sunrise Church, which had movie and film clips in almost every service. This low usage may be due to the fact that the Harvest, due to its size, had a large media staff (as the pastor indicated in interviews) that produced much in-house media, including their own PowerPoint images, testimonies from local church members, and video spoofs of television shows. One example of this is the church’s intentionally comical parody of the popular television game show *Deal or No Deal* (featuring a local congregation member playing contestant “Ivana Riskitalla”) within two back-to-back sermons on the pernicious influence of greed and the danger of coveting material wealth.

When Harvest did include commercial entertainment media, it was almost always integrated into the sermon to illustrate specific points. Not once during my observations did the church show a movie or television clip without directly referencing it and

explaining why it was used and how churchgoers could apply it to their own lives. One example of this comes from a sermon in July of 2007 about how to deal with anger as a Christian. To illustrate his point the pastor used a scene from *Bruce Almighty*, a film about a man who God chooses to temporarily take his place. The clip depicted the character Bruce, played by comedian and actor Jim Carrey, who had a bad day at work and expressed it in an unhealthy way to his girlfriend, who was played by Jennifer Aniston. The clip was both humorous and serious; when it concluded the pastor asked the congregation to consider their own anger issues and how to deal with them faithfully.

Similar to Sunrise and Rock River churches, Harvest also used imagery from *The Lone Ranger* in a sermon. Showing a short clip from the show on the large screens that flanked the stage, the pastor exhorted congregants to avoid being a “Christian bunny.”<sup>33</sup> The message to take home from the clip, churchgoers were told, was to stop hopping from “place to place” and from “church to church.” The following sermon description provides a representative example of commercial media as used in Harvest.

Harvest: Media Use Vignette, June 2007

*The auditorium of the church, colored in subtle beige and gray tones, was quite large. I had been told by one of the lead pastors that it, and the foyer I passed through on my way to the auditorium, was designed to look like an “upscale hotel lobby.” To me, the inside of the auditorium had always seemed more akin to a movie theatre: there were wide, comfortable stuffed cloth seats that had plastic drink holders attached to the back of the next seat; an elevated center stage with black backdrop; and two large white*

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<sup>33</sup> This example, in which the pastor used Rick Warren’s term “Christian bunnies” in “The Purpose-Driven Life” (2002) was initially described in Moore and Press (unpub manuscript).



*screens flanking either side the stage. Most of the people were white, most looked to be in their 20s and 30s, and almost all were casually dressed in jeans and sneakers. I saw no one in a suit or a formal dress. When I entered, everyone was standing, facing the rock band as it played in the center of the stage. Some people had their hands raised in prayer, others swayed, and some simply stood. When the song finished people clapped and cheered while the senior pastor came up on stage. Dressed slightly more formally in slacks and a collared shirt, the founder of this church was in his early 60s with snow white hair and a medium build. He noted that the sermon for this day was a continuing part of a sermon series dealing with the Old Testament Book of Psalms. He told churchgoers specifically what the Psalms were for: as a prayer guide. The sermon focus this day, he added, was how to deal with feeling overwhelmed by issues – including health, marriage, work, or sin – through the power of prayer.*

*In order to address this issue, the pastor told the congregation he would use an illustration from the life of David, who he explained was an important character from the Old Testament. The pastor noted that there was a contradiction between David's outer and inner life while reading from Psalms 61. As he read, the PowerPoint slides on the screens above him reflected the specific passage of the scripture. The pastor then gave what he called a "quick synopsis" of David's life: he was a shepherd boy who was anointed and then fought Goliath, killing him with a slingshot. The pastor told the congregation more about David. He was not a perfect man, he said: he slept with a married woman named Bathsheba and was a terrible father. Thus, David's life was in turmoil and he had people (including King Saul) chasing him. How did David respond to this tension?, the pastor asked rhetorically. The answer, we were told, was that David*

*had a relationship with God. In order to understand David's struggle, and his feeling of being chased, he suggested that churchgoers watch a "modern day" example of desperation that came from the film "The Lord of the Rings." The lights in the auditorium dimmed as the movie clip began.*

*The scene showed a dark forest in twilight in which four characters (hobbits) were being chased by a dark, cloaked specter riding a black horse searching for the coveted gold ring carried by Frodo<sup>34, 35</sup>. The hobbits darted around trees to avoid the horse and rider in a rapid sequence of shots and sequences. They ran, tripping on the undergrowth of the forest, reaching out to help each other and calling to one another until three of them made it onto a small wooden dock that had a raft at the end. Three of the hobbits unmoored the raft by untying the ropes holding it to the dock and then jumped in. Frodo, the main character, was last to get on the raft. As he entered the space of the screen in his run from the forest he was followed by the horse and rider close on his heels while his compatriots encouraged him to run, his best friend Samwise holding out a hand. Frodo reached the end of the dock, leaping to cross the space of water that had opened up between the dock and raft and just made it, tumbling to floor of the raft amongst the other hobbits. The shot showed the horse's hooves as the rider attempted to slow him, and the hooves came to a stop at the end of the dock, with the rider reining the horse away from the hobbits on the raft and back into the woods. The hobbits began to drift away, dazed, as Frodo stared at the vision of the departing specter.*

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<sup>34</sup> In the *Lord of the Ring* film series, a gold ring that carries much power is sought after by forces of evil. The ring has been entrusted to the hobbit Frodo, who must flee from various dark forces attempting to capture it.

<sup>35</sup> This scene was from the first film in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy: "The Fellowship of the Ring."

*With the end of this scene the pastor continued his sermon, noting that the “poor guys” in the movie were in trouble and that now we could return to the story of David. The sermon then moved directly to an audio version of two biblical passages: I Samuel 23 and 24 that describe David’s chase by King Saul and his evasion of capture that echoed the “Lord of the Rings” scene. The pastor noted that the chase experienced by the characters in the “Lord of the Rings” was very similar to that experienced by David, who must have felt as scared as the hobbits did.*

As this clip reveals, there are several similarities between media use in Harvest and the other churches in this study, including both the association of media to scripture as well as using a commercial media clip to illustrate a specific religious principle or point. In the case of Harvest’s use of the chase scene from *Lord of the Rings*, congregants were encouraged to understand David’s flight from King Saul through the lens of a fictional story about hobbits escaping from forces of darkness. As with other churches, the use of the commercial clip appears to be a way to get churchgoers to apply a possibly arcane biblical story that seems far removed from contemporary life to a media text that may be familiar to many individuals. The clip therefore seemed to be one way to make the story of King David relevant for churchgoers both inside and outside the space of the church. In addition, scripture was used in direct conjunction with the media clip: in this case, the hobbits’ flight from the dark horseman was accompanied by I Samuel 23 and 24, which details David’s attempt to evade King Saul. In this way, Harvest’s media use seems similar to the other churches in this study.

There were also some differences in the way Harvest used commercial media, however. The Harvest sermon was distinguished from other churches’ sermons in the

level of detail it was attempting to teach congregants about a biblical story: in this case, the story of David. In this, the church appeared to be heavily based in scripture, which was consistent with other Harvest sermons I observed. But there is another aspect to this detail, which was that the church leader appeared to assume that very few of the churchgoers would be familiar with the story of King David. Thus, it seems that the media clip was used in a way that would illustrate a biblical principle otherwise unknown to churchgoers. In the auditorium itself there were no Bibles available to congregants unless they brought their own: the space in front of each seat was designated instead for coffee cups and pens. This fits with the description of seeker churches provided in Chapter One in that there are no outward traditional markers of religion. Seen from this perspective, incorporating a media clip from a dramatic and action-filled movie like *Lord of the Rings* could both break up the long and detailed Bible story as well as help individuals who may be new to the faith apply a biblical message to their own lives through contemporary commercial media.

### Media Use Summary

There are general patterns and similarities that emerge in the descriptions of media use in the four churches that can be explored in this research. First, the majority of sermons that used commercial media clips were also focused on the dangers of individualism. Specifically, churchgoers were constantly exhorted to put aside individual wants and desires in order to serve a greater good. This was seen in several sermons including the Sunrise sermon that used the “mirror mirror” scene from *Snow White*, in which churchgoers were supposed to wage an inner battle against individualism; in

Choice's service showing the clip from *Everybody Loves Raymond*, when congregants were asked to fight the "sin of selfishness"; and even in the sermon using the blockbuster film *Braveheart*, in which part of the bondage from which individuals needed to be freed was that of personal addiction and hunger.

Another pattern that emerges is that many of the commercial media clips incorporated into sermons are comical: the media clips often starred comedians like Jack Black in *Nacho Libre* (River Rock) or Jim Carrey in *Bruce Almighty* (Harvest and Sunrise) and the movies themselves often had a humorous bent, as in the *Emperor's New Groove* (Choices) or in *Veggie Tales* (Sunrise). In terms of content, then, many of the movie and television clips appear to be intended to evoke laughter.

In addition, regardless of what media are used or how they are used in sermons, they are almost always associated with scripture<sup>36</sup>: often after a media clip has concluded, bible quotes are displayed on the same screens in an almost seamless discussion of biblical principles. Thus, the narratives within the movie and television scenes are directly equated with stories in the Bible. As such, there appears to be a dual framing, where religious stories frame the media clips shown in church (so that the hobbits' frantic attempt to escape is now directly related to the desperate escape of David in the Bible), and in turn the commercial media clips provide a frame of reference for the potentially inaccessible biblical stories.

The practice of the direct association of Hollywood movies to scripture is intriguing because it seems to be an effort on behalf of pastors to redeem secular entertainment media. Redeeming the media is a theme that recurs in the pastor

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<sup>36</sup> Moore and Press (unpub) also noted this interesting phenomenon.

interviews described in the next chapter (Chapter Four). In linking the movie clips with passages from the Bible during sermons it appears that the intent is to provide another way to look at the secular clips: instead of seeing a bloody political war in *Braveheart*, churchgoers are encouraged to think of the freedom that a relationship with Jesus Christ can bring; instead of an Aztec emperor who is turned through a curse into a llama in *The Emperor's New Groove*, congregants are asked to think of discipleship; and in the forest pursuit of hobbits by dark figures on horseback, the faithful are instead supposed to see the flight of King David.

Reframing secular messages into religious ones, imbuing the potentially problematic values in secular entertainment media with religious values, appears to be church leaders' attempt to redeem the media from an evangelical perspective. This effort begs the question of what it really means to "redeem" commercial entertainment media and if it is even possible to do so. At this juncture the research turns to this question, in the process challenging the view that the values in mainstream entertainment media can be changed with such facility.

#### *Discussion: Redeeming the Media and the Mixed Message*

In terms of conversion of culture (and its artifacts), scholar Clifford Christians' (1990) submits that to "redeem" the media is to offer a different, potentially subversive meaning than the preferred one. Using Christians' definition, it is possible to state that the evangelical leaders in this research "redeem" the movies and television shows they use in sermons by attempting to impart a moral meaning to the potentially "immoral"

commercial (and often R-rated) entertainment media they show in their church. But is this “redemption” the same as Christians’ (1990) version? Christians writes that

While claiming to save the world through mass communication, evangelicals have merely adopted the techniques of the secular culture they so deplore. Ironically, it is the Bible – or at least their reading of it – that has led evangelicals astray in their media use. Overlooking their own roots in the entire Scriptures, they located their calling merely in the New Testament command to preach the gospel to the world... Hoping to convert others, they are reshaped themselves.

Christians’ comment here points to a different way to assess evangelicals’ redemption of media, one not based solely on content. Specifically, evangelical church leaders’ attempt to redeem the media they show in their churches can be explored from two different vantage points: the content and the medium itself.

As the descriptions of media use indicate, an overwhelming majority of the sermons in these churches revolved around the theme of individualism. The theme of anti-individualism was also seen in the frequency of appearance of imagery from the television show *The Lone Ranger* in sermons. In three out of the four churches, as described above, the Lone Ranger character appeared in some form as a way for church leaders to discuss the harm that stems from individualism. Reference to the Lone Ranger in a sermon on the dangers of isolation make sense in part, since the television character is the epitome of American rugged individualism (Dorfman, 1983). The problem for these pastors is that at the same time they critique the iconic hero they also pay homage, (as they do to all of the male heroes that appear in the media shown in church), holding

him up in some sense as the American ideal of the rugged individualist. Bellah et al. (1985) observe, “America is... the inventor of that most mythic individualistic hero, the cowboy.... (but) it is as if the myth says you can be a truly good person, worthy of admiration and love, only if you resist fully rejoining the group” (144). Thus, there appears to be potential for a contradiction between what is communicated by the media text itself versus the pastors’ messages about the need for community, a contradiction that rests at the level of content. Following Christians’ (1990) observations, however, there is an additional contradiction between pastors’ message of community and the airing of any commercial entertainment media clip in church, one that is worth exploring here.

In his work assessing how media shape religion, Shane Hipps (2005) tells an interesting story about Christian use of media. Hipps describes visiting a church that had recently introduced a “multisite” service, where people from locations other than the church were able to watch the sermon live on large projection screens. The preacher was telling a story about the difference between character and talent. To illustrate the distinction, the pastor sprayed whipped cream from cans on top of a large dictionary. The dictionary, the preacher stated, represented character; the whipped cream was the talent. Moral character, which provides a firm foundation, is necessary for a successful ministry, he stated, while the whipped cream (as he dispersed it with his hand off the dictionary) was impermanent and frail.

Hipps believes that the story told by the preacher was excellent and agreed with the message that ministry is supported by character, not talent. However, Hipps continues by stating that this was not the most interesting part of the sermon. Instead, the



most intriguing feature of the sermon was that the preacher's message was contradicted by the medium itself. He explains that

The medium of the video venue had a subliminal message of its own. The message of a video-venue sermon is that the authority to preach is derived from talent and celebrity, not character.... A televised event doesn't communicate anything about a person's character. It can only affirm or deny talent and attractiveness.... Not only did the medium itself undermine this particular preacher's message, but the extensive financial outlay required to pull off a video-venue service also communicated to the congregation that only a preacher with a golden tongue has the authority to preach the gospel.... With video venues we can say goodbye to the priesthood of all believers and hello to the papacy of celebrity (2005. 151-152).

Hipps' observation about the inherent contradiction between message and medium is a good example of Christians' point that "Every medium has its own grammar, that is, the elements enabling it to communicate. Even in the hands of evangelicals, there is no changing the inherent biases of a medium" (1990. 340).

Applying Hipps' and Christians' observations to this research, it seems that evangelical churchgoers exposed to commercial entertainment media in their churches get a dual and potentially incongruous message: while church leaders communicate a message of selflessness, they simultaneously provide an alternative, conflicting message by appealing to churchgoers through visual entertainment. According to Wade Clark Roof (1999), "Visual media reinforce a cultural conception of an expansive self, if not an

empty self, in need of constant filling.... In this respect the media create ‘spiritual omnivores,’ that is, people hungry for new experiences and insights (p. 69, citing Peterson, 1992a). Seen from this perspective, the message sent by using the film *Braveheart* by Pastor Steven at River Rock Church can be examined in a new way. Pastor Steven stated that Jesus is the key to true freedom and that people are otherwise in “bondage.” Specifically, he stated that “to be happy and to be satisfied we have to experience the truth of what we say we believe.” Taking Roof’s perspective, however, the medium that brings the illustration of freedom (in the form of Mel Gibson rallying the troops) can simultaneously create new needs in an ever-expanding self<sup>37</sup>.

At the beginning of this chapter I posed a question regarding what it means to bring mainstream entertainment media into the spaces of evangelical churches. As noted in the next chapter, pastors of these churches indicate that they are fairly concerned with the movies and television shows they use in sermons, being careful not to cross over any perceived moral boundaries in terms of content with their congregations (*eg*, sexuality, cursing). But what other “subliminal messages,” to use Hipps’ phrasing, accompany these media? What does it mean to attract people in to church using media, and how does the message change when media are included in worship?

An examination of the medium itself reveals an important way in which churchgoers may be hailed. In entering the spaces of their church and encountering mainstream entertainment media, churchgoers are invited into a consumerist identity, one that highlights individual needs and personal choice. The subliminal message brought by

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<sup>37</sup> In recognizing this phenomenon, it is important to note that Roof (1999) is also acknowledging that media are integral to the process through which religion becomes commodified into a product that can satisfy ever-expanding needs (69).

the medium, as Hipps (2005) puts it, is many times at direct odds with the religious message pastors want to convey regarding the need for community and the dangers of individualism. Thus, the perspective taken in this research is that both content and the vehicle of delivering that content matters a great deal. If churchgoers in the new spiritual marketplace are drawn to a particular church because of the media they show (and there is indication in ethnographic observations that some churchgoers are), what does that say about not just personal choice in the spiritual marketplace but the *nature* of that choice? A better way to put it might be that visual media, especially secular entertainment media, appear to hail churchgoers in a particular way: as a consumer first and a person of faith second. It is possible that the Hollywood movies and television shows help acculturate unchurched constituents, evangelize others, and help to instruct individuals about biblical principles, but all of this is done in an environment of consumption. As Einstein (2008) notes in her book *Brands of Faith*, churchgoers don't leave the consumer environment when they enter the space of the church; instead, the church is now a space for consumption as well. These changes in the American religious landscape are not simply due to the presence of media, of course: the spiritual marketplace is a broader phenomenon than this. But media appear to be one tool to use in the new marketplace; instead of being a value-neutral tool, however, media are, collectively, a unique kind of instrument, one that carries with it a host of other signifiers and meanings.

### *Conclusion*

As noted in Chapter One, the practice of using various forms of entertainment, including dramatic skits, the use of new technologies, Christian-produced films, books,

videos, and magazines has been documented by many scholars. Quentin Schultze (2001) notes that religious groups often see religious popular culture as a means of converting people to their beliefs, and that “today, Evangelicals, the conservative Protestants, champion evangelistic popular culture” (39). Schultze also noted the “love-hate” relationship that has existed between evangelicals and media: while they use them to evangelize, they are also wary of their influence. Bill Romanowski (1996) sums up the relationship as there being “...a widely shared assumption about a basic incongruity between organized religion and entertainment. Historically the relation of religion and entertainment, back in the United States at least, has been something of a pendulum swinging back and forth between vicious attack and uneasy cooperation. What has remained constant, however, is a level of antagonism between the two” (34). What this chapter has shown is how much the relationship has changed in recent years. Far from “embattled and thriving” on a distinction from secular, mainstream culture as Christian Smith (1998) has noted, there appears to be more similarity now than difference when it comes to engagement with mainstream, commercial media culture in the evangelical churches in this study. This is most evident in the embrace of not only the *style* of commercial American media culture but now the *content* as well in a way that significantly changes church ritual, increasing the consumerist focus that is the hallmark of the American spiritual marketplace by hailing churchgoers as individuals and consumers directly through commercial entertainment media.

This chapter has opened a window to see how commercial entertainment media formations are used by evangelical leaders in the American spiritual marketplace. In so doing it has contrasted the instrumentalist view, which treats media as an effective and

useful value-free instrument that can be used for a variety of purposes, with the substantive view, which examines the potential influence of value-laden media. This research takes the perspective that to subscribe to a substantive view of media use in these churches is to see both “sides of the mountain,” as it were: to consider both content and medium together. The next step is to consider how pastors perceive of the commercial media they use. Do they recognize the same conflicts and inherent tensions between the media they use and the messages they wish to impart to their congregations? The conversation here has provided part of the foundation needed to understand pastors’ and churchgoers’ statements, actions, and beliefs in small prayer groups, which is the focus of the remainder of the dissertation. It is to the leaders of these evangelical churches that we turn next.

## CHAPTER 4

### PARABLES OF *TALLADEGA NIGHTS*: PASTOR INTERVIEWS

#### *Introduction*

As noted in preceding chapters, many evangelical churches in the United States have shifted away from traditional forms of worship and instead have become part of the “spiritual marketplace,” a place where churches compete in a business model of worship to provide the best “religious product” that will attract the most new members. Attention has been paid to how evangelical groups use media technologies and religious popular culture; very little research, however, has attempted to describe the manifestation of the relatively new phenomenon of secular entertainment media use in churches or describe in detail *how* Hollywood films and television shows are used in these evangelical churches and *why* pastors have chosen to use secular media. While Chapter Three has revealed in detail how commercial entertainment media – including Hollywood movies and television shows – are used in the churches that operate within the spiritual marketplace, this chapter continues to fill the gap in the literature by turning the focus onto church leaders themselves, continuing the introduction to commercial entertainment media use in these evangelical churches by providing a description of church leaders’ reasons for using secular entertainment media in sermons based on in-depth interviews with individual pastors.

In the process of examining pastors’ reasons for embracing commercial entertainment media, this portion of the research also assesses whether or not church leaders perceive any tension in weaving together faith and commercial entertainment media in the American spiritual marketplace. Do church leaders see the potential conflict

between their messages decrying individualism and the commercial entertainment media they use to draw new members into the faith? In addressing this question, this chapter continues to lay the foundation for a meaningful and productive discussion regarding the instrumentalist/substantive theoretical debate by identifying evangelical leaders' perceptions of the secular entertainment media that they employ towards various ends in their churches.

Christians (1990) underscores the importance of increasing evangelical understanding of the value-laden nature of media, observing that "If evangelicals could demonstrate how a medium's expressive scope is maximized – or, in other terms, how a medium's biases are overcome creatively – they would be subduing it for the kingdom of God and showing leadership in the artistic arena at the same time" (343). They would also, Christians notes, encourage "moral literacy" in their followers. To address the instrumental/substantive debate thoroughly, ultimately this research culminates in an examination of churchgoers' own beliefs about media, exploring the potential tension that may result from the use of secular entertainment media as evidenced in churchgoers' statements and beliefs. For now, however, the focus is turned to church leaders' own views about the utility of entertainment media in their churches.

### *Pastor Background Information*

As detailed in Chapter Two (Methods) there were four pastors interviewed in this study. Most pastors were interviewed two times (with the exception of Pastor Harrison from Sunrise Church, who left to become pastor of a different church in a different town after the first interview). Appendix A lists the interview schedules and locations.

The following section provides some additional detail on pastors' backgrounds. The pastors were roughly similar in age, as all were in their 40s and 50s. In addition, the pastors were all Caucasian. Their backgrounds were diverse, however, and how they came to be leaders of their churches were all different stories.

Pastor Wilhelm of Choices Church, from a small Midwestern farming town, was the youngest pastor in this study. At 43, he was a youthful-looking, handsome man with a ready smile and an infectious laugh, a man who was willing to see the humor in most things, including himself (as well as my research). He was a certified public accountant for the healthcare industry before being invited by elders at his church to become the lead pastor of a planted church (located in a rural town near Smallville) planned by his parent church. He resisted at first but then acquiesced to the church leaders and planted Choices in 2003. He chose the name of his new church through an informal survey, specifically by asking colleagues and coworkers which name, from a list of several choices, they liked best. Of the choices (including "Bridge" and others) the name "Choices" was selected. Pastor Wilhelm's family, including a wife and several middle-school and high-school age children, eventually moved out of Smallville, relocating to the smaller town where he planted the church.

Pastor Steven, at 58, was the oldest pastor in the study and the church leader at River Rock Church. An incredibly energetic man, he exuded confidence, was quite loquacious and was also well read: at any given time during our interviews he would suggest one book or another off his bookshelf or desk and provide quotes from memory. Growing up in the rural Midwest, he came from a family of farm workers and blue collar factory laborers. He noted that, aside from himself, his cousin was the only family



member to attend college. Pastor Steven told me that he had a religious experience – a “divine encounter” – when he was in youth camp the summer after he graduated from high school. It was this that convinced him to become a preacher. He did most of his work through extension, as he never attended a formal seminary. During my time of research he changed the name of the church, from one that included the name of the denomination (Assembly of God) to another name that omitted reference to religious tradition. I had the chance to ask him why, to which he responded that he wanted to be relevant to the local area and so had named the church after a local subdivision.

Pastor Charlton, a 52-year old man and one of the lead pastors at Harvest Church, was an intelligent, diminutive, slender man with a keen, thoughtful gaze and a thick shock of salt-and-pepper hair. He grew up in the Midwest in a large family. His father was closely involved in a local church, raising Pastor Charlton and his siblings in the Apostolic Christian tradition, a faith that Pastor Charlton likened to strict Mennonite or Amish traditions where technologies like television were forbidden and there was no involvement in sports or theatre. In his adult life, Pastor Charlton was a landscape architect, having graduated in the 1970s from Smallville University. His plans to practice landscape architecture as his profession changed when he, in his own words, “surrendered his life to Jesus.” His current title, when I interviewed him, was Executive Pastor and also the “Architect of Atmosphere.”

Pastor Harrison from Sunrise was an intelligent, serious man with reddish brown hair, a slight build, and a warm smile. During our interview he was perceptive and staid, answering questions but also posing some of his own to me. A few months after the interview he left to take another pastor position in a larger town a few miles away from

Smallville. He received a degree in biology from a four-year university and performed various odd jobs, including green's keeper at a golf course and general construction laborer before receiving his Master of Divinity degree and Doctor of Ministry from a university in the Midwest. His doctoral research focused on how to reaching unchurched baby boomers through small group and prayer.

*Pastors' Accounts on the Origin of Secular Entertainment Media Use in Their Churches*

The four churches in this study generally began incorporating secular entertainment media into their sermons in the mid-1990s but this time frame varies by each church according to when it was created. Harvest Church, the biggest church in this research and part of a larger group of churches of the same name, officially began meeting in east central Illinois in 1986. According to a pastor from this church that I interviewed, the church's founder was a member of a nationally popular rock music group and so his church denomination has always been open to the influence of popular culture. However, he was able to identify when his church began the specific practice of incorporating Hollywood movies and television shows into their sermons:

...secular media use in the Harvest churches increased in the decade of the 90s as more and more churches were willing to expand the boundaries of cultural sensitivity in their ministries, programs, and outreaches. They wanted to build a more effective bridge to people by using forms with which their audiences were already familiar. So the integration of movie clips, cover tunes as worship service openers, and the like increased (*Pastor Charlton, former landscape architect, 52, Caucasian*).

According to the pastor of Choices Church, the youngest church in this study, he has used secular entertainment media in his services since the church was created in 2003. The pastor explained that Choices was created as a “plant” from a larger church in another town that encouraged the use of media in sermons. The slightly larger, slightly older Sunrise Church has always used media since it was founded in 1995, according to its pastor. River Rock Church was founded in 1968 and the current pastor (Pastor Steven) took over approximately 15 years ago. His answer is somewhat similar to the pastor from Harvest Church in that he feels as though he has always used some form of media:

Even as a youth pastor in the 70’s I used ‘media’: dry ice for smoke, ‘colored’ overhead transparencies, fancy poster boards, object lessons, early VHS video clips in youth sermons and studies (*Pastor Steven, 58, pastor, Caucasian*).

Pastor Steven’s statement of his use of media seems to echo the earlier practices of evangelical leaders such as Aimee Semple MacPherson (Sutton, 2007). Pastor Steven, however, could not, or would not, specify to me what year he began to use secular entertainment media.

In general, for all of the churches in this study it is clear that secular entertainment media use is a relatively new phenomenon (within the last 15 years). It is important to note that three out of the four of these churches (including Sunrise, Choices, and River Rock) are members of the Willow Creek Association of churches. Willow Creek, a Chicago-based megachurch, is considered by many of the pastors in this study to be the first to use secular entertainment media, and with huge success. Pastor Harrison from

Sunrise Church noted that the Willow Creek Association (WCA), of which his church was a member, was “very influential” in the development of Sunrise. Although most of these churches were influenced by Willow Creek, it is clear that media use in evangelical seeker churches is not limited to this particular church organization. In response to a question I posed about how widespread the use of secular entertainment was in American evangelical churches in general, Pastor Wilhelm from Choices gave the following response:

I don't think it's tied to WCA or even to seekers as much as one might expect.... Even those (churches) who use media wouldn't necessarily have been influenced by WCA as much as hearing about it from other churches or at a variety of books and conferences.... As early as 1998 or so, I attended a large pastor's conference that had many breakout sessions, of which several were devoted to either the use of technology, designing powerpoint slides, presentation software or media. And then after that, books and websites came out with specific clips from movies and how to use those clips to illustrate... certain points. ie you would look up topics like jealousy, anger, etc and find 5 or 6 media clips to illustrate that (*Pastor Wilhelm, former certified public accountant, 43, Caucasian, via email*).

According to Pastor Wilhelm's statement, media use in church is not directly tied to or influenced by WCA, although the association is the most prominent example of a seeker church that uses secular entertainment media with great success (if gauged using the 12,000 smaller member churches and over 90 different denominations that are associated with it). In addition, information on when Willow Creek began to use secular

media is not readily available, as there is little published research on this topic and as my calls to Willow Creek to inquire about their media use went unanswered<sup>38</sup>.

### *Reasons for Media Use in Sermons: Pastor Interviews*

One important question to ask the leaders of the churches in this study was (Willow Creek's potential influence notwithstanding) why they made the individual decision to begin using secular entertainment media in their sermons. Pastors' answers were surprisingly similar, revealing a general pattern of similarity in the perceived benefits of using Hollywood movies and popular television shows in church. The reasons, which are inter-related, include the potential to grow church numbers, deepen individuals' faith, acclimate the "unchurched" to the church environment, and to instruct churchgoers on Christian principles.

### Media as Parable

One reason to use secular entertainment media in church is that it is a useful teaching device. One of the lead pastors from Harvest Church, Pastor Charlton, stated it the most simply, namely that "The spoken word is too narrow. Jesus was a storyteller: he told parables and he used visual metaphors." From Pastor Charlton's statement it seems that not only is there a biblical basis for the use of secular media but that media can serve the function of parables, which is to instruct and encourage understanding. Pastor

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<sup>38</sup> The calls weren't unanswered in the strict sense. When I called the main number of WCA and stated my identity as a researcher who had some questions about the church I was transferred four times, eventually ending up in the bookstore. Several of the pastors I worked with then attempted to contact WCA on my behalf with similar results, even though they were members of the association.

Wilhelm from Choices said more about this function of secular media when discussing media choices in his church:

...it tells a short story, and it's almost like when Jesus told parables, and He said, "there was this farmer who was out scattering seed, and he scattered some seed, and some fell on the path, and some fell on rocky ground, and some fell..." I think if He could have had a video of that farmer, he would have shown it.... There's a movie called *Minority Report* with Tom Cruise, there's a point where he has this person with him who can kind of see the future, and he just has to listen to her guiding him through this, this shopping mall type of thing. And so I said, "as best I can tell, following the Holy Spirit is a little bit like this"... so it's just, it, it helped reinforce a point in the message through a story.

Pastor Wilhelm's statement, like Pastor Charlton, appears to define the utility of media in a very specific sense, which is that film clips can function as a didactic device, one that can help churchgoers to learn biblical principles using a language they are familiar with and enabling them to draw from their own experiences outside of church.

The leader from Sunrise Church, Pastor Harrison, expressed a similar sentiment, although not framed specifically in terms of parables:

I think working with media and its various forms in our culture can be valuable. Because there are a lot of spiritual themes, spiritual messages, spiritual values that are in our culture. They don't necessarily happen to be Christian, but they're spiritual that you can take and use and say, "OK...now this is what you have been taught to believe, here is what Jesus says about

that. Here is what the Bible says about that. Can you see the differences between the two?” That you really have a clear choice here (*Pastor Harrison, pastor, 46, Caucasian*).

Interestingly, for the pastor of Sunrise, the movies and television shows that he incorporated into his sermons weren’t considered “secular” by him in the strict sense: instead, he perceived the presence of spiritual messages within media that might, in other contexts (such as outside the space of church) and by others (non-religious individuals) be thought of as devoid of religious content. From this example, it also is clear that the way Pastor Harrison uses media in his sermons functions much in the way that the other pastors above describe, which is as a teaching device to help congregation members understand biblical concepts.

#### Media as Evangelizer

The second reason that pastors provide to explain their use of secular entertainment media in their churches is that it is an effective tool of evangelization in several respects. First, it is a way to “spread the good news” (evangelize) to potential (new) churchgoers. Pastor Wilhelm at Choices Church made the candid remark that the clips from popular movies and television shows that he uses in sermons helps to entice “window shoppers” who may be visiting his church for the first time. Second, using secular entertainment media in church helps to attract those individuals who may be “seeking” some sort of spiritual connection but are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with traditional forms of religion, including conventional religious symbols and rituals. Using

popular movies and television shows in sermons, pastors believe, helps to bring more people to faith by making them feel more comfortable in church.

Pastor Harrison from Sunrise Church discussed this reason for incorporating media into his sermons:

The intent of the media is really to have an identification point for people, help them to sense what goes on in that big room.... (Media), uh, is connected to what goes on in their life every day. Uh, and also to help point to a um...human condition or dilemma that they all experience, that we all experience.

Seen from this perspective, clips from Hollywood film and television shows are able to help new churchgoers orient themselves in a new space that may be filled with the unfamiliar, including crosses, bibles, and other traditional religious rituals and symbols. Since popular Hollywood movies and television shows are connected with individuals' everyday lives, they provide one way to acculturate new churchgoers to the institutional church experience. Media also can be used to, as Pastor Harrison put it, "meet people where they are," which, in the case of those individuals unfamiliar with religious institutions, would be in secular, mainstream, mediated culture. Meeting people where they are in contemporary American society, to these pastors, means using secular media. The statement from Pastor Steven at River Rock Church exemplifies how his church works in this framework and how he defines his mission:

I consider myself... a missionary to this culture. If I was a missionary in a Spanish country, I would learn Spanish. If I was a missionary in Czechoslovakia, I would learn Czech. I am a missionary to midtown



America in a city that is basically dominated by a college, a Big 10 College. So I use, I do a lot of things... in regards to illustrations... you need to contextualize your message. And, you know, Jesus was a master at this. He was an absolute master of this.... There are some Christian groups (that) put the cookie jar on the top shelf. I don't believe Jesus would've done that. I believe he would have put the cookie jar on the bottom shelf so we could all find out how good God was. So that's what we try to do with the use of media.

In Pastor Steven's statement, it is clear that the "cookie jar" on the "top shelf" represents the inaccessibility of Christianity as traditionally practiced with its seemingly arcane rituals and cultural isolation from mainstream American society. By not using media, Pastor Steven believes that other churches put Christianity out of the reach of those individuals who may not be familiar with the symbols and traditions within Christianity. His statements also speak to the perceived utility of media as an agent of acculturation, one that has the ability to reach – and influence – a wide audience.

This use of media points to a central unifying factor in these churches: they are all "seeker" oriented. As noted in the Introduction, the churches in this study (as well as others like them) were created for the purpose of attracting "seekers," those individuals who are not familiar or comfortable with the rituals and symbols of traditional religion and yet lean toward spirituality (Roof, 1999). Seekers tend to be either the "unchurched" (those who have never attended church regularly) or the "dechurched" (those that have left more traditional churches). Wade Clark Roof (1999) has described seeker churches and their use of media in particular detail in one passage, observing that

Seeker churches' work at developing forms of worship, and most especially utilizing music, that convey a sense of authenticity and reality about contemporary life. Above all, they try not to be boring.... Praise music and extensive sound systems create an inspirational context. Overhead projectors and large screens making possible visual connection with lyrics, cartoons, and Bible verses add to the overall experience. Drama and clips from film and television – mininarratives describing the joys and dilemmas of life - communicate effectively and relate to common, everyday experiences. Meeting in auditoriums... where there are few religious symbols and no stained glass plays down the 'churchy' atmosphere and sends the message that persons are accepted for who they are..." (pp. 95-96).

*Missional* in the context of this research means meeting people where they are in secular, mainstream American culture. There is no significant distinction between seeker and missional churches: seeker churches, in attempting to attract spiritual individuals who may be more comfortable in mainstream, secular American culture than in a church with traditional symbols and rituals, use a missional evangelical style to “meet people where they are.”

Thus, the way that media help to evangelize, according to pastors, is through the ability to speak – and appealing – to everyone by meeting them where they are. Pastor Steven’s comments illustrate this best:

Media is a unifying factor of communication. Now you think about, oh let’s pick one of the reality shows, *Amazing Race*, think about the huge

diversity of people that watch. People in Kentucky, coal miners, city dwellers in New York, housewives, collegiates, educated, uneducated, professionals, factory workers, so when you show some video clip [it appeals to a wide range of people].

In this sense, media can be seen to have broad appeal, able to speak to people from all walks of life. The assistant pastor of media at the Harvest, Ashley, echoed this view of secular entertainment media as having universal appeal when she provided her reason for using media in her church:

We need to be as effective as possible. People are ‘pre-programmed’ to respond to media. It also allows us to connect with different generations.

There has to be a visual element because it makes church relevant.

Ashley’s comments also demonstrate a particular view of the significant power of the media on churchgoers – as well as the homogeneity of her media “audience” (churchgoers), a point revisited later in this chapter. During the same interview at Harvest, Pastor Charlton agreed with Ashley, stating that “We need to use the language of the culture in order to ‘stick’ to people.”

### Media As Entertainment?

Thus far, the reasons given by pastors have pointed to the power of the media in two inter-related ways: first media can be used as a didactic tool, used to instruct individuals who may be unfamiliar with scripture; second, it is a way to draw in, or evangelize, individuals by using a vehicle not only familiar to them but also one that has incredibly broad appeal, able to hail both young and old, white- and blue-collar, male and

female, religious or just “spiritual.” However, there are a few other reasons to use media that become apparent in the pastor interviews. The first is very practical and points to media as a useful tool on a very basic level. As Pastor Steven from River Rock states,

I like to have a little video clip because it gets people in the listening mode. The lights are dimmed, there’s not as many distractions, they’re all focused on the screen, which is the language of our culture and they know it’s time to go to work to learn something... So when I get up, I do not have to get their attention. It *grabs* their attention from the youngest one in the room to the oldest one in the room regardless of social, economic, educational, theological level. It absolutely grabs everybody’s attention. So I get up and boom, go right into it.

Pastor Steven’s comment indicates that media can be used fairly simply (but to great effect) as a “sermon starter,” to use his words. This reason to use media in sermons seems a far cry from the biblical basis of telling parables or even to evangelize and “meet people where they’re at.” Instead, media seem to be used as a tool to get an audience’s (potentially wandering) attention. Pastor Harrison from Sunrise echoed this reason to use media to some degree, stating that

Lots of times we’ll show clips like we did today as a call (to) worship. Uh, which is... primarily a way to kind of identify the theme of the day and help people to get connected with where we’re going.

Seen from this perspective, media are simply a useful and effective collective tool to get churchgoers’ attention and begin sermons. One final comment illustrates this point, at the same time pointing to one more potential reason to use media in evangelical

churches. When asked about why media are used in his sermons, Pastor Wilhelm responded that:

Um, one good thing is that it is entertaining. And I've always noticed, and even when I've taken, uh, I took a class on counseling, and the teacher brought in some video clips from movies, whenever they showed a media clip I sat up, I perked up, I paid more attention because there was something that gripped my, my focus during that time. So, I think that by doing that in a church service it does say to people, "hmm, I wonder what this is about?"

This comment on media use provides a segue to the final potential reason that pastors use secular movies and television shows in their churches, one that may provide the most tension: entertainment. This reason it is written here as a "potential" reason is because the pastors in this research appear to actively try to avoid using secular entertainment media *solely* for entertainment purposes. However, it is clear that entertainment is one aspect of using media in church, potentially as one more way to evangelize. Pastor Wilhelm's "window shoppers" may be interested in the religious implications of the mall scene from the movie *Minority Report* when shown in Choices on Sunday, but they also may be entertained in the process.

The tension about media use functioning as entertainment in these churches was recognized by most pastors in this research. Pastor Harrison, when discussing his use of media clips in sermons, stated that he sometimes uses more than one movie clip in one sermon. In his discussion, however, he was careful to state that

you know, I think that the potential danger with that is that the movie clip can overwhelm the message. You know um, so it needs to be almost organic, it needs to really tie in, uh, and you better have something to say that takes you someplace from the movie clip.

Ashley, the assistant media pastor at Harvest, echoed Pastor Harrison when she stated that although she wanted to make church “relevant” for churchgoers, “there must be a (religious) tie in to the message.” The point regarding media as entertainment is represented by another example. In a Choices Church prayer group where the pastor was present, one churchgoer (a man in his 70s) told me that the secular media used in sermon was always “germane to the topic.” Turning to Pastor Wilhelm, the man looked for confirmation, asking, “right?” The pastor chuckled at his question, replying, “sometimes, no.” Although the pastor may have been joking with his constituents, church leaders were clear that, even though entertainment media may be a side benefit of using media, able to make churchgoers laugh and to gain their attention, they did not wish to use secular entertainment media solely for entertainment.

This tension – using media not primarily to entertain but instead to instruct and bring people to faith – in using movies and television shows in the context of church was best illustrated by one movie in particular: the R-rated comedy *Talladega Nights* (2006). Interestingly, three out of the four pastors in this research identified the film during interviews as having a prayer scene that they wanted to use in sermons. Pastor Wilhelm from Choices describes the scene from the movie, noting that

There’s a prayer scene in there where the guy is praying to little baby Jesus, because that’s the theme that he likes, and he prays and he thanks

God for his smokin' hot wife, and, it's just funny, so it's like, do we show that?

Clearly, the humor in the scene made Pastor Wilhelm want to show the clip, indicating a desire to use the media for entertainment and not to illustrate a biblical principle. Echoing this statement, Pastor Harrison from Sunrise called the scene from *Talladega Nights* an “absolutely solid gold clip... just hysterical,” and also considered using it. Pastor Charlton from Harvest noted that he had seen the movie three times with his family and considered using the clip in question in a sermon about prayer.

Significantly, none of the pastors did ultimately use it in their Sunday sermons, and all for the same reason: a concern with the rest of the movie being too sexually explicit. Not only does the movie contain multiple instances of crude language, suggestive sexual content and explicit references to (and depictions of) homosexuality, but the prayer scene in question ended with the main character's young son telling his father that he had made that prayer his “bitch” and the wife climbing on top of her husband to have sex at the dinner table in front of the family.

In sum, pastors in this research indicate that they use secular entertainment media to evangelize, to instruct churchgoers on biblical principles, to acclimate “unchurched” individuals into the church environment, and less often, to entertain. In using media for these reasons, pastors clearly perceive many benefits of incorporating commercial entertainment media into their sermons. One question that was important to ask was if they recognized any tension in the use of movies and television shows in church. Their answers reveal a great deal about their perception of not only what the movies convey to their constituents but also their ability to control the messages within the media.

### *Tension in Transmission: Sexuality, Violence, and Individualism*

The decision by the pastors not to use the prayer scene from *Talladega Nights* provided a glimpse into the potential tension that pastors may perceive in bringing secular entertainment media into their churches. Clearly, their main concern was with the explicit sexual depictions in the film. Overall, pastors' concerns about the use of movies and television shows in their churches manifested itself in three ways, all of which rested at the level of the text itself, and included sexuality, individualism, and – to a lesser extent – violence. These three tensions emerged during pastors' responses to my questions during interviews about what problems they perceived, if any, in their use of commercial entertainment media in church. Interestingly, all perceived tension rested at the level of the media text itself and with overt content: none of the pastors recognized tension that might arise from the transmitter of the messages themselves: the media.

#### Sexuality

The first tension in terms of content – sexuality – was evident from statements made by all pastors. Here, a few specific examples provide a representative indicator of the tension. Pastor Wilhelm at Choices provided an example of media that his “parent” church<sup>39</sup> had used in a sermon that seemed to demarcate the line between acceptable and unacceptable media solely in terms of sexual content. He had difficulty talking about this, as indicated by the fragmented sentences and pauses in the conversation.

Pastor Wilhelm: This was probably somewhere in '05, '06, they pulled back on some of the use of media clips, um, because there were... yeah.

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<sup>39</sup> Choices Church was a “plant” created from a larger, older Baptist church in a nearby town.



There were a couple of Sundays where... there was one Sunday where there was a guest pastor and he showed, uh, a clip from an R rated movie. It wasn't a risqué part of the movie necessarily, but it was edgy enough that they got some backlash from enough people.

Interviewer: Do you remember what movie it was?

Pastor Wilhelm: Uh huh (*pause*). *Moulin Rouge*.

*Moulin Rouge* (2001) is a film about a fictitious French courtesan in Paris in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and her love for an impoverished English writer. Although there was no depiction of nudity or sex depicted in the clip, the mere allusion to unmarried sex and prostitution created real tension for both the pastors of the parent church as well as churchgoers. The pastors from the other churches also provided their own examples of tension resulting from sexuality in the media. Pastor Charlton from Harvest noted that church leaders had decided to show a controversial clip from the television game show “Deal or No Deal” the depicted women in low-cut, form-fitting dresses. Similar to the backlash from *Moulin Rouge*, after the sermon several Harvest churchgoers complained on the basis that several were trying to overcome sexual addiction (and the “Deal or No Deal” clip had seemed harmful in this regard).

Pastor Harrison from Sunrise Church also alluded to the difficulty that sexual content created for his potential selection of media clips, using a prayer scene from a comedy as an example:

*Pastor Harrison*: There's a great clip in “Talladega Nights,” or however you say that, uh that we were going to use. And we were going to use it for Christmas, maybe even for Christmas...

*Interviewer:* Wow!

*Pastor Harrison:* And uh, it just, the rest of the movie was so bad, so raunchy that we just decided that that was not the thing that we wanted to communicate

It is apparent from pastors' statements that the sexuality that characterized much mainstream media created a significant tension, one that was to be avoided in church. However, it is interesting to note that several of the examples provided by the pastors indicated that it was the churchgoers that perceived a problem with the sexual references and not the pastors: clearly, the church leaders at Pastor Wilhelm's parent church had approved the depiction of Moulin Rouge in church, as had the leaders at Harvest Church to use *Deal or No Deal*. In fact, Pastor Steven at River Rock held a sermon that had a "Victoria's Secret" theme in February 2006<sup>40</sup>. When he was asked about this in an interview he admitted,

I was trying to grab the men, I'll just admit it I was trying to grab the men. Trying to get them interested. I dealt with a whole bunch of relationships in the series. I think I preached to the married couples, the singles, overcoming temptation, sexual purity. To me that wasn't compromise, to me that grabbing...

In sum, the depiction of sexuality in mainstream media created constant tension for pastors (as well as churchgoers, a point addressed in more detail in Chapter Six). Having expressly noted the tension of sexuality in mainstream commercial media, however, the pastors still had chosen to show clips that, although not depicting sexuality,

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<sup>40</sup> See Moore and Press (unpub) for more information.

drew from movies and television shows like *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, *Bourne Identity*, *Forrest Gump*, *Lost*, and *Witness*, all of which depict premarital sex. The film *Talladega Nights* stood out to the pastors only, it seems, as the extreme end of a spectrum, representing with its explicit depictions of sexual behavior and allusions to sexual “deviance” a line that they couldn’t cross.

### Individualism

The second tension that pastors identified was the expression of individualism that they felt was evident in most secular media. For pastors, the notion of individualism ran counter to the values they espoused in their churches regarding community and a selfless life. For Pastor Steven at River Rock Church, individualism is a sin, one that is almost inescapable. He stated that “We’re all that way; I’m that way, you’re that way...um, you know it’s, it’s *me-ism*. It’s called culture lag, it’s called human weakness; theologically it’s called original sin.” “Me-ism” is an interesting phrase because of the pastors’ recognition of the significant degree of individualism that existed in his congregation, a point that is taken up in detail in Chapter Seven on individualism in evangelical prayer groups. Pastor Steven’s concern with “me-ism” was echoed by other pastors. In one interesting exchange, Pastor Wilhelm at Choices expressed his concern with individualism, at the same time making an interesting distinction in this regard between different types of technology:

I worry about movies that are so focused on self indulgence, (which is) just an attitude that I need to take care of myself. That life is about me... and maybe it’s more just from, um, television. To me *Seinfeld* was a very

self-focused type of show. *Friends*, um, uh, and again funny, good acting, you know, but again a lot of it seems to be about, “I’m the one that determines my destiny.”

One of the most interesting – and potentially contradictory – statements about individualism in American culture came from a discussion with Pastor Harrison at Sunrise church.

Rugged individualism is probably the second most dominant philosophy in our culture. It is just the way we think. So, uh, the Christian Gospel, the Christian message is really antithetical to both of those. Uh, so you have to find some ways, with regard to rugged individualism, to help people break out of that John Wayne mode of life and say, “you know what? You are not an island. You do not exist unto yourself. You are and need to be part of a community.” If you're not uh then who you were created to be, in the image of God, is going to be severely compromised, if not deeply marred.

The significance of this statement from Pastor Harrison when considering pastors’ use of secular entertainment media lies in the inherent contradiction it reveals. The pastor recognizes the tension that individualism causes in his church using the example of John Wayne, arguably one of the best Hollywood representations of Western individuality; at the same time, however, Pastor Harrison’s church incorporates images of rugged individualists like the Lone Ranger into sermons. Reference in a sermon to a typical American hero such as the Lone Ranger would seem to make sense when discussing themes of redemption, inner strength, or the need for strong moral values;

however, as noted in the last chapter, it is a mixed message, for at the same time that Pastor Harrison critiques the individualistic nature of John Wayne and the Lone Ranger in the media he also is holding them up in some sense as the American ideal for his congregation.

### Violence

The last tension identified from pastors' statements was the violence found in mainstream entertainment media. It is important to note that violence was much less of an issue than sexuality or individualism and was mentioned by only two of the pastors. In a conversation with Pastor Harrison from Sunrise, he discussed how he made a decision about whether or not to show certain media in his church, specifically referencing the film *Braveheart*.

That's a conscious choice. You know what? I understand that, you know, like for instance somebody (in the church), not very long ago, wanted to show a clip from "Braveheart," which was a very popular movie. But, you know, the question was, well was that an 'R' rated movie? Yeah. Well, why was it 'R' rated? Because of the violence. Uh, and do we want to promote that as a church? No, not really. (*Pastor Harrison, 48, pastor, Caucasian*)

For Pastor Harrison, although *Braveheart* was a "popular" film and might have been well received by his constituents, the remainder of the movie was too violent. A similar statement on the depiction of violence was voiced by Pastor Wilhelm from Choices Church, who noted that he had shown the movie *Witness* (1985), which starred

Harrison Ford as a policeman protecting a young Amish boy who had witnessed a murder. Pastor Wilhelm noted that they had cut the scene right before Harrison Ford's character punches someone else in a retributive act, smiling in remembrance of the decision to stop the scene at that moment. For these two pastors, the violence in the films they wanted to show meant that they couldn't show the movie, or at least had to edit the clip that they did show to churchgoers. However, in a seeming contradiction these churches showed scenes from films like *A Few Good Men*, *Minority Report*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Indiana Jones*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and other films that featured a great deal of violence. It is important to note that the movies themselves contained violence but the clips did not<sup>41</sup>. However, all pastors in the study acknowledged that the media clips from film and television they showed in church could be perceived as an endorsement of the entire film by churchgoers, which was reflected in Pastor Harrison's reason not to show films such as *Talladega Nights* (for crude content) or *Braveheart* (for violence).

These three tensions in using secular media in church described by pastors above – sexuality, individuality, and to some degree violence – are interesting for several different reasons. First, while it seems that the pastors perceive some real tension in what to show and what not to show in terms of content, they also seemed to like to test the limits intermittently, as was evident in the showing of the scene from *Moulin Rouge*, the use of a clip from the television show *Deal or No Deal*. *Talladega Nights* specifically provided an example of a film that most pastors seemed genuinely interested in due to the content dealing (however crudely) with Jesus and prayer; however, the film was deemed

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<sup>41</sup> For instance, in *A Few Good Men*, a film that depicted scenes of brutality the scene was of Jack Nicholson's character in a courtroom yelling "you can't handle the truth!"; the scene from the movie *Minority Report* was of Tom Cruise's character traveling through a mall; Indiana Jones took a leap of faith; and *Saving Private Ryan* showed of the characters (Private Ryan) kneeling at the gravesite of the man who saved him.

too “raunchy” by the pastors and therefore reveals an interesting line that pastors wouldn’t cross. Interesting also is the fact that often it is churchgoers themselves that “police” the church leaders’ choices of media along the lines of sexuality, a point that is taken up in Chapter Six in the ethnography of prayer groups. Perhaps it is the flirting with the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is forbidden that there seemed to be a discrepancy between what the pastors said and what they showed in church: although several discussed the need to avoid depictions of sexuality, individualism and – to a lesser extent – violence, all churches showed media that contained these themes.

One of the most intriguing contradictions was evident in the discussions about individualism. Clearly too much of a focus on the self concerned pastors, yet the vehicle that they use to evangelize and teach churchgoers highlights individual desires and consumption. This incongruity highlights the point brought up earlier in the chapter, namely that the pastors interviewed in this research take a relatively limited view of the media they use. Specifically, the pastors seem to limit themselves to a view of communication as transmission only, one that rests at the level of the text alone. This perspective on communication was illustrated well when I asked Pastor Charlton at Harvest Church if the use of secular entertainment media in his church created any tension. His reply was emphatic: “it’s filled with tension!” When asked to elaborate, however, he brought up two instances of tension in his church that dealt with concerns of sexuality: *Deal or No Deal* and *Talladega Nights*. He did not find significant tension in using visual imagery from commercial entertainment media and the consumerist, individualistic focus that the media may bring in to the church during Sunday sermons. Pastor Charlton’s response is representative of all of the pastors in one sense: he is

focused on tension from showing secular entertainment media in church that resides at the level of the text only. None of the pastors saw tension in what the use of movies and television shows in church might communicate on a deeper level, namely how church ritual might be changed with the introduction of secular entertainment media. The significance of this view is twofold. First, church leaders appear to believe that if they control the media (in church, only certain parts of movies) they can control the ultimate message communicated to churchgoers. Integral to this is the belief that the media they show can be redeemed, whereby pastors believe that the symbols in secular media can be reframed and imbued with a religious message, a pattern that emerged in the examination of media use in church in Chapter Three. Second, in taking the transmission perspective of communication pastors ignore the significance of bringing secular entertainment media into church from the perspective of ritual communication. In other words, they do not appear to recognize the consumerist, individualist aspect that they bring into the spaces of their churches with this media. This view directly translates into the instrumentalist view.

#### *Pastors and the Instrumentalist View*

Statements from several pastors reveal an instrumentalist viewpoint in regards to the consequences of bringing Hollywood movies and television shows into their churches. When pressed as to what other types of tension (aside from sexuality, individualism and violence) they perceived in using Hollywood movies and television to illustrate religious messages, none of the church leaders saw significant problems; instead, media use was seen as having almost universally positive effects with very few



negative ones. Pastor Steven at River Rock summed up his view of media use in sermons succinctly. While he recognized that some “religious Christians” (“who everything’s an issue to them”) were troubled by the use of secular media in church, he personally saw no cause for concern:

First of all in God’s eyes, I don’t think there’s a difference between the secular and the sacred. I can go out in the woods and get close to God, I don’t have to be reading my Bible, you know? So, yes, I would say there is a disadvantage in that there would be some people that would not appreciate it and they would see mixing the gospel and media as compromise.... You’re compromising with the culture. Well, you know, I just don’t agree with that.

Pastor Harrison from Sunrise Church, when asked if he saw tension even in the use of PG movies in his church (due to the individualism and consumerism it might promote) answered, “Not really. Uh, I don’t see any tension. I see, you know if you’re trying to reach people in the culture, that’s exactly where they are.” From this perspective, pastors perceive that they need media to reach people. Pastor Harrison’s statement highlighted the use of secular entertainment media as an instrument that could be used with no tension at all. For him, the benefit was not only clear but predictable: by using Hollywood films and television shows his church could evangelize more and help people to understand biblical principles better.

The clearest instantiation of the instrumentalist viewpoint was provided by Pastor Charlton at Harvest Church when discussing the implications of media use in evangelical

churches. In response to the same question posed to all pastors regarding any perceived tension in the use of media in church, he responded that:

You know, music is music. There's nothing moral, ethical, spiritual or not about the rhythms, the melodies or the harmonies. A drum beat is a drum beat. An A chord is an A chord... And in the same way a show or a movie, it's a show, it's entertainment. It can be laced with profanity or maybe have full frontal nudity, and in that sense, it's doesn't necessarily make it evil, it's just makes it probably not a good choice, but by and large movies are movies. They are what they are. They're entertainment. And you could, depending on the setting, you could use one to teach a spiritual or moral principle, at home watching it on Sunday morning could be just entertainment. And I don't have any reservation in using something and redeeming it. In that sense it's amoral.

Pastor Charlton's comments provided the clearest example of an instrumentalist view of media in two key ways. First, the context for media use can make a significant difference, he noted, this being the hallmark of an instrumentalist view. As Christians (1990) notes, "A knife in a surgeon's hand saves a life; in the hands of a murderer a knife destroys life. The same projector shows pornography and National Geographic Specials. One is reminded of the familiar slogan, 'Guns don't kill people, people do'" (337). Second, and related to this belief is a perception of the "amorality" of media and technology: in his statement, Pastor Charlton almost perfectly mirrors Christians' (2002) definition of the instrumentalist view of technology, which is "essentially amoral, a thing apart from values, a neutral instrument that can be used for good or ill" (38). In sum,

media, in these pastors' minds, tell stories that are highly accessible and can be used with great effectiveness for a variety of purposes.

Within the perception of media as a collective, effective tool to use for evangelism and teaching are a few associated beliefs regarding the media as well as the audience (in this case, churchgoers). From pastors' statements it is clear that media are effective in reaching a wide audience, and pastors also seem to believe that, by and large, the effects of using secular entertainment media are fairly consistent. When considering pastors' views about their constituents, it is useful to return to the pastors' belief about media as a parable to address not simply the way pastors think about the media they use in their churches but also their "audience." For in their views of the power of media comes a perception of their congregants as well.

#### *Media and the Audience: Parable or Magic Bullet?*

In *Speaking into the Air*, John Durham Peters (1999) compares and contrasts the Socratic conception of dialogue – marked by privacy, reciprocity, and selectivity – with Jesus' practice of dissemination as manifested in the telling of parables: one message to a large and diverse audience. In three of the synoptic gospels (*Matthew 13*, *Mark 4*, and *Luke 8*), Jesus' parable to people by the lakeshore is described. This section is taken from *Matthew 13:1-13* from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible<sup>42</sup>:

<sup>1</sup>That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. <sup>2</sup>Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it,

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<sup>42</sup> From the Bible Gateway website:  
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew%2013&version=31>

while all the people stood on the shore. <sup>3</sup>Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. <sup>4</sup>As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup>Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. <sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. <sup>8</sup>Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. <sup>9</sup>He who has ears, let him hear."

<sup>10</sup>The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

<sup>11</sup>He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. <sup>12</sup>Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. <sup>13</sup>This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand."

Peters notes that the parable of the sower is really “a parable about parables,” or a “metaparable” (51-52). What Jesus meant in telling the story about the fate of the seeds (some may take hold in the soil and grow whereas others may lie dormant or be lost) is that the seeds are a metaphor for a message, while the fate of the seeds represents the different potential receptions of that message: some individuals may understand (and, in this case, come to God); some may receive the message but, due to varying factors, are not able to let their faith “take root,”; and some may not understand at all (and thus are

completely unreceptive to Jesus' message). In a sense, the parable of the sower is a story about the diversity of the audience: a message may be uniform and clear but the reception will always be unpredictable. As Peters observes, "parables are marked by uniformity in transmission and diversity in reception" (52). He goes on to note that

The diverse audience members, like the varieties of soils, who hear that parable as told by the seashore are left to make of it what they will. It is a parable about the diversity of audience interpretations in settings that lack direct interaction. It examines the results when sender and receiver, sower and eventual harvest, are loosely coupled (51).

The word "parable" is closely related in Greek to "problem," and Peters suggests that "the meaning of the parable – the interpretive burden – is quite literally the audience's problem" (52).

Peters' discussion of the theory of communication as dissemination can be applied to the pastors' instrumentalist views of the secular entertainment media they use in their churches. As understood from their statements, pastors believe that Hollywood movies and television shows have the ability to effectively transmit religious ideas or principles to members of their churches in a way that closely resembles the parables told by Jesus. This may explain why pastors are uniformly positive about secular media as a way to achieve their goal of bringing people to God and also to deepen their faith.

Seen from this perspective, the most interesting part of seeing media as a storyteller is not necessarily that a secular movie (like *Lord of the Rings* or *Minority Report*) may be reframed by pastors to become a parable about redemption or conversion in a biblical sense; instead, the significance lies in pastors' view of media as storyteller

that goes *beyond* the power of Jesus' parables to reach (and therefore influence) an audience. The parables told by Jesus, as illustrated by the metaparable of the farmer sowing seeds, have an uneven reception. In Matthew 13:18-23, this point is stated most clearly by Jesus:

<sup>18</sup>"Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: <sup>19</sup>When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. <sup>20</sup>The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. <sup>21</sup>But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. <sup>22</sup>The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. <sup>23</sup>But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."<sup>43</sup>

As this passage from Matthew 13 makes clear, not everyone will hear and understand Jesus' message. However, pastors' statements reveal an interesting view of media, namely that the movies and television shows shown in church are potent and will have a fairly consistent reception by a diverse audience. This view is most clearly stated by Pastor Steven from River Rock about how a video clip can reach "people in Kentucky,

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<sup>43</sup> From the Bible Gateway website:  
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew%2013&version=31>

coal miners, city dwellers in New York, housewives, collegiates, educated, uneducated, professionals, (and) factory workers.” It is also seen in the statement made by Ashley, the assistant pastor at Harvest Church who saw that people in general (religious or secular) are “pre-programmed” to receive (and be affected by) media, and by Pastor Harrison’s perception of the need to “deprogram” churchgoers, partly through the use of media. These views – that media can hail a diverse audience and that individuals are programmed to be strongly affected by visual images – is a hallmark of a hypodermic, or Magic Bullet model of media effects. As DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) note, the Magic Bullet theory of media effects held that “the media were thought to be able to shape public opinion and to sway the masses toward almost any point of view desired by the communicator” (163). DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach note that this view also limits the conception of the audience: “it is also one that presumes a particular set of unspoken assumptions concerning not only the social organization of society but the psychological structure of the human beings who are being stimulated and who are responding to the mass communicated message” (163). While the pastors in this study clearly recognize differences (in terms of class, race, age, gender, religious background, etc.) in their constituency, they also seem to believe that media are able to have broad appeal and “teach,” acculturate churchgoers equally.

It is important to note that several of the pastors noted that not everyone liked the media shown in church, as the pastors indicated in interviews. Pastor Wilhelm at Choices noted that one family had left his church due to his inclusion of a clip from one of the *Harry Potter* movies. According to him, the family approached him after he showed a scene from the film, which the family saw as promoting witchcraft. Pastor Wilhelm

noted that the family believed that his using Harry Potter represented his “implicit endorsement” of the film to churchgoers, an interesting statement as to what churchgoers may read into their pastor’s media choices. Pastor Wilhelm noted that while he did not change his media choices as a result of their disapproval, he paid more attention to churchgoers’ sensitivity to certain films.

Pastor Charlton at Harvest Church mentioned that some of his congregants were upset about the sexuality of the television show *Deal or No Deal*. Specifically, several female churchgoers expressed concern and anger that imagery from the game show included attractive women who were wearing revealing and suggestive clothing. Their concern was that their husbands were battling sexual addiction. As a result, they were upset that their husbands encountered what they considered to be sexual imagery in the space of the church. Pastor Steven, although not making reference to any specific complaints from members of his congregation, noted that there were some churchgoers who didn’t like the media he showed, labeling them as “religious Christians, who everything’s an issue to them.” This recognition of potential differences in their congregations tempers the idea of media as a “magic bullet” somewhat, as churchgoers clearly were critical of some of the messages in the media pastors showed in church, but the perception by pastors remains that media are a power visual tool and also highly effective.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, interviews with pastors have revealed that that they use secular entertainment media in their churches for several inter-related reasons. One of the



primary motivations to use Hollywood movies and television shows is to evangelize, attracting new members by meeting them “where they are” in secular, commercial American culture and sometimes (as an auxiliary component) to entertain. In addition, the justification to use secular entertainment media is made on the grounds that they are able to provide instruction to new churchgoers who may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with more traditional forms of religion and help them to understand biblical principles with greater clarity. Part of the reason why these church leaders appear to believe in the efficacy of secular media to accomplish these goals is because of their constituency: these churches attempt to attract the “unchurched” and “dechurched,” also known as *seekers*, those individuals who are already familiar with and attuned to the “language of our time,” as Pastor Charlton stated it. Pastors’ beliefs about the utility of media help to explain their relatively heavy use of media in sermons. Most often, television and film clips are played at the beginning of sermons as a way to “grab people’s attention” and then tell a story that frames the pastors’ sermon message in a way that is digestible to a potentially diverse audience.

In perceiving of Hollywood movies and popular television shows as a useful collective instrument to use for the purpose noted above, the pastors of the churches in this research take an instrumentalist approach to media and technology. This instrumentalist view is influenced by several factors. First, the pastors appear to limit their understanding of the commercial movies and television shows they incorporate into sermons to a transmission perspective of communication. In this view, what is most important is what is conveyed to churchgoers on the level of the media texts themselves. From this perspective, while almost all of the pastors recognized a certain tension in

bringing in aspects of what they all referred to as “the culture” (meaning secular American culture), the only tension they saw in the use of media in church was where to draw the line in terms of certain types of content, almost always sexual. Controlling the message on the level of transmission is feasible, these pastors seem to believe: if they remove depictions of overt sexuality and, to a lesser degree, violence, in the media clips they show during sermons they can control the ultimate message being sent to churchgoers.

Although communication in this sense is important, as the dominant messages in media texts can invite an audience to subscribe to certain belief systems – including normative views on patriarchy, individualism, militarism, and race – it is also necessary to consider what is communicated to individuals by incorporating commercial entertainment media into church sermons. What does it mean for churchgoers to encounter commercial media in the space of their churches? A different way to ask the question is, What other stories – or parables – about the way the world is or should be are brought in with the media incorporated into the sermons? From a transmission perspective one could consider the ideologies in the media texts themselves regarding individualism, patriarchy, militarism, and race; from a substantive perspective of the interconnection between media and religion one could consider the commercialism and consumerist, individualistic mindset that may be encouraged by including secular media in church rituals. As Postman (1985) keenly observes, technology is a strong force that shapes social consciousness and institutions: “A medium... has the power to become implicated in our concepts of piety, or goodness, or beauty. And it is always implicated in the ways we define and regulate our ideals of truth” (p. 18).

In the process of seeing media as a tool to evangelize and deepen faith, it is apparent that pastors also hope to “redeem” the media that they show in their churches, changing messages within mainstream movies and television shows regarding individualism and sexuality to reflect completely different values, including community and fidelity. This belief was identified and described clearly by Niebuhr (1951) in his discussion of the various ways in which the relationship between Christianity and culture has been viewed, discussed more in depth in Chapter Three. Of the five perspectives Niebuhr identifies, the pastors’ in this study appear to reflect the “Christ as converter of culture” viewpoint, namely that culture is able to undergo conversion with the influence of Christ. This is clearest in the statement by Pastor Charlton at Harvest that he didn’t have a problem “redeeming” the media on Sunday mornings, but also evident in how pastors use the media in their churches. In examining the context for media use in evangelical sermons, then, the next chapter will examine how pastors attempt to reframe popular Hollywood movies and television shows to imbue them with religious meaning. The ritual perspective has the most relevance here, for the question may be asked of these attempts whether or not it is possible to redeem a message within the context of consumption.

When considering content, in bringing Hollywood movies and television shows into church, pastors may not intend to teach their “audience” anything but biblical principles, how to live a godly life, or how to grow in their faith. However, it is clear that the pastors have made choices in the types of media to show to their parishioners, choices that may *reflect* a certain set of ideologies about race, gender, individualism, and militarism as much as promote them. Pastors may believe that a clip from *The Guardian*

(2006), a movie starring Hollywood celebrity Ashton Kutcher, is able to convey a sense of purpose and mission in life from a story about a man who enlists in the military, but what alternative message about individuality and consumption is being sent to churchgoers who watch the clip? In showing media in their churches pastors appear to believe two things: first, that the transmission message is the most salient message that churchgoers receive; and second, that they are able to use secular media texts simply as a tool, one that is effective in increasing church numbers and developing faith and one that has no potential disadvantage or downside. However, as many scholars have noted, the very method of delivery of media has the potential to change what is communicated to media consumers (Einstein, 2008; Roof, 1999; Romanowski, 1996; Miller, 2003; Christians, 1990; Hipps, 2005).

Thus far in this research the chapters have framed the examination of religion and media through the lens of the instrumentalist/substantive theoretical debate (Chapter One) as well as provided a foundation to understand how media are used in evangelical churches (Chapter Three) and why they are used by evangelical leaders (Chapter Four). The potential consequences of church leaders' incorporation of Hollywood movies and television shows into their sermons is taken up more in the next chapter with the in-depth exploration of how evangelical leaders responded to one media text in particular: *The Da Vinci Code* movie. Through an examination of church leaders' responses to the film and how they attempt to frame the film for their churchgoers, Chapter Five addresses the question of what happens when commercial entertainment media, used by church leaders to evangelize, entertain, and instruct, provides a message that directly contradicts some of the central tenets of Christianity? Put another way, in using commercial media in church,

pastors have encouraged their congregants' immersion in mainstream commercial media culture, highlighting the importance of these media texts to tell a story that churchgoers can use to gain understanding and develop faith. How then do church leaders navigate the problems that arise as a result of churchgoers' familiarity with mainstream media culture in the context of everyday, lived faith?

## CHAPTER 5

### THE GOSPEL OF TOM (HANKS): AMERICAN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES AND *THE DA VINCI CODE*

#### *Introduction*

In Chapter Four, interviews with evangelical church leaders revealed their reasons for incorporating clips from Hollywood movies and popular television shows into their sermons. In their statements, pastors reveal their beliefs that incorporating commercial entertainment media into church services provides myriad benefits, including enabling more effective and widespread evangelism; encouraging churchgoers to learn biblical principles and apply them to their own lives; and helping churchgoers to focus their attention during sermons.

Pastors' beliefs about the utility of the movies and television shows they employ towards these ends reveal a few interesting perspectives on mainstream entertainment media. The first is a clearly instrumentalist view, in which media are defined as a value-neutral instrument available for a variety of religious purposes. In *Religion and the Media Age*, Hoover (2006) notes that "In the instrumentalist view, the media are to be understood primarily for their potential to affect and influence audiences, institutions, values, or other sectors of the culture, of which religion is a central one" (67-68). As Pastor Charlton from Harvest Church noted, the movies he shows in churches are "amoral" in the sense that a movie viewed outside of church could have a negative influence; a movie watched inside the space of the church, however, can have a positive impact. In other words, the context matters, similar to what Christians (1990) has observed regarding a movie projector that can show both National Geographic programs

as well as pornography. This is the foundation of the instrumental view: seeing media as a value-neutral tool that changes its value only in different contexts.

This chapter builds from pastors' statements to examine what happens when the "instrument" used so readily to build faith contains a message that runs counter to the tenets of Christianity in a specific media text: in this case, the blockbuster film *The Da Vinci Code*. This chapter was completed as an independent study directly before beginning dissertation research in 2007, and thus uses different methods (focus groups, attending various church sermons that addressed *The Da Vinci Code*, and the like). In fact, the results from this research provided the foundation for the dissertation research that has followed. What is found in this portion of the research is that in a strong sense the church leaders find themselves in a self-created paradox: in using mainstream media in their sermons they have encouraged immersion in mainstream commercial culture. What happens when that very immersion threatens churchgoers' faith in providing a potential alternate source of truth?<sup>44</sup>

### *The "Da Vinci Code" Comes to Theatres*

On 19 May 2006, the blockbuster movie *The Da Vinci Code* opened in American theatres, holding the top box office spot and earned over US \$77 million upon opening. The film purports to provide answers about the life of Jesus Christ, in the process calling into question some of the main tenets of Christianity, in particular whether or not Jesus was divine and whether or not he fathered children with Mary Magdalene.

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<sup>44</sup> A portion of this chapter has been published in *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age* (ed. Christopher Deacy & Elisabeth Arweck). United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2009

*The Da Vinci Code* is closely based upon author Dan Brown's book of the same name. The film follows symbologist Dr. Robert Langdon (played by Tom Hanks) on his journey to find the code after a murder in Paris' Louvre Museum. He finds clues in churches and in paintings as he travels across Europe with French agent Sophie Neveu (played by French actress Audrey Tautou). Eventually he makes several discoveries: Mary Magdalene, a woman who accompanied Jesus and the twelve apostles, had a relationship with Jesus and also had a child, a secret that was kept by various religious bodies including the Catholic Church. Langdon eventually determines where Magdalene is buried (underneath the Louvre) and also discovers that the woman who has been traveling with him is a direct descendent of Jesus.

Catholic reactions to the movie were strong, with Vatican officials calling for boycotts (Wooden 2006), Catholic groups pressuring the Chinese government to ban the movie (Kahn 2006), religious hunger strikes in India and a ban in the Philippines (Goodstein 2006). In the US, however, it is fair to say that evangelical reactions to the movie were mixed at best. While one Presbyterian evangelical church rented an entire theatre for its members to see the movie and then take part in church-sponsored discussions, two other evangelical churches — River Rock and Harvest — provided alternative literature and held sermons refuting the principles of the movie. Meanwhile, religious leaders from Willow Creek Church in Chicago strongly rejected the content of the film but made their church grounds into a kind of *Da Vinci Code* movie set, hiding 'secret codes' for church members to find inside the sanctuary and outer areas and remaking their website and church map to look like an ancient scroll, taken directly from the movie itself.



These varied responses prompt some compelling questions, since at first glance the proper reactions of evangelical leaders and their churchgoers to a film with which they disagree might seem obvious. Why not simply boycott the movie, as many Catholic leaders advocated? Why refute the content of the movie while appropriating the style? The answer seems to rest partly in the fact that all of the churches have incorporated popular movies, commercials and television shows into the fabric of their religious messages and teachings, a strategy chronicled in detail in Chapter Three. Examples of the adoption of secular media include: using contemporary U.S. game shows such as *Deal or No Deal* to discuss effective evangelizing methods, incorporating the communication company On-Star into a discussion about fostering strong Christian values and showing a clip from the popular movie *Bruce Almighty* (2006) to illustrate the power of prayer.

While it seems as though reframing commercial entertainment media texts to have a religious message has been successful for churches' success in terms of increasing numbers, it is evident that there is substantial tension underneath such reframing. It is this unease that becomes most apparent when popular culture goes too far in using religious symbols for a secularist message. In the case of *The Da Vinci Code*, what is directly attacked is the integrity of the most prominent and important symbol in Christianity: Christ himself.

A movie like *The Da Vinci Code* thus appears to pose two inter-related problems for evangelical churches. Firstly, it challenges the strategy of appropriating and reframing secular media symbols to create religious messages, and thus exposes the significant tension that arises when the boundaries between mainstream culture and religious faith are blurred. In addition, it recasts Christianity's own symbols by using a vehicle that

resonates with evangelical individuals: popular culture itself. However, the research on which this chapter is based then reveals a third issue: these churches are forced to confront their churchgoers' familiarity—and reliance on—Enlightenment concepts concerning rational thought, individualism, scientific reasoning and what constitutes 'fact'.<sup>45</sup> In this case, the embrace of popular culture by both evangelical churches and their churchgoers complicates this issue, because what provides the 'truth' in some instances is popular culture itself.

### *Methods*

General research methods are described in detail in Chapter Two of this research. Empirical material for this case study is derived from several sources, including multiple observations of church services before, during and after *The Da Vinci Code* was released in theatres. This included attending a screening of the film by one church (that had rented out an entire theatre so that churchgoers could see the movie together) and observing the pastor-led discussion group that followed. I also read the literature—including 'fact sheets' and books—that churches provided in response to the movie. Finally, church observations were supplemented by a series of interviews and focus groups with evangelicals—both churchgoers and church leaders—which explored the relationship between media and religion. The focus groups and interviews provided an in-depth exploration of the way in which evangelicals perceived the churches' use of secular media and how this shapes both private religious faith and perceptions about objectivity and truth.

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<sup>45</sup> For more information on the relationship between scientific reasoning, conceptions of truth, and Christianity in the U.S. in the context of the abortion debate, see Press & Cole (1999).

This multi-method approach provides an understanding not only of churches' use of secular media and the messages being conveyed, but also of how individual churchgoers receive these messages and of the implications of this for faith and perceptions of science and objectivity. What becomes clear is that mainstream media, science and religion are connected in different ways: the portrayal of science in the secular media influences ideas about empirical reasoning and the scientific process and perceptions of science in turn challenge religious doctrine and private faith. *The Da Vinci Code* allows for an analysis of this intersection for various reasons, including its worldwide popularity, the close relationship that contemporary churchgoers have with American media culture and its appeal to scientific and historical evidence in the search for details about the human life of Jesus. My research thus provides a glimpse into the nature of contemporary American evangelicalism as it is shaped by mainstream media and into the beliefs held by modern churchgoers about the power of science and the importance of objectivity and 'truth'.

*'A Diabolical Attack on Christianity': Evangelical Reactions to The Da Vinci Code*

What emerges from the various methods is a surprising picture of the myriad, often conflicting, ways in which evangelical churches, with their heavy reliance on secular media, attempt to negotiate their churchgoers' immersion in, and love of, mainstream, consumerist culture—a connection that these churches have often encouraged (Hendershot 2004; Roof 1999; Cimino and Lattin 1998). What follows are examples of the various ways in which evangelical churches have responded to *The Da Vinci Code*. Of course, this list is not exhaustive and represents only the churches

observed during the course of this research. However, all of these churches are part of much larger national and international organizations, allowing for the possibility that the results of this research may be indicative of larger trends within the US. In each reaction, the underlying tension becomes clear: the churches can neither completely embrace nor completely reject this instance of popular culture, partly because of their churchgoers' close relationship with secular media, partly because of American individuals' perceptions of the nature of science and objectivity.

The leaders of Harvest Church – the ‘megachurch’ that was described in previous chapters – reacted by rejecting the premise of the movie and many of the ‘myths’ it contained. However, the pastor stopped short of telling churchgoers not to see the movie, instead simply exhorting members to stay engaged and involved and implying that churchgoers could see the movie and read the book so as to be able to respond in conversations with ‘non-believers’ who were challenging the Christian faith. Encouraging members to be engaged did not mean that any part of the book was considered to be acceptable; in fact, the pastor called the book a “diabolical attack” on the Christian faith and a “grand deception” that had to be addressed. The fact that he perceived *The Da Vinci Code* to be a “cultural phenomenon that is sweeping America” seemed to make it even more threatening. In addition, the pastor’s statement about the role of popular culture in America revealed a great deal about the close relationship between evangelicalism and the secular media: “We can’t ignore that this is the water we swim in. It’s here, it’s part of our life, it’s part of what we’re living in.” To supplement the sermon, the pastor also provided online notes to refute the ‘erroneous facts’ in the movie.

Another church, River Rock, reacted by rejecting the movie outright, providing sermons and alternative literature to frame the discussion and help churchgoers refute the assertions made in *The Da Vinci Code*. Although they did not explicitly state that church members were not to see the movie or read the book, the message was clear: ‘The Bible is the authority, not the book.’ Oddly, however, in the strongest attempt to refute the statements made in the movie, the pastor relied not on the Bible, but on the words of a fictional character in the movie itself: “As Langdon himself says, ‘All that matters is what you believe’.” The pastor’s reliance on popular culture to frame discussions about Christianity reveals the potential authority that is attributed to the secular media, especially when it comes to individual faith.

Similar to leaders of the Harvest church, this pastor also expressed uneasiness about the potential influence of the secular media on evangelicals’ faith, most notably in his statement that “We live in a media-driven society, where images make impacts and imprints”. The pastor’s main concern seemed to be that this popular movie would make church members vulnerable to doubts concerning some of the central tenets of the Christian faith. Ironically, however, this was the same church that had used the images of Victoria’s Secret (an American lingerie company known for its provocative images of women) advertisements in its sermons a few months earlier in an attempt to frame a discussion about healthy family relationships (Moore & Press, 2007). Although church leaders consistently recast the symbols from secular popular culture to imbue them with religious undertones, they were extremely uncomfortable with religious symbols being employed for the decidedly secular, arguably anti-Christian message conveyed in *The Da Vinci Code*.

The third church, which identified itself as evangelical Presbyterian, rented out a local movie theatre for its churchgoers to view the movie and then held a lunch seminar immediately afterwards, when the pastor refuted the premise and some of the assertions made in the movie. To frame the discussion, the pastor provided a handout for churchgoers to read while he discussed the ‘claims’ and ‘inaccuracies’ of the book and movie. Churchgoers—whose questions are discussed in more detail below—were then invited to ask questions to be answered by church leaders.

Finally, an evangelical church based in Chicago strongly refuted the claims made by the movie and provided numerous works of literature for churchgoers to purchase that contradicted the film’s premise. Quite clearly, this church viewed the movie as a direct threat to the Christian faith. At the same time, however, the church grounds were turned into a kind of *Da Vinci Code* set, so that members could go from the sanctuary to the outer buildings solving encoded puzzles and riddles, just as the characters in the book and movie do. In addition, the church’s website contained a map of the church grounds that was re-drafted to resemble an ancient scroll, similar to the parchment shown in the film. Such incongruous reactions—rejecting the content of the movie, but appropriating its forms—reveal a great deal about the degree to which evangelical churches have adopted secular media. Interestingly, this Chicago church, which clearly exhibits the strong love/hate relationship with the media that characterizes many evangelical churches (Schultze 2001), was one of the first churches to make secular media—and consumer culture—the cornerstone of its marketing strategy (e.g. Cimino & Lattin 1998).

*Doubt and Faith: The Effect of the 'Spiritual Marketplace'*

What the four closely related reactions have in common is the perceived need to address the assertions made in *The Da Vinci Code* and the issues they raise in the minds of churchgoers. As set out above, the churches held discussions, provided 'fact sheets' and offered a plethora of alternative media (mostly books) that pointed out the factual errors in the movie and book. Yet, why did the churches feel the need to address the claims made in the movie and book for their churchgoers? First and foremost, this is because these churches have appealed to previously 'unchurched' individuals through secular media, to those who are either unfamiliar or disillusioned with more traditional religious traditions, a finding that was clearly supported in the interviews.

In an article in the *New York Times* entitled "It's Not Just a Movie, It's a Revelation (About the Audience)," Laurie Goodstein points out that the reactions to the film reveal a great deal about the changes in evangelical churches and American society that have occurred since the 1980s, when evangelical churches first began to appeal to 'seekers'—individuals who might be spiritual, but not necessarily strictly religious and who are immersed in American media culture. As noted in Chapter One, seeker churches are part of the American spiritual marketplace, where consumerism and a focus on the individual are highlighted. As this research has indicated, an integral part of the religious marketplace comes in the form of commercial entertainment media texts, which are used for a variety of purposes in evangelical seeker churches: to attract new members, to instruct, and to teach biblical principles.

Using Hollywood films and television shows in church sermons is one way in evangelical seeker churches to treat churchgoers as customers—and consumers – of

popular films, television shows and contemporary music. It also creates the potential to privilege the individual over the institution, thereby creating the opportunity for churchgoers to reject or question the church's messages if they contradict individual search for meaning or happiness. The perceived need by evangelical churches to address the doubts of churchgoers regarding *The Da Vinci Code* thus appears to be directly tied to the appeal through popular culture to 'seekers'—individuals who are 'unchurched' and who might be the most prone to doubt. When the Harvest pastor expressed his anxiety in a sermon that "I've already had people come to me that are confused" after seeing the movie, it reveals the nature of the new evangelical churchgoers: they question the precepts of traditional religion, a tendency that is exacerbated by a movie such as *The Da Vinci Code*, which purports to be at least partly based on fact.<sup>46</sup> The blend of fact and fiction, of entertainment and supposed reality (in the form of scientific evidence regarding historical people and events) seems to pose the greatest difficulty for evangelical churches, although they have already crossed this line in the space of the church by employing secular media for their purposes

#### *Fact, Fiction and Faith: American Evangelical Churches and Popular Culture*

The redefinition of churchgoers as consumers and the use of secular media are not the only explanations why *The Da Vinci Code* elicited the controversial reactions among evangelical leaders. Another reason for the tension is revealed in the language used by the church leaders:

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<sup>46</sup>The author Dan Brown consistently blends fact with fiction, creating a story around imaginary characters, but including a section in *The Da Vinci Code* that lists historical and scientific evidence to support the claims made in the book.



*The Da Vinci Code* is filled with half-truths, distorted facts, and outright lies about the person of Jesus Christ and foundational Christian beliefs ... and these statements often appear deceptively as the truth. Christianity is not about simply believing what we want... Truth does matter, truth is important, and truth must be fought for (Harvest sermon, April 2006).

...the [*Da Vinci Code*] is filled with inaccuracies. It maintains that the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the 1950s. They were actually discovered in 1947. The book reports that the pyramid at the entrance of the Louvre is composed of 666 panes of glass, thus evoking Satanic connections. Except that the pyramid is composed of 673 panes of glass (Lead pastor at a Presbyterian church, May 2006).

What stands out in these statements is a sharp distinction being made between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction,’ a point made previously by Press and Cole (1999) in their analysis of how the relationship between media, science, and religion influenced how women talk about abortion. Employing the language of scientific reasoning—including ‘inaccuracy,’ ‘truth’ and ‘proof’—reveals the churches’ strategy in responding to *The Da Vinci Code*, which is to challenge the ‘evidence’ in this instance of popular culture. However, what constitutes ‘truth’ for evangelical church leaders and, perhaps more importantly, how do churchgoers themselves conceive of truth in their quest for faith? The first part of this question can be answered by data obtained in observations during church sermons and discussions, while the latter is addressed through interview and focus group material.

What my research reveals is that the churches used three main sources of information to contradict the assertions made in *The Da Vinci Code*: scientific and historical evidence, biblical sources and, surprisingly, popular culture itself. None of these categories is mutually exclusive: much of the biblical ‘evidence’ cited by the churches is based upon scientific analysis of historical texts, while contemporary secular media consistently blur the line between fiction and reality, thus shaping perceptions of science and the scientific process. What is surprising, however, is to note how infrequently church members were called upon to rely solely on faith—an omission that seems, at least on the surface, to privilege scientific knowledge and reasoning over personal religious conviction.

#### *American Churches and Science*

One of the primary ways in which churches attempted to refute the statements in *The Da Vinci Code* was by challenging the authenticity of the historical documents used by Dan Brown. The Presbyterian church pastor, in his lunch discussion, noted that “the famous Gospel of Phillip text 63:32 is actually broken”, so that the specifics of Jesus’ relationship with Mary Magdalene could not be known with certainty. In addition, the church leader stated that, regardless of its state of preservation, the gospel was not ‘authentic’, which was due to the late time frame in which it was written, calling it instead a ‘misguided forgery’. River Rock church took a similar approach, providing literature which indicates that ‘bona fide’ scholars have dated the Gospel of Phillip and the Gospel of Mary, both of which featured in the film, hundreds of years after Jesus’

time.<sup>47</sup> Harvest Church relied on historical data to challenge statements in *The Da Vinci Code* about events that occurred at the Council of Nicene. The churches also discussed historical figures, such as the Roman Emperor Constantine and his role in the creation of the gospels' idea of Christ's divinity.

In relying on historical and scientific evidence to assess the authenticity of the claims in *The Da Vinci Code*, it appears that the churches attempted to provide a body of knowledge that churchgoers can use to counter the assertions made in the book and movie. The reliance on evidence to verify truth claims reveals a great deal about the close relationship between American Christianity and science, most clearly in assumptions about the power of the scientific process to reach an absolute objective truth. As Christian Smith notes, science and Christianity were considered to be mutually supportive in the nineteenth century:

The Bible would reveal God's moral law and certain natural truths; science, for its part, would confirm the teachings of the Bible and expand human understanding beyond what the Bible revealed. Together, the Bible and science were expected to render a rational validation of the veracity of Christianity and lay the foundation for a healthy national moral and social order (Smith 1998: 3).

This line of thinking keeps science and religion particularly close, especially in the US. One well-known example comes from Dr. Francis Collins, the head of the Human Genome Project, whose recent book *The Language of God: A Scientist*

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<sup>47</sup> The book provided by the River Rock church was Josh McDowell's *A Quest for Answers: The Da Vinci Code* (2006). Similar to *The Da Vinci Code*, this book contains "Fact or Fiction" sections, provides timetables for the dates of certain gospels, and cites "eminent" scholars to support biblical and historical claims.

*Presents Evidence for Belief* presents the idea that scientific knowledge can be used to aid faith instead of contradicting it (Masci 2008). Press and Cole (1999) recognize this connection, noting that in their study the pro-life evangelical women often framed their discussions in scientific terms, emphasizing the need for documentation and scientific fact to understand abortion issues. In the course of the current research it was clear that evangelicals were quite comfortable about talking about science in relation to their religion. Far from the uneducated, backward stereotype of Christians portrayed by the media during the Scopes Trial in the 1920s (Marsden 1991), the evangelicals I interviewed had all completed high school (with the majority of the women in one group having college degrees), were fairly media literate and were, for the most part, immersed in mainstream culture: many watched popular television shows, used the internet and were familiar with the latest political and social events. In addition, one taught high school science and several others considered themselves to be amateur scientists. One man in particular had a set of fossils that he had collected in a nearby town. He emphasized that he did not doubt that the fossils were 43 million years old (a fact which a local scientist had provided through analysis), indicating that an older age for the earth did not pose a threat to his religious beliefs.

Interestingly, however, evangelicals' acceptance of both science and the media was tempered by certain issues, including a perceived 'liberal' bias in the media and the problems posed by specific components of science, such as evolution. These findings fit well with a recent study conducted by Keeter and colleagues (2007) at the Pew Research Center, who note the potential point of tension between scientific evidence and religious

belief in the U.S. However, Keeter et al. (2007) see this tension as being extremely limited, stating that “the theory of evolution as a means to explain the origins and development of life remain the only truly concrete example of such a conflict.”

What becomes clear is that, although the evangelicals in this study appeared to be immersed in mainstream American culture, discussions about the media and certain aspects of science highlighted significant points of tension. However, the general acceptance of science was made clear when the churches I observed framed their arguments in scientific language about evidence and authenticity in a way that was clearly understood by the churchgoers.

### *Biblical Authority*

In responding to *The Da Vinci Code*, the churches I studied also relied upon the Bible, predominately by citing numerous biblical passages to refute the claims made in the movie. For instance, an River Rock pastor referred to Timothy 3:16: “Every Scripture is God-breathed and profitable.” This was followed with a list of ‘heresies’ in *The Da Vinci Code* which were systematically refuted through reference to scripture. For instance, in response to the assertion that the Council of Nicea invented the divinity of Jesus, the pastor provided John 10:30: “I and the Father are one.” The question whether Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene was answered by the pastor with reference to Revelation 21:9: “And he spoke with me, saying, ‘Come here. I will show you the wife, the Lamb’s bride.’”<sup>48</sup> The pastor of the Presbyterian church used biblical verses in a similar fashion, stating that “passages like John 4:6 and John 11:35 clearly show Christ’s

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<sup>48</sup> The “wife”, or “lamb’s bride”, thus appears to be the city of Jerusalem, and not Mary Magdalene.

humanity”. Interestingly, however, the Bible was also subject to questions concerning truth and authenticity. In response to *The Da Vinci Code*’s claim that the Roman emperor Constantine himself created the Bible, one church listed the criteria that were used to select the gospels for the New Testament. In essence, the church leaders provided ‘evidence’ for the authenticity of the biblical canon.

The pastors’ statements indicate reliance upon the Bible and it is clear that faith plays a significant role in the churches’ discussions of Jesus’ divinity. However, it is both striking and significant that the Bible itself—as the ‘ultimate authority’—is subject to scrutiny; hence the need to provide evidence for the authenticity of some of the gospels. Thus, it appears that, for the churches in this study at least, faith in the Bible is insufficient: in order to be compelling (from both an intellectual and religious standpoint), the Bible must first be subjected to the rigours of scientific inquiry.

#### *The Authority of Tom Hanks: Popular Culture and Evangelical Churches*

The churches in this study did, however, not rely solely on scientific reasoning and the authority of the Bible. What provides striking insight into the relationship between popular culture and religion was the frequency with which popular culture was invoked as a definitive way to distinguish fact from fiction. This included comments from the pastor of the Presbyterian church: he made an odd attempt to discredit the veracity of the movie by stating that “*The Da Vinci Code* is a work of fiction. Tom Hanks said so himself.” Later the pastor commented on the actor’s private life, stating that, “I heard Tom Hanks might be a Christian. Perhaps the story in the well came from him.” In this case, a popular actor is invoked as an authoritative source in a discussion about

Christianity<sup>49</sup>. As mentioned earlier, the River Rock pastor also resorted to popular culture by quoting Robert Langdon, the main character in *The Da Vinci Code*: “The most important thing is what you believe.”

These comments indicate a significant blurring of the line between reality and fiction, as the purported real-life beliefs and behaviour of Tom Hanks the actor are integrated into his fictional character Robert Langdon. In addition, an appeal for faith that stems from a character in a fictional work is a powerful indicator of evangelical churches’ perceptions of what might constitute ‘truth’ for individual churchgoers: popular culture itself. It is also a testament to the churches’ beliefs regarding the power of popular culture to change perceptions and challenge beliefs through the presentation of what is true and what is not true. This was evident in both the River Rock pastor’s comment about the potential ‘impacts and imprints’ that images can have on individuals and in the Harvest pastor’s concern about ‘confused’ members of the congregation who had seen the movie. Comments such as these indicate strong convictions about the power of the secular media to challenge religious beliefs about Christianity and the power of knowledge—not faith—to provide answers.

At this juncture it is important to ask what individual churchgoers themselves feel about the secular media—in the space of the church and in their own private lives—and how this affects evangelical perceptions of a movie like *The Da Vinci Code*. Many evangelicals I observed fit the profile of the description by Roof and Cimino & Lattin of ‘seekers’: those who are immersed in the American media culture, make no hard and fast

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<sup>49</sup> In the movie, the main character Robert Langdon (played by Tom Hanks) recalls a childhood event when he was trapped in a well overnight. The character states that he felt as though he was not alone in the well, an experience that gave him faith as an adult in later life.

distinctions between spirituality and traditional religion and have the potential to question the more traditional aspects of their religion. This aspect of American evangelicalism has the greatest potential to influence individuals' perceptions of a movie like *The Da Vinci Code*. While the church leaders' reactions were overwhelmingly negative, I observed that evangelical churchgoers voiced no explicit criticism of the movie; their reactions were surprisingly positive, revealing a great deal about the influence of secular media consumption on perceptions of science and personal faith.

*Testing Jesus' DNA: Churchgoers' Perceptions of Popular Culture, Science and "The Da Vinci Code"*

*The Da Vinci Code*, which purports to tell the 'truth' about Christianity, has created an opportunity to discuss the relationship between the secular media and religion. During my interviews with evangelicals, I noted that they were careful to distinguish between what they considered 'good' and 'bad' science; they were able to accept the general principles of science—the process of scientific reasoning, testing, empirical evidence and so forth—while completely rejecting the concept of evolution. Therefore many felt comfortable about discussing biology as long as evolution was not included in the discussion. Thus, when an immensely popular movie, such as *The Da Vinci Code*, draws upon (or contends to draw upon) scientific principles in order to challenge central principles of the Christian religion, it is not surprising that this sparks fierce debate and controversy in evangelical churches. However, the somewhat positive reaction from churchgoers themselves stands in marked contrast to the negative responses by the church leaders and merits exploration.



The analysis of reactions to *The Da Vinci Code* indicates that evangelical churchgoers do not make hard and fast distinctions between science and faith: they are comfortable about blurring the boundaries. Part of this ease rests in the historically close relationship between religion and science. Another reason may be the consumption of American mainstream media, as entertainment television increasingly blurs the lines between fiction and reality, a point taken up in conjunction with evangelicals' statements below. In this sense, this study provides an interesting insight into American media culture and the effect it has on perceptions of science and questions of faith.

#### *Churchgoers' Reception of "The Da Vinci Code": The Nature of 'Seekers'*

As described earlier, when *The Da Vinci Code* first opened in theatres in May 2006, I went to a private screening held by a local evangelical Presbyterian church that had rented an entire theatre complex so that its churchgoers could see the movie together. After the movie I attended a lunchtime discussion which was held by the pastor at the church. When he had finished speaking, the pastor invited questions. The questions and comments from the churchgoers provide significant insight into the way evangelicals themselves negotiate the intersection of science, popular culture and faith.

Many questions revealed the individualistic focus and 'seeker' character of contemporary evangelical churches. Countering the pastor's vehement assertion that there was no scientific or historical evidence that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, one woman in her 50s asked, "If he hungered or thirsted, couldn't he have married? What would it matter if he had?" Although the churches stressed the importance of believing in the Bible's inerrancy and strict adherence to the scriptures (Roof 1999; Smith 1998;

McDannell 1998; Marsden 1991), this woman questioned whether new evidence (in the form of new gospels that were not in the New Testament) could shed more light on the subject. She was thus open to the idea that the Bible—and perhaps her pastor—did not provide all the information required to understand her version of Christianity. In addition, she asked about the possibility that Jesus’ bloodline may have continued, referring directly to claims made in the movie and the questions they raised for her.

Another evangelical, a man in his 60s, told the pastor he had difficulty seeing Jesus as divine, since it was so clear that he had lived a human life. Even more telling, perhaps, was a question posed by a third person who asked if it was possible to conduct DNA tests in the laboratory on the remains of potential members of the bloodline created by Jesus and Mary Magdalene. This sparked an unusual exchange between pastor and congregation: the pastor replied that it would be possible to test for DNA, but only if Jesus’ remains could be found to provide a baseline with which to compare with the descendants from the bloodline. Many members of the congregation nodded in agreement, when this was said, apparently understanding this point.

Questions like this—and the ones asked before it—indicate that the claims in a popular movie had made individuals reconsider or question information in the Bible and church teachings. Such questions caused the pastor at the Harvest church to lament that the movie was creating ‘confused’ Christians. The unusual conversation between the Presbyterian pastor and the churchgoers about the possibility of conducting scientific tests on Jesus’ remains indicates several things, including compatibility between science and religion; thus, to find out if Jesus fathered children with Mary Magdalene, one simply tests the DNA. The most unusual part of this is, however, the clear association between

popular culture, science and religion: not only were the questions about Jesus' life sparked by a popular movie, but the potential answer to these questions could be provided through reference to popular television crime dramas that include plot lines about DNA testing.

According to Delli Carpini & Williams (1994), the line between entertainment and reality has been blurred for some time; they cite the example of the way lawyers are now forced to approach real-life legal cases differently, because *LA Law* has had an impact on jurors' understanding of certain aspects relating to the legal system. In a similar vein, the churchgoers in this study discussed issues of faith in terms of contemporary crime dramas like *CSI*: "Couldn't we get the DNA and test it?" Interestingly, the pastors appeared to recognize the importance of the secular media for the way their churchgoers understood their faith, which was revealed by their willingness to engage not only in conversations about scientific testing of Jesus' DNA, but also with references to Tom Hanks's private religious beliefs and the stated convictions of fictional characters in the movie. Quite clearly, *The Da Vinci Code* had created questions in their minds that the pastor was not able to address and church leaders were aware of the authority of the secular media to challenge churchgoers' faith.

#### *Focus Groups: A Closer Look at Evangelical Churchgoers and Secular Media*

Statements such as those made in the church discussions indicate evangelicals' ready familiarity with the mainstream media and underscore how easily the secular media are brought into the space of the church and into discussions of personal faith. The focus groups revealed that the use of secular media, far from detracting from personal religious

experience, actually enhances the notion of the sacred and strengthens personal faith.

Two focus groups – one involving Sunrise Church as well as another Methodist church in Smallville – were conducted in the months before *The Da Vinci Code* opened in theatres, thus precluding in-depth discussions of the movie. The focus groups can, however, shed light on the close relationship that evangelicals have with the media and how this intersects with their personal religious faith.

In the conversations with evangelicals I found that many had left more traditional churches, including Catholic, United Methodist and Missouri Synod Lutheran, because they felt they had very little connection with them. In the Sunrise focus group, one participant, a high school teacher, in an all-female focus group explained it as follows:

I grew up in a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, you know, very traditional, the organ playing, and you sing out a hymnal and, you know, so everything is *very* different from here, and you know I think... I have much more of a connection to God when I'm at New Beginnings in a more modern setting, than I do when I go to my grandma's church.

A woman, a homemaker and mother of two, had a very positive view of media use in her church, stating that it ultimately helped her to develop a 'connection,' or relationship, with God:

So I think that it actually makes a point, to try to meet people where they're at, so that God can make a connection with them, and then they make a connection with other people as a result of that.

For many evangelicals interviewed for the study, the media were seen not only as an effective evangelizing tool to attract new members and 'bring them to God', but also

as an instrument to strengthen their own personal connection to their faith. The emphasis on a personal relationship with God is a primary defining characteristic of contemporary evangelicalism (Marsden 1991) and, according to the evangelicals I interviewed, the secular media are seen as integral to fostering this relationship. Thus media use in a contemporary church setting seemed to make churchgoers feel more closely connected to their faith than they considered possible in more traditional churches (one participant referred to them as being ‘dead’) without any media. One evangelical woman, who discussed the use of the movies *National Treasure* (2004) and *Batman Begins* (2005) in her church, provided an especially clear example of the way in which the connection between secular media and faith occurs:

But actually pay attention to what you’re looking at, what issues this character is facing, you know, are those issues that you maybe face as well? And so, I think in that way, you know, here’s somebody with a bunch of money [in *National Treasure*] and what’s he going to do with it? Well, what do you do if you have a whole bunch of money, you know, what does God say about having a lot and how you spend your money? Or, you know, you have all this unresolved guilt [in *Batman Begins*], what does God say about how can you resolve that guilt and where can you look for comfort, and ways to take care of that?

Such statements provide strong support for the idea that secular, entertainment media can be used to strengthen personal faith. Although it seems that on the surface movies like *National Treasure* or *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005) hardly contain anything that speaks to religious values, Roof notes that reframing is part of evangelicalism’s

strength: “Reframing has potential in a media age, where words and symbols are manipulated in ways that often disassociate them from a historic and grounded tradition... Rather than approach a symbol as doctrinally formulated, allow the possibility that people may freely associate with it, drawing from their own experiences” (Roof 1999: 170).

The churchgoers in the focus groups also seemed aware of the potential tension in bringing commercial entertainment media into their churches. In the following exchange, some women discuss how and why they thought media were used during church sermons:

Susan: Church is not a movie theater, but [using media] is a way to relate to people on a higher scale.

Marie (40, Registered Dietician): They showed the *Passion of the Christ* and –

Susan: - and we had a discussion about it afterwards.

Darlene (36, High school biology teacher): Media brings them (the dechurched) back to God. I have much more of a connection to God (through media use).

Stacey: Yeah. You’ve got to meet people where they’re at.

For the women in this group, it seems, meeting people “where they’re at” is in mainstream media culture, which often involves entertainment media such as the blockbuster, mainstream films discussed by the women above. These media appear to be seen by these churchgoers as a way to bring the unchurched and dechurched into religion using media to speak a common language. Not only do the media attract people but they also help new churchgoers to acclimate themselves and learn biblical principles through Hollywood movies.

In addition, like their pastors these women seemed to have the same view of reforming, or redeeming the media, as indicated by the following conversation:

Sherry: What was the one they just did and Jackson said “that was my favorite movie.” It had a newer, uh, was it the 40 Year Old Virgin, or was it that one, or was it...?

Marie: I wasn’t there if that was playing [*laughs*]

Sherry: So maybe it wasn’t that movie, they didn’t say what movie it was from , but like I had friends there who came only for the second time but it was one of their favorite movies but they were like, “I can’t believe they used a clip from that in church, oh my gosh,” but I think they’re just trying to say that, you know, you can find these topics in, like everyday, like, life, and media, and I think it’s a way to actually reach people’s hearts, so like if they’re not paying attention “wow, there’s that” and they’re like “oh my gosh I just saw that, I gotta listen and figure out what the rest of this is about.”

Marie: Well, there was the soccer one, the soccer Dad, or whatever, with Will Ferrell, was that the one that Jackson was saying was his favorite movie?

Darlene: You know, I see it sometimes as a way that, you know, when we’re using the media in church, here’s a way to kind of view media critically, and to think about it more than just as mindless, mind-numbing entertainment.

Like the pastor of her church, Dee saw that media could be taken out of its context and placed into the context of the church, allowing churchgoers to be critical.

In sum, the focus groups provide strong support that the secular media, at least for the evangelicals I observed, play a powerful role in their personal faith. This in turn provides crucial insights into the reactions by evangelical churches—and their churchgoers—to *The Da Vinci Code*. This brings up an interesting question for the next chapter. Since pastors believe that all of the messages of the media (on the level of the text) can be altered to reflect Christian messages, is it possible to be critical? Are churchgoers critical of the media that come into their churches? Into their homes?

### *Conclusion*

The research described in this chapter has explored the close, often uneasy relationship between American evangelical churches and the mainstream media at a specific moment when secular and religious values stand in direct contrast. The churches that I observed responded in different ways to the movie *The Da Vinci Code* in several respects, but had a number of features in common, including reliance on scientific reasoning, search for the ‘facts’ and demonstration of close connection with secular, entertainment media. Evangelical churches have been employing secular media as an evangelizing tool for some time, effectively reframing the symbols in secular culture into messages with religious undertones. The problem for evangelical churches is, however, that *The Da Vinci Code* did the reverse very well: it challenged the authenticity of Christianity’s own symbols while using the conventions of popular culture and appealing to Americans’ love of science.

Evangelical leaders appeared to find themselves in a bind: the very instrument that was so effective in evangelizing—the secular media—had become a competing



source of information and ‘truth’. The focus groups and church discussions revealed evangelicals’ positive perceptions of the use of mainstream media in church sermons: many felt that they could make closer connections with God through the experience of the secular media during worship. However, an important question is what happens when the mainstream media—especially an incredibly popular movie about Christ—stands in direct conflict with evangelical Christian values? As this research has shown, *The Da Vinci Code* proved exceptionally effective in challenging contemporary evangelicals’ faith, as indicated by church observations.

The ‘spiritual marketplace’ described by Roof has so far been largely successful in intertwining religion, the media and consumerism to attract churchgoers. The argument here is this: when evangelical churches begin to open the door to accepting secular culture—even embracing it through the use of secular media in the space of the church—this places limits on their ability to respond when an instance of popular culture contradicts the tenets of religious faith. Ultimately, a movie like *The Da Vinci Code* reveals the significant pitfalls of fostering a connection between private religious faith and the mainstream media, not only because of the individuality that the secular media encourage, but because the media, used by evangelical leaders so readily for evangelism, have the potential to become a competing source of information and truth.

This chapter has been a detailed study of pastor and churchgoers’ reactions to one popular, commercial media text that highlighted some of the tensions in bringing Hollywood movies and television shows into contemporary evangelical churches. It has revealed pastors’ concerns about messages communicated to churchgoers at the level of the text as well as how powerful these media texts may be as a competing source of truth

for their congregants. In so doing, this chapter has provided a segue to Chapter Six, where evangelical churchgoers' views on the media are explored in greater detail from ethnographic observations of prayer groups. For this chapter has indicated that some evangelical churchgoers draw from commercial entertainment media in their consideration of a specific text like *The Da Vinci Code*. The question that is addressed in the next chapter is how does this engagement with secular media culture impact everyday, lived faith? Are churchgoers critical of the media they encounter in the spaces of their churches, as the comments made by members of some of the focus groups indicate?

## CHAPTER 6

### **SACRED HEART, *BRAVEHEART*: THE INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN EVANGELICAL FAITH AND COMMERCIAL ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA**

#### *Introduction*

The focus of the research thus far has been to recognize and describe several different facets of mainstream entertainment media use in American evangelical churches. The research has revealed how Hollywood movies and popular television shows are incorporated into evangelical churches and how this has changed church practices, sermons and rituals. Church leaders' reasons for using mainstream entertainment media in their churches also have been described through in-depth interviews, in the process revealing an instrumental view regarding Christian redemption of the media. In this chapter, attention now turns to the potential impact that commercial media formations have on evangelicals' lives inside and outside of church, as well as assessing how these media work their way into churchgoers' everyday lived faith. Using participant observation of prayer groups, this portion of the research explores how evangelical churchgoers negotiate identity, the production of meaning, and faith in their everyday, increasingly mediated lives. It also addresses the substantive theoretical question posed earlier in the research by ascertaining what media mean to evangelicals as they develop their Christian faith.

This chapter contains four central components. The first section assesses evangelicals' use of media in their everyday lives as indicated from observations of prayer groups. Building from these observations, the next section explores how the themes and symbols within commercial entertainment media texts have made their way

into evangelical discussions of faith. These two sections work in concert to provide a glimpse into the interconnection of faith and media. The third section assesses if churchgoers perceive any tension in the incorporation of the Hollywood films television shows into their church sermons. Specifically, this section evaluates whether or not evangelicals recognize any contradictions or tensions in bringing commercial entertainment media into the spaces of their churches (and into their own lives as Christians). The fourth, final section considers the relationship evangelicals have with commercial entertainment media culture within the context of the instrumental/substantive theoretical framework laid out at the beginning of this research. Taken as a whole, the sections are meant to provide not only a portrait of media use in churchgoers' daily lives but also to consider the implications of this use for evangelical faith in the American spiritual marketplace.

#### *Ethnographic Observations of Commercial Media Use in Evangelical Prayer Groups*

As described in Chapter Two (Methods), I observed and participated in several prayer groups from Harvest, Sunrise, River Rock and Choices Churches between the spring of 2008 and the summer of 2009. The church groups, being small in number by design (in several instances, the groups I visited were split into subgroups due to an increase in the number of members that made the groups too big to be cohesive), often had incredibly intimate moments. I watched as members cried over their past abuse of their spouses, discussed their battle against alcoholism, revealed painful and abusive childhoods, fought over various interpersonal and political issues, opened up about personal involvement in war (and the harmful and traumatic after effects) (see Appendix

H), and acknowledged deep disappointment with their pastor and with themselves. I also observed light-hearted moments, such as joking about the perceived flaws of a spouse, laughing over small medical problems in “sensitive” areas, humorous miscommunication over song lyrics, and teasing about the dangers of turning fifty. I also experienced group prayer and bible study and group members opening up about their personal faith. Most important for this research, observation of the groups also allowed a detailed portrait of how mainstream entertainment media formations – including blockbuster movies, television shows, and popular music – circulate in these evangelicals’ lives and how they become interwoven into evangelical faith.

One early observation made during ethnographic research was that, contrary to my expectations, rarely were the clips from television shows and Hollywood movies that were shown during Sunday sermons a specific topic of discussion in weekly prayer groups. This is not to say that group members didn’t discuss mainstream entertainment media in small groups or use media on a regular basis. On the contrary, during the time I participated in prayer groups I became aware that commercial, mainstream media meant a great deal to these churchgoers when it came to their everyday lives.

The churchgoers I observed were technologically savvy: many had their Bibles on personal handheld devices; they created their own websites; they led “worship” (singing to music) on iPods and watched church-produced DVDs during prayer groups; and followed prominent American evangelical leaders by subscribing to their weekly podcasts. Churchgoers did not simply use new technologies for religious purposes: they also followed developments on late-night television comedy shows on personal electronic devices; watched the Superbowl on TiVo; rented the latest movies from Netflix; and

created profiles on the popular social networking site Facebook<sup>50</sup>. In sum, the observations made during fieldwork indicate that these evangelicals were comfortable with – indeed, immersed in – mainstream media culture, both in terms of being well versed in both contemporary technology as well as the stories and symbols within media texts themselves.

Several examples from field research reveal how commercial media culture has entered evangelicals' lives. The following ethnographic vignettes of exchanges in prayer groups reveal how the symbols and stories from Hollywood movies and television shows have permeated informal exchanges and more formal interactions. These examples reveal how commercial media formations have become woven into the everyday lives of evangelicals in this study. Interestingly, often prayer group members' knowledge of commercial media culture surpassed my own and they had to explain references to Hollywood movies and television shows to me so that I could understand. The first example comes in the form of a “monk moment” in the Arnold group from Sunrise.

Arnold Group from Sunrise: “I’m Having a ‘Monk Moment!’”

The Arnold gathering from Sunrise was one of the largest of the groups I observed; in fact, when I left the group in April 2009 there was talk of splitting the group, which was so big at that time (about 16 members) that often there were too many individuals to fit comfortably in the host's living room. Members of the Arnold crowd were younger than those from the other groups, with ages in this gathering ranging from early thirties to mid-forties. Occupations varied substantially: the group included a

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<sup>50</sup> During research, many of the evangelicals that I worked with wanted to know if I was on Facebook; when I said I was, they found and befriended me on the social network.

registered dietician, PhD student, editor and research writer, graphic designer, financial services officer, homemaker, data analyst, web administrator, church accountant, mechanic, college professor, and a sales clerk.

One trait that set the Arnold group apart from the others was the constant levity of the group: during the times I visited there was incessant laughter, with members teasing and ribbing each other continuously throughout the evenings that the group met. This was true even in potentially tense, serious moments when discussing their unhappiness with their church leader. Members of the Arnold group were also very much immersed in media culture: it was at the confluence of these two things – mainstream entertainment media and their love of laughter – where the most memorable moments from this group came. Individuals laughed about a female member who avidly watched the *Gossip Girls* television series (and admitted that she “loved” the portrayals of sex and violence in it). They joked about irreverent Monty Python movies – including the *Holy Grail* as well as the *Meaning of Life* – while quoting from the movies directly (“It’s just two coconuts!” and “I’m stuffed: couldn’t eat another wafer”) and laughing uproariously, holding on to countertops and spilling their coffees in the process. Some members of the group rented movies like *Hellboy* (2004), a film about a demon who decides to be “good,” with some members laughingly suggesting that they all watch it together. They joked about my research, with one member referencing sexually explicit media – the pornographic film *Debbie Does Dallas* – because he knew that, my research being on media, it would go into my field notes and I would be writing about it here.

One specific reference to media in the group came one night in March of 2009 when the members decided to forgo formal prayer in order to prepare church grounds for

an upcoming conference Sunrise was hosting:

*We arrived in the music room of the church to arrange the chairs according to the map we had been given: three columns with four rows in each. Which way should the chairs face?, we wondered aloud. We decided that the chairs should be oriented toward the small “stage” in the music room, facing the musical instruments. We began to pull folding chairs from the back of the room to set them up. As we began to unfold them one member of the Arnold group named Karina, a 43-year old doctoral student in nutrition, began to worry about the arrangement of chairs. She told us that each row should have a certain numbers of chairs and should be arranged in a particular order and angle. We discussed her plan for a few minutes until she stopped, looked up from the paper map in her hands and, laughing at her own punctiliousness, exclaimed to all of us, “I’m having a ‘Monk Moment!’” Group members laughed with her while I asked for an explanation. A “Monk Moment,” Karina explained to me, still smiling, is an obsessive-compulsive inclination towards neatness or cleanliness that stems from the behavior of the detective on the tv show “Monk.”<sup>51</sup> After she finished explaining she threw her hands up in apparent surrender and let us organize the chairs as we wanted. As we finished and started to leave the room, her original “Monk” reference started a light-hearted conversation between some of the members about obsessive-compulsive behavior which became more serious as Karina quickly noted to others that she felt vaguely uncomfortable making fun of people with the disorder because she recognized that it was a real disease. As we walked to the next room she clarified to members of the group that*

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<sup>51</sup> “Monk” is a popular television show starring actor Tony Shalhoub that airs on the USA Network.



*she saw the show as “paying homage” to the disease rather than ridiculing it, which was important to her.*

This exchange between members of the Arnold group is interesting for several reasons. First, in noting her own need for order in arranging the chairs, Karina seemed to surprise herself by suddenly making a link between her own actions and those of a popular television character like the “Monk.” This way of applying the stories from media to one’s personal life echo the recognition by Storey (2003) that the “message is not solely in the text but can be changed or worked on by the audience as they make their own interpretation. The making of meaning is an ongoing process (where) new contexts bring about the creation of new significances” (21). Dorothy Hobson (2000), who researched individuals’ reactions to the television show *Crossroads*, notes that the women in her study would move almost seamlessly between the fictional story lines and the real events in their everyday lives. This was observed here in the case of Karina, who evaluated her own behavior in reference to “Monk,” which then caused her to clarify to herself and others in a more serious discussion her views on a disease like OCD.

This example also indicates Karina’s engagement with at least some aspects of American mainstream media culture, in this case, a popular cable television show. The other examples that follow here reveal evangelicals’ ready familiarity with commercial media formations. In these cases, references to commercial entertainment media surface quickly and easily in informal prayer group exchanges and discussions about myriad topics.

### The Reed Group: Getting Into a Car Accident

Another example of evangelicals' immersion in mainstream media culture comes from the Reed Group from Harvest Church. The Reed group was a large, mixed-gender, all-white prayer group from Harvest Church that met in the evenings at the home of Mr. Reed, the group leader, and his wife. The house was located in a development complex in a fairly new suburban neighborhood on the outskirts of town near a local community college. It was filled in a warm, comfortable way with framed family photos, scented candles, carpeted floors, miscellaneous knick knacks, and oversized chairs. The size of the group ranged from eight to twelve people and the members ranged in age from 40 up to about 60. Occupations were wide-ranging and included two bankers, a CEO of a non-profit organization that helped disadvantaged youth, accountants, a physician's assistant, and sales clerk. Like the Arnold group, this gathering was typically relaxed: members often joked continuously throughout the evenings' activities about everything from politics to cooking mishaps to minor medical injuries. Also like the Arnold group, the Reed's members discussed commercial entertainment media, including films such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. One night in September 2008 one of the members, Ricky, a 49-year old banker, shared a story during prayer requests:

*Ricky, sitting in a folding chair and leaning forward, elbows on his knees, told the group (with a rueful smile) that he had gotten into a car accident that was not his fault: someone in another car had hit him from behind while he had paused at a stop sign. He recounted how he and the man had spoken after they had gotten out of their cars to exchange information. While he told the story someone interrupted to ask the man's name – it was a small town, and many people knew each other – but he shook his head in*

reply, indicating that they probably wouldn't know him. He explained that the man was Asian and that his name had been difficult for Ricky to pronounce. He paused for a moment, tried the name, and then gave up, shaking his head. He then looked around the room, started smiling broadly, and slowly intoned the word "Frankenstein."<sup>52</sup> There have been a multitude of movies that were based on Mary Shelley's original book "Frankenstein" and so Ricky could have been referring to any number of films or to the book itself. However, I – and others in the group who laughed when he said the name – knew what text he was referring to by the pronunciation alone: comedian Mel Brooks' film "Young Frankenstein" (1974). In the film, actor Gene Wilder plays a medical doctor who is descended from the original Dr. Frankenstein. Wilder's character, however, wants to differentiate himself from his mad ancestor and so comically changes the pronunciation of his last name to sound like "Fronkenshteen," constantly correcting anyone who tries to use the original pronunciation. When Ricky intoned "Frankenstein" in this style, many of the members laughed. Encouraged, he continued with several quotations from the movie as group members listened, including imitations of characters called "Frau Bleucher" and Igor (pronounced "Eye-Gore" in the film). Laughing, the group then continued with prayer requests.

The reference to the film "Young Frankenstein" in the Reed group provides a humorous glimpse into how commercial entertainment media permeates the small groups. The first observation that can be made of this exchange during prayer requests (where individual members make requests for healing prayer for themselves or for others)

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<sup>52</sup> The name "Frankenstein" comes originally from author Mary Shelley's (1831) book of the same name that chronicles a story about a mad scientist (Dr. Frankenstein) who creates an out of control, anthropomorphic creature from various body parts culled from the deceased in an experiment that goes awry due to the corrupt nature of urban society.

is the amount of cultural capital exhibited by churchgoers like Ricky. Not only did he reference the comedy but also provided direct quotations from it, to the amusement of others. In her discussion of individuals' knowledge of the stories and characters in the *Crossroads* series, Hobson (2000) notes that "No one has to explain (who) is being talked about because the shared knowledge of the characters which is held by the viewers becomes part of the cultural capital which they exchange in normal conversation" (604). The *Young Frankenstein* exchange parallels the jokes made about the *Monty Python* movies by members of the Arnold Group, where references made by some members were picked up and built upon by other members in a way that demonstrated both in-depth knowledge and understanding of media texts specifically and mainstream media culture in general.

Another observation can be made about the text itself. *Young Frankenstein*, about a mad scientist who creates an anthropomorphic monster from culling body parts from a graveyard, is a film that also is somewhat bawdy, referring to the size of penises as well as allusions to and depictions of sex (albeit in comedic fashion). The *Monty Python* movies Arnold group members quoted – *The Holy Grail* and *The Meaning of Life* – are also crude, dealing with nuns singing about sperm, songs for the various colloquial names for penises, cursing, and depictions of virgins who want to have oral sex. The evangelicals' familiarity with not only commercial media texts but also the seeming acceptance of the references to sex indicates a comfort level that is surprising given research that indicates an often uneasy relationship between Christianity and mainstream media (Hendershot, 2004; Buddenbaum, 1998; Smith, 1998; Schultze, 2001). Interestingly, in the exchanges described thus far there seems to be little tension

regarding the themes of sexuality, cursing, and violence and instead an unusual level of comfort.

The Gilmore Group: Prayer Group Screening of the *Bucket List*

Another example of evangelicals' immersion in mainstream media culture comes from an all-female, all-white prayer group from Sunrise Church that met weekly in the evenings. There were approximately eight members in this group, although numbers changed weekly as they did with most groups. Most of the women were in their early to mid-fifties and held occupations including a certified public accountant, several registered nurses, and a librarian. The majority of the women in this group were not married and several were single mothers, two of them having made the decision to adopt. Many of those in this group lived together and I believe this – along with their high comfort level with each other – was the cause for the dynamic and lively nature of the group. The group met (indeed, most lived) in a beautiful, large brick house located in an old, well-established neighborhood located on a major artery leading to the university campus in Smallville.

When conducting the prayer group at the house, the group always began with dinner preparation. To contribute for the dinner, as well as to thank them for allowing me to join the group, I usually brought some form of dessert and helped out with setting the table, as well as clearing dishes at the end of eating. When the weather was nice we sat outside in their backyard garden table with Henry, their small dog who preoccupied himself with running along the wooden fence to bark at passersby or cars (or falling leaves, I thought sometimes). After dinner we would usually clear dishes and move

indoors, to sit in the living room while the women's two young children would drift in and out of the room with various requests. Sometimes the group followed the bible study guide provided by their church; and sometimes they did not, choosing instead to have lengthy political conversations while lingering over dinner. Once they decided to see the religious-themed movie *Expelled* (2008) in a local theatre and went to a café in Borders Books after to discuss it over coffee.

Another night, in May of 2008, the group leader, Nena, decided to forgo formal prayer study and instead rent *The Bucket List* (2008), a clip from which had been shown in their church the previous weekend. After dinner, the group settled down in the various chairs and couches in the living room, turned down the lights and watched the film. The movie centered on two elderly men (played by veteran Hollywood actors Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman) who meet in a cancer ward, become friends, and travel the world before one of them (Freeman's character) passes away. In general the film had some dramatic, emotional moments regarding family, but also contained expositions by Nicholson's character on sex and his multiple marriages as well as his hiring of a prostitute for Freeman's character. At one point in the film Nicholson's character gives advice to his younger employee: "Here's something to remember when you're older Thomas - never pass up a bathroom, never waste a hard-on, and never trust a fart." At this line several of the women, including myself, giggled, but I wondered if it had offended them. In the brief discussion period after the film, as the prayer group ended, Nena, the group leaders, asked the group members what they thought. The women agreed that they found parts humorous and that the film had an interesting and thought-

provoking message about death. None of them mentioned the bawdiness of the film and none expressed criticism.

The screening of *The Bucket List* in lieu of formal prayer is particularly interesting because it reveals that the films that pastors show in church – like *Fast and the Furious*, *Nacho Libre* and *Moulin Rouge* – can be taken as an implicit endorsement of the film by churchgoers. In interviews with me (in Chapter Four), pastors noted that they were keenly aware of (and slightly worried about) the potential for the media used in sermons to be seen as approval of the entire film. (It was for this reason that the majority of pastors in this study decided not to show the prayer scene from *Talladega Nights*, since the majority of the film was seen as “raunchy” or crude.) The Gilmore’s Group’s decision to watch a movie in prayer group that had been shown first in their church is a good indicator that churchgoers do take the clips shown in church in this way. Watching the films in their entirety – instead of simply an abbreviated clip of the film with cursing, violence, and sexuality removed – could create tension for churchgoers and their pastors because of the cursing, violence and sexuality contained in the films. However, the observation of this prayer groups appeared to indicate that there was little or no tension in the crude or sexual material.

The three exchanges provided in this section provide some examples of the ready familiarity that many of the churchgoers in this research have with commercial entertainment media culture. Evangelicals in the prayer groups use the stories and symbols within media texts often in humorous, informal discussions in a way that other members not only understand but consider acceptable. The easy references to numerous forms of secular popular culture – including Hollywood films such as *The Holy Grail*,

*The Bucket List*, and *Hellboy* as well as the *Gossip Girls* and *Monk* television series – indicate how much evangelicals enjoy secular commercial media culture in myriad aspects of their lives both inside and outside their places of worship. This became most apparent in the humorous moments in the groups, when members would “get” what to some (like myself) would be obscure references and respond in kind with their own references and quotes.

It seems, then, that the evangelicals in these churches are well versed in commercial media culture in their everyday lives and that the stories and symbols in commercial media texts make their way into informal and formal interactions and discussions in prayer groups. The question that can now be asked is if there is a relationship between the commercial media that permeates evangelicals’ lives and their personal faith. Phrased a different way, do the commercial media formations that are woven into the interstices of evangelicals’ lives impact the way churchgoers perceive of and develop their religion?

#### *The Interconnection between Commercial Entertainment Media and Faith*

Considering evangelicals’ general approval of – and engagement in – American commercial media culture, it is important to ask how mainstream entertainment media have influenced perceptions of faith in the evangelicals in this study. The following descriptions of specific interactions in prayer groups provide an interesting window into how the evangelicals in this study take their immersion in commercial media culture, as well as their exposure to Hollywood films and television shows in the spaces of their churches, to develop their faith and negotiate their identity as Christians. The examples



include perceptions about personal faith, God and the Bible. The final example provides a glimpse into the interesting intersection of media, politics, and faith.

#### The Reed Group from Harvest: Perceptions of God and Gandolf

The first description comes from the Reed Group from Harvest. On the evening described below group members were discussing a book called *The Shack* (Young, 2008) that had made it onto the New York Times bestseller list<sup>53</sup>. The group had decided to read the book instead of following the normal activities that their church, Harvest, had suggested for small groups. As a result, we would read selected chapters and come to group prepared to discuss them with others. The following is from one exchange on a September evening in 2008:

*We had gotten to about halfway through the book when the group began to discuss how God was represented in the story. The group leader, Jason Reed, a 61-year old banker with a direct manner and a ready smile, sitting in his cloth-covered easy chair, asked if the group had thoughts. There was silence for a moment as members pondered his question. Then Kay, a woman in her forties with short, straight brown hair who was sitting to my left, spoke up. Smiling a little, and pausing between her words, she said that she had always wondered what God looked like. "The Shack," she said, had made her think about this since God was represented in many different human ways in the book<sup>54</sup>. Jason nodded appreciatively at this but said nothing, waiting, it seemed, for*

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<sup>53</sup> The book is about a man who loses his daughter to an unknown person who supposedly murdered her in a small shack in the woods. The man loses his faith in God as a result until he receives a letter from God asking him to come to the shack. When he does go to the shack he meets Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit, who all come in different forms, races, and genders.

<sup>54</sup> In *The Shack*, the Holy Trinity (God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit) is represented by an older African-American woman, a young white man, and an Asian woman, respectively.

other members of the group to contribute their own thoughts. After a moment, Dan, 57, a plain-speaking, handsome man with dark hair and a ruddy complexion who worked as a Director of Community Services in a Child Welfare organization in Smallville, spoke up. Addressing Kay and the rest of us, he stated that he also had been curious about the representation of God, especially due to the various forms of God in the book. He paused for a moment, then admitted that he had always seen God like "Gandolf: with a white flowing beard and old." Kay nodded at this and some in the group murmured approval or agreement. Then there was silence for a moment or two as we all mulled this over. Shifting in his chair then, Ricky, a 49-year old banker with short-brown hair and a pale complexion, confessed to the group, stammering a little in a way that seemed to indicate his discomfort, that *The Shack* made him "a little uneasy because it... it challenged who I thought God was." In the book, he said, God is represented as a woman, and he had always thought of God as a man. There was more silence as the group considered this, while some members nodded in silent agreement or understanding. Just then Cassie, a 40-year old accountant, who either did not sense his discomfort (or perhaps didn't care), responded loudly with "I loved it! I was like, 'a woman! Woo hoo!'" While some members of the group chuckled, Ricky looked down quietly at the book sitting opened in his lap. Seeming to notice his uneasiness, John noted sympathetically to Ricky (and to the group) that representations of God in the book "had challenged my own assumptions as well." John then turned to me and explained that in the book God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are represented by different types of people, but he didn't want to tell me what form they took specifically as I was still reading it. His wife Cathy, however, turned to me and let the cat out of the bag: "In the book God is represented as an older Black

woman.” The group laughed while her husband protested to her that “You gave it away!” but he was smiling. With the conversation seemingly over, we turned to the next topic in the book.

This brief exchange at the Reeds introduces several interesting points to explore when considering the intersection of commercial media and religion. To begin, it is interesting that a secular mainstream media text like *Lord of the Rings* (in which Gandolf, a beneficent and powerful wizard with blue eyes and a flowing white beard with a penchant for white robes, is a central character) is brought into a fairly serious discussion about the representation of God. Specifically, in the struggle to understand God in his own mind, Dan turned to a fictional character in a commercial, blockbuster film. Although this could be seen as “proof” of some kind that popular entertainment media have a direct impact on the faith of a Christian like Dan, even down to shaping personal perceptions of God, it is possible to make too much of this. Dan was not joking when he made his comment about the visual link he made between God and the fictional Gandolf character from *Lord of the Rings*; however, he also may have been trying to find a way to respond to Kay’s comment about different ways to conceive of God’s physical manifestation, showing her through the common “language” of mainstream media that he understood what her (perhaps more conventional) perception of God might be like and how it might resemble his own.

This possible explanation for his reference to God as a fictional movie character fits with the high level of immersion in mainstream media the evangelicals in this study exhibit, especially considering that Dan did not feel the need to explain who Gandolf was: in not explaining, Dan seemed to assume that everyone in the group would

understand his reference. Interestingly, a few months earlier, leaders at Harvest, the Reed's church, had used a clip from *Lord of the Rings* in a sermon about the biblical character King David. Described in detail in Chapter Three, it was not a clip that included the character Gandolf; however, it is possible that Dan thought others would get the reference, either because of the church's service or due to their own immersion in commercial media culture.

#### The Murray Group from Sunrise: Revelation, *Caddyshack*, and the End of Days

Another example of how media come into discussions of faith comes from a small, all white, mostly female prayer group. Many members of the group were from Sunrise Church, including the leader, Dena, 50 a junior high school registrar and recent grandmother, while other members came from different churches in the area. The group met on Saturday mornings at one of the group member's houses in a small (population about 500), rural town on the outskirts of Smallville that had one church and one post office. The town itself encompasses .2 square miles, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000) and consisted of about three blocks worth of modest houses with large trees lining all sides and an old highway running through the center. It often reminded me in the late fall after harvest of a green oasis amidst the then-barren corn and soybean fields.

The house we met in was the house of Amy, 46, a marketing assistant, and her husband Roy, 51, a Union laborer at a construction company. Amy and Roy owned a modest, comfortable two-story house that they shared with their youngest child, a daughter who was in the fourth grade. Amy and Roy laughed and joked with each other

gently and continuously during the meetings and seemed to share a very real affection for each other. The group was fairly small and, perhaps as a result, also very close-knit and comfortable.

Meetings were characterized by a lot of laughter and good-natured teasing before formal group started, but also by serious Bible study once formal group began. Every week Dena would designate a member of the group to bring breakfast for everyone, and usually we would start by making small talk and jokes while the designated person would prepare the breakfast in Amy's kitchen. We would then move to the dining room to eat while continuing our casual conversation. The time remaining after breakfast was focused on bible study and discussion. On this morning in July of 2009 the group had begun to discuss individualism in American churches and the wider secular culture. Described in more detail in Chapter Seven (*American Evangelical Churches and Individualism*), this conversation led to a discussion of the state of American families, salvation, End Times, and the film *Caddyshack*.

*Roy, a good-natured, mustachioed 47-year old union laborer whose well-worn Bible lay on the table in front of him, brought up the Book of Revelation to the group. Speaking to the other members in his gravelly but pleasant and congenial voice, Roy stated that he thought Revelation wasn't "as bad" as some people made it out to be even though it dealt with the End of Days. Seeming to make a connection between the stories in Revelation with the hardships of everyday life, he said that "when times get rough" people approached faith and marriage in the same way, observing that "We all say, 'for better or for worse' but then we mean only 'for better.'"* Shaking his head in frustration, Roy said that he thought that when things got "really bad" that people tried to find a way

*to escape both their marriage and their faith. There was a slight pause as members of the group considered what he said, and then Pam, a pretty, 50-year old administrative assistant with short, chestnut brown hair, responded to Roy's statement. Pam said that attitude toward life and faith made her think about the "fate of younger generations." She agreed with Roy that Revelation wasn't "so bad," how it wasn't all "doom and gloom." Susan, a 50-year old software developer, began to nod, agreeing with her. But, Pam continued with a frown, she wasn't so much worried about her generation; instead she was worried about the children now. With their "attitudes" and lack of faith, what would happen to them?, she wondered aloud, seeming to refer to when Jesus did return. The group took a moment to consider this quietly, as was typical for the group, when Susan suddenly said, "Well, I guess we've got that going for us," and everyone began to laugh loudly. I looked quizzical at this, not understanding her comment or why people were laughing, and Susan explained: it was a funny line from the movie Caddyshack. When I still looked confused (I knew the movie but not what scene she meant) she explained further: in the movie, which revolves around comical events on a golf course, Bill Murray's character (a greens keeper) relates a story to other employees about caddying for the Dalai Lama. When the Lama is done golfing, Susan recounted, "Bill says, 'Lama, how about a tip?'" In response, the Lama tells him that he will reach pure consciousness and true happiness when he dies. Susan finished by saying, "Then Bill says, "Well, I guess I've got that going for me." When she finished, Pam sat for a moment, got serious again, then finished her original thought, concluding with, "Well, I guess we have that going for us then."*

This conversation at the Murray group is remarkable for the direct juxtaposition of an extremely serious discussion regarding future generations and the end of the world during Jesus' return to earth and a humorous (and often vulgar) R-rated movie like *Caddyshack*. It is important to note that the concurrence of both a mainstream media text like *Caddyshack* and the biblical story of Revelation doesn't necessarily mean that the symbols or story of the popular, humorous film are Susan's way of understanding the Second Coming. Instead, Susan appeared to make a reference to the popular film in two ways: first to lighten the tenor of the conversation, which had turned somber, and also as a way to acknowledge, through the common language of popular media, the difference in generational belief systems.

Interestingly, once again it seems that evangelical churchgoers in this study did not attempt to avoid films with morally questionable material. Also similar to the previous examples in this chapter, the members of the Murray group were even more immersed in mainstream media culture than I was. I didn't get the reference, but they did, speaking a common language through commercial media in discussions of their faith. In the last example in this section, the connection between faith and commercial entertainment media is examined through observations of a discussion about war, the End of Days, and American politics.

#### O'Hara Group: *Braveheart*, War and the End of Days

The O'Hara group was a small, all-male, all-white prayer group that met early in the morning on the grounds of River Rock Church. Normally there were three men that met in this small, close-knit gathering; but on this morning on November 4, 2008 (U.S.

Election Day) described below, however, there were only two men: Ralph and Julius. Julius, 54, was an occupation counselor; Ralph, the group leader, appeared to be in his fifties (he would not specify his age) and worked in sales for a pest control company. The men were very comfortable with each other, able to converse easily about their work and their personal lives before they began their formal prayer group.

*On this morning we met in the baby changing room of the church: a small room with one overstuffed easy chair, a few folding chairs and a television on a metal stand with a DVD player. The three of us took seats in the folding chairs and, after a short prayer to begin the meeting, began to watch a video produced by River Rock. We were meant to follow along with prayer group sheets provided by the church by filling in the blanks on each corresponding page as the DVD progressed. The video dealt with how to develop community through trust, love and sharing. Early in the video, Pastor Steven, the lead pastor of River Rock, acknowledged that there was a great deal of strife in the world that was a challenge to developing community. Specifically, he stated that, "There are wars and rumor of wars" when discussing how troubled our times were and how we needed community. When the DVD finished Ralph, who was the group leader, asked us additional questions and we were invited to ask our own. I used this opportunity to ask about the war Pastor Steven had mentioned.*

*Using Pastor Steven's mention of war as an entrée to the discussion, I asked about war. I used the blockbuster film Braveheart as an example, as River Rock had shown the pre-battle scene from the film before in a sermon, and at this mention Ralph nodded in recognition. I said that I had noticed that in this film and others like it (other war films) there always seemed to be an underlying message about good versus evil. Did*



*that theme in Braveheart resonate with them on a personal level? Did they ever make a connection between that type of battle and the way they felt about war?*

*I was completely surprised when, instead of silence or flat-out refutations of what I had asked, Ralph said, "I go right there with it." He noted that Pastor Steven "doesn't address politics directly, but he does a lot indirectly," stating that he felt that Pastor Steven made his conservative views on war clear to him as a congregation member on a subtle level. I asked for clarification: was he saying that the values in a film like Braveheart made sense in how he saw the war in Iraq? Ralph affirmed this again, stating "I go right to it. I'm not disagreeing with what we've done there: there will always be unrest. Look at Bible prophecy: things are gonna happen. And there will be war." At this I asked what he meant by this: did he mean there will be war before Jesus returns? "Yes," he affirmed.*

*Jeff, however seemed to have a different perspective: "War is an absence of God. I see missions – we do a lot of missions here at this church – as a way to avoid war. I don't like taking from one country that has one resource, and then we don't care if we leave them poor. It's the militaristic machine. You have to ask yourself when you go to vote: who are the people who are the real peacemakers? Also, it's important to note that one man can't fix all ills (Ray nods in agreement). The first thing is to make sure you're seeking God.... It's better to give an opportunity to change people's faith – give them that opportunity." Is that what we're doing over there in Iraq?, I asked. Jay nods. Ray says, "I think so." I asked then, but do we have missions over there now to convert people, or are the conversions you see happening in Iraq the result of war? Neither man knew if the U.S. had missionaries in Iraq, but Jay noted that there may be a secret movement there.*

*He had read about secret movements, such as one in Russia where a couple was smuggling Bibles in for years. He loves hearing stories like this. Ray added, “we have to do the only thing we can do – what God tells us to – and that’s to go over there.”*

*So would God approve of this war?, I asked. Would Jesus? “That’s a good question,” Ralph said. “We’re responsible for protecting our country. There are also a lot of Christian soldiers – a lot – a lot of people are being saved.” Jay now brings up President Reagan’s invasion of Grenada. “Grenada was no threat to us: why did we go in there? I mean, my goodness, Grenada? A lot of people don’t even remember this, but I do. Why was our first response a militarist action?” Ralph said, “One cause for war is oil. Take it all down. It’s money, oil, conflict, and prophecy. It’s gonna happen. You don’t quit. You’ve got to protect it to a point. Through the conflict and war, God creates good. A lot of those people there wouldn’t be touched” if not for the war, he says.*

My conversation with these men revealed a few interesting points to explore regarding media, faith and politics. First, the two men had significantly different points of view regarding the purpose and benefits of war in general, including the war in Iraq specifically. While Jeff was dubious about the justification for both past and present wars, Ralph was unequivocally supportive of war, believing it to be not only morally just but required and inevitable. Their conversation reveals nuanced and complex conceptions of the origins and justness of war in general terms as well as specific historical and biblical causes for the war in Iraq specifically.

In addition, the discussion of *Braveheart* and war is intriguing for Ralph appeared to make a strong connection between the film, his faith, and the American conflict in Iraq. In Ralph’s mind, the story of *Braveheart*, with its dichotomy of good versus evil

and the idea of a just war was completely compatible with biblical Revelation when it came to “money, oil, conflict, and prophecy.” More specifically, he seemed to perceive of American forces as bringing only “good” to Iraq in the form of Christianity; if there were some negative consequences that Ralph recognized they were overshadowed by the inevitability of war, which Ralph saw as an unavoidable clash between good and bad forces that had to be played out prior to the Second Coming.

In considering Ralph’s strong views, pastors’ beliefs (described in Chapter Four) about the ability of media to provide a compelling and powerful parable for churchgoers is applicable here. When Ralph responded to my question about *Braveheart* and war, he not only agreed but was emphatic, telling me that he would “go right there with it.” It is interesting to see the parable of *Braveheart* – the justness of war when good should triumph – and the eschatological parables of the Bible juxtaposed in a discussion of politics, war, oil, and prophesy.

In the spring of 2009, which marked the beginning of the end of fieldwork, I began to ask the churchgoers in these prayer groups more explicit questions regarding media use. Having watched evangelicals talk about commercial entertainment media in their everyday lives as well as in conjunction with their faith, I wanted to ask specific questions about how they used the media texts shown by their churches in the development of their faith. I asked both general questions about the media their church leaders showed in church as well as specific questions about certain media texts. The following section details the answers I received from some of the groups.

### Arnold Group: Taking “A Walk in the Clouds”

During observation of the Arnold prayer group from Sunrise one night in May, 2009, I asked what media use in church sermons (specifically, movies) meant to them for their faith. This sparked a lively conversation amongst the members, who began to talk about their personal views as well as providing detailed examples. The following ethnographic observations were the result of my questions:

*We had finished the formal portion of the prayer group, which had included watching a religious video purchased by their church and then discussing the video using set questions that came with the video package. I had mentioned to Franz, a 43-year old research editor and leader of the Arnold group, that I had a question for the group and he had agreed to let me ask it. Now as he faced the group from his chair, he gestured to me, sitting on a sofa near him and said to everyone, “Ellen has a question.” The group quieted down and everyone turned to me, watching expectantly and politely. I noted that on the previous Sunday the pastor had chosen a clip from the Star Trek television show<sup>55</sup> and I thought it was interesting. Some people nodded in seeming recognition. I continued by way of a very general question, chosen intentionally to be broad in scope: how did they feel about this type of media use in their church? There was silence, but by now I was used to this in these groups and waited patiently. Virginia, a 37-year old finance record keeper at a local church who was wearing a pink sweatshirt, was the first to speak up. “It’s relevant for today,” she stated, then paused, adding that she thought that “someone new (to the church) would think church is fun.”*

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<sup>55</sup> The clip depicted Captain Kirk, Spock, and a few other members of the crew in the control room of the Enterprise.

*Titi, a 40-year old homemaker and mother of two added that the video helped to remind her of the sermon message because “The video sticks in my memory.” There was more silence and then Cash, a 33-year old mechanic, speaking from his chair behind me, stated that he liked the serious ones the best, not the funny ones, noting that “The more serious ones make you feel more convicted.” I asked for an example but by now the conversation was rolling along, which for this loquacious group meant that it was difficult to stop and ask any additional questions. Franz noted that “it (the media clip) is talking about our human-ness. It’s in Hollywood, a common human condition. It’s universal; it’s not a Bible thing.” Immediately Saul, 46-year old financial services officer, spoke up, stating that media “makes church more relevant: it reinforces the message.”*

*Franz then provided an example with a specific movie shown in Sunrise, questioning the group as to the name of it: “There was that movie, the one with the vineyard that burned down and the old man... what was it?” No one answered him at first and he continued by describing a scene where a vineyard burns down. It makes it seem as though everything is lost for the family that owns the vineyard, he explains, and then the main character finds one plant still alive in the burned ruins. “How many times in my life have I burned all my bridges... and then to think there’s something still alive, still there?” His wife Marie, 40, a registered dietitian, looked at him: “A Walk in the Clouds?” “Yes, that’s it!” he exclaimed, snapping his fingers in excitement.*

*Emma, a 32-year old web administrator with shoulder-length chestnut-colored hair sitting across the room in an overstuffed cloth chair, talked next. She stated that, contrary to Cash, she liked “the funny ones: they’re the ones I remember. I liked the*

*MasterCard commercial, no, I think it was the Discover Card one” on identity theft<sup>56</sup>.*

*This must have made Titi think of her own example for she immediately exclaimed: “I liked Wonder Woman!”<sup>57</sup> Picking up on the humorous thread of the conversation, Franz said he liked the one with “Me, Myself and I,” quoting the media clip in mock seriousness: “‘There is none like me.’” At this he began laughing at the memory and others joined him. “To see it is so hilarious” he exclaimed.*

*When the conversation paused for a moment I asked them if they got as much out of the movies when they were outside of church, namely did they ever think of their faith when they were watching a movie outside of church? Marie immediately said, “I do! I see movies now that I think, ‘Oh, that’d be perfect to show in church!’” Talking past her in the rapid conversation now, Cash discussed how media made church relevant for him, stating that “I liked it in the beginning (when first beginning to come to church) because I was able to go in to church and see a clip that I could apply to my own life.” Basil followed Cash’s comment with his own experience. He was raised Catholic, he noted, and stated that he would go into his former church to find it completely different from the world he was living in every day. But for “one hour a week” he would make himself go into church. During that one hour he felt as though everything was different, and not in a good way, he was careful to emphasize. I asked him if he meant that he was living “in the world” most of the time and that going into church felt like stepping out of that entirely for one hour. “Yes,” he said, “exactly,” adding that going to Sunrise now was “different” in a good way.*

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<sup>56</sup> This was a local Sunrise church production video that spoofed a credit card identity theft commercial in a message about Christian identity.

<sup>57</sup> The “Wonder Woman” video sketch was another Sunrise-produced video in which a local church member dressed up as Wonder Woman – complete with tights and red leotard and performed domestic feats such as vacuuming.

This detailed and rapid exchange in the Arnold group provides several different and interesting avenues to explore when considering what media means to these churchgoers. First, the comments from some members of the group like Franz and Cash indicate that some of the movie and television clips resonate with them on an individual level. For Cash, when he saw serious clips he felt “convicted,” which seemed to refer to religious conviction on a personal level, although I did not have the chance, during or after the group, to ask him what he meant specifically by this. For Franz, the vineyard scene from the film *A Walk in the Clouds* (1995) where Keanu Reeves’ character finds a tenacious, resilient plant made him think about the nature of renewal in his own life. In the same vein, Franz also seemed to take the clip from *A Walk in the Clouds* as a cautionary tale not to burn bridges. In this, it seems, Franz and perhaps Cash found that they could apply the morals and lessons gleaned from popular media to their own lives outside of church in a way similar to that recognized by Loomis (2004) in his research on how Christian college students use Hollywood film outside of church to develop faith.

In addition, some comments made by members of the group alluded to the ability of media to tell a story relevant to churchgoers’ lives in contemporary American society. Other churchgoers in the group made similar comments in this vein. Virginia noted that media made church “relevant” for people new to church as well as making it “fun.” For Virginia’s husband, Basil, the use of commercial entertainment media clips meant that church was no longer a space far removed from his everyday life for “one hour a week” but was instead now an integral part of it. For him, the film and television clips his pastor incorporated into church sermons seemed to be one integral way in which relevance to his everyday lived experience outside the church was accomplished. Several

churchgoers' comments, then, indicate that they felt a very strong need for church to be relevant to their everyday lives, which for them was both mediated and often entertaining.

Members of the Arnold group also seemed to value the humor in the clips, laughing in small group about the spoofs of commercial media their church had produced<sup>58</sup>. Members of the group such as Titi and Emma seemed to remember most clearly the clips – including the “Wonder Woman” and credit card identity theft spoofs – that made them laugh. Considering their comments, it did not seem as though these clips had a spiritual message for them in the same sense that Franz or Cash discussed. Instead, they seemed to appreciate the clips on the level of a humorous interlude only, although it is important to acknowledge that I did not get the chance to probe this with them in more depth. In admitting the importance of humor, it seems that the churchgoers were not reticent to note that entertainment could be an integral part of their church without detracting from their spiritual connection.

Finally, comments from members of the group indicate that they saw the evangelizing potential of the Hollywood film clips. Both Virginia and Saul recognized how commercial entertainment media could make church “fun” and “relevant” for new potential members. In perceiving commercial entertainment media as an instrument to bring new members into the church, these churchgoers echo their pastor's statements regarding the utility of movies and television shows for the development of faith.

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<sup>58</sup> In other conversations with the Arnold group members, they told me how much they loved the clip Sunrise produced that mimicked the story from the film *Indiana Jones: the Last Crusade*. In it, their pastor was trying to find the church's “Holy Grail” and went to local Smallville landmarks (and, on a map, Morocco and Europe), eventually finding it within the church. The clip ended when the pastor, wearing a whip, fedora, and leather jacket, went to his suburban home at the end of the day, retrieving his hat from underneath the closing garage door at the last moment in a spoof of Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark when Harrison Ford's character grabs his hat as stone walls descend.



Specifically, members of the Arnold group provided many of the same reasons that their church leader (Pastor Harrison) did in terms of why commercial media are used – for entertainment, instruction, and evangelization.

The Green Group: *Everybody Loves Raymond* and Perceptions of Family

The first time I visited this group (in October of 2008) from Choices Church, there were approximately 11 people attending this early morning, pre-dawn group that met in different locations in a rural town outside of Smallville, including a bar and a café. Subsequent visits had fewer members, perhaps due to the early meeting time, and were all male except for myself. The group's members ranged in age from 41 to 67, with most members being in their forties. The gathering included various sales representatives, several upper level managers at local Smallville businesses, a former U.S. military officer and farmer, and Pastor Wilhelm, who often attended. Discussions always took place over breakfast and coffee as the morning moved from darkness to morning light.

My interest in asking the Green Group members about their perceptions of commercial entertainment media in their church stemmed from a previous prayer group meeting (in March of 2009) when one of the members named Jake, a 45-year old product development manager at a local toy manufacturing company, noted that mainstream movies had a resonance for him that didn't exist before he came into his faith. "I've grown more spiritually, so that when I go back now [to watch secular films outside of church] I see more in movies than I would have before." I followed this comment up in May of 2009 when I asked members of the group what media use in their church meant to them.

*I walked into the small, brick-walled café at 6:30 on a rainy morning to see several members of the group already seated, drinking coffee, and talking. Shaking off my umbrella and coat I sat down, ordered coffee from the waiter and joined the conversation. Jake, a tall man of European (German and Portuguese) heritage with a salt and pepper goatee wearing a blue collared shirt, was talking to Pastor Wilhelm about the media used in Choices during Sunday service a few days earlier. Leaning forward in his chair so that his arms and hands encircled his coffee mug, Jake told Pastor Wilhelm that the “Everybody Loves Raymond” clip<sup>59</sup> had been “great.” Pastor Wilhelm, smiling at this, asked, “What’d you like about it?” sounding pleased. Providing more specifics, Jake stated that “my wife turned to me and said, ‘That’s your mom!’” I asked Jake which mom he was referring to, as the clip on Sunday had depicted three types of mothers. “Raymond’s mother,” he responded. He turned back to Pastor Wilhelm, adding that it was true that so many families had problems. He recognized that there were other types of mothers, like Raymond’s wife’s mother (who was also in the clip, who was portrayed in a negative light as being distant and uncaring). Jake noted that the clip had made him think more about family relationships.*

*I noticed that the group had not yet started their Bible study (which for that day was on Acts 2), and so I asked the group a question I had been meaning to ask. What did media use in their church mean to them? Jake spoke first, saying that, “it’s everything, it’s part of the style.” I asked if anyone at the table would feel that something was missing if media wasn’t shown in church. Dan, a 67-year old retired Air Force pilot and*

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<sup>59</sup> This clip from the television show *Everybody Loves Raymond* (starring Ray Romano) is described in detail in Chapter Three (*Evangelical Churches and the Temple of Media*). Briefly restated, the clip showed a discussion at the family dinner table about the nature of motherhood.

*farmer, shook his head “no” vigorously. Jake, acknowledging Dan’s opinion with a nod, continued by saying the media clips are “just offerings in different ways. Some people may listen and not get it. When they see it,” however, they may understand better, he stated. Dan then offered that “It’s always germane to the topic. It’s good to use to start a particular topic. There’s always a purpose.” Then, looking at Pastor Wilhelm questioningly, he asked for confirmation: “Right?” he questioned? Pastor Wilhelm laughed, shaking his head and saying, “Sometimes, no.” After a moment’s silence, Dan said, “It’s sometimes good as an ice breaker. It keeps my attention better.” Jake agreed, stating that “it (a media clip) gives you something to look at.” Seeming to follow along the same thread of conversation, Dan stated that he didn’t like it when a pastor just would stand in one place; instead, movement was good. Jake agreed with him by nodding emphatically.*

Comments from the Green group are intriguing on several different levels. First, unlike members of the Arnold group from Sunrise, the men seem to offer little support for the notion that the media clips shown by Pastor Wilhelm mean anything to these men aside from something to look at while they are seated in church. In this, comments from Dan and Jay seem to downplay the potential for media to affect them in any way, spiritual or otherwise. Jake’s comments in particular seem to contradict both of his earlier statements made in March, including his spiritual growth impacting how he viewed commercial movie and television clips outside of church as well as his discussion with Pastor Wilhelm moments before my question where he acknowledged the impact the *Everybody Loves Raymond* on how he thought about families. In the direct conversation about media, Jake seemed to assign little importance to the media clips his pastor

showed. Instead, both Dan and Jay seemed to relegate secular media to simply a way to get their attention during a sermon and give them something to look at, an interesting reason for media use in sermons. Jake did note the importance of commercial media to get a message across to other people, but did not apply this learning on an individual level, an interesting exclusion of media's impact on his own spiritual development.

The men's comments are also interesting for their similarity to Pastor Wilhelm's statements made in interviews with me. In perceiving of commercial media texts as an innocuous yet useful tool to use to get churchgoers' attention for a religious message, Jake and Dan appear to take an instrumental view of the movie and television clips their pastor uses in church. In sum, all members of the Green Group appeared to perceive of only beneficial (and often fairly banal) uses for the media their pastor used in church services. The comments from this group exist in sharp contrast to statements about media made in the next group from Harvest Church.

#### The Weaver Group: "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow"

The Weaver Group was a gathering from Harvest Church comprised of both male and female members ranging in age from 52 to 75. This was a mostly-white group; however, one African-American woman, a professor at the local university, was a regular member here. Other members of the group had diverse occupations, including a nurse practitioner, a retired geologist, a teacher, teacher's aide, property assessor, two computer technicians, a construction company owner, a homemaker, and a retired telephone operator. The group was not as close-knit and cohesive as the other groups, including the Reed group from the Harvest. There were jokes and chatting, but there was not the same

sense of warmth or intimacy as in the other groups. We met weekly in the evenings in the furnished basement at the home of Macy, a pleasant and soft-spoken Caucasian woman in her seventies who had retired from her job as a telephone operator and lived with her husband on a quiet, tree-lined street. Macy was a conscientious hostess who always had fresh coffee and homemade cookies on hand when we arrived, to which we all helped ourselves intermittently throughout the evening. On this evening in May, 2009 once formal prayer had ended, I asked the group what they thought of the media used in their church:

*I told the group that I had noticed commercial entertainment media use at Harvest and provided some examples of what I had seen: the scene from Ben Hur in which Jesus provides water to Charlton Heston's character (Val, the charismatic, 67-year old group leader and teacher at a school for disabled children, interrupted: "That's Patsy's favorite!") as well as scenes from "Bruce Almighty" and "Lord of the Rings." Did this group, I asked, feel as though the media use meant something to them in terms of their faith? I did not elaborate, waiting for the answer in the ensuing silence.*

*Gary, a 56-year old computer technician spoke up first. I had met Gary in other Harvest groups and noted that he was emphatic in his faith: he usually wanted to pray for me, told stories about miracle healings and evangelism, and wanted to lay hands on me ("heal" me). Gary said, "In this society we're sight-oriented: we want to hear it, see it." He provided the example of seeing the Sombrero Galaxy, a beautiful galaxy that has been photographed and shown on various news' websites. "A picture's worth a thousand words," he ended. Following up on the mention of astronomical features, someone in the group noted that the sun was seen as a "pinprick" – in order to understand the*

*immenseness of our galaxy, it's important to be able "to see it." Regina, the 52-year old college professor, noted that she recently saw a clip of three people praying. "To see it was amazing," she said, shaking her head and emphasizing the word "see." She then said that she had seen a "cosmic band, not in church but on CNN. That stuck with me. For me, it represented the hand of God."*

*Macy then commented that "There's something about sight that's convincing. I can hear a story. But to be able to see it is something else." She then brought up the example of "the people with the signs." What were they called?, she wondered aloud. "Cardboard testimonials," answered Adam, the bearded and tall 61-year old geologist sitting to my left. Virginia, nodding, said that there was one sign that she liked the most: "On one side of the sign it said, 'I was gay'; on the other side of the sign it said, 'God healed me.'" As she said this she began to cry, explaining that her son was gay and this sign had given her hope. Patsy, the 63-year old nurse who liked the "Ben Hur" clip shown in church, said that the signs weren't "even nice: they were ragged cardboard, which made them seem even more powerful to me."*

*Phil, a 45-year old computer technician with a dark moustache and thinning brown hair, was silent during most of this exchange but at this juncture, smiling, brought up an interesting example. He noted that he liked the popular Fleetwood Mac song, "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow." The song represented one thing to secular people, he observed, "but it represents something different to me," he said with a wry smile. Specifically, he notes that for secular people the song might mean literally only the "day after today"; for him it was a song about heaven and eternal life.*

This conversation between members of the Weaver group provides several points to explore on the interconnection of media and faith. For the evangelicals from Harvest, the media were able to offer a visualization of reality, one that was potent for them to actually see. This is similar to Jake and Dan in the Green Group from Choices, for whom media clips were important to church in church insofar as they provided a visual reference point and a way to hold attention; however, members of the Weaver Group seemed to take this idea farther. For Virginia, it seemed as though actually seeing a cardboard testimonial on a homosexuality confirmed for her on a deep level that change for her son really was possible. Many members of the group seemed to agree that visual media have the ability to powerfully represent reality in a way that impacted their spirituality: the work of God as manifested in a distant galaxy; the potent effects of prayer; and the ability of God to “heal” homosexuality.

In addition to providing a “seeing is believing” benefit, members of the Weaver Group also emphasized how media that might seem to have a purely secular message can be reframed in churchgoers’ minds to have a decidedly Christian moral message, one that can be applied to personal lives in the development of faith. Paul’s discussion in particular of his changed perception of the Fleetwood Mac song exemplifies what other members from different groups in this study have discussed in terms of having “spiritual eyes” (Franz from the Arnold Group) or how spiritual growth enables one to see more in a secular media text than might be available to individuals lacking this growth (Jake from Green Group).

### Discussion of Evangelicals' Use of Commercial Entertainment Media

In sum, evangelicals seem to be familiar and comfortable with secular commercial entertainment culture: it is incorporated into their everyday lives and in more private discussions of faith. It becomes interwoven into both light-hearted and more serious discussions as well as a part of how evangelicals understand their faith and sometimes political issues like war. When asked about media explicitly, they note that media function in different, often powerful capacities: as a way to evangelize, to provide relevancy and a link between church teachings and contemporary life, to learn, stories to apply to their personal lives and personal growth, and to provide a reality.

The ability of Hollywood films and television shows to provide an opportunity for spiritual growth has been described on a smaller scale by Loomis (2004), who demonstrated that Christian college students use some Hollywood films for growth, contemplation, and decision making in their spiritual lives outside of the church<sup>60</sup>. These observations go farther, however, in that the images and stories from mainstream entertainment media are not only an integral part of evangelicals' lives but are now interwoven into faith, where the symbols from commercial media texts are now part of the way these evangelicals view God, or the way they rationalize or joke about the end of days, or see an issue like war, or perceive of how they have burned bridges in their personal lives, and the like. For these evangelicals Hollywood films and television shows can contain real spiritual lessons when contextualized in their faith.

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<sup>60</sup> This is also supported more anecdotally by Sharlet (2009), who notes that an American military lieutenant who attacked a Muslim town at prayer with a Bradley "tank killer" believed that the film the *Passion of the Christ* had sent him a personal message that he would not be killed in battle.



Given how similar churchgoers' statements about media use in their churches were to their pastors, it is important to assess whether or not prayer group members perceived any tension in bringing commercial entertainment media into the spaces of their churches and into sermons themselves. To ascertain this, I asked members of the groups, wondering if they would be like their pastors, who took an instrumentalist view of the media they used for religious purposes, or if they would be critical of this media and the way they have become interconnected with their faith. Would they be cautious about the blurring of the line between the profane (a film like *Fast and the Furious*, as River Rock showed in church) and the sacred (represented by the practices and beliefs of their faith)?

#### *Prayer Group Responses: Perceived Tension?*

I asked questions about tension in several different groups, including the Arnold group from Sunrise, the Weaver group from Harvest, and the Green Group from Choices. I kept my questions as broad as possible so that I did not lead evangelicals into discussing only the issues that I had perceived in interweaving faith and commercial media (the cultivation of individualism and consumerism being some of them). My questions, and their responses, are described in the section below.

#### The Arnold Group: "Debbie Does Dallas"

*As chronicled in the sections above, I had asked members of the Arnold Group how they felt about media. After noting their responses, I then inquired of them if they saw any tension in the content of the clips that were shown. I left it open at that then*

*waited. Most in the group shrugged, seeming to be noncommittal at first about the question. Finally Marie spoke up, mentioning that there was a clip shown in her church from the film “Forrest Gump” that had caused some controversy. She explained: the clip had run for too long because the media team hadn’t been able to stop it, resulting in a curse word being said in the movie (and thus in church). “Everyone heard it!” Marie exclaimed, smiling but eyes also wide in shock<sup>61</sup>. The group laughed as they discussed how it was important to strategically mute the clip in the right spots.*

*Franz, Marie’s husband, who was sitting behind me, then leaned forward and said to me, “Here’s another problem.” He noted that sometimes Sunrise would show clips from television shows such as “Lost” or “Heroes.” He noted that people “watch them (in church) with ‘spiritual eyes’; then they think they can watch this when they’re outside of church.” Franz also brought up the use of a clip from the popular television comedy “Family Guy” that their pastor had chosen to show one Sunday: although he thought the show was funny, he also found it “crude and lewd” and it bothered him. Franz stated that the mentality of new churchgoers would be “I don’t have to censor what I see since it’s shown in church. But it doesn’t work that way,” Franz concluded. Following her husband’s thought, Marie added that “Some pastors feel like it’s like Pandora’s Box” and that they were worried that “things are going to go ‘hog wild’” if secular media is used in church. But, she noted that if pastors didn’t use it, they risked becoming irrelevant. Her husband added, “It’s not like we’re showing ‘Debbie Does Dallas’” and at this Marie became a bit upset and surprised, saying “Franz” very loudly*

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<sup>61</sup> I believe this is the scene in the film where Lt Dan and Forrest are in the hotel room and Lt Dan is claiming that he doesn’t believe in Jesus when Forrest says he is going to heaven, then Lt Dan tells him to take his “ass” down to the liquor store and get some more Ripple (alcohol).

*and pulling the collar of her buttoned blouse closer into her chest instinctively: “What has gotten into you tonight?” “Hello?” her husband said, smiling devilishly at me while I scribbled notes from the exchange, “It’s media!”*

*Now the conversation was flowing quickly. Someone in the group noted that “One pastor believed that no R-rated clip should be shown in church. I don’t necessarily agree with that.” Saul jumped in, agreeing that if movies aren’t shown in church “then you can’t connect as well....” Titi also joined in the conversation, stating that she didn’t “want rules. So what if we show a clip from an R-rated movie?” To this Marie rejoined with, “But then you need guidelines. There was a sermon a while back that addressed this....”*

*This thread of the conversation got Franz to note that the Superbowl commercials had to be muted when they were shown. “But that’s what people come to see!” he said ruefully, shaking his head in disappointment. I asked where they all watched the Superbowl: at someone’s home? “At church!” Franz answered while smiling. Members explained that every year Sunrise shows the Superbowl after church on Sunday. Marie added, however, that “We don’t go anymore though,” because they (the advertisements) showed “that woman from Alias” (Jennifer Garner) “prancing around” and she hadn’t liked that. The group seemed to be done speaking, and so Franz leaned over to me and stated, “So see? There is some tension, obviously. You want to reach people where they are but it’s a double-edged sword.”*

For the evangelicals in the Arnold group, there were several potential tensions in bringing commercial entertainment media into church sermons. The two problems highlighted by most members of the group who spoke up were profanity and sexuality.

The fact that the *Forrest Gump* clip had run too long seemed to amuse Marie and the churchgoers in hindsight, yet clearly there was some controversy over this as they remembered this mistake. Her husband Franz also noted that he disapproved of the airing of shows like *Family Guy* in church due to “crude and lewd” content. Tension also emerged in terms of sexuality, represented by Marie’s concern and criticism of the sight of actor Jennifer Garner’s body “prancing” on the screen in church.

Surprisingly, other members of the group seemed less concerned over the airing of questionable content, especially in terms of R-rated films. Saul in particular saw that showing an R-rated clip in church could be problematic but at the same time believed that the ultimate goal – to evangelize – superseded any potential problems. Saul’s comment appears to echo the beliefs of many evangelicals in the Arnold group: there may be tension in the use of certain commercial entertainment media texts in church, but the good (evangelism) outweighs the bad (someone hearing a curse word or seeing Jennifer Garner’s body in church). This was summarized well by Franz when he commented to me that using media represented a “double-edged sword” when it came to evangelism. However, the sword he referred to was represented by tension in terms of content; no one in the group voiced a concern about the commercialism in the clips and the underlying focus it would put on the self and individual needs.

#### Weaver Group: “The Hook”

In order to gauge tension in the other groups in the study I asked the same question to members of the Weaver Group from Harvest, again keeping the question

general. One night in May of 2009 I asked if they perceived any tension in using commercial media clips in their church.

*Paul spoke up first, stating that “Media tells a truth. All truth is God’s truth. Even in the mouth of a skeptic. The message may come out twisted,” he admitted, smiling, “but it’s still there.” Val joined in then, stating that “The (media) clips don’t necessarily represent values that are against the Lord.” Laura, the 67-year old teacher’s aide sitting to my right, said that media were “a hook” (making the gesture with her hand, wrist bent, of a hook). “I think that’s what this media does, it grabs your attention.” Regina, the college professor, then stated that she thought it represented an attempt to “connect God’s world to cultural things,” but then paused and admitted thoughtfully, “I don’t know.” Val’s wife Elaine, a 61-year old property assessor, then spoke up for the first time this evening, stating that “Non-believers don’t like the use of media in church: they see it as a ‘hook.’ From the outside they don’t understand: they see it as a negative thing.”*

*Val made an interesting comment now, noting that he had noticed that there were mostly white people used in the media shown in church (I had noticed this as well but had said nothing). He mentioned it to Barbie, the former media coordinator for Harvest. “I told her, ‘No more white people jumping up and down on the screen.’ Now there’s people of color up there (on the screen). Our group, Racial Reconciliation, went to the leadership and said, ‘It’s all white, it doesn’t represent the world we live in.’” I asked Val: did he actually speak with church leaders about it in church and they actually changed the media? He confirmed this.*

During this exchange, individuals within the Weaver Group provided several different benefits that they saw in media in all forms. For members like Paul and Val in particular, the commercial media texts shown in Harvest's Sunday services tell "God's truth" in a different, but equally valid way than religious media such as the Bible. Even if the message is "twisted," as Val put it, the underlying truth remains. Regina posited that the movies shown in her church provided a way to make a biblical message relevant for churchgoers, directly similar to comments made in other groups regarding the benefits that media offer for the development of faith.

The discussion of the "hook" was interesting. Laura seemed to consider the "hook" as a positive strategy, with the media shown in Harvest as a way to draw people in to church to be evangelized; for Elaine, however, the "hook" could be something that could be perceived as negative, an easy yet inauthentic way to draw people in. She herself did not appear to believe this, however, only recognizing that others might think so.

In general, the group did not criticize the media texts I mentioned that their church had shown, choosing to focus on the positive aspects of media use in terms of relevance and evangelism. Only Val saw something more that he could criticize about the films and television shows his church leaders at Harvest had shown in sermons. Specifically, Val was concerned with depictions of race and had attempted to change the whiteness he saw in the media. He was concerned with the message about race his pastors were sending. Interestingly, however, his criticism was of what commercial media texts his pastors showed in terms of race; the question in his mind was not whether

they should be shown but which texts were appropriate to choose. For these evangelicals, the focus still remained on content itself instead of the method of delivery.

#### Green Group: Harry Potter and Witchcraft

The final example from prayer groups of the tension involved with the use of Hollywood films and television shows comes from the Green Group from Choices Church. One morning in May of 2009 over breakfast I asked group members explicitly if they believed there were any problems in showing movies and television shows in sermons.

*As we ate breakfast I asked the men if they saw any issues in showing movies and television clips in church. To this the men shook their heads “no,” with none of them responding verbally. I decided to ask the question a different way: did they see any problems with the showing of R-rated films on Sunday morning? To this they all shook their heads “no” again. I began to wonder about the wisdom of asking questions to churchgoers while they were eating when Jake looked up, asking Pastor Mark: “You’ve shown some R-rated films, right?” To this Pastor Mark simply nodded, then continued to eat. I asked for examples and Pastor Wilhelm then responded in more detail, stating that “Sometimes you want to show a movie but you can’t show it. Like the ‘Talladega Nights’ thing. Every pastor has a line.” Jake followed Pastor Wilhelm’s statement by noting that “Some films are more controversial, like Harry Potter.” I inquired further: “Why? Because of witchcraft?” to which Jake nodded. Pastor Wilhelm said, “Yeah, the Watson family didn’t like it. They said it created tension” for them because they believed that*

*some of the younger members of their family then wanted to watch it because they had seen it in church. They left the church after this, he said*<sup>62</sup>.

Within these three examples from prayer groups several patterns emerge regarding the perceived benefits of commercial entertainment media as well as the potential tensions. Interesting is the lack of any substantial tension for individuals in these groups: as long as more “traditional” moral violations were avoided – largely cursing and sexuality – churchgoers seemed very comfortable with the use of all types of Hollywood films (including those that are R-rated) and television shows. Val’s comments in the Weaver Group were interesting regarding whiteness and his desire for inequality in this area to be resolved by church leaders; however, even the recognition of racial inequality in the media clips his church showed still indicate an acknowledgement of tension on only one level: content. Would any of the churchgoers perceive that the vehicle of delivery itself mattered? Had I asked the question the wrong way or in the wrong context?

#### The Email Survey of Choices Church

To make sure that these uncritical comments about secular entertainment media weren’t a result of the social setting of the prayer group, where members might have been wary of making comments critical of their pastor in front of others, I decided to contact the members of one church, Choices, to ask the same questions about secular media through email. I did this with Pastor Wilhelm’s consent and sent out an email (Appendix

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<sup>62</sup> In an email discussion with Pastor Wilhelm later he explained in more detail: “Their (the family’s) concerns were not so much about the scene, but rather they were concerned that we would reference Harry Potter and thus give an implicit endorsement. They saw *Harry Potter* as promoting witchcraft and evil and did not want their daughters exposed to this.”



B) asking about 45 churchgoers three questions: 1) Did they like or dislike the movies and tv shows that were shown in their church? 2) Did they have any examples of media that they liked or disliked?; and 3) Did they see any tension in the use of secular media in church? I asked churchgoers to respond to me alone and not to the pastor, telling them that their responses were anonymous and would not be shared with anyone, including Pastor Wilhelm. The following are excerpts from churchgoers' responses.

One female, a white 48-year old professor from the University of Smallville, stated that she liked the mainstream media shown in Choices because they helped to focus her attention during her pastor's message. They also helped her to think about the sermon message "in a unique way." She didn't perceive of any tension in the use of movies and television shows in church although she did admit that "I imagine that some very traditional or conservative people might be upset if it is an R-rated movie or a tv show that doesn't promote traditional values, but that is irrelevant for me." Another Choices Church member, a white 23-year old office administrator, stated that she appreciated Pastor Wilhelm's "ability to relate God's word to today's culture. All of the clips that I have seen used have been family friendly and relevant to the message." Like the 48-year old professor she did not experience any tension in using movie or television clips in church services but did recognize that other "more conservative members were not pleased at the teaching pastor's use of current media." One church member, a white 41-year old receptionist and drama director, noted that she liked media clips because "I think that it can be a very effective way of reaching folks-by bringing in some of the 'world' into church. Sometimes when I see a movie (outside of church) that we've shown a clip from (inside of church), I'm reminded of the message that went with it."

Addressing the tension, she wrote, “Oh, sure. As a theatre major, I want as much 'art' in church as I can get. Unfortunately, with Hollywood...there isn't much 'wholesome' stuff sometimes. There's that fine line between making church relevant and making church a 'safe' place for folks to go with their children.... I think, though...that the more we can use 'everyday' things in our life to point us towards God...the better. We watch a gajillion number of videos a day, most of us, anyways...and I don't think that church should 'ignore' that aspect of our daily life...It's good to 'mix things up a little.’”

A white 47-year old stay-at-home mother and teacher responded to say that she liked the clips Pastor Wilhelm showed in church because she felt “that it makes a connection between our ‘everyday lives’ and church culture. It keeps the message from feeling so ‘religious’ in nature. I also think that it can often reinforce the message that is being spoken, by presenting an example people can relate to.” Again, like the others who responded, she believed that tension was felt by other people but not herself: “I enjoy it, though I imagine there are those who do not feel it is appropriate due to their own church upbringing and religious attitudes.” Other churchgoers wrote in to say that there were no tensions at all: “Whatever makes the message more digestible is fine with me,” one 47-year old graphic designer wrote. Another Choices member, a 63-year old man who owned a coffee shop, wrote that “I really don't see any downside. They are always relevant and in good taste. ‘Today... we are going to something a little different’ -- I love that!”

*Discussion: Tension in Transmission?*

Responses to my questions in prayer groups as well as to the Choices email survey reveal interesting overall trends. First, evangelicals in these groups provide overwhelmingly positive evaluations of media much in the same way their church leaders do. Specifically, churchgoers see that commercial entertainment media texts can function as an evangelizer, a teller of powerful parables, and as a way to increase the relevance of religious messages in a mediated world. Also similar to their pastors the primary tension they perceived was fairly narrowly defined, including concern with “crude and lewd” content, including sexuality and cursing. Finally, any concerns with bringing commercial movies and television shows into the space of the church rested at the level of content only: in all of my questions, no churchgoer (or pastor) expressed a concern with not only the content of the media texts but also with the vehicle of delivery. This was true even in Val’s valid concern regarding the normative views of whiteness that he saw portrayed in the film and television clips his church was using. Val, like other churchgoers in this study, was concerned also with the message being sent by the content alone. But what about the method of delivery itself?

This research posits that there are other messages that accompany the Hollywood films and television shows that transcend content. More specifically, the question can be posed, what sort of a message is being sent to churchgoers when they are entertained through the media shown in their churches? Saul and Franz from the Arnold group recognized that the commercial media texts used in their church represented a “double-edged sword,” an instrument that could hurt as well as help the Christian cause. But what if the harmful part of the sword is the commercialism and individualism promoted by

attracting people to church using entertainment media? Does the use of humorous clips from popular movies blur the line between churchgoer and consumer? Does it provide a mixed message regarding the need to define oneself as a member of a community versus that of an individual?

### *The Paradox: Criticism of Religious versus Mainstream Media*

Criticism of religious but not commercial secular media was a trend observed in most groups. Criticism of myriad forms of religious media emerged in two different areas: gender inequality and commercialism. Frequent, often contentious, discussions of gender were often sparked in the prayer groups by reactions to certain Bible passages, church DVDs, and popular, religious-themed books like *The Shack*; however, not once in these groups did anyone – male or female – object to the patriarchal representations of gender in the movies or television shows incorporated into their church sermons (see Appendix G for more detail). Given the amount of tension in the small groups regarding gender, as well as the domination of male protagonists and almost complete exclusion of female characters in any of the clips shown in church sermons, it is an interesting silence.

In terms of commercialism, some churchgoers were critical of the commercial nature of visual media but, as with gender inequality, all criticism was focused on religious, not secular, media. This was the case often in the Arnold group, when members picked up on the fact that the religious DVDs they were watching were treating them as consumers first and as Christians second. One night as we watched a DVD that Sunrise had purchased from the Willow Creek Association (WCA), group members expressed their awareness that the videos put out by WCA were commercial products and

that they were being treated as consumers (instead of Christians) by WCA. After watching the DVD, group members derisively joked about the fact that the one of the leaders of the WCA listed his website at the bottom of the screen on the video. In deciding not to watch more of the video, Emma exclaimed that “Probably they’ll just ask you to buy the book anyway!” and people laughed. Franz then intoned mockingly, “Go to lee strobel dot com,”<sup>63</sup> to which Basil exclaimed, “I know! I was like, ‘why don’t you just plaster it on the screen?’”

Their criticism of the WCA DVDs echoes Shane Hipps’ (2005) observation that employing mass-produced media to develop faith in diverse groups of followers is to use a very blunt and ill-defined tool that will often miss its mark in terms of relevance. It also indicates that at the very least these churchgoers were critical of commercialism when it occurred in the context of their faith. Tellingly, however, none of the Arnold group members recognized the commercialism of the Hollywood movies and television shows they watched in the space of their churches.

Why are churchgoers in these groups critical of inequitable gender representations and commercialism from religious media sources yet silent when it comes to the commercial entertainment media shown in their churches? It is possible that the answer lies in churchgoers’ instrumentalist view of secular entertainment media. It may be for this reason that they don’t take the Hollywood movie and television clips as seriously as they do the religious media (which include church-produced videos, religious-themed books like *The Shack*, and the Bible) they encounter as they develop their faith. As Christians, and especially as evangelicals who belong to churches where the Bible is

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<sup>63</sup> Lee Strobel is one of the leaders of WCA.

taken as the literal and untrammelled word of God, scripture is something to be taken seriously. Perhaps this is why they are critical of the inequitable gender relations and commercialism in the religious media in their churches – these media *matter*, and churchgoers take them seriously as a result. Entertainment media, on the other hand, are seen as mere *divertissements*, engaging stories that serve a particular purpose and nothing more.

Perhaps this is not so unusual, as perhaps most media consumers – religious or secular – don't take entertainment media (and their potential influence) that seriously. This is referred to as the "third-person effect," summed up by Meyers (2000) as the "this doesn't affect me" (but it does affect you) phenomenon (206). Romanowski (2007), who also refers to the third-person effect in his work on the interconnection between Christianity and what he calls the "popular arts," notes that most people believe that they are personally immune to entertainment media: "Like most people, churchgoers generally think of popular art as entertainment, downtime after a long day, or a social activity to be enjoyed with friends. They don't think too much about the films and videos they watch or the music they listen to" (40).

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has revealed the myriad ways that evangelicals use media as well as how Hollywood movies and television shows are woven into churchgoers' everyday lives and into their continuous development of personal faith as well. There are several observations that can be made of evangelicals' use of – and familiarity with – all types of media, both religious and secular. First, the stories and symbols from mainstream,

commercial media culture are used in redemptive ways: to grow spiritually, to provide meaning to everyday life inside and outside the space of the church, and to forge a link between the potentially arcane and inaccessible religious world with contemporary everyday life. Like Hobson (2002), who noted that the women in her study applied the stories from *Crossroads* to different contexts in their own lives, so these evangelicals, in their myriad conversations about faith, take the parables from mainstream media texts and use them to develop their personal religious beliefs.

Evangelicals in the study also appear to use commercial entertainment media as a common language to discuss issues of faith. Conversations about Christian perceptions of God used the symbols from texts like *Lord of the Rings* to foster common understanding; serious discussions about End Times were aided by humorous references to *Caddyshack*; and the film *Braveheart* provided one way for a churchgoer to articulate his thoughts on the relationship between war, American politics, and biblical prophecy. In examples such as these, commercial entertainment media was seamlessly interwoven with discussions of faith.

Observations of prayer groups also indicate that churchgoers feel a very strong need for church to be relevant to their everyday lives that are highly mediated. Popular films and television shows are seen as a way for churchgoers to relate potentially arcane biblical principles to what is going on in their lives outside of church, and vice versa. In embracing secular commercial media culture in this manner, it appears that evangelicals are very much a part of secular society, contrary to what Hendershot (2004) has noted about evangelicals typically striving to be *in* but not *of* the world. This well-known phrase implies that Christians live in the world but do not necessarily become too closely

involved with the secular culture itself. This living in and of the world practice exhibited by the evangelicals in this study contradicts other research, including the “love-hate” relationship described by Quentin Schultze (2001) and Buddenbaum (2001), where evangelicals simultaneously see media and technology as something to use but with great caution and some suspicion. Instead, media and technology now appear to be embraced rather than held carefully at arm’s length.

In engaging with mainstream commercial media culture as they have, the question can be asked as to how different these evangelicals really are from mainstream secular American society. Christian Smith (1998), in his study of American evangelicals, has noted that evangelicals are “embattled and thriving.” He explains that evangelicals thrive on creating a distinction between themselves, their faith and secular culture. What this research suggests is that there may be no more conflict and that the lines of distinction between Christianity and secular American society, at least in this group of evangelicals, are being blurred.

One final point can be made of evangelicals’ immersion in commercial media culture. Specifically, the benefit of evangelism (through relevance) that so many of the evangelicals in this study cited as the reason to use Hollywood movies and television shows in church may be questioned. In a recent book titled, “Reveal” by Hawkins and Parkinson (2007), Bill Hybels, founder of Willow Creek Church in Chicago (of which three of the four churches in this study were members), provides the foreward. Here Hybels makes a crucial distinction between evangelism and merely bringing people to church. People can be brought into the space of the church through entertainment, Hybels notes, but this is different from bringing them to God.



Hybels' perceptive comments can be applied to this research by asking how churchgoers are hailed when they enter seeker churches such as the ones described in this study. Are they identified as individuals of faith or as consumers? As members of community or as individuals whose needs supersede those of others? How do churchgoers define themselves in these groups? The next chapter, *The Danger of the Lone Ranger*, addresses these questions by assessing the consumerism exhibited by evangelicals in prayer groups. The chapter highlights the tension of individualism when it comes to practices of faith, a tension that stands at the confluence of mainstream media and instrumentalist-substantive debate.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE DANGER OF *THE LONE RANGER*: INDIVIDUALISM AND CONSUMPTION IN AMERICAN EVANGELICAL FAITH

#### *Introduction*

Previous chapters of this research have revealed how evangelical churchgoers have been redefined – from a member of the faith to a consumer of religious products – by evangelical churches in the American spiritual marketplace. The introductory chapter noted the recognition by scholars that contemporary churches in the religious marketplace treat their constituents as individuals and consumers, with tailor-made Alpha Programs (Einstein, 2008) and visually-entertaining sermons (Roof, 1999; Cimino and Lattin, 1998; Shibley, 1996) designed to appeal to new members' consumerist, individualistic sensibilities. Chapter Three revealed for the first time how commercial entertainment media like Hollywood films and television shows are interwoven with church sermons, making religious messages perhaps more relevant to contemporary churchgoers' mediated lives outside of the church but definitely more entertaining as well. Chapter Three also acknowledged a fundamental contradiction between the messages pastors give to churchgoers about the dangers of individualism and the vehicle used to deliver the message: commercial entertainment media. The question reasonably can be asked, Is it possible to send a message highlighting the importance of putting community needs over selfish individual desires when an entertaining movie clip shown in the same sermon provides an underlying, alternate message about where the true focus lies?

This chapter closes out this line of thought by exploring how individual faith changes, if at all, in a spiritual marketplace in which consumption has been emphasized and the individual has been privileged. In this sense, this chapter also represents a return to the instrumentalist/substantive debate introduced at the beginning of this dissertation by asking how the introduction of mainstream entertainment media into the spaces of these churches intersects with individual faith and evangelical identity through the ethnographic observation of how churchgoers talk about their faith in prayer groups. As was noted in Chapter Six, commercial media and faith are intertwined in the everyday lives of the evangelicals in this study. This chapter builds from this recognition in turning to the question of how evangelicals, in their highly mediated lives and faith, define themselves in the context of their faith: as a member of a religious faith or as a consumer of a product? Before turning to the empirical material from observations of prayer groups, it is useful to review the history of the relationship between consumption and American Christianity.

### *Evangelicals, Individualism, and Consumption: Literature Review*

The relationship between individualism, consumption and Christianity in the U.S. has been addressed by many scholars (Lears, 1983; Roof, 1999; Emerson and Smith, 2000; Twitchell, 2000; Miller, 2003; Bauman, 2004; Einstein, 2008). Many students of American religion have noted a transition from the Christian denunciation of the acquisition of worldly goods that Weber (1958) referred to as the “Protestant ethic,” – which emphasized the accumulation of wealth through self-denial and valued thrift over consumption – to a focus on the satisfaction of individual needs through consumption

that emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lears (1983) observes that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a significant shift occurred from the earlier concept of Protestant salvation – with the accompanying focus on “perpetual work, compulsive saving, civic responsibility, and a rigid morality of self-denial” – to an emphasis on individual fulfillment through the enjoyment of leisure, increased consumption (and political apathy) (p. 3)<sup>64</sup>. He attributes the shift away from a belief in the virtue of self denial to several factors, including: the rise of medical authority; a growing sense of “unreality” that stemmed from increasing urbanization, the development of new technologies, and shift to an interdependent national market economy; and the secularization of liberal Protestantism (p. 6). The first – the rising influence of medicine – placed authority with ministers, doctors, psychologists, and other “therapeutic ideologues” (p. 4), who stressed that individuals needed to focus inward on their physical and psychological health. The second factor – the sense of unreality created by urbanization and mass production – prompted individuals to search for new ways to build identity. All of these factors occurred during technological changes that increased production of goods and services, as well as the rise of the corporation as the prevailing model of the market, and thus contributed to the “therapeutic ethos” that was central to the new consumer culture (Lears, 1983).

Central to Lears’s argument is a distinction regarding causality: instead of seeing advertising as creating the therapeutic ethos, he inverts the causal relationship to assert that societal shifts in religion, technology, and psychology created an opportunity for advertisers to exploit the concept of the therapeutic self. Thus, the rise of the focus on

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<sup>64</sup> Other scholars have noted this shift in the U.S., including Berman (2006. 243), who (drawing from Appleby, 1984) notes that American colonies had a clear definition of “virtue” [similar to Weber’s (1958) notion] that changed as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment. After these changes, the conception of “virtue” underwent a significant shift to refer to the well-being of the individual (and family).

the self in society was merely reflected in advertising, which then further reinforced the trend. Lears provides the example of the prominent advertiser Bruce Barton, who not only infused advertising with therapeutic ethos and religious undertones, but also incorporated a therapeutic ethos into Christianity as well. Towards this end, Barton published various works that actively associated Jesus with modern business practices, in the process representing Jesus as a healthy, self-realized individual who also happened to be an astute businessman. In addition, religion was brought into the therapeutic mindset through claims that faith was a cure for depression, thus representing Jesus as a psychotherapist. As a result, “Melding therapeutic religiosity with an ideology of consumption, Barton retailored Protestant Christianity to fit the sleek new corporate system” (p. 31). James Twitchell (2000) also has discussed Bruce Barton, noting that he highlights some of the similarities between advertising and religion: “Jesus was a businessman; advertising is a business. Jesus spoke in parables; advertising speaks in parables. Jesus did magic; advertising works magic. The similarities are too powerful to overlook” (p. 66).

Thus, the emphasis on work instead of leisure and the general denigration of excess consumption that Weber (1958) ascribed to Protestants underwent a shift to a primary focus on the needs of the individual that largely could be satisfied through consumption. In addition, the personal benefits that were gained as a result of consumption benefited the individual during his or her lifetime, instead of salvation in the afterlife. Because Lears associates the increasing focus on the individual in consumer culture with the secularization of liberal Protestantism, he believes that Barton’s work clearly “illuminates the moral and psychological conflicts at the heart of our consumer

culture” (p. 30). Ultimately, the rise of the therapeutic ethos is seen to undermine the importance of religious institutions and community ties because

...commitments outside the self shrank to meet the seeker’s immediate emotional requirements. Rooted in largely personal dilemmas, the therapeutic ethos nevertheless provided a secular world view that well suited the interests of corporate proprietors and managers in the emerging culture (Lears, 1983. 11).

What Lears makes clear in his essay is that the shift from the Protestant work ethic and concept of salvation to a therapeutic emphasis grounded in individual needs (to be fulfilled through consumption) represented a fundamental change in the relationship not only between individuals and religious institutions but also between individuals and consumer goods. Similar to Lears, Slater (1997) notes the importance of the rise of “experts” in consumer society. These “authorities,” who are primarily located in the advertising industry, constantly identify new “problems” (skin, breath, weight, etc.) for consumers that must be “cured” through the purchase of consumer goods, a phenomenon also noted by Twitchell (2000)<sup>65</sup>. This creates a state of endless needs and wants that is the hallmark of consumer society (Miller, 2003). This argument is extended in an essay titled, “From the Work Ethic to the Aesthetic of Consumption,” by Zygmunt Bauman (2004), who observes that the shift from producer to consumer society entailed fundamental transformations in myriad aspects of individuals’ lives, including the absence of routine and the state of constant choice, which Bauman labels as the new

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<sup>65</sup> Twitchell pointedly asks, “Where did such currently widespread afflictions such as BO, halitosis, iron-poor blood, gray hair, water spots, vaginal odor, dishpan hands, and split ends come from?” (2000. p. 59). However, it is important to note that, unlike Lears, Twitchell does not see changes in society (urbanization, mass production) as precipitating mass consumption. Instead, he turns Lears’ argument on its head in stating that “our love of things is the cause of the Industrial Revolution, not the consequence” (p. 54).

“virtues” of consumers (p. 25). The shift to a consumer society has another impact, namely that individuals are continuously required to construct an identity defined in relation to others in society.

What becomes apparent, then, is that several changes have occurred as a result of the shift to consumer society, including a change in the way individuals construct their identity and define their needs. These changes ultimately impact the relationship between the individual and society as well, based on an underlying focus on the individual. In addition, the increasing commodification of culture changes the relationship between individuals and religious institutions in fundamental ways.

The scholarship summarized above reveals that individualism in Christianity, and specifically in American evangelicals, has been a topic of interest and concern for some time. This interest has been heightened since the rise of the spiritual marketplace initially recognized and described by Wade Clark Roof (1999) and the scholarship that has followed from this. As noted in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, the *spiritual marketplace* refers to a relatively recent phenomenon where churches have redefined themselves as competing entities in a free market defined by consumer choice and have concomitantly reconceptualized churchgoers as potential customers (Einstein, 2008; Cimino and Lattin, 1998).

Mara Einstein (2008), providing one of the most recent additions to the discussion of evangelicals in the new spiritual marketplace, makes a connection between the notion of consumer choice and individualism, noting that the Alpha Course (created to introduce the unchurched and newly churchd to Christianity) is a “prime example of creating individualized programs for individualized consumers” (116). Einstein sees that

American religion has become a consumer-friendly, consumer-focused environment: “The focus is on the individual and not the broader social agenda – at least not when selling to religious prospects” (190-191). Hipps (2005) has also addressed individualism in Christianity and in Protestantism specifically. Taking a perspective critical of Protestant churches that use methods of entertainment to attract churchgoers, Hipps states that “modern Protestants have an impoverished theology of the church, the result of being reared in a faith that emphasizes individualism and reinforces consumerism” (147).

Wade Clark Roof (1999), in his analysis of the media shown in seeker churches, notes that the media themselves carry a message independent of content. He writes that “Visual media reinforce a cultural conception of an expansive self, if not an empty self, in need of constant filling” (69). According to Roof, media are “integral to the process through which religion becomes more self-reflexive and dynamic activity, through commodification of religion into a product that can satisfy needs (or quench thirst) and place emphasis on accessibility... Casting religion in subjective terms (such as experience, fulfillment, inner peace, or thirst quencher) meshes well with a highly individualistic, inward-looking culture (68-69).

This is what scholars studying the new spiritual marketplace have found through their research. However, broadly speaking, much of the research has been conducted from a “top-down” perspective; that is, it has focused on evangelical churches and the actions of their leaders, painting evangelicals as a whole with a broader brush. While this is essential for an understanding of the new spiritual marketplace, it is important to also consider how this consumption and focus on the individual is manifested by churchgoers themselves in their everyday lives. This chapter thus extends the discussion, begun in the



first chapter, of the instrumentalist/substantive debate by exploring through ethnographic observation how individualistic and consumerist mindsets are manifested, if at all, in the smaller, more intimate and close-knit prayer groups. It is in these groups that a deeper understanding of the impact of the new mediated spiritual marketplace on the practice of everyday faith is possible.

*Ethnographic Observation of Prayer Groups: a Focus on the Individual or Community?*

When I began observation of evangelical prayer groups I had several questions I wanted to be able to answer, which included how media were used in small prayer groups; how the media use might relate to politics (especially the then-upcoming 2008 presidential election); and how (or if) church members made sense of the world through the media they were exposed to inside and outside of their church. As mentioned earlier I also thought I would find a direct connection between media consumption and political beliefs and outlooks. With my research focus and design I paid careful attention to when media was used or mentioned and in what context, as well as politics. I was not expecting to consider the question of consumerism and individualism in small groups; however, it became clear to me during fieldwork that I could not ignore consumption and individualism when considering media use and faith in the spiritual marketplace.

Over the course of my participant observation of small prayer groups, I encountered a range of individualistic behavior in evangelical small group members that occurred in different contexts, including informal discussions and exchanges, formal prayer requests, and healing ceremonies. To understand how faith is practiced in the American religious marketplace it is important to explore all three contexts. As noted in

Chapter Six, my questions posed to evangelicals about media use – Did they see any benefits? Any tension? – revealed that they believed that the incorporation of movies and television shows into church sermons was almost uniformly positive. The only tension they perceived (when I inquired further) fell along the same lines as those identified by their church leaders, namely that there was too much sexuality in the Hollywood movie industry. None of the churchgoers I spoke with saw a potential connection between the use of commercial entertainment media in church and the fostering of an individualist, consumerist mindset. But interestingly, even though their pastors addressed the dangers of self focus in almost every sermon (sometimes obliquely through asides, and sometimes directly, as with the war zone metaphor at Sunrise and River Rock churches), this was a phenomenon churchgoers almost never discussed directly at all.

### Discussions and Exchanges

The small groups I observed contained a mixture of formal and informal, structured and unstructured interactions and exchanges, exemplifying what Wuthnow (2000) calls the “small group paradox,” where the “informality of small groups depends on having formal structure” (158). In these casual discussions, evangelicals revealed a great deal about how they came to their churches and how they defined themselves in relation to their faith. In the course of doing so, churchgoers also revealed a great deal of individualism in various forms and in often surprising ways.

In my conversations with evangelicals in small groups, several members revealed how they chose their church and why they joined small groups. During one visit to the all-female Gilmore group from Sunrise described in Chapter Six, several of the members

discussed how they came to their church. Mindy, a 54-year old nurse, after noting that she strongly disagreed with leaders of her church on several political and social matters, thoughtfully added that she stayed because of the “feeling of community” she got from the church. Nena, a 50-year old certified public accountant, followed Mindy’s statement with her own reasons for coming to Sunrise: “I didn’t come to this church and see a bunch of holy people: I saw a bunch of broken people like myself. I was lost when I came to this church.” Joan, a 52-year old librarian at the Smallville Public Library, added her reasons to return to church after a long absence: “I was searching for something in my life that I hadn’t experienced. I went (to church) at a really bad time in my life.”

In October 2008 at the Harvest Reed Group during a discussion of how better to “partner” with the Holy Spirit, Kris, a 57-year old administrative assistant who attended Harvest Church, said, “I need more time here. This group feeds me as much as church does. I would like to be here three days a week.” When other group members acknowledged that she had lost her husband and her job the year before, she agreed, stating that it was “hard” and that the small group had helped her through her difficult time.

These statements made in the Gilmore Group from Sunrise and the Reed Group from the Harvest reveal that there are some individuals in these groups that joined their churches for individual needs. But perhaps this is not surprising. Wuthnow (2000), writing on small groups (both religious and secular) in the U.S., finds that the majority of individuals join for personal needs, stating that “a high proportion of people list ‘personal growth’ as their reason for being in (small) group” (85). This appears to be the case with

many members of the Gilmore and Reed groups, many of whom came to church (and to small group) when they were “broken” and during difficult times in their lives.

In addition to supporting Wuthnow’s observation, however, many of the evangelicals in these groups exhibit a type of individualism referred to as *personalism*. Defined by sociologist Paul Lichterman (1996), *personalism* is a way of speaking or acting that underscores the importance of the individual, a concept that seems to have as a precursor the concept Lears’ (1999) describes as the *therapeutic ethos*. With *personalism*, Lichterman extends Lears’ observations on the therapeutic ethos, noting that, in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American religious organizations had taken up therapeutic religiosity with zeal, holding Bible study or prayer groups that used the language of individualism in the focus on individual needs and wants in a way that closely resembled psychotherapy. With *personalism*, Lichterman states, churchgoers talk about their individual problems and emphasis is placed on individual needs and wants. This focus within religious institutions on the individual – that closely mimics the focus in consumer culture – is therefore another crucial point of tension to be included in the discussion of the relationship between religion and consumption. The *personalism* exhibited by several members of the prayer groups in this study fits with Wuthnow’s observation that “most members say their group gives them a chance to discuss their problems and provides them with emotional support” (86). In this sense, the groups resemble more self help, which is not inconsistent with Wuthnow’s research assessing why people join small groups, secular or religious. Thus, individualism, or *personalism*, is not necessarily a new or unrecognized phenomenon.

In another prayer group, however, one church member indicated a different reason that he joined. In November of 2008 I visited a prayer group from River Rock. As I chatted with the prayer group leader Ryan (a white man in his sixties with dark black hair and an energetic style of talking) one night before group was formally underway, he told me he had chosen his church based upon the enjoyable atmosphere. Describing his surprise during his initial visit to River Rock at the interesting sermon given by Pastor Steven, Ryan said, “I thought to myself, ‘what? Church can be fun!’” Ryan’s comment is interesting because he made his choice not on the type of denomination (River Rock is an Assembly of God church, a fact that they do not advertise), on the church’s theology or religious practices, but instead on the social atmosphere. Selecting a church based not on tradition but instead on personal choice is not necessarily a new observation. Roof (1999) has made clear in his detailed description of the spiritual marketplace. Emerson and Smith (2000) also note that in interviews, evangelical churchgoers often discussed choosing a church the way that one would choose another household product, supporting Einstein’s (2008) recognition of religion being recast as another product in the religious marketplace. However, in Ryan’s comment it is the *basis* of the choice that is striking: church can be entertaining, or “fun.”<sup>66</sup> Here the focus for Ryan seemed to be on how church could be fun for him, placing the emphasis firmly on himself and seemingly less on his commitment to either his religion or his church.

In addition to sharing how they came to their faith, churchgoers also demonstrated what might be called a consumerist mindset in other exchanges as well. In the following

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<sup>66</sup> In stating so, Ryan may have been trying to evangelize me, attempting to draw me into the church, but even if so it is still telling, for he seemed to believe that selling his church as “fun” would bring me into the church.

exchange from the Krandall Group from Sunrise Church, members were discussing their new pastor. The conversation was unique in terms of its spontaneity and honesty of the members, all of whom seemed displeased with their new pastor but hadn't yet shared their thoughts with the group before this night in October, 2008. After watching a DVD series ("Contagious Christianity") on how to evangelize that their pastor had chosen for small groups to watch, members had the following discussion.

*With the DVD paused (or over, perhaps), Marie, 40, a registered dietician, stated seriously that she had not wanted to evangelize recently because she had not wanted to bring people into their church: "It's not seeker oriented anymore," she complained. JoBeth, 44, a graphic designer, agreed, stating that the sermons were "not deep, not challenging," like they were before with the former pastor. Dena, a 37 year-old retail assistant, noted that the dissatisfaction everyone was now expressing with the current pastor had been the "elephant in the room," that which no one had been talking about but about which everyone had been thinking. Marie re-entered the conversation, opining that their church was now "too churchy," by which she seemed to mean too traditional and too judgmental as she explained in later statements. Saul, the 47-year old financial services officer, stated that he thought the church was in a downward trend, to which Dena replied, seeming to agree, "We've been (in the church) for a while; it's hard to give up on." Virginia, 37, finance record keeper for a church, stated that their original church leader, Pastor Harrison (who had recently left the church), seemed to like the new pastor, but someone then rejoined that he was supposed to say that he liked him. After a moment where no one spoke, Dena, seeming to not be able to control herself anymore, blurted out, "He sucks eggs!" and people gave a kind of collective gasp and then*

*laughed. Marie laughed too but then spoke up. Sounding serious and emotional, she said, “He can’t even follow a Willow Creek seeker message that we paid for. Instead, he gives a sermon telling us we’re all going to hell!” Titi, 40, homemaker, posed a question to the group: “Can we hire from a Bible college? Can we get resumes?”<sup>67</sup> Marie, taking her question seriously, noted that they were getting a new bishop and so there was hope.*

This discussion at the Krandall’s is striking in several respects. First, while complaining about church leadership didn’t seem to be too unusual, the discussion of firing him did. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that it seems unusual if one considers American religion as practiced 50 years ago, which was ascribed and not chosen, (according to Roof, 1999), but perhaps not in the context of the new American spiritual marketplace, where the notion of consumer choice in a free market mentality is prominent. As noted above with River Rock’s Pastor Steven, it is the church leaders themselves that have encouraged this mindset. In discussing Bill Hybels, founder of Willow Creek Church (of which most churches in this study were members), Einstein (2008) notes that

It was Bill Hybels...who pioneered the concept of an upscale, youthful “seeker” church. He used consumer-focused techniques popularized by management guru Peter Drucker.... “What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer consider value?” – these questions, provoked by Drucker, are listed on a poster outside of Hybel’s (church) office (103).

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<sup>67</sup> It was difficult to tell from Titi’s question if she was serious or not. Most of the exchanges in this group, as indicated in Chapter Six, were marked by levity; however, after asking the question she waited for an answer from Marie, who seemed to take her question seriously.

If church leaders themselves have encouraged this consumerist mindset, it is not necessarily surprising that churchgoers themselves have adopted it. This individual, consumerist perspective was most clearly stated by Marie, who was noticeably upset that she didn't agree with a message that she felt she – and the others in the group – had “paid for.” What is perhaps most striking about her comment is not simply that she made a correlation between her identity as a churchgoer and her identity as a consumer (who paid for a product) but also her perception of what the weakness was of her pastor's sermon. Marie was clearly upset that the pastor was sending a message – to herself and others whom she might bring to church to evangelize – that was negative, (*ie*, that she was going to hell). The consumerist mindset emerges here, as Marie did not seem to feel that, having paid for a message, that churchgoers should be exposed to a potentially negative message. Admittedly, part of her complaint was that people she might bring to church would not return due to the depressing message, but the underlying belief appears to be the same: that people come to church to be pleased and not to be challenged in negative ways. The comments made in these groups are interesting in that they are the extemporaneous, informal comments of evangelicals concerned about their church during regular conversation in small groups. Turning now to the more formal – and structured – aspects of the prayer groups, the next section addresses potential consumption aspects within prayer requests.

### Prayer Requests

Prayer requests were lists created by members of most small groups of people – both inside and outside the group - who needed specific prayers. Churchgoers typically



requested prayer for themselves, for their relatives, and sometimes for coworkers, acquaintances, and friends of friends. Typically conducted at the beginning of the meeting, one person in the group was designated to write down the prayer requests. When I asked what the group did with these lists I was told that they were forwarded to church leaders who would then pray for these people and send the list out to a wider Christian network on the internet. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the ailments (physical or emotional) the requests were meant to be private, with specific names not shared with people outside the church<sup>68</sup>. The prayer requests are particularly informative because they reveal churchgoers' everyday needs and desires as well as their belief that the needs and desires are appropriate to request. Typically the requests were for prayer to alleviate physical ailments – upcoming surgeries, cancer treatments, and heart problems – or for emotional troubles, including marital strife, alcoholism, and anger issues. The requests were not only for themselves; prayer was also asked for neighbors, coworkers, friends of friends, and distant relatives in need. Interspersed with these requisitions, however, were more personal requests that reflected desires with an oddly individualistic focus, including a request made at the Reed Group one May evening in 2008.

*The Reed group members from Harvest Church met at their usual time at the home of John Reed and his wife Cathy. Cathy, a 58-year old accountant, was the one who typically took the requests and she sat there carefully writing down in a small spiral notebook the requests of various members as they discussed health problems and family issues. When it was Cathy's term, she mentioned the high gas prices. At the time, gas*

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<sup>68</sup> For this reason, the names of people in these groups, or anyone they mention outside of the groups, are changed, consistent with the pseudonym practice employed throughout this dissertation. When I asked group members about this potential sensitivity given my presence as a researcher, they indicated their general approval of my observance of any and all group activities.

*prices nationwide had risen to and were hovering at \$4 a gallon. Cathy lamented how expensive it was to drive around town and so her request for prayer was relief from high gas prices. At this people nodded and some discussed various gas prices around the nation, wondering where the highest prices were. After the prayer requests the group then bowed their heads and prayed for, among other concerns such as health and marriage troubles, lower gas prices.*

This request by members of the Reed group was unusual in several regards. First, the request was for financial benefit (or relief) for members of the group. From occupations, which included several bankers, accountants, physician's assistants, and executives of local organizations, the group seemed to be middle-class. Thus it seemed an odd request: although the high gas prices in 2008 were harmful to many low-income Americans and businesses in numerous ways (Scherer, 2008), this group was not praying for people perhaps less fortunate but instead for themselves. In addition, this request highlighted that no one in the groups ever prayed for issues pertaining to social justice, including resolution of war or inequalities relating to poverty or racism. In addition to it seeming to be a particularly individually-focused request, it was also interesting that religion was identified as the source to provide low gas prices to this group.

In the same month as the Reed Group I visited the Schneider Group, which was also from Harvest Church. At the time the group was quite large – over 20 people – and there were numerous prayer requests for myriad issues, including two poignant ones for a woman in the group who was suffering from severe heart disease and from a bright, sensitive man with cerebral palsy who could not walk or talk (and wished to). Members of the group prayed over them with care so they could be healed of their illnesses. One

couple, a white man and woman in their sixties, spoke up after the healing ceremonies to testify to the power of prayer. They had lost their checkbook the week before and had prayed to God that he would find and return it. They were happy to report to the group, they said, that God had answered their prayers. Members of the group nodded, with people sharing similar stories, including praying to God for a happy and successful vacation.

Alan Wolfe (2003) believes that the sorts of requests concerning vacations and checkbooks described above fall under the general rubric of “practical prayer,” in which individuals pray for help with personal matters ranging from concerns about health to finding a new church leader (23). These concerns, as Wolfe notes, are

...anything but otherworldly; most involve the health and healing of individual members, financial difficulties, and real estate, along with issues facing the church. We should not doubt the meaning that worship has for conservative Christians. But... the concerns that so many believers express in prayer suggest that, in their minds, God helps those who focus on themselves (23-24).

There were other examples of prayer requests that fell along these same lines. Although they seem to represent particularly individualistic – or *personalistic*, to use Lichterman’s (1996) phrasing – desires, this is a trickier conclusion to draw. In part this is true because it makes sense to pray for oneself, as this is one aspect of prayer with biblical precedent. In the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) as well as the Christian Old Testament there is a story about the prophet Daniel going home to pray after King Darius’ decreed that prayer to any god would be punished by death in the lion’s den. Upon hearing this,

Daniel went home to pray by his windows that opened toward Jerusalem, not only out of a sense of duty to God but also for his safety (*Daniel 6*). Clearly in this well-known story, Daniel prayed for himself; however it would be a stretch to label his prayer for himself as representing only selfish motives. Coming back to the prayer in these small groups, however, it is also possible to consider the prayer requests in these evangelical small groups along a spectrum; that is, a prayer for personal safety against a life-threatening hazard, such as recovery from debilitating cerebral palsy or severe heart disease, can be compared to the formal prayer from middle class evangelicals for lower gas prices, or to prayer to find a lost wallet or have a happy vacation. Some of the cases described above seem particularly individually oriented. It is possible to consider evangelical healing ceremonies, the topic of the next section, along this same spectrum.

#### Healing Ceremonies at Harvest Church

Although every prayer group had some form of group prayer together, often standing in a circle holding hands to pray for general issues and concerns, including the desire for new members, the Harvest groups were the only ones to conduct formal healing ceremonies. Healing through the “power of Jesus” was strongly encouraged by the Harvest leaders. Healing prayer for individuals was something that came up frequently in the Harvest small groups, in large part because the church emphasized this aspect of prayer consistently to members. In fact, prior to this small group was a 6-week long seminar sponsored by the church (called the “Harvest Bible Institute”), which focused on how to channel the powers of Jesus into healing the sick. I had attended a few of these seminars, noting the focus placed on cultivating individual members’ abilities to

use the power of God to heal family members, friends, fellow Christians, and strangers. The nature of the healing was sometimes odd, however: during the Bible Institute one of the lead pastors noted that God could heal people financially, stating (through a pre-recorded DVD) that if one was faithful in tithing, that “it’s very easy for God to, you know, jump in and bless you with sales.”<sup>69</sup> What follows are descriptions of two healing ceremonies, each involving members from Harvest prayer groups. Although the structure of the healing prayer ceremony is the same, the requests themselves are quite different.

#### The Reed Group: Healing Prayer for a Physical Ailment

The Reed Group, described in Chapter Six, conducted healing prayer ceremonies at the end of every small group. In general at the Reed’s, unlike in other Harvest groups, these were not solemn procedures: there was laughter and conversation, and in general they didn’t last long. The following is from one evening in September 2008 at the Reeds, nearing the end of the meeting when prayer requests transitioned to healing prayer before the group convened for the night.

*Gene, the 49-year old Caucasian bank loan officer who tonight was wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and comfortable-looking brown loafers with matching brown socks, brought up his own health: he had hurt his leg, he said, while working on his home. The group, concerned, pressed him – How did he hurt his leg? Where did it hurt? – until Gene seemed to give up and said with a smile, “Ok, ok, it’s my right cheek,” emphasizing the last word, and the group exploded with laughter. Cassie, a 40-year old woman, asked rhetorically, “Didn’t you learn to turn the other cheek?” and we laughed more.*

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<sup>69</sup> At another time, the lead pastor of Harvest had told the congregation that he regularly took prayer teams to businesses to pray for their health.

*Someone else made a pun regarding his rear and there was more laughter. Once the laughter stopped, the group placed a chair for him in the center of the room. There were murmured jokes and smiles, including when someone said that they weren't going to touch him on the spot that hurt (as is normally done in prayer), which prompted more laughter. Members of the group placed their hands on Gene – on his shoulders, knees, hands and head – and began to pray quietly, with intermittent murmurs about Jesus needing to heal Gene's body. Gene submitted to the group, eyes closed and hands on knees, as they prayed over him. The ceremony lasted for approximately 10 minutes as each member spoke in turn about the desire to heal Gene's physical ailment and bring him relief. I heard murmured whispers of "Jesus" as well as lengthier individual prayers until the group convened, with members smiling at Ricky as they removed their hands from him. He thanked them, and with this the group was over.*

This exchange provides a glimpse into what was a fairly typical, if humorous, healing ceremony at the Harvest. In the times I observed healing prayers, it was almost always for health issues. One night in my observations of the Schneider group, however, there was a request for prayer that differed from the others, detailed in the section that follows.

#### The Schneider Group: A Different Kind of Prayer

The Schneider group was another group from Harvest Church that was particularly contentious, one whose members openly argued about war (which may have led to the group's disbanding). However acrimonious the arguments in group, however, members always came together at the end of the evening for healing prayer. At the end of

every evening the group leader, Dan, would ask who in the group needed healing. Usually one or two people in the group would raise their hands for physical or emotional ailments, and the group would put a chair in the center of the room, standing or kneeling around the individual to be healed, placing hands on him or her, and praying out loud. Healing requests in the past in this group included a woman with eye troubles and a man with a painful back. One of the most poignant moments in the group involved a man (Tom) with cerebral palsy. In a wheelchair for most of his 49 years and unable to speak except in grunts, he requested prayer the most, with the continual and consistent comment (pointed to on his worded sign paper), "I want to walk." During these times, the group would gather around Tom and ask God to heal his limbs, audibly acknowledging events described in the Bible when Jesus healed the sick and telling Tom that God could heal him. These were particularly emotional, intense, and perturbing moments for me, as it was clear that of all the people I had witnessed requesting healing prayer, Tom was the most disappointed (yet ever hopeful) when healing didn't come. A more unusual request for healing, however, occurred one night in October, 2008:

*When the worship music ended Dan, a 67-year old retired delivery truck driver and Schneider group leader, asked who would like prayer. It was after 9 pm now and I caught myself wishing that no one would want healing or the laying on of hands tonight. But Gary, a Caucasian, balding, 58-year old computer repair technician, half raising his hand for attention, requested it, and his request surprised me: "I would like prayer for \$1000 in sales by the end of the month." I looked at the others to see what their reactions were: Would they laugh? Frown at his request? But Dan just smiled and asked for more information as Gary seated himself in the middle of the room in a chair*

*and others gathered around. “What kind of business?” Dan asked. “Repairing computers and resale,” Gary answers. The members gather around Gary – some kneeling with their hands on his knees and some standing with their hands on his shoulder – and begin to pray. It was like the typical healing prayer I had heard before in this and other groups – some members prayed silently, others audibly – except this time the topic was different. Some members noted Jesus’ ability to heal; others asked for Jesus’ assistance with Gary’s request. With his hands on Gary’s shoulder, Dan said, “Lord, please help people to see that Gary offers a good product at a reasonable price.” Another woman, Carrie, a 59-year old nanny with a degree in social work, was on her knees in front of Gary and had placed her hand on his right knee. She whispered something generally inaudible from where I was sitting but I caught the word “laptop.” After a few more minutes, the prayer ended. Gary and the others who were kneeling stood up, made small talk, and eventually we all made our way to the door and to our cars.*

There are several observations that can be made from a comparison of both healing ceremonies from the Reed and Schneider groups. As with the prayer requests, the individualism exhibited by members of these groups seems to be located upon a spectrum. That is, although requesting prayer for a physical ailment (as with Ricky) was fairly typical of these groups, the expectation that God should provide increased sales for Gary seemed especially individually focused. Interestingly, however, his request did not seem to surprise members of the group as it did me, the outside observer.

Gary’s request seems different from Ricky’s and unusual in the sense that it seems to be contradictory to the central tenets of Christianity in several different ways.



Historically, Christianity has been strongly associated with the eschewing of worldly goods, an asceticism often considered to be at the core of Christian ethics. The ascetic worldview of Jesus Christ is made clear in numerous biblical passages: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24); “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:19); “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13). It is possible that Gary’s request was for money that he needed to pay rent, buy groceries, or other items necessary to survive. If this is the case, it indicates a necessity and not simply self-focused desires. Even in the relatively new context of the spiritual marketplace, however, where the importance of the consumer is highlighted, the request for increased sales sits a little uneasily, in part because the healing prayer was focused solely on Gary’s desire for money.

In sum, there were some elements of individualism and consumerism seen in some members of the prayer groups I observed. The consumerist mindset was apparent especially in several instances – in Marie’s anger that she had “paid for” a sermon series that wasn’t good, in Cathy’s request for lower gas prices, and in Gary’s desire for increased sales. This is the type of consumerism in which individual needs seem to come first before a desire to care for others. Rarely did group members in this study talk about helping others in the community<sup>70</sup>; never did I observe them praying for the poor, for those fighting in the Iraq War, or others in need. This observation supports Wuthnow’s

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<sup>70</sup> While group members did not often discuss helping others, some groups would work at the church from time to time helping single mothers and providing food for the poor. Not all groups did this, and no group did this on a regular basis, but some did and it is worth including here.

finding that that community work ranks low on the list of reasons why people join small group and ranks low in terms of member satisfaction with the group.

Although individualism seemed to pervade these groups, as the above encounters and exchanges indicate, it was almost never discussed. For members of the groups, it was almost as if individualism created an atmosphere that seemed normal, like Marshall McLuhan's fish that do not notice the water in which they swim. Only one time in my visits to these groups did evangelicals discuss the tension between individualism and community. It is important to include here, for it reveals some of the ways in which evangelicals think about what one of the pastors in this study referred to as "meism." This exchange comes from the Murray Group from Sunrise Church and occurred on the day I came to say goodbye to the members.

#### The Murray Group from Sunrise: "We're All Very 'Me, Me'"

Mentioned in Chapter Six, the Murray Group was a friendly and low-key group of varying ages (30s to early 50s) that had more of a foundation in the Bible and other religious literature than most groups. This group never watched videos, religious or secular, during prayer meetings: the only media encountered during most of the gatherings I observed were religious books and, occasionally, religious music. This exchange on individualism occurred one morning in July, 2009. I had come to say "goodbye" to the group and ended up staying for the entire prayer group, participating in the discussion for the day, which was focused on a religious book the group had chosen to read.

*The group was reading a book called “Unlocking the Bible Story” by Colin Smith (2004) and was on Chapter 5 titled “Blood.” I didn’t have the book and Roy, the 51-year old union laborer sitting next to me angled his copy so that we could both read it. When we got to Question 2 (“How can the Christian life be like a trip to the grocery store? What demands of the Christian life do you find yourself wanting to circumvent? How do you handle this?”) Josie, the vivacious and intelligent 32-year old event coordinator, read the question aloud and waited while group members thought about the question. Leslie, a 45-year old property manager, was the first to speak. She noted that “A lot of people see choosing a church like ‘shopping for God’” (Here she gestured at me in case I didn’t know or perhaps because she thought I did know). Her pastor, no, she corrected herself, her youth minister at Sunrise gave a sermon the week before about “not what the church can give you but what you can give to the church.” Pausing for a moment, she then continued: “He said you can’t just go for the music or the, the message.” Looking at the group she said with a smile, “It’s an interesting twist.” Susan, a 53-year old software developer seated to my left, said with the dry, humorous tone that marked most of her speech, “I don’t like that aisle in the grocery store called ‘must do, have to do,’” but she didn’t elaborate on what obligations she meant in terms of her faith.*

*After a moment’s silence, Missy, a new member of the group, told a story about doing for others instead of doing for oneself that involved her parents. “My father is 80 and my mom is almost there and there are three of us to take care of our parents. The other night my sister went there and my father was out on the front porch shucking corn. He asked what (food) there was to go with it. So my sister went inside and made Mom a grilled cheese sandwich, then called me to complain that she had to make her dinner. I*

*didn't say anything – I know my sister, I wanted to but I didn't – but our Mom took care of her (when she was a child) and she can't even take five minutes?"*

*When she finished speaking, Roy, nodding slowly, seemed to agree and stated that "we're all very 'me me.'" He noted that his youngest daughter was going to be in a performance the coming Monday. "I asked my family if they wanted to come. My brother said, 'Monday nights are our time to chill out'" (emphasizing the words "chill out"). Roy (throwing hands up in the air in frustration and judgment) continued: "I was like, come up with any excuse, then, like taking care of your dog." Leslie then brought up a mayor in a nearby town who declined to attend a community event: "His response was, 'I'm sure I have something to do that day.'" Then she repeated it, emphasizing every word, in awe of his selfishness while the group discussed it.*

This discussion is striking for several reasons. First, it was the only time the tension between the needs of the individual and the needs of the community/family were discussed in any of the groups. This "me me" mentality that Roy acknowledged was clearly an issue that bothered some members of this group; in other groups, the subject simply did not come up at all. Members of other small groups would at times discuss the evils of the prosperity gospel or decry the "slickness" of some churches, as Jay from the breakfast group from Choices Church did<sup>71</sup>, but never considered aloud how this applied to themselves as Christians<sup>72</sup>. Members of the Murray group were clearly considering the issue in relation to themselves and their families, and were able to openly and respectfully discuss it with others in the group.

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<sup>71</sup> In fact, Jay even showed me during one breakfast prayer group an advertisement in a religious magazine for an automated tithing machine that Christians could use, shaking his head in good-humored disgust.

<sup>72</sup> It is possible that this was a subject for personal introspection and not one discussed frequently in social settings such as prayer group meetings, but I did not talk to churchgoers individually on a consistent basis in this research.

The discussion at the Murray group is also interesting due to the myriad viewpoints in this relatively small group (which averaged about eight members a week). Susan seemed to resist the pull of community, stating that she didn't like the sense of obligations, perhaps to her religion or to others (it wasn't clear), while the others like Missy decried the individual putting himself or herself above the needs of others. Meanwhile, Leslie seemed to have found herself caught in the trap mentioned by her youth pastor: she was thinking of what the church could do for her (in terms of an interesting "message" or good music) instead of what she could do for others. In this she seemed slightly ambivalent: it struck her as a thought-provoking "twist" on her normal way of thinking about her faith, but given her hesitation she hadn't seemed to fully commit to the idea espoused by the pastor although she was affected by it.

The thoughtful exchange from the Murray group is informative for it indicates how some churchgoers struggle with their personal needs in their everyday lives as Christians. The "me me" mindset was clearly something to which many of the Murray group members had given some thought. It is also interesting that, mentioned above, this was one of the few prayer groups that used almost no media during prayer: they never used church-produced DVDs to structure the group, instead relying on the Bible and other religious literature. One could say that the absence of media left the members of this group with a clear focus: studying the Bible and biblical principles. Inverting the causal relationship, however, one could also say that the "spiritually mature" nature of the group was the reason they chose not to use much visual media in the prayer meetings. Although brief, the Murray group discussion sheds some light on the conflict that evangelicals face as they attempt to define themselves in the new spiritual marketplace,

one in which consumer desires are privileged but one in which the central tenets of Christianity still exist, often in tension.

### *Conclusion*

What observations of the prayer groups have revealed is individualism and a consumerist mindset in some of the ways in which evangelical churchgoers define themselves in terms of their faith. Perhaps this is small surprise: in *Evangelicals and Tradition*, D.H. Williams (2005) notes that

sociologists of religion have shown repeatedly how far a fierce individualism dictates American Christians' worldview. We are most motivated by a pattern of dispositions and practices that define life's goals in terms of personal choice, by a freedom that is framed in terms of being allowed to believe and act as one wishes, and by justice that is meant to be an opportunity for individuals to pursue happiness as each person has defined it for himself or herself (100).

This research has indicated that often the needs of these evangelical seekers are put first before community, subordinating those of others (in terms of feeding the poor, helping those less fortunate) in favor of the individual. However, here is another interesting paradox that Wuthnow (1994) has identified, one in which individual desires don't necessarily preclude community:

Close consideration of what goes on in small groups suggests that they are attractive to many Americans because they do, indeed, provide a comfortable balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of

the group – but the balance is comfortable because it is often tipped decisively in the direction of the individual... It can be said that the group's power is greater than the individual member's. Yet, it is striking that most group members feel they compromise nothing to be part of their group; they do not even feel that the group nudges them in one direction or another. They like being in their group because it allows them to express their individuality (190).

Seen from this perspective, what seems to be tension *in terms of individualism* may in fact be closer to symbiosis in an interesting contradiction, where a small group, one that purportedly exists to promote community does so precisely *because* it nurtures individuality and individual needs. For in providing one's own time to help others – whether it be listening to a member's stressful life situation or praying for success in family or work, it is clear that these members, however individualistic, give to others, even if it is a gesture that has its origin in reciprocity.

From the works of these scholars it seems that individualism need not be defined as a harmful phenomenon, one that corrodes commitments to community and to faith. Having stated this, however, what this research has revealed is a particular kind of individualism that is strongly linked to notions of consumer choice. Specifically, the focus on individual satisfaction in terms of low gas prices, lost wallets, better sermons (and pastors), increased sales, and the like, appears to point to a particularly individualistic, consumerist mindset in the evangelicals in this study, one that would seem to impact the way in which these evangelicals practice their faith and define

themselves. For if we think of only what the religion can do for us, what happens to a focus on the needs of others, including those in the church?

This research has been an assessment of what happens to faith in the new spiritual marketplace. The empirical material has indicated that a consumerist mindset based in an individualistic focus is present in the small groups. None of the pastors in this study saw a connection between the individualistic, consumerist mindset of their congregants and their strategy of entertaining churchgoers through commercial entertainment media. However, it is important to recognize the potential link between the two.

In a recent book titled, “Reveal” by Hawkins and Parkinson (2007) Bill Hybels, founder of the Willow Creek Church, provides a foreward. In the foreward, Hybels makes a crucial distinction between evangelism and merely bringing people to church. People can be brought into the space of the church through entertainment, Hybels notes, but this is different from bringing them to God.

Hybels’ perceptive comments can be applied to this research by asking how churchgoers are hailed when they enter seeker churches such as the ones described in this study. Are they identified as individuals of faith or as individual consumers? As members of community or as individuals whose needs supersede those of others? As a way to partly answer this question, and close this chapter, Shane Hipps’ (2005) research on the use of modern forms of technology to entertain and instruct churchgoers is useful here in his discussion of what he terms spectacle:

A spectacle invites as many people to come and have personal encounters.

In the case of a worship service, the gathered crowd may share an affinity for musical styles, a particular preacher, or a personal experience of God.



The church is about the big weekend encounter, but once people have had their encounters, everyone goes their separate ways. Their worship experience has little to do with sharing life together and nothing to do with a corporate mission in the world. It is about personal transformation and private faith. In this sense, spectacle – by its very nature – reinforces an individualistic understanding of faith. As a result, leaders in such churches spend extensive amounts of time and resources seeking ways to encourage and channel people into small groups in a noble effort to build community. Those responsible for doing this can attest that this is a bit like trying to build community among strangers at an airport waiting for the same plane. Unfortunately, the weekend attractions that are so successful in drawing crowds comprise the very force that works against the creation of missional community” (150).

Hipps’ insightful discussion of spectacle is interesting for he addresses the significant downside of using entertainment to draw people to church: it may draw them in but it stops short of building community. In addition, Hipps notes that it also encourages individualism. Taking a perspective critical of Protestant churches that use methods of entertainment and spectacle to attract churchgoers, Hipps states that “modern Protestants have an impoverished theology of the church, the result of being reared in a faith that emphasizes individualism and reinforces consumerism” (2005. 147). Hipps’ discussion as it relates to faith and individualism can be applied to this research as the commercial entertainment media – including such films as *Lord of the Rings*, *Nacho Libre*, *Braveheart*, *Indiana Jones*, *Spiderman 2*, *A Walk in the Clouds*, and *Bruce*

*Almighty* – can be said to create a spectacle, one that is meant to capture attention but one that also is incongruous with the development of faith and community. This spectacle is called to mind when River Rock’s Pastor Steven made the interesting statement that “Who ever said church was boring? Church is fun!” In so stating, Pastor Steven’s comment exemplifies Frank Schaeffer’s (2009) keen observation that, “Faith entertains. It makes money. It nurtures a celebrity culture all of its own with its own TV stations, radio stations, book publishers author tours, rock concerts, schools, colleges, etc. What’s not to love?”

Thus, it appears that at least some of the churchgoers in this study exhibit the consumerist, individualistic mindset that church leaders work so hard to fight against.

For the church leaders in this study, the individualism they perceived in their churchgoers was a pernicious influence on the practice of faith, constantly threatening to pull their congregants away from the building and maintenance of community. Rarely, however, did the church leaders in this study make a connection between the Hollywood film and television clips they showed in church and the individualistic tendencies they observed and worried about in their constituents. And yet, according to scholars of religion and the media such as Christians (1990), Romanowski (2008), Hipps (2005), Roof (1999), and Miller (2000), mainstream media do have the potential to influence how religion is practiced, and more importantly perhaps, how individuals conceive of themselves in relation to their faith.

It is important to reiterate that the desire to bring people to the church – and the practice of using entertainment to do this – is not new. As noted in the introductory chapter to this research, charismatic evangelical leaders like Aimee Semple MacPherson,

Billy Sunday, and Evangeline Boothe used drama and entertainment to draw in the unchurched and dechurched almost a century ago. However, what is new is the use of Hollywood movies and popular television shows to do so. Instead of being the value-free tool that pastors believe they are, however, they bring a host of messages of their own into the church. Simply put, while the entertainment media may encourage churchgoers to adopt an individualist, consumerist mindset when it comes to their faith, pastors also constantly push their congregants to define themselves instead as part of a larger community, to see themselves as an important part of a whole instead of an isolated individual acting only in self interest. It is also important to note that the commercial entertainment media that have been the focus of this dissertation are not necessarily the cause of this individualistic focus of evangelicals, but instead are just one tool in church leaders' arsenal to entertain. Instead of a value-free tool, however, it seems that the Hollywood movies and television shows that pastors show in church bring in a whole host of other meanings, conveying to churchgoers a message that speaks just as clearly (if in the opposite direction) as the spoken word of the pastor.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF RESEARCH IN THE AMERICAN SPIRITUAL MARKETPLACE**

The preceding chapters in this research have described in detail multiple facets of a relatively new phenomenon in evangelical churches: the incorporation of commercial entertainment media formations into evangelical churches and into individual evangelicals' lives. This inclusion, as the previous pages have revealed, has myriad consequences for how faith is practiced both inside and outside of church in the American spiritual marketplace. Through examination of church sermons, in-depth interviews with church leaders, and ethnographic observation of prayer groups, various aspects of media use in evangelical churches have been explored from different perspectives. Field observations were made at an important moment in time: not only in the last year of the Bush Administration and the first of the Obama presidency but also during a time of heightened attention to political matters during a contentious presidential election. Observations of media use are thus situated in this transitional historical space as evangelicals negotiate faith, meaning, and identity in the American religious marketplace.

This research began in Chapter One with an examination of the American spiritual marketplace, noting the emphasis in this marketplace on individual choice when it comes to the practice of religion. Numerous scholars have described the origins of this marketplace as well as its manifestations (Einstein, 2008; Hoover, 2006; Wolfe, 2003; Roof, 1999; Cimino and Lattin, 1998); however, the use of commercial entertainment media texts in evangelical churches is a relatively new phenomenon and had not (prior to

this research) been explored in detail. In doing so, this dissertation is able to provide a portrait of how evangelical faith and individual identity are altered as a result of a new religious marketplace in which commercial entertainment media texts – including popular Hollywood movies and television shows – are woven into the religious messages received by churchgoers.

Chapter One also included an introduction to the theoretical framework of the dissertation, noting that the research has been guided by the substantive/instrumentalist theoretical debate. One of the hallmarks of the debate rests on the assertion of substantive scholars that contemporary media texts (and technological vehicles that deliver them) exert a powerful influence on the way in which religion is practiced. This is evident in the writings of Hipps (2005) and Romanowski (2008) in their assessments of the way in which technology has fundamentally altered church worship, as well as in the work of Christians (1990), who provides a nuanced and complex perspective on evangelicals' attempt to "redeem" the media that they use. These observations by substantive scholars provide the foundation upon which the instrumentalist beliefs expressed by both pastors and churchgoers in this research are understood.

After situating the research in the American spiritual marketplace as well as within one of the central debates in the area of religion and media, this research explored commercial entertainment media use in evangelical churches by providing detailed descriptions of how clips from Hollywood films and television shows are brought by church leaders into their Sunday sermons. The focus of the research has not been on the overt ideological content of the films shown during church services, although I recognize that this focus was a potentially interesting avenue that the research could have taken.

Instead, the research has emphasized the *context* for media use in the space of evangelical churches. This emphasis has rested on James Carey's (2007) recognition of the importance of a focus on ritual communication, where the context of media use is seen as being as important as what is transmitted in terms of content at the level of media texts themselves. Following Carey's guiding principle, Chapter Three provided detail on when and how commercial media formations are used in church services, using both broad descriptions of commercial media in each church as well as more in-depth descriptions in the form of ethnographic sermon vignettes from each of the four churches in this study.

What was found in the course of describing the incorporation of commercial entertainment media into evangelical sermons was that these media formations permeate the contemporary evangelical church environment by being woven directly into pastors' sermon messages. The way in which the media are used in the spaces of these churches is intriguing, for the scenes from the secular Hollywood film and television shows (including *Lord of the Rings*, *Fast and the Furious*, *Witness*, and *Spiderman 2*) appear to have no direct tie to a biblical message; instead the media clips appear to be used as a way to frame the pastors' sermon messages as well as instruct churchgoers on biblical principles. This particular use of media by church leaders is directly tied in to changes within the American religious marketplace, as various scholars have noted that evangelical seeker churches appeal to the unchurched and dechurched. Seen from this perspective, contemporary commercial media are one way to make an otherwise arcane biblical message digestible to individuals new to the faith. In this sense, the media clips used in church are used to not only appeal to new churchgoers who may be

uncomfortable or unfamiliar with traditional religion and also provide a frame of reference to understand a biblical story.

Intriguingly, the majority of pastors' sermons I observed were focused on the dangers of individualism. When I first began research I had not intended to examine the interconnection between faith, commercial media, and individualism; however, the constant anti-individualistic, pro-community messages delivered by pastors, especially given their incorporation of commercial entertainment media, with its consumerist and individualistic focus, encouraged me to make this relationship the focus of the research. Specifically, this dissertation has adopted the perspective that the incorporation of these secular media texts, however effective for conveying a message, also brings with it accompanying underlying messages, ones that have the potential to fundamentally alter church rituals as well as the way churchgoers define themselves in relation to their faith. It was this recognition that provided the foundation for the remainder of the chapters, in which both pastors' and churchgoers' views about commercial entertainment media were explored.

Building from the observations in Chapter Three, Chapter Four turned to the views of church leaders themselves. In lengthy and candid interviews with me, pastors described their reasons why they had chosen to bring popular films and movies into their churches. In their statements, pastors revealed a strongly instrumental view of all media that they used. For them, clips from films like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Braveheart*, *Nacho Libre* and *Happy Gilmore*, while containing no overt religious messages, served a variety of important purposes, including evangelism and instruction. Evangelical church leaders were keenly aware that many of their congregation members had either not attended

church before or had left churches that they could not relate to: in this sense, their churchgoers were the “unchurched” and the “dechurched” individuals described by several scholars writing on the American spiritual marketplace.

Perhaps because of this recognition by pastors, they felt that they had to use means to attract churchgoers using a language that was recognizable to them: mainstream, commercial media culture. When asked about the potential for tension in bringing the movies and television shows into their churches, all pastors did express some trepidation. However, their concern lay primarily with either sexual content or overt messages of individualism in the texts; they did not perceive a problem with attracting individuals to church through entertainment media. Instead, they seemed uniformly confident in the ability to “redeem” the media from a Christian perspective, even with Hollywood’s persistent emphasis on consumerism and individualism.

Both observations of church sermons as well as interviews with pastors pointed to some interesting trends. At this juncture the research necessarily turned to the most important component of the research: churchgoers’ own perspectives. Chapter Six described my participant observation of prayer groups from the four churches, which occurred between 2008 and 2009. Participation in these groups revealed a great deal about the relationship between commercial media and evangelicals’ everyday, lived faith. Specifically, the observations indicated that evangelicals were completely immersed in secular American commercial media culture: they consumed popular media on a daily basis and incorporated the stories and symbols from these media into prayer group discussions. Chapter Six chronicled the various ways in which evangelicals brought Hollywood movies and popular television shows into discussions of faith as they created



meaning and constructed individual identities in their lives inside and outside the spaces of their churches.

One important question I had of their use of commercial media formations in the development of their faith stemmed from my observations with pastors. Specifically, I wanted to know if churchgoers' themselves perceived of any tension in the inclusion of blockbuster films and popular television shows into their places of worship. I had specifically wanted to know if they perceived of any tensions regarding the consumerism and individualism promoted in many commercial entertainment media texts. Would they see it as a contradiction, one that would inhibit their faith? In my questions to them in prayer groups as well as an anonymous email survey, churchgoers provided overwhelmingly and uniformly positive evaluations of the media their pastors showed in church. The only tensions they perceived rested on the level of the texts themselves in a way that precisely echoed the views of their pastors. Specifically, they stated that the clips from Hollywood movies and television shows used in Sunday sermons were a good and effective way to evangelize, provide a message relevant to contemporary life outside the church, and teach biblical principles. No one in any of these churches, leaders or followers alike, expressed criticism of commercial entertainment media on a deeper level than just what the texts themselves transmitted (including sexuality, crude themes and language, and the like).

Watching evangelicals discuss what these media meant for the development of their faith fostered a greater understanding as to how commercial media texts are used by contemporary evangelical seekers. Specifically, individuals used the stories from the media in what for them were redemptive ways: they created interpretive communities

using the language of Hollywood film; used media narratives to understand their own behavior as Christians, and found reassurance in being able to “see” how their faith worked through the lens of media. In sum, churchgoers indicated how powerful they thought visual media were for them in the development of their faith as well as in the ability to draw others to religion.

The final chapter took churchgoers’ observations and applied them to individualism, the very phenomenon against which church leaders fought on a constant basis. Through observations made in prayer groups, the degree to which individualism – and more specifically a consumerist mindset – was exhibited by churchgoers was explored in detail. In examining prayer requests, informal group interactions, and healing ceremonies, the research came full circle in this chapter by examining churchgoers’ expressions of individualism to address the question posed at the commencement of research regarding the impact that commercial media culture may have on the way in which faith is practiced in the American spiritual marketplace.

What I found in this portion of the research was the existence of some individualism and consumerism in the way churchgoers described their faith. In this sense, the substantive argument regarding the potentially harmful influence of media on religious practices was seen to be supported. However, as noted in Chapter Seven, to make a direct connection between the Hollywood movies and television shows pastors incorporated into church sermons, while tempting and maybe justified, is too facile. It is potentially facile and thus misleading because there are myriad other factors that have contributed to the rise and flourishing of the spiritual marketplace. These include the general strategy – independent of and preceding the use of commercial media in

evangelical seeker churches – of American evangelical churches to entertain, a trend that began well before this research and even before the recognition of the American spiritual marketplace as described by scholars of the media decades before (Roof, 1999; Cimino and Lattin, 1998). What can be said about the use of commercial media formations in the churches in this study is that the movies and television clips are not the cause but rather the symptom of the commercial focus of the American religious marketplace. As such, they may exacerbate individualistic or consumerist tendencies in evangelical churchgoers but are not the ultimate cause.

In addition, it is clear that the relationship between individualism and Christianity is one that has been described since de Tocqueville's (1835) recognition of American individualism and its influence on various structures and institutions in American society and since elaborated upon by numerous other scholars (Romanowski, 2008; Einstein, 2008; Hoover, 2006; Beaudoin, 2003; Emerson and Smith, 2000; Roof, 1999; Bellah et al., 1985). Thus the causality can be stood on its head, for the evangelical churches in this study have emerged and grown within the American culture of rugged individualism. From this perspective, the individualism seen in the churchgoers in this study can be seen as coming from within American society, of which these evangelicals are an integral part; the individualism can also be seen to be encouraged by evangelical church leaders in the strategy of entertaining their members through the use of commercial entertainment media.

As a final note, it is important to pose the question of how different are the evangelicals in this study? Are they still embattled and thriving, as Christian Smith (1999) has proclaimed, or does their immersion in secular American media culture – with

its gratuitous violence, sexuality, overt consumerism and constant emphasis on the individual – mean that they have come closer to secular Americans and secular culture than previously considered? It has been the quest of this research to pose this question, the answer to which should lie in the pages within.

### *Future Research*

There are several different and interesting ways that this research could have gone: 1) could have looked at heterogeneity of evangelicals: although churches seem to fit well within what is known of American evangelical churches (politically conservative, militaristic pastors) but evangelicals themselves are completely heterogeneous: one group, when I asked about political affiliations, included a republican, a democrat, independent, libertarian, and a member of the green party. It would be difficult to find such heterogeneity in any social group or gathering, highlighting just how different these evangelicals are and how they can't be lumped into any one group. Because these observations did not fit within the larger theme of the research (on the use of commercial entertainment media in evangelical churches and lives, indication of their diversity on two issues – gender inequality and war – is provided in the form of appendices (G and H, respectively). This portrayal of the heterogeneity of churchgoers' beliefs can provide a more nuanced, complex view of American evangelicals, who are often painted with a broad brush in mainstream commercial media, as a political group.

Another area of potential future research builds from this recognition of evangelical diversity and comes in the form of evangelical discussions of electoral politics during a time of heightened attention to political matters in the U.S. In the

summer and fall of 2008 I was in evangelicals' homes on a weekly basis, listening to them discuss their daily lives as well as political issues that would arise as the presidential campaign between Senator John McCain and then-Senator Barack Obama. I also received email correspondence during this time as I was on all evangelicals' mailing lists. This did make me privy to some political discussions and debates; however, despite my continual presence in evangelical prayer groups during this time, politics were not discussed as often as I had anticipated and perhaps it is more accurate to suggest future research on the *lack* of discussion during a contentious and controversial election. Interestingly, the lack of in-depth political discussions in prayer groups ultimately pointed back to evangelicals' own perceptions of the diversity of belief within their own groups. This became apparent after one night in which I, frustrated with the lack of political discussion in the groups, asked one of them (the Krandall group from Sunrise) why. They revealed to me that they were acutely aware that very few of them agreed about electoral politics; as a result, the topic of politics was studiously avoided by group members to avoid tension between members that might threaten the cohesion of the group.

Another avenue that can be explored in future research is the potential relationship between commercial media, faith, and politics. As noted above, churchgoers used media to make decisions in their lives as well as evaluate their behavior. During research I noted that some evangelicals used the Hollywood films and television shows their pastors used in church sermons when discussing politics. These mentions were fairly rare and often came in the form of a specific response to a question I posed as a researcher. The nature of this research, which used ethnographic observation as the

foundation for empirical material, precluded detailed examination of this potentially interesting phenomenon as I tried to let prayer groups flow naturally and minimize my own influence as a researcher in the groups. Thus, future research could explore in more detail and depth how the commercial entertainment media used in individuals' churches and everyday lives shape evangelicals' understanding of political matters such as war or electoral politics through focus groups or individual interviews. Although participant observation was integral to my understanding of how evangelical church leaders and their congregants used commercial media formations in their everyday lives, it was not the most effective method to explore the relationship between entertainment media and politics as evangelicals did not bring up the media texts used in their churches unless asked explicitly and directly.

A final area of future research rests at the intersection of religion, media and politics, including the relationship between the individualism seen in the prayer groups and the way in which politics were discussed by evangelicals. There were several indications that the individual focus exhibited by churchgoers influenced particular beliefs about certain topics, including war, poverty, and electoral politics. Specifically, what this research reveals is that evangelical discussions of political issues quite often were resolved by a direct reference back to individuals' relationship with Jesus in a way that seemed to decontextualize and depoliticize certain issues. This phenomenon was not described in detail in this research as these discussions never involved commercial media, and thus seemed to be outside the scope of the research. Recognition and description of this phenomenon would foster greater understanding of how evangelicals make decisions and create meaning in the American political landscape.

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## APPENDIX A: PASTOR INTERVIEWS: SCHEDULES AND LOCATIONS

<b>Pastor Name, Title, and Church</b>	<b>Date(s)</b>	<b>Location</b>
<p>Pastor Charlton, Pastor and “Architect of Atmosphere,” Harvest Church</p> <p><i>Interviewed with</i></p> <p>Assistant Pastor Sarah, Media Pastor, Harvest Church</p>	26 September 2007	Harvest Church, small room used for general purposes inside the administration section of the building (security pass needed for access)
Pastor Charlton, Lead Pastor, Harvest Church	March 6 2008	Harvest Church, Pastor Charlton’s office
Pastor Steven, Lead Pastor	November 7 2007	River Rock Church grounds, Pastor Steven’s office
Pastor Steven, Lead Pastor	March 10, 2008	River Rock Church grounds, Pastor Steven’s office
Pastor Wilhelm, Lead Pastor, Choices Church	September 18 2007	Small coffee shop near church in small rural town 20 miles west of Smallville
Pastor Wilhelm, Lead Pastor, Choices Church	February 17 2008	Small coffee shop near church in small rural town 20 miles west of Smallville
Pastor Harrison, Lead Pastor, Sunrise Church	March 6, 2008	Sunrise Church grounds, Pastor Harrison’s office

## **APPENDIX B: EMAIL SURVEY QUESTION FOR CHOICES CHURCH MEMBERS**

Hello, and thanks for agreeing to answer these short questions regarding media use in your church.

The answers to these questions are anonymous. There is no need to respond with your name, but background information as to age and occupation will be useful for the study. Please answer the following questions, either in a word document or simply in an email (to [emoo@illinois.edu](mailto:emoo@illinois.edu)).

Please be specific but there is no need to take a lot of time to answer: short, detailed answers are fine, while longer essays are also welcomed. It's your choice, and there are no right or wrong answers.

Thank you!

1. Briefly discuss the pop culture (movies and television shows) that Pastor Mike shows in church on Sundays. Do you like them or dislike them? If so, why?
2. Can you give a specific instance of a movie or tv clip that you liked? That you disliked?
3. Do you see tensions (of any kind) in showing movies or tv shows in church?



## **APPENDIX C: MEDIA USE IN SUNRISE CHURCH: 2007-2008**

Bourne Identity – understanding his identity  
Bruce Almighty – scene where Bruce receives prayer emails  
Bucket List  
Cars  
Castaway  
Chariots of Fire  
Enchanted  
The Guardian – Initiation  
Hook  
Indiana Jones & Last Crusade  
Lone Ranger  
Lord Of The Rings  
Major League – “Wild Thing” scene  
Monsters Inc.  
Ratatouille  
Snow White – “Mirror Mirror” scene  
Santa Clause 3  
Veggie Tales – the rubber ducky scene  
Walk In The Clouds – scene after the fire in the Vineyard  
What About Bob?

## **APPENDIX D: MEDIA USE IN RIVER ROCK CHURCH: 2007-2008**

Lord of the Rings - scene leading up to the battle  
Bruce Almighty - conversation with God  
The Passion of the Christ  
Forrest Gump - where Forrest is running  
Transformers - clips of them transforming  
Fast and the Furious - racing clip  
Cast Away - when he's on the island with Wilson  
Happy Gilmore - on the golf course with Bob Barker, anger  
Parenthood - family dinner  
Leave it to Beaver - a family discussion  
The Brady Bunch - the kids fighting  
The Cosby Show - a family dinner  
The Simpsons - Bart and Lisa arguing  
King of Queens  
The Grinch - where his heart grows  
The Incredibles  
Anchorman - cannonball  
Schindlers List - where he bargains lives for his car  
24 - the intro  
Saving Private Ryan - remembering his father in the cemetery  
50 First Dates - a clip of the guy and girl leaving the café, dancing between their vehicles  
Nacho Libre - baptism scene

## **APPENDIX E: MEDIA USE IN CHOICES CHURCH: 2007-2008**

Chronicles of Narnia (Prince Caspian)

Invincible - two scenes, Vince finding the note that his wife was leaving and then Vince later tearing up the note

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory - Willie not listening to the boy and calling him a mumblar

A Few Good Men - You can't handle the truth

Jimmy Stewart western (Shenandoah) - Prayer scene

Bruce Almighty - prayer scene

Christmas Vacation - prayer scene

The Incredibles - dealing with his boss

Evan Almighty - do we get what we ask for or do we get situations that help us develop what we need

Spiderman 2 - our actions have consequences

A Christmas Carol - Scrooges change of heart

Indiana Jones, The Last Crusade - Leap of Faith

Batman Begins - "It's what you do that defines you"

The Passion of the Christ - temptation scene in the garden

The Emperor's New Groove – scene where he gets everything he wants

Minority Report – scene in mall

Witness – scene punching townspeople

Braveheart – prebattle scene?

## **APPENDIX F: MEDIA USE IN HARVEST CHURCH: 2007-2008**

### Television Shows:

Deal or No Deal

Fear Factor

Heroes

Lost

### Films:

Amazing Grace (teaching grace)

Remember the Titans (teaching diversity)

Spiderman 2 (teaching calling)

Bruce Almighty (teaching prayer)

Meet the Parents (teaching prayer)

Drumline (teaching disciplines)

Jesus (teaching the life of Christ)

Ben Hur (giving water)

Lord of the Rings (chase scene)

Gettysburg

## APPENDIX G: CHURCHGOERS' BELIEFS ABOUT PATRIARCHY

This dissertation has shed light on the use of Hollywood movies and popular television shows in evangelical churches, including pastors' reasons why they use media, what type of media (specific movies and television shows) are used, and then *how* media are used during church services. With this focus certain trends have become apparent, including church leaders' instrumental views regarding media, the normative discourses – including patriarchy, individualism and militarism – evident in the media used in church sermons, as well as what messages about consumption and individualism may be conveyed through the *act* of bringing secular entertainment into the space of the churches. Considering in isolation just one of these observations – the normative discourses about gender – it might be fairly easy from a researcher's vantage point to conclude that the general conception (held by many in the news media, political analysts, and many academics) of American evangelicals as patriarchal is, on the whole, correct. This would not be entirely without precedent, as many well-known studies in other fields have done the same: Bartkowski (2001) notes that “traditionalist gender ideologies are alive and well among many evangelicals” (5); a survey by Grasmick et al. (1990) survey finds a strong correlation between evangelical beliefs and support for a patriarchal family structure; and Bendroth (2001) identifies a resurgence of patriarchy in conservative Protestants<sup>73</sup>.

Looking at the seemingly obvious, surface correlation between the patriarchal discourses in the movies shown in evangelical churches and the studies demonstrating

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<sup>73</sup> Bendroth (2001) sees this resurgence in popular religious groups like the all-male organization “Promise Keepers,” whose members have urged men to take back their role as household leader

patriarchy in American evangelical institutions, it would be tempting to end the research at this juncture, throw off the researcher's mantle and call it "case closed," satisfied that the research was brought together so neatly. After all, the media used by church leaders *do* appear to demonstrate a consistent focus on males (in the form of heroes or at the least protagonists) at the expense of female figures who are largely absent, demonstrating what feminist researchers such as Dorothy Smith (1978) have written regarding patriarchal cultural traditions that are created by men for men. However, leaving the research at this juncture would provide a view of only one side of the mountain, to paraphrase Bronowski (1990). The missing side, as it were, comes from the views and beliefs about patriarchy from evangelical churchgoers themselves.

In "Deconstructing the Popular," Hall (2006) makes an observation regarding the perceived passivity of the audience when it comes to the reception of cultural products, noting that

If the forms and relationships on which participation in this story of commercially provided 'culture' depend are purely manipulative and debase, then the people who consume and enjoy them must either be themselves debased by these activities or else living in a permanent state of 'false consciousness.' They must be 'cultural dopes' who can't tell that what they are being fed is an updated form of the opium of the people. That judgment may make us feel right, decent and self-satisfied about our denunciations of the agents of mass manipulation and deception - the capitalist cultural industries: but I don't know that it is a view which can survive for long as an adequate account of cultural relationships....

Ultimately, the notion of the people as a purely passive, outline force is a deeply unsocialist perspective (481).

In this passage, Hall makes it clear that it is a serious mistake to conceive of consumers of commercial ‘culture’ as cultural dopes, even if to do so makes one feel satisfied (with either themselves or with their research). To do so is to miss a clearer account of how people really act – or react – to certain ideological frameworks or discourses. In her work on British female youth subculture, McRobbie (2000) claims that institutions like school, the family, and youth clubs have certain central functions, namely “to reproduce the sexual division of labour so that girls come willingly to accept their subordinate status in society. This work is done primarily through ideologies which are rooted in and carried out in, the material practices specific to each of these institutions” (53). Having made this claim about the potential ideological influence of these institutions, however, McRobbie then warns against assuming a “mechanical acceptance of these ideologies” by the girls, who

do not accept unquestioningly the ‘careers’ mapped out for them... For example, the girls’ existence within them (the ideologies) and experience of them, was clearly more a matter of gentle undermining, subtle redefinition and occasionally outright confrontation” (53).

In being willing to acknowledge the girls’ negotiated or even oppositional reception of patriarchal ideology coming from various institutions in their lives, McRobbie highlights the importance of looking at not only the ideologies themselves but individuals’ responses to them. To be unwilling to do this would be an implicit acknowledgement of a view of society that has long ago been discarded, namely a Magic

Bullet or “hypodermic” model, where media are seen as incredibly powerful and the conception of the agency of individual media consumers is severely limited (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989). If this research limited itself to simply an analysis of the media shown in church or a rhetorical analysis of evangelical sermons, it might be tempting to conclude that evangelical churches are accurately portrayed by news media as homogeneous entities whose members think and act in predictable unison. In essence, it would also treat evangelicals as cultural (or religious) “dopes.”

As a result of this awareness, at this juncture the focus is switched, essentially moving from a “top down” perspective (where evangelical leaders’ choices in media and messages from mainstream commercial media are emphasized) to a “ground up” perspective, where attention shifts to the beliefs and actions of the evangelicals who attend these churches. This is done in turn for gender (the focus of this chapter), for militarism and views on war (Chapter Six), and finally for individualism (Chapter Seven). In each of these chapters, evangelical churchgoers’ views about patriarchy, war, and the role of the individual as they relate to media and faith are explored in depth, using churchgoers’ own perspectives and beliefs as the foundation of the research and observations.

Although the considerations of media use in church are interesting and useful for understanding the relatively new phenomenon of secular entertainment media use in evangelical churches, from the ethnographic observations come the richest material, since the men and women in these groups provide individual perspectives on the issues of gender, war, and individualism, including acceptance of – as well as resistance to – discourses that come from their churches, either in the form of media (both religious and



secular) or pastors' sermons. The focus here is how evangelical men and women think about prominent issues in their church as well as about the media shown in their churches and how they incorporate this meaning into their everyday lives outside of church. In sum, in first examining the messages sent by these churches and the media they use and then assessing how churchgoers think about the issue of gender, this research is positioned to interrogate the definition, often presented in mainstream news and entertainment media, of evangelicals as a homogenous, monolithic group that thinks and acts in consistent and predictable ways, ultimately presenting a more accurate, nuanced perspective of this influential religious and political group in the U.S.

#### *Prayer Groups: Media, Faith, and Sharing*

The fact that evangelicals did not talk about media used in their churches directly shaped this portion of the research. Unlike other studies that have looked at the direct correlation between media texts and audience reception of those texts (*eg*, Morley, 1980; Radway, 1991; Rendleman, 1994), this research does not follow that structure. Instead, this research explores evangelicals' beliefs about certain issues such as gender and war, issues that are addressed in their churches by the media shown during sermons. Unlike in previous focus groups where I asked direct questions about media and got very specific responses<sup>74</sup>, these groups, progressing more naturally as a result of the ethnographic method, offer a different perspective. That is what is presented here.

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<sup>74</sup> Specifically, in one all-female focus group I conducted prior to ethnographic observations, the women discussed how a clip from the film *Batman Begins* helped them to deal with feelings of guilt, and how the movie *National Treasure* starring actor Nicholas Cage helped them to think about greed in their personal lives.

Chapter Three, which focused on both the *content of* and *context for* the use of media in evangelical churches, pointed to interesting trends, including the predominance of normative discourses about gender in the clips from popular films and television shows shown in church. As noted in that chapter, the movie and television clips shown in the four churches included a focus on male characters to the almost complete exclusion of females. When they did appear, the women were depicted much in the way that scholars studying gender and film have depicted: in peripheral, subordinate roles (Mulvey, 1975; Benshoff and Griffin, 2009; Kellner, 1995; Kaplan, 1990). As a result of this exclusion, the clips used by pastors seemed to define individual Christian faith in terms of men alone: men were the ones consistently shown in action, whether it was talking to God, battling for freedom, or undergoing personal transformation. Given that these clips are intended to evangelize as well as instruct churchgoers about biblical principles (as pastors indicated in Chapter Two), it is important to examine what the absence of female representation means for churchgoers. As mentioned, this research does not draw a direct link between specific media texts (such as *Lord of the Rings* or *Indiana Jones*) and churchgoers' views of them directly; instead, what is explored is how churchgoers – both male and female – feel about gender when it comes to matters of faith and in general about media, both in their churches as well as in their personal lives.

### *Observation of Prayer Groups*

What follows are ethnographic descriptions from different prayer groups when the topic was focused on gender. They are meant to provide a snapshot of the groups, revealing how the topic of gender came up in conversation, elucidating various views on

gender, and showing how potentially sensitivities surrounding gender were resolved during social interaction in small groups. During observations I found that tension regarding gender permeated almost every small group. As stated earlier, during ethnographic participation in these groups I did not ask about gender; instead, discussions about gender came up naturally in the course of informal discussions between men and women as they discussed their daily lives and their lived faith.

#### The Kilmer Group at Harvest Church: Patriarchy, Oppression, and the Holy Spirit

The Kilmer church group was a group from Harvest Church comprised of both male and female members ranging in age from 52 to 75, slightly older than the Reed group. This was a mostly-white group; however, one African-American woman, a professor at the local university, was a regular member here. Other members of the group had diverse occupations, including a nurse practitioner, a retired geologist, a teacher, teacher's aide, property assessor, two computer technicians, a construction company owner, a homemaker, and a retired telephone operator. We met weekly in the evenings in the furnished basement at the home of Virginia, a retired telephone operator in her seventies who lived with her husband on a quiet, tree-lined street. Virginia was a conscientious hostess who always had fresh coffee and homemade cookies on hand when we arrived, to which we all helped ourselves intermittently throughout the evening.

On this particular October evening in 2008 we had watched a short DVD produced by church leaders discussing the Holy Spirit that sparked a contentious discussion between several of the members of the group regarding gender identity. This DVD featured the lead pastor Angus, a man who appeared to be in his late sixties. The

DVDs were designed for the pastor to speak for a short while and then pause at various junctures for group members to discuss suggested topics. On this evening Angus began by discussing “extreme” sports, specifically mentioning BMX bikes and snowboarding while images of men flying through the air with snow flying off their snowboards were shown on the television screen. He then asked us rhetorically if we liked a personal challenge, noting that “I have one for you: to continue the work of Jesus Christ.” The group paused momentarily to tell personal stories of continuing the work of Jesus, including baking cookies for neighbors and teaching. We then began the DVD where it had been paused. It is the discussion that occurred at this juncture that forms the excerpt here. The description of this exchange is lengthy but is worth reproducing in its entirety here due to the intensity of the conversation between group members about gender.

*Val, the group leader, a 67-year old man who worked as a teacher at a school for special needs children, pressed “play” on the remote control and the DVD continued with Angus now discussing the Holy Spirit, citing Zachariah 4:6 (“Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit”). Angus referenced this passage to make the point that “you can’t do it yourself: you need the Holy Spirit.” At the end of this section of the DVD Angus said, “I challenge you to be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Text then flashed up on the television screen in front of us asking if any of us had questions about the Holy Spirit: if we did, we were encouraged to discuss them with the group. At this Regina, a 52-year old African-American college professor, spoke up, seemingly hesitant but speaking clearly and unwaveringly: “I’m wondering why the Holy Spirit is always given a male pronoun. That has never made sense to me.” As we listened to her question, Shauna, a 63-year old nurse practitioner who was sitting on the floor to the left of me (I was on the*

couch), put her hand over her mouth, shaking her head and exhaling audibly as if in disbelief and shock. Once Regina had finished speaking the nurse responded tersely, "They're all one: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I don't see what's not clear." Regina reiterated her point once again, noting that "I've struggled with the patriarchy in language related to that for some time." At this the nurse countered, this time louder, "That he is male? His son is male. Jesus said, 'If you've seen me you've seen the Father. I don't see the difficulty that you have in seeing the Father as male.'" Regina was then silent, looking at her lap.

Val, breaking the silence that filled the room just then, stated that he believed that "God made male and female." To Regina he stated, "I know what you're saying but I don't think it's used oppressively. I'm sensitive to it also." Aaron, a man in his sixties who was sitting behind me next to his wife, then spoke up, noting that the cause for these gender issues had its origin in the Bible. Specifically, he noted that "Genesis describes the 'curse' that befell Adam and Eve in the garden." Vern looked at the group, then at me, asking me (in the form of a statement) that "you know what this is" to which I and another man, Paul, a 45-year old computer technician, shook our heads. Vern turned to Aaron, who started to explain but then stopped, explaining that it was better to get it straight from the Bible. Paul added that he did remember that women, because of their sin in the Garden, are cursed with painful childbirth. Paul continued by saying that "part of the curse is that the woman would have the desire to supersede the man." Gladys, the teacher's aide, then read Genesis 3: 14-16 aloud to the group at Val's request:

*So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this,*

*"Cursed are you above all the livestock*

*and all the wild animals!*

*You will crawl on your belly*

*and you will eat dust*

*all the days of your life.*

*And I will put enmity*

*between you and the woman,*

*and between your offspring <sup>[a]</sup> and hers;*

*he will crush <sup>[b]</sup> your head,*

*and you will strike his heel."*

*To the woman he said,*

*"I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing;*

*with pain you will give birth to children.*

*Your desire will be for your husband,*

*and he will rule over you." <sup>75</sup>*

*When Gladys had finished reading, Val noted that there was a "huge controversy" over this passage about gender, noting that the Harvest "a few years ago made the decision to let women be full pastors." He also stated that he had "real issues" with the treatment of women before he "came to the Lord" and that he had to discuss these issues with friends before he was able to accept Christianity. He continued by stating that "right now, we're drugged: we can't see clearly until Jesus returns. We see*

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<sup>75</sup> Taken from Bible Gateway website at  
[http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?book\\_id=1&chapter=3&version=31](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?book_id=1&chapter=3&version=31)

*through a glass darkly. Once we're restored our human relations will be better. God loves men and women," he finished by saying.*

*Regina appeared to hear all of this but stuck tenaciously to her original point, stating that "at the end of the day it doesn't matter when I partner with the Holy Spirit, but I don't like the exploitation of women and that 'better than' thing." I spoke up then, noting that I had read The Shack. Val had read it too and so we took turns describing it. I started to tell the group about the representation of God but hesitated, feeling nervous about telling the group how God was represented, but Val told the group for me: "She's a Black woman," he said, adding that the Holy Spirit was represented as an Indian woman. At this, Shauna, turning her head to look up at me, asked pointedly and rhetorically, "Was it fiction?" "Yes," I said, to which Shauna nodded curtly. Ignoring Diane's disapproval, Val agreed with me that it was a good book.*

*Due to the late hour (almost nine pm) Val adjourned the meeting and we all stood to hold hands in a circle and pray. Val prayed that we would find answers to our questions about gender and other issues. Then the group broke up and people began to gather their belongings and say 'good night.' Val started to talk to me but I was listening admittedly with half of an ear and I excused myself from him after a moment, apologizing, as I wanted to hear the conversation between Shauna and Regina. I saw Regina go up to the nurse, smiling, and put her arm conciliatorily around the nurse's shoulders. The nurse was not as warm, not smiling back and not reciprocating the hug. I heard Shauna ask Regina tersely, "Why are you questioning it?" Regina began to explain her view but the nurse interrupted her and once again said emphatically, emphasizing each word: "He. Sent. His. Son." Regina responded gently, "I don't like*

*the ‘don’t say anything, just shut up’ thing....” At this point I was only getting fragments of the conversation. Once they were done talking and Shauna had left I stopped Regina to ask her about her t-shirt. I had seen it from a distance earlier and now I looked closer. A photo of a line of Native Americans with guns was on the front of her t-shirt. The caption below, which I couldn’t read before, stated, “Homeland Security: Defending against Terrorists since 1492.” I stopped and asked, “what, who are the terror-... oh!” and Regina laughed. Val came over smiling then as well and said affectionately, “She’s our radical.” To Regina he then offered reassurance, telling her “I’m glad you asked the question.”*

Many interesting points emerge from this lengthy and at times heated exchange in the Kilmer group meeting that night. While the both the Reed and Kilmer groups had similar discussions – specifically on the gender of God – the Reed’s exchange was rather light-hearted and the discussion relatively limited (as well as quickly and amicably resolved, at least in the short term). The argument in the Kilmer group points to more serious tensions between members of the group who had clearly opposite beliefs regarding Christianity and gender, tensions that have the potential to create significant rifts in the group. One characteristic of small groups, Wuthnow (1994) notes, is that the needs of the individual are balanced with those of the group. This applies to beliefs as well, where individual beliefs are generally respected by other members if not always agreed with. The Kilmer group didn’t seem to follow the small-group model Wuthnow describes in that the personal struggle that Regina had regarding gender inequality were not tolerated by some members of the group, including Shauna and it seems also Aaron and Paul. Wuthnow (1994) also claims that there is a “built-in mechanism” for resolving



difficult interpersonal issues in small groups where the more contentious members often leave to maintain the stability of the group. Interestingly, this did not happen in the Kilmer group, as Regina, Aaron, Phil, and Shauna were still present when I visited the group several months later.

Considering the interaction itself, what was especially interesting was that the most vociferous group members involved in the discussion were the defenders of the status quo (both male and female), who outnumbered Regina, the lone voice asking for discussion and resolution of what she considered to be gender inequality. This interaction resembles the “spiral of silence” recognized and described by Noelle Neumann (1974) where the perceived dominant beliefs of a group appear to dampen or silence those of the perceived minority. When Regina looked down at her lap, unwilling to say more after Aaron, Phil, and Shauna spoke to defend what she saw as patriarchy in her religion, it appeared to represent her acknowledgement that this group was not the place to voice these concerns.

Regina’s attempt to reconcile with the most contentious member of the group, Shauna, brings up another point for consideration. Regina, the challenger to the status quo (which, in this case was patriarchal representations of the Holy Spirit), appeared to then be the one to make the effort to make amends with Shauna, the most fervent defender of the status quo. This phenomenon was seen in other groups for other topics (such as war), explored more in Chapter Seven.

### The Murray Group from Sunrise: The Leader of the Household

Another example of discussion of gender issues comes from a small, all white, mostly female prayer group. Most members of the group were from Sunrise Church, including the leader, Dena, 50 a junior high school registrar and recent grandmother. The group met on Saturday mornings at one of the group member's houses in a small (population about 500), rural town on the outskirts of Smallville that had one church and one post office. The town itself encompasses .2 square miles, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000) and consisted of about three blocks worth of modest houses with large trees lining all sides and an old highway running through the center. It often reminded me in the late fall of a green oasis amidst the then-barren corn and soybean fields. The house we met in was the house of Amy, 46, a marketing assistant, and her husband Roy, 51, a Union laborer at a construction company. Amy and Roy owned a modest, comfortable two-story house that they shared with their youngest child, a daughter who was in the fourth grade. Amy and Roy laughed and joked with each other gently and continuously during the meetings and seemed to share a very real affection for each other. The group was fairly small and, perhaps as a result, also close-knit and comfortable.

Meetings were characterized by a lot of laughter and good-natured teasing as a rule. Every week Dena would designate a member of the group to bring breakfast for everyone, and usually we would start by making small talk while the designated person would prepare the breakfast in Amy's kitchen. We would then move to the dining room to eat while continuing our casual conversation. The time remaining after breakfast was focused on bible study and discussion.

Most mornings when I visited (in the summer to winter 2008) we read from a locally published book by a local doctor who published the letters her father had sent to her over the years when she was in school. Titled “Wisdom of Life: Letters from Dad,” by Christine Henrichs (2007) the book frequently referred to Proverbs, which we read along with the book. The morning described below on a September morning in 2008 we were reading *Proverbs 5:1-6*, which dealt with temptation and adultery.

*We came to a section in the book in which the father of the author wrote to his daughter and gave her advice regarding the temptation she might face at school. Dena asked Leslie, 45, a property manager, to read the passage. Leslie read aloud to the group from her Bible:*

*My son, pay attention to my wisdom,  
listen well to my words of insight,  
that you may maintain discretion  
and your lips may preserve knowledge.  
For the lips of an adulteress drip honey,  
and her speech is smoother than oil;  
but in the end she is bitter as gall,  
sharp as a double-edged sword.  
Her feet go down to death;  
her steps lead straight to the grave.*

*She gives no thought to the way of life;  
her paths are crooked, but she knows it not.*<sup>76</sup>

*Once Leslie had finished reading, Susan, a petite, attractive 53-year old software developer with a dry sense of humor, looked up and around at the group and said with a wry smile, “You can tell it’s written by a man.” She noted that “he” (the writer) seemed to interpret all potential temptation as coming from women, because that was his perspective as a man. She told the group, however, that it seemed to her than women were more susceptible to temptation than men. I responded with “really?” as I was curious about this statement. “Yes,” she said, to me and to the group, explaining that men are often the ones who try to lead women astray: “I mean, look at our husbands,” she said while speaking to Leslie and Dena, gesturing with a pointed finger between the two of them. “Neither of them believe or go to church.” Leslie agreed by nodding, but then, turning to me, tried to explain the relevant passage in the Bible: “It’s been a while since I’ve read it (Genesis), but when Adam and Eve were in the garden it was Eve” who found the apple and offered it to Adam, thereby tempting him. I nodded at this, smiling, appreciating the explanation although I already knew this story.*

*At this point Roy looked over to Josie, an intelligent 32-year old event coordinator with a dry, incisive sense of humor and an infectious laugh with whom he has a comfortably close friendship to discuss the “Beth Moore study.” Roy explained to me that it was usually a bible study group “by and for women” and was based very much on the Biblical stories of women. He stated that he could read it and interpret it also from a man’s perspective. Susan agreed with Roy, noting that she too could look at*

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<sup>76</sup> Reproduced from Bible Gateway <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=proverbs%205:1-6&version=31>

*scripture and see past the gender difference, making the observation that, “to me, it’s genderless.” This prompted the following exchange between Amy and Susan:*

*Amy: I don’t think of it that way, as genderless*

*Susan (challenging): You think there’s different roles for men and women in the Bible?*

*Amy (tentatively): No... yes...maybe*

*Susan (not smiling): Well, I don’t think it’s ‘ok, whatever you say’*

*Amy: We are supposed to respect men, which is difficult at times, and they are supposed to love us, which I know is difficult too...*

*Susan (raising hand, palm outward, seeming indicating disagreement surrender for the moment): The genders are different, it’s true, but...*

*Roy: I know that men are supposed to be the spiritual leaders in their household. (pauses, looking at his wife Amy, smiling). But you are the spiritual leader in this household.*

*Amy (looking at Roy, blushing, smiling, shaking her head slowly, and whispering): I’m not*

The exchange at the Madsen group has similarities and differences to the other prayer group discussions about gender. Similar to the Reed and Kilmer group, this exchange was sparked by the content of religious material that a group member perceived of as representing gender inequality. In this case, Susan believed that the Proverbs passage from the Bible exhibited a gender bias that favored males, appearing to take offense at the presentation of men as being relatively pure and thus needing to avoid the consistently negative influence of women in order to remain uncorrupted. In this sense,

the conversation that ensued between Susan and Amy resembled the discussions of inequality in gender representation at the Reed group (with Cassie and her “woo hoo” of joy at God being represented as a woman) and the Kilmer group (with Regina and her objection to the Holy Spirit being represented as male).

Although members of the Madsen group may not have had access to the same language (including “oppression” and “patriarchy”) that Regina the college professor did in the Kilmer group, they did seem to understand the potential for conflict that the inequality in gender might create. When his wife Amy struggled with the idea of gender representations in the Bible, for both her personal life as well as how she defined her relationships with others as a Christian, Roy indicated that conventional (or religious) gender stereotypes held little interest for him when he stated to her and everyone in the group that he considered her to be the leader of their household. In readily relinquishing his power in this regard, Amy’s husband seemed to indicate a belief in gender equality when it came to his personal life and faith. His deference in this discussion may also have been related to his wife’s high level of devotion to Christianity relative to his own. In this group Dena, the group leader, did not try to alleviate any tension between Susan and Amy and I believe it is due to the fact that the group was so close and comfortable with each other – although the conflict wasn’t resolved, this did not appear to be a contentious enough exchange to cause lasting interpersonal conflict in the group.

#### The Gilmore Group from Sunrise: “What Does This Have to Do with Me?”

The final example of gender tension in small groups comes from an all-female, all-white prayer group from Sunrise Church that met weekly in the evenings. There were

approximately eight members in the group. Most of the women were in their early to mid-fifties and held occupations including an Assistant Director of Assurance/CPA, several registered nurses, and a librarian. The majority of the women in this group were not married and several were single mothers, two of them having made the decision to adopt. Many of those in this group lived together, and I believe this – along with their high comfort level with each other – was the cause for the dynamic and lively nature of the group. Sometimes the group followed the bible study guide provided by their church; and sometimes not. Several times when I visited we watched a rented movie (*The Bucket List*, 2008, a clip from which had been shown in their church previously) or went to see a movie (*Expelled*, 2008) in the theatres. The group met (indeed, most lived) in a beautiful, large brick house located in an old, well-established neighborhood located on a major artery leading to the university campus in Smallville. When conducting the prayer group at the house, the group always began with dinner preparation.

To contribute for the dinner, as well as to thank them for allowing me to join the group, I usually brought some form of dessert and helped out with setting the table, as well as clearing dishes at the end of eating. When the weather was nice we sat outside in their backyard garden table with Henry, their small dog who preoccupied himself with running along the wooden fence to bark at passersby or cars (or falling leaves, I thought sometimes). After dinner we would usually clear dishes and move indoors, to sit in the living room while the women's two young children would drift in and out of the room with various requests. This night, however, we lingered at the table outside as the conversations moved to the topic of politics and gay marriage in their church.

*The women were discussing some political issues in the news and I asked a follow-up question: did the politics of their church fit with their own personal political views? Did it matter to them if they didn't? This got the group members discussing various issues, including sex before marriage and homosexuality. The women noted that there was a gay couple that had come to the church and caused some tension, but they personally didn't seem to see a significant problem with homosexuality. The women became curious as to what the Bible had to say specifically about homosexuality and so Darlene, 50, a nurse and supervisor, made the decision to get a Bible and read it at the table. Darlene leafed through her bible for a few minutes while the conversation continued about sex before marriage, with Joan (52 years old and a librarian), noting that there was a heterosexual couple in the church that wanted to get married but, because they had lived together prior to the wedding, were told by their pastor that they had to apologize to the congregation and God before getting married. The women shook their head at this in apparent disapproval. Just then, Darlene looked up from her Bible and said, in a frustrated and indignant tone, "What does this have to do with me? It (the Bible) was written by a whole bunch of men for men!" At this some of the women nodded in agreement, and discussed general beliefs about authorship of the Bible. The discussion moved to what it meant to be a good Christian. Darlene spoke to me directly while the group listened about what it meant for her to be a "better Christian," in the process emphasizing the importance of faith. She stated, "You have to go with belief." She admitted, however, that she didn't have all the answers, noting that, "When I get there, He'll tell me." She paused for a moment and then, with a mischievous smile to the group, said, "Or She'll tell me," emphasizing the female pronoun. Everyone laughed at*



*this point and the conversation moved on to other topics until the evening drew to a close, with no formal Bible study having taken place.*

This particular exchange, however brief, exhibits the trends seen in the other prayer groups thus far regarding women's recognition and criticism of unequal power relationships when it came to gender. The statement made by Darlene was the most straightforward comment regarding patriarchy in a religious text (the Bible) that was written "by... men for men." It is similar to Susan's comment about the apparent male bias in Proverbs due to its being written by men and thus biased towards the male perspective. Darlene's indignant assertion about patriarchy in the Bible in her prayer group in 2008 matched almost verbatim what Dorothy Smith observed 40 years prior regarding the absence of female representation in American media culture, namely that

Women have been largely excluded from the work of producing forms of thought and the images and symbols in which thought is expressed and ordered. There is a circle effect. Men attend to and treat as significant only what men say.... What men were doing was relevant to men, was written by men about men for men. Men listened and listen to what one another said (Smith, 1978. 282).

The Gilmore group is interesting for other reasons, including the relative freedom they seemed to feel about expressing their individual – and potentially contradictory – views about not only gender but other issues as well. In the passage above, the women were the most critical of any group of their pastor's views on homosexuality, on living together before marriage, and especially about the pastors' insistence that a cohabitating couple apologize before being allowed to marry. When I had asked the group about their

political views and if they found it necessary to belong to a church that held similar views, they disagreed. Marissa, 54, a registered nurse, stated that she liked Hillary Clinton. Joan, 52, the librarian, followed Marissa's comment with her own political views, stating that she didn't care who at the church knew how she would vote.

In sum, these women from the Gilmore Group were independent, unmarried, had their own careers, children, and lives. It did not seem, as I listened to them converse over the course of several months, that they felt they needed to conform to any particular standard that either their church or their society set for them. This seemed to hold true whether the issues were political, social, moral, or some combination of these three.

### *Discussion*

Participation in the prayer groups reveal intriguing trends at the intersection of gender, media and faith as well as raise some interesting questions. To begin, in this abbreviated sample of the exchanges from prayer groups there is significant tension revolving around the issue of gender in these churches. It consistently appears in the everyday interactions between group members as they continually define and redefine themselves as individuals, as men and women, and as Christians. Because of its continual introduction by members into discussion during small groups, it appears that gender politics represent an ongoing negotiation as patriarchy is challenged, altered, or reconfirmed in these groups. As many critical theorists have noted, ideological hegemony is in continual need of reinforcement to ensure its continuance due to constant challenges by those who wish to change the ideological status quo (Marchetti, 1989; Ryan and Kellner, 1990; Bennett, 2006). Seen from this perspective, the constant

negotiation and renegotiation of gender is a continual process in the attempt to change what some members feel are inequitable power relationships in these prayer groups.

As indicated from churchgoers' statements above, most often it is the women who bring up gender issues: as a rule the men do not introduce topics of gender into the prayer groups unless it is to challenge non-traditional representations of gender (as seen in the discussion of *The Shack*). This is in contrast to the women, for whom traditional representations (and the status quo) were the source of discussion and attempts at resolving the tension. Thus, women were most often the ones to challenge the status quo, which for them meant unequal representation in religious media texts, while the men (such as Ricky in the Reed group) often appear to react when they feel the status quo has been challenged. What the women seem to object to the most is what Smith discusses when she states that

Let us be clear that we are not talking about prejudice or sexism as a particular bias against women or as a negative stereotype of women. We are talking about the consequences of women's exclusion from a full share in the making of what becomes treated as our culture. We are talking about the consequences of a silence, an absence, a non-presence (1978. 283).

Smith's comment about the exclusion of women can be applied not just to American culture as a whole (about which she was referring) but also to the patriarchal "culture" created in these American evangelical churches. It is this silence, or absence, that is recognized and constantly challenged by the women in these small groups,

providing a constant underlying tension that emerges consistently in the informal discussions of these groups.

It is intriguing to note that discussions of gender were often sparked by reactions to certain Bible passages, church DVDs, and popular, religious-themed books like *The Shack*: not once in these groups did anyone – male or female – object to the patriarchal representations of gender in the secular movies or tv shows shown in their churches. Given the amount of tension in the small groups regarding gender, it is an interesting silence. Why are women in these groups critical of traditional gender representations from religious sources yet silent when it comes to the secular entertainment media shown in their churches? There are several potential ways to explore the absence of evangelical criticism of the secular media texts.

First, the silence appears to point to a certain passivity in the reception of secular entertainment media by these churchgoers that is in direct contrast to a very active and critical stance of religious media. Most of the religious media to which churchgoers reacted took print form – the book *The Shack* and the Bible – while all secular entertainment media used in church were visual. This may point to an interesting phenomenon noted by Neil Postman (1985), who claims that a visual medium like television reduces our capacity for critical analysis. Print media, on the other hand, encourages critical thinking due to the mental engagement required in reading. It is possible that, in the case of these evangelicals, the answer lies in the power of visual media to create a sense of what social relations are natural, to take Goffman's (1976) view regarding the representation of gender in advertising. Adopting the view of Gramsci that hegemony finds expression through "common sense" (from Marchetti,

1989), the dominance of male representation in the secular entertainment media shown in these churches may seem “natural” and “normal.” According to Hall (2003), “... ideologies produce different forms of social consciousness... They work most effectively when we are not aware that how we formulate and construct a statement about the world is underpinned by ideological premises; when our formulations seem to be simply descriptive statements about how things are... or of what we can ‘take-for-granted’” (90). Seen from Hall’s perspective, perhaps the ideologies from within secular entertainment media are able to go “under the radar,” displaying patriarchal ideology without being overt.

Although making a distinction between visual and print media may provide some provocative areas of thought to explore, there are other options that may be considered as well that are unique to American evangelicalism and not simply the distinction between different types of media. In Chapter Two the leaders of evangelical churches discussed the use of movies and television shows in their sermons that reflected an instrumentalist view of media, namely that secular media are able to be used as a value-neutral tool for a variety of ends, which for them meant evangelizing and teaching biblical principles. Interestingly, the churchgoers in prayer groups appear to hold this instrumentalist view as well. Nearing the end of my prayer group observations I asked all members in each group what they thought of the secular entertainment media their pastors used in sermons. Surprisingly, churchgoers by and large reflected the views of their pastors. They told me that entertainment media were important to use to draw people to church as well as help to understand biblical principles and apply them to their personal lives. When I asked if they perceived any tension in the use of the film and television clips during sermons,

churchgoers reflected the same concerns as their pastors, namely an apprehension, however, slight, about sexuality in the content of the clips. Thus, churchgoers mirrored their pastors almost perfectly, seeing all the same benefits and worrying about the same potential harmful “effects” of the media.

To make sure that these uncritical comments about secular entertainment media weren't a result of the social setting of the prayer group, where members might have been wary of making comments critical of their pastor in front of others<sup>77</sup>, I decided to contact the members of one church, Choices, to ask the same questions about secular media through email. I did this with Pastor Wilhelm's consent and sent out an email asking about 45 churchgoers three questions: 1) Did they like or dislike the movies and tv shows that were shown in their church (and why)?; 2) Did they have any examples of media that they liked or disliked?; and 3) Did they see any tension in the use of secular media in church? I asked churchgoers to respond to me alone and not to the pastor, telling them that their responses were anonymous and would not be shared with anyone, including Pastor Wilhelm. Of the ten individuals that responded to the survey, none saw tension in the use of secular media in church that went past sexual content, appearing to continue to reflect their pastors' view of media.

Churchgoers' statements thus reflect the same instrumentalist view of secular entertainment media that their pastors hold. It may be for this reason that they don't take the movie and television show clips as seriously as they do the religious media (including church-produced videos, religious-themed books like *The Shack*, and the Bible) they encounter as they develop their faith. As Christians, and especially as evangelicals who

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<sup>77</sup> This fear may have been unfounded, as small group members did criticize various aspects of the religious media their pastor had chosen, commenting frequently on the commercialism, patriarchy, and the like.

belong to churches where the Bible is taken as the literal word of God, scripture is something to be taken seriously. Perhaps this is why they are critical of the inequitable gender relations in the religious media in their churches – these media *matter*, and churchgoers take them seriously as a result. Entertainment media, on the other hand, are seen as mere *divertissements*, engaging stories that serve a set purpose and nothing more. Perhaps this is not so unusual, as perhaps most media consumers – religious or secular – don't take entertainment media (and their potential influence) that seriously. This is referred to as the “third-person effect,” summed up by Meyers (2000) as the “this doesn't affect me” phenomenon (206). Romanowski (2007), who also refers to the third-person effect, notes that “most people believe that they are personally immune” to entertainment media: “like most people, churchgoers generally think of popular art as entertainment, downtime after a long day, or a social activity to be enjoyed with friends. They don't think too much about the films and videos they watch or the music they listen to” (40).

One last characteristic to note about women and their strong reaction to patriarchy in their churches is that almost none of the women in these small groups fit the profile that one might expect of evangelicals in a patriarchal church culture<sup>78</sup>. Almost all of the women worked outside the home. Not only did they work outside the home but many (if not most) held jobs that required a college education (teachers, scientists, accountants, nurses, librarians, software developers, and professors). Criticism of patriarchal ideology in the religious media texts makes sense coming from women who are used to a certain amount of independence (financially, in the workplace) as well as autonomy during the workday. In the case of the Gilmore Group in particular it was clear from my visits that

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<sup>78</sup> Especially as described by studies such as Grasmick et al. (1990), where patriarchal culture usually means that men are the financial and spiritual head of their households.

the women were completely autonomous socially and financially from men: many of them lived without men, they owned their own homes, they had good educations and stable careers.

### *Conclusion*

According to Rakaw (2006), it is common in feminist theory to recognize “the silencing of women and making them and their experiences invisible” (211). It is clear from observations of media use in church and tension in small prayer groups that gender is a central issue for many small group members in these churches. In considering the politics of gender representation, Dorothy Smith (1978) provides the example of listening on the radio to part of a musical based on the book of Barry Broadbent. The book itself had contained contributions and narrative from both men and women; the musical version, however, contained only men’s voices. Smith concludes that “only men’s viewpoint, men’s experience of that time were there for all or any of us to hear. Women’s experience and viewpoint were altogether missing” (283). Smith’s comment is reminiscent of Entman’s (*date*) keen observation that it is essential to consider what is *included* as well as what is *omitted*. What the women in these groups seem to reject is the lack of power on their behalf to shape a religious tradition in a way that means something to them. The predicament of these evangelical women – caught between wanting to develop their faith as Christians yet rejecting gender stereotypes that seem to consistently favor men – seems to echo Betty Friedan’s work on the feminine mystique. Friedan (2001, originally 1963) found a significant amount of internal turmoil when it came to gender relations in women’s lives in post-WWII period, where women felt split



by the desire to conform to expectations that they stay in the home while simultaneously feeling torn from the isolation and despair they felt in their everyday lives (in Rakaw, 2006. 203). The women in the prayer groups, while working outside the home and enjoying relative freedom compared to 60 years ago, also appear to feel torn, wanting to have a voice in their Christian faith, a voice that matches the apparent autonomy they have in their everyday lives. These observations find some support in the study by Grasmick et al. (1990). While pointing to a strong correlation between evangelical beliefs and general support for a patriarchal family structure, Grasmick et al. also found significant gender differences, with women being less supportive of the notion of a patriarchal family than men<sup>7980</sup>.

It still begs the question of why the women were able to be so aware of the politics of gender representation in the religious media they encountered but not the commercial entertainment media. Rakaw (2006) claims that “popular culture plays a role in patriarchal society and that theoretical analysis of this role warrants a major position in the ongoing debates” (199). Mentioned in Chapters Three and Four, the clips of Hollywood movies and television shows that pastors choose to show during sermons depict men as the ones taking action, talking to God, fighting wars, finding redemption, and engaging in acts of faith. The men and women in these small groups may not react specifically to the patriarchal representations in the secular entertainment media they

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<sup>79</sup> Specifically, Grasmick et al. (1991) note that “the effect of religious fundamentalism is equal in magnitude to the effect of age, and greater than the effects of education, gender, family income, head of household occupational prestige, subjective class identification, race and rural background. In terms of the significance of age, older individuals were more likely to support patriarchal family structure than younger people.

<sup>80</sup> Also mention *Christians for Biblical Equality*, an organization created for the purpose of challenging patriarchy in evangelical churches whose members believe that arguments for gender equality can be found in the Bible itself.

encounter in the space of their churches on Sunday mornings but they quite clearly react to patriarchy in their personal lives as well as their Christian lives where faith and gender intersect.

The fact that churchgoers are not critical of male-dominated representations of gender from the secular entertainment media shown in the spaces of their churches is interesting and worth additional exploration. Why are these church members vocal in their criticism of religious books, including the Bible, and their pastors but passive when it comes to secular media? Romanowski (date) sees a danger in this. While he recognizes that evangelicals, like many secular individuals, don't engage critically with what he calls "popular art" (most likely for the same reasons that many secular individuals don't) he advocates for a "faith-informed" critical engagement with popular art and culture (23).

Finally, as observations of prayer groups indicate, there is no one viewpoint, mindset, or belief about gender in these churches. Although this research has explored the very specific topic of gender in seeker churches, it is clear that what comes with the recognition of gender tension in these churches is also the notion of the potential heterogeneity of beliefs and practices. This allows an interrogation of the notion of evangelicals as a homogenous, cohesive unit that thinks and acts in uniform and predictable ways. In this study, the exploration of gender issues in small groups has permitted a glimpse of lines of tension as well as individuality and difference. This is important because, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, to see an all-powerful media system as well as individuals that are cultural "dopes" of this system is to have an overly simplistic view, of both media and also of individuals.

It should also be clear from this chapter on small group members' perceptions of gender and the one that follows on war that evangelicals, like the British youth studied by McRobbie, do not have one homogeneous belief system that encourages them to act in predictable, consistent fashion. Hoover (2006) has noted that contemporary religious practice does not have to be seen as monolithic:

...we should expect there to be differences between individuals and interpretive communities within the whole field, defined by social and religious demographics as well as by different life trajectories and histories (77).

The two observations from this research – patriarchal ideologies in the media shown in church and a significant amount of tension regarding gender in small groups – can be brought together in an interesting way. Ryan and Kellner (1990), writing about Hollywood film in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> C, note that “the virulence of contemporary conservatism (the revival of militarist, racist, patriarchal, and capitalist ideologies) is itself ample evidence that something very nonconservative was still active in U.S. society” (266). For Ryan and Kellner, ideology is always in flux, never set in stone, and is thus in need of constant reinforcement. As Fiske (1989a: 20) notes, there is a “popular vitality and creativity that makes incorporation such a constant necessity” (in Storey, 2003. 34). Storey (2003) notes that it is important to understand the “everyday resistance and evasions that make ideology work so hard to maintain itself and its values” (in Storey, 34). Applied to this research, perhaps the prominence of patriarchal ideologies in the media shown in these seeker churches indicates substantial *tension* instead of *compliance*, supporting the notion that patriarchal ideology in these churches is, like

other ideologies, in constant need of construction, repair and reinforcement to ensure its continuance.

## APPENDIX H: CHURCHGOERS' BELIEFS ABOUT WAR

### *Introduction*

Like patriarchy in these evangelical churches, militarism was evident in both the language used by evangelical leaders and also in the secular entertainment media used in sermons. As noted in Chapter Three, militarism in the movies and television shows seen in the churches in this research follow Douglas Kellner's (1995) and Ryan and Kellner's (1990) general use of the term to refer to presence of redemptive violence and the glorification of war or military systems. In *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics* Kellner (1995) provides a lengthy discussion of these thematic patterns of militarism in films that he places within the conservative Reagan-era films. These include movies such as *Top Gun*, *Iron Eagle*, and the *Rambo* film series that Kellner believes glorify American military power as well as highlight cultural and ethnic differences with "Others" and encourage a simplistic binary conception of "good" versus "evil."

The question explored here is whether or not the militaristic ideology seen in the secular mainstream media shown in these churches is reflected in the beliefs of churchgoers. Specifically, this chapter delves into evangelicals' beliefs about war as represented in prayer groups. It is useful here to provide an additional definition of militarism as it applies not just to mainstream media but also to the beliefs and behaviors of churchgoers themselves.

### Militarism, Defined

Andrew Bacevich (2005), writing on what he refers to as the “new American militarism,” provides a fairly straightforward definition of militarism that he takes from the Oxford English Dictionary: “...the presence of military sentiments or ideals among a people; the political condition characterized by the predominance of the military class in government or administration; the tendency to regard military efficiency as the paramount interest of the state” (227*n*). Bacevich believes that these three elements describe the new American militarism. He also incorporates elements of a definition from The New Oxford Dictionary of English, which is “the belief or desire of a government or people that a country should maintain a strong military capability and be prepared to use it aggressively to defend or promote national interests” (227*n*). Militarism is supported, according to Bacevich, by the idea that “the ideals we espouse represent universal truths, valid for all times” as well as the “certainty that American values are destined to prevail,” which refers to the strong nationalism he describes in his work (2). Bacevich ultimately gives a concise definition of militarism as “a romanticized view of soldiers, a tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness, and outsized expectations regarding the efficacy of force” (2)<sup>81</sup>.

For the purposes of this research, militarism is seen as a synthesis of Kellner’s (1995) and Bacevich’s (2005) uses of the term. It therefore includes several inter-related concepts: a belief in redemptive violence (or force); a conception of the existence of “good” versus “evil”; and a belief that force is not only necessary but may be the correct

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<sup>81</sup> Other scholars have provided some variation of this definition. Barker et al. (2008) define militarism as “a particular variant of internationalism, namely, the kind that calls for a willingness to use the U.S. military to defend and protect American interests abroad” (309).

moral solution. Taken together, this definition provides a framework for assessing churchgoers' beliefs and behaviors. The question is, do these churchgoers manifest these traits? If so is there tension? Dissent? How is the sensitive political issue or war negotiated among members? This is the focus of this chapter.

### Evangelicals and War: Media Portrayals

As discussed in Chapter Six, it would be fairly easy to look at the television shows and Hollywood movies shown in these churches and conclude that evangelicals as a whole subscribe to or are interpellated into the ideologies expressed in these media. Looking at the militaristic films – such as *Braveheart*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *A Few Good Men*, *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Bourne Identity*, *Gettysburg* and *Witness* – that church leaders have shown in their sermons that highlight redemptive violence and glorify war, one could proclaim the churches and their constituents to be militaristic. When I first began this research I started attending church sermons first. What I found – the militarist, patriarchal media in church sermons – convinced me that evangelicals were militaristic and I wrote an entire chapter assuming as if this was the case. This phenomenon that I fell into – examining the messages (mediated or otherwise) sent by evangelical leaders and then assuming a consonance of belief between church leaders and church followers – has been repeated many times by scholars and professional journalists who study evangelicals.

In *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*, Bacevich (2005) characterizes Christians – and especially American Protestants – in the following way:

The relationship between Christianity and war has been a tangled one. Despite Christ's admonition to love one's neighbor and to turn the other cheek, Christians historically have slaughtered their fellow men, to include their fellow Christians, in breathtakingly large numbers (124).

Journalist Jeff Sharlet (2009) chronicles the experience of a U.S. Army sergeant who encountered Christianity in the form of a Special Forces group who called themselves the "Faith Element." Sharlet describes the Army sergeant's horror at the Christian soldiers' actions: after a day of fighting on Easter Sunday they got into a Bradley "tank killer" on which they had inscribed the words "Jesus Killed Mohammed." They then rode through Samarra – which they were told was considered a holy city – and used a bullhorn to say the same words inscribed on the tank to the Muslim people of the town during their evening call to prayer. According to the sergeant, when people in the city would yell and fire their personal weapons at the tank (he was told that it was local law that every home could own one gun) the men in the tank responded by killing them with the tank's firepower. Sharlet ends his article by noting that Christian influence in the military has created a "quiet coup" in the form of a "cultural transformation."

The association between Christianity and militarism continues with Barker et al. (2005) who write on "messianic militarism" in the U.S. Specifically, they state that traditionalistic Christian "believing" is significantly associated with nationalistic fervor, which in-turn predicts militarism—both generally and in the specific defense of Israel.

For Barker and colleagues, "traditionalistic" Christian faith rests in part on a belief of biblical inerrancy, which was one of the hallmarks of most of the churches in



my study and, indeed, of most evangelicals as traditionally defined (Morgan, 2003; Roof 1999; Smith 1998; McDannell 1998; Marsden 1991).

According to Eric Gorski (2007), writing for the Associated Press, the war in Iraq represents for evangelicals a war against “Islamofacism,” in which Islam is seen to be an immoral enemy that threatens Christianity. He notes that many prominent American evangelical leaders have called upon their followers to take up the war in Iraq as an important moral values issue, one that is on par with other moral issues such as gay marriage and abortion. In his article he quotes some of the Christian leaders who state that Christianity will cease to exist if the war in Iraq is lost. The title of his article is “Evangelicals Seize on ‘Islamofacism’ as New ‘Gay Marriage’ Issue of 2008.”

The publications described above have one central characteristic in common: they all lump Christians (and often specifically evangelicals) together into one category. In Sharlet’s (2009) article in particular, Christians are not only grouped together but also portrayed negatively – as ignorant, violent ideologues. When it comes to war and Christianity, it seems, Christians get somewhat negative treatment in being treated with such a broad brush.

#### American Evangelicals and War

This is not to say that there is not some justification for making a connection between some Christians and militarism. George Marsden (1991) observes that evangelicals supported American efforts in the First World War. In her study of American evangelicals and the U.S. military since the Second World War, Anne Loveland (1996) notes that evangelicals saw in the military a chance to convert thousands

of young people. At the time, evangelical groups perceived substantial competition from liberal Protestant and Catholic organizations, which had placed numerous of their own chaplains in military positions in a way that almost constituted a monopoly, keeping evangelicals almost completely from serving in these influential positions at the time. The efforts of Billy Graham in subsequent U.S. wars changed this situation significantly, with his highly successful 1953 Korean Mission reaching – and evangelizing – thousands of young servicemembers (Loveland, 1996). Graham continued this tradition in the Vietnam War, going overseas to visit troops, becoming a spiritual counselor to U.S. political leaders, and supporting government policies regarding the use of force or expansion of the military arsenal (Bacevich, 2005).

There are several reasons why the military was seen as an attractive demographic to target for evangelizing. At the time of World War II, the American military environment in general was seen to be vulnerable to all types of moral decay. Americans in general, and not simply evangelicals, were worried about reports of widespread sexual immorality among the troops, with the substantially high rates of venereal diseases in young men returning from the war seen as evidence of this problem. In addition, the military was also believed to condone prostitution, which added to the notion of the organization being morally corrupt in general (Loveland, 1996). Interestingly, in the period leading up to WWII, many American evangelical leaders saw the drinking, prostitution, and general moral bankruptcy of the military to be a reason to stay *away* from the troops, believing it to be a lifestyle not conducive to Christian values. However, Bacevich (2005) notes that religious reformers in the 1940s changed this perspective substantially in a way that indicated an embrace of the problem, rather than a shunning of

it, as a chance to not only re-engage with American society but also to change the downward trend: “A process of engaging the world – with an eye toward transforming it – had commenced” (125).

This shift to connect with an American institution like the military was indicative of larger changes in the perspective of evangelicals, namely that it was necessary to re-forge a connection with American society in general that had been lost after events like the Scopes Trial in the 1920s (Bacevich, 2005; Marsden, 1991). Integral to this re-engagement of American society was a desire to connect with both contemporary, secular American culture as well as the U.S. political sphere. One of the primary political struggles of the day was the perceived need to fight against communism, which provided yet another reason for evangelical engagement with the military.

Martin (2005) notes that Billy Graham, one of the most prominent religious figures in the post-war period, equated communism with atheism, believing that a victory against communist countries was a triumph for God. The U.S.-Soviet struggle was seen as a real-life spiritual battle by many evangelical leaders, including Graham and McPherson. According to Sutton (2005), Aimee Semple McPherson, leader of the immensely popular Angelus Temple in Southern California, believed that communism and fascism were “equally deplorable ideologies: communists attempted to rule without God, while fascists sinned by claiming the power of God” (320). For this reason, McPherson worked closely with the federal government on anti-communism campaigns. Following the natural progression of thought, a strong U.S. military and extensive arsenal could be seen as an effective safeguard against the moral decay of communism.

This apparent connection between Christians and militarism continues today. In 2006, a survey conducted by the Cooperative Congressional Election Study indicated that there was a potential connection between Christian belief and support for the U.S.-led war in Iraq (Jacobson, 2007). The evangelical respondents to the survey who stated that they believed George Bush was chosen by God exhibited the strongest support for war (81%). This figure is striking when placed next to those individuals who stated that they “did not know” if Bush was chosen by God, in which support for the war was lower (69%), and those who believed Bush was not chosen by God, in which support for war was the lowest (21%) (Jacobson, 2007).

More recently, a survey of evangelical Christian leaders in February in 2008 found that the “majority” still support the war in Iraq. According to a 2008 survey conducted by the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), the largest evangelical organization in the U.S.<sup>82</sup>, most evangelical leaders still back the war and want the United States to stay until the job is done. Notably, many insist that “the war is just, the President was right and the United States should stay the course” (NAE, 2008). Leith Anderson, president of the NAE, states in the published survey report that “Most evangelicals in America subscribe to the theological position called ‘Just War Theory,’ that it is morally justifiable to go to war under certain conditions” (NAE, 2008).

As the various research above indicates, there is potential reason to conceive of evangelicals much in the way that previous research has done, in large part because American evangelicals have often been cited as supporting American wars in various

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<sup>82</sup> According to Marsden (1991) the organization was created in 1942. According to the NAE website ([www.nae.org](http://www.nae.org)), the organization identifies with 60 denominations and has 45,000 churches listed as members.

ways. However, this is not the only reason for the connection made between evangelicalism and war in the examples cited and described above. In the 2008 NAE survey, the president, Leith Anderson, makes an interesting comment about evangelicals' subscription to a "Just War Theory." It is not the idea of a "just" war that is the focal point here, but instead the broad reference to "evangelicals," essentially lumping them together as though they all acted and believed in a unified and consistent fashion. The NAE survey was of evangelical leaders, but in his statement, the NAE president seemed to make a jump from the beliefs of church leaders to those of their followers. This is important because in writing this research I, like the NAE president and others described here, fell into making this overly facile connection.

As I began research, noting the militarism in the mainstream movies shown in churches and then some of the comments in these small groups, I felt as though there was a definite connection: that if the movies did not at least *influence* churchgoers views about war, then at least the movies *reflected* the militarism that existed on behalf of evangelical leaders and churchgoers alike. While it may be true that the war and violence-themed movies chosen by the pastors in this study reflect their own views about the justness of war<sup>83</sup>, it is another issue entirely to transfer this to churchgoers themselves. The language used by church leaders in sermons made this assumption even easier as the sermons I observed used what I considered to be militaristic language, images, and media. The Harvest Church did a sermon series called "Join the Revolution," which used a black crown of thorns image on a blood red background. In one sermon, the pastor likened the actions of Jesus to Paul Revere and his "shot heard

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<sup>83</sup> Many of the pastors in interviews expressed support, whether direct or indirect, for war.

‘round the world.” The church also showed films such as Gettysburg and Ben Hur<sup>84</sup>. Sunrise Church gave the sermon titled “Behind Enemy Lines,” where the need to battle against evil was preached and the sermon literature featured an image of barbed wire wrapped around what was meant to resemble a war zone. River Rock Church included the pre-battle scene from Braveheart (described in Chapter Five) in a discussion of the war within and the need to overcome a spiritual battle. It was temptingly easy, using these examples, to label these churches as militaristic, and by doing so neither challenging the notion of direct interpellation of an ideology by churchgoers nor making a separation between church leaders and followers. It is this separation between leaders and constituents that is key for this research, for it is in observing and participating in small groups that a more realistic picture of how the evangelicals in this study really feel about war.

Not all scholars, journalists, and research institutions lump evangelicals together. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2008) conducted an exit poll survey of religious individuals who voted in the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Called “How the Faithful Voted,” the survey report breaks down voting patterns by different faith traditions, including Catholics, Jews, and Protestants. The Protestant category is broken down further into the category of White Protestant. In this category the Pew Forum survey indicates that 65% voted for McCain while 34% voted for Obama. The exit poll shows some diversity in voting patterns, but still shows that the majority of White Protestants voted for the Republican candidate McCain. Another study, however, indicates even more evangelical diversity.

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<sup>84</sup> The use of Gettysburg and Ben Hur at the Harvest was first noted in Moore and Press, unpublished manuscript.

An exit poll sponsored by the Faith in Public Life and the Center for American Progress Action Fund in Missouri and Tennessee indicated that not only do white evangelicals vote Democratic in large numbers but that they also support a “broader agenda” in terms of religion and politics, namely that they care about protecting the environment, ending poverty, and addressing the HIV/AIDS issue. The report based on the poll (Faith in Public Life, 2008) concluded that white evangelicals are not monolithic on political and social issues. Work by Silk et al. (2008) suggest that there is diversity in religious belief and that this can be understood along geographical lines. These works, and others like them, provide a new framework for exploring a political issue such as war, the focus of this chapter. While the surveys point to diversity within white evangelicals, the focus of this research is to take that acknowledgement farther: to recognize that diversity where it exists and then explore *how* this diversity exists in evangelical prayer groups. How does dissent, if it exists, manifest itself in small groups? How do members negotiate difference and try to maintain cohesiveness? These questions are addressed in the remainder of this chapter.

### *Ethnography of Prayer Groups: Militarism and Beliefs about War*

When I first began observations of prayer groups admittedly I was, because of my earlier mindset, “on the lookout” for militarism in the four churches included in this study. And it was easy enough to find if one had the right focus. It existed in small groups, especially in the language of an email passed around between members exhorting them to act as “Christian prayer warriors” for 2008 vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin. It was seen in the nationalistic statements (about the U.S. being a just and

powerful nation in relation to other countries) made by some of the churchgoers. Chris Hedges, writing in *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (2003), describes in depth the importance of nationalism and its strong relationship to the support for war that he sees in U.S. culture<sup>85</sup>. Finally, it was also manifested in the pro-war statements made by several of the churchgoers in prayer groups. These examples alone seemed to define evangelicals as militaristic. It was not until I had spent a significant amount of time with these groups, attending weekly for several months, that a more complex picture of how churchgoers felt about war began to emerge.

In terms of my method as a researcher, it became clear to me that discussions around this topic required me to be more sensitive than with gender<sup>86</sup>. In some of the exchanges described below, individuals shared personal stories, cried, expressed anger, and argued with other members. Although in the role of “researcher” I was keenly aware of wanting to take accurate notes of the occurrences in these groups (my notebook was always open and was the frequent focal point when I was teased by the members – “Oh Ellen’s writing in the book again!”), the sensitive nature of some of the debates made me want to stop writing, stop recording, and simply listen. As a result, in some cases who said what gets blurred, but the general understanding of the exchange remains. Although the discussions brought up delicate and often painful personal issues, none of the group members asked me to exclude these exchanges in my research. Although I think that in part it is because they trusted me with the information, at the same time I also believe (as

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<sup>85</sup> As do Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) in their political science article on the topic.

<sup>86</sup> Although gender was a sensitive topic as well, discussions about war were consistently more emotional and required more delicate navigation by all members.



Wuthnow, 1994, does) that small groups are typically places where people are meant to share personal information.

As mentioned above, some of the interactions in the groups fit the myriad studies described in this chapter that define evangelicals as militaristic, and I will describe some prayer group observations in detail here that fit this stereotype. In late October 2008 I had visited a Choices prayer group that met early in the morning at a local café in a small town about 20 miles away from Smallville. I arrived early and, before the group formally started, began talking with members who were there who wanted to know more about me. I told the members what I used to do for a living before going back to school: I had been a forensic anthropologist who had worked for the U.S. Department of Defense and had been in charge of recovering the remains of those military members who went missing in action. My previous occupation was a source of much discussion between some of the members before the formal group started. Once the group began, the conversation naturally turned to politics, and very conservative politics at that<sup>87</sup>. I said nothing about my personal political beliefs but while talking with the pastor at my car after the group adjourned one of the men from the group came up. He said he wanted to talk to me and that he hoped that, since I had worked with the military in the past that I would understand the importance of a strong U.S. military and also support the causes behind it. I assured him that I cared about the military and, seeming satisfied, he left us<sup>88</sup>.

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<sup>87</sup> Most of the group seemed to have strongly anti-Obama sentiments, with several in the group referring to him as the “One” and the “Messiah,” direct references to Timothy LaHaye’s book and film series *Left Behind* where the antichrist is referred to in these terms. Several stated that they didn’t trust that he would maintain their personal freedom while others were apprehensive about his power to alter the Supreme Court.

<sup>88</sup> This was true – I did and do care about the U.S. military, having recovered and repatriated the remains of U.S. service members who did not return from Harm’s Way and having seen firsthand the effects of war on families.

This was a surprisingly personal exchange for me as a researcher, one that was seemingly sparked by his concern that I had a potentially liberal, anti-war “bias” and would convey this in my research to others. There were other exchanges – these mostly among members themselves and not involving me – that also revealed strong support for the war in Iraq. Many members of these groups defended the war in Iraq and the concept of war in general. In one prayer group from River Rock Church, the leader of the group noted to other members that he enjoyed teaching Revelation in the Bible because it presented the “right” view of conflict in the world: “I love to teach Revelation. People always talk about starvation, AIDS, war, and I say, ‘so what’? There’s always wars and rumors of war.” This view may represent apathy (*ie*, there will always be war and strife and thus worry does no good) but it also seemed to reflect an eschatological belief about the presence of war, hunger, and disease before the return of Christ. In this man’s mind, war wasn’t anything to fight against or protest but was simply an inevitability, proof of which – for him – stemmed from the Bible and his faith.

Taking some of the comments – including those from the man from Choices who wanted me to support military causes or the reference to Revelation from the River Rock group leader – initially led me as a researcher to begin to conceptualize these evangelicals I worked with much in the way that past research has: as militaristic war supporters. This initial “finding” tied in nicely with the militaristic media I had seen in these churches. As with gender, though, to see the media as directly shaping individuals’ views on a particular topic or belief system feels like adopting a cause and effect stance that does not ring true. Thus, it was in the in-depth discussions and interactions between members, achieved over a longer length of time with these groups, that a more nuanced and clearer

picture emerges of how these evangelicals really think about an issue like war. These are described in depth in the pages that follow.

#### The Gilmore Group from Sunrise: 26 May 08

As described in Chapter Six, the Gilmore Group is an all-female group that met weekly in the evenings. The first time I had met this group was at the local movie theatre to watch *Expelled* (2008), a film that openly criticized the concept of evolution. When we had gone out to a nearby bookstore after the film to have coffee I observed that the women were very critical of the movie, with some of them noting that the star of the film, Ben Stein, “obviously has his own agenda” regarding intelligent design theory. The women criticized the film – while still entertaining the possibility that intelligent design might be true – in a warm, nonconfrontational way that indicated their ease with being critical of things other Christians might agree with (such as Creationism). This open, friendly, unstructured style was characteristic of the Gilmore Group on the whole. If the group followed the pastor’s recommended prayer group structure (which was about half of the time), it was still punctuated with personal observations, laughter, and, sometimes, political discussion. On this cool evening in May 2008 the topic momentarily turned to politics, and specifically to the American military and the war in Iraq.

*The group on this night followed Sunrise’s prayer guide, using the “ice breaker” questions (those questions designed to open up conversation between group members at the start of every meeting) and the pastor’s Bible study guide. We read and discussed questions from the guide, turning to suggested passages in the Bible to accompany the conversation. The discussion this evening was very structured and Bible-based, unlike*

*those groups from the Harvest Church, which often are based on church-produced videos with the pastor providing Bible references only intermittently. During this discussion, however, the group broke the structure and began briefly discussing politics. Two of them – Maude and Darlene professed a liberal form of politics: Maude said she would vote for Hillary Clinton and Darlene made a humorous comment criticizing conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh. I found it interesting that while the members felt that their pastor was politically conservative in key ways, including on issues of homosexuality and marriage, they still appeared to feel completely comfortable expressing opposing liberal viewpoints amongst themselves.*

*After the informal conversation Nena, the group leader, began creating a prayer list, a list created by group members to identify people who need prayer. Members listed various friends, coworkers, relatives and acquaintances who were going through a difficult time, and after each one there was a short discussion. Jeanine then asked for prayer for her sister. Her sister, who was pregnant, had lost her husband, who was a member of the U.S. military in Iraq. After the death of her husband, her sister had very recently given birth and was raising the baby on her own. Jeanine noted that she had read in the news that President Bush’s daughter recently had gotten married<sup>89</sup>. She made a connection with the news to her personal life, angrily noting that “Bush involved us in a war” but still was able to celebrate the positive occasion of his daughter’s wedding while her baby niece would grow up without a father. The other women in the group, who seemed to have heard this story before, offered no direct condolences but thoughtfully inquired about her sister and her niece, asking how the two were doing on*

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<sup>89</sup> President George Bush’s daughter Jenna Bush had gotten married in Texas two weeks earlier on May 12, 2008.

*their own. She answered all of the questions in turn, and then the group returned to the structured Bible study.*

Jeanine was clearly angry about what she saw as an unfair juxtaposition: the happiness of President Bush, who got to celebrate his daughter's wedding, versus the intense sorrow and traumatic change of life of her sister and infant niece. In her comments she hinted at the nature of her disturbance over this: neither of President Bush's daughters was going off to war and thus he did not have to experience this loss. However, Jeanine took it farther, seeing Bush as the ultimate cause of her brother-in-law's death, as he had "involved us in a war" but did not have to suffer the personal consequences of loss. I later saw Jeanine at Sunrise, holding her niece as she listened to the sermon, taking care of the infant to give her sister a respite from childcare and stress.

As indicated in Chapter Six, one hallmark of the Gilmore Group was its cohesiveness, it is apparent that the women feel not only that they can say anything they want about sensitive issues, including gender and war, but also can do so with the assurance that their views, if not always agreed with, are at least respected in this circle. Thus, another distinctive feature of the group is that, because group members trust that their views will be respected, they can be critical – of their religion, the media, their pastors, and politics – in a way not seen in many of the other groups. In the case of politics in general, the women feel very free to criticize popular religious media figures (such as Ben Stein in *Expelled*), conservative public media personalities (such as Rush Limbaugh) and even the President of the U.S.

This level of comfort may be due to the fact that many of them either, lived together, were related to each other, or were close friends: as a result they most likely

knew each other's views well enough to know what was accepted in the group. However, their ability to speak freely was not just due to this, I think. Once, when I asked if the women felt nervous offering viewpoints that went against those of their pastor, one of the women stated that, "anyone in the church can know what I think," indicating also that, unlike some of the other prayer groups, there is no "silence" for these churchgoers in their prayer groups or their public lives.

#### Arnold Group from Sunrise: War and Family

This group from Sunrise was one of the largest of the groups I observed; in fact, when I left the group in April 2009 there was talk of splitting the group, which was so big at that time (about 16 members) that often it overflowed from the living room and extra chairs had to be brought in. Members of the Arnold crowd were younger than those from the other groups, with ages ranging from early thirties to mid-forties. Occupations also varied: the group included a registered dietician, PhD student, editor and research writer, graphic designer, financial services officer, homemaker, data analyst, web administrator, church accountant, mechanic, college professor, and a sales clerk.

If cohesiveness was the defining characteristic of the Gilmore Group, the trait that set the Arnold group apart from the others was the incessant laughter, with members teasing and ribbing each other continuously throughout the evenings that the group met. They were also very much immersed in media culture: it was at the confluence of these two things – mainstream media and their love of laughter – that the best moments from this group came. They cringed – and laughed about – a member who loved reading the *Gossip Girls* book series (a series widely criticized for its portrayals of teenagers who

drink, have sex, and do drugs). They joked about irreverent Monty Python movies – including the *Holy Grail* as well as the *Meaning of Life* – while quoting from the movies (“I’m stuffed: couldn’t eat another bite” and “You’re just banging two coconuts together!”) directly and laughing uproariously, holding on to countertops and spilling their coffees in the process. They rented movies like *Hellboy* (2004), a film about a demon who decides to be good, with some members laughingly suggesting that they all watch it together. They joked about my research – one member referencing sexually explicit media – *Debbie Does Dallas* – because they knew that, my research being on media, it would go into my field notes and I would be writing about it here.

Their obvious ease and conviviality with one another as well as the comfortable way they approached practicing their faith did not preclude them, however, from being active, critical interpreters of elements of their faith, including religious media and their pastor. On several occasions the group was highly critical of the religious videos their pastor assigned for small prayer groups. One night, after watching a DVD produced by the large Willow Creek Association (WCA, of which Sunrise is a member), members grumbled about the length of the video but also on the “tactics” suggested by one of the heads of WCA (Lee Strobel), stating that they seemed calculating and cold as well as impossible for normal Christian families on a budget. When Strobel suggested that Christians go into bakeries and ice cream stores to evangelize, one member of the group exclaimed “How much money does he have anyway? Buying a muffin every day?” to which other members nodded vigorously and shouted in reply “I know!”

Group members were also very aware that the DVDs put out by WCA were commercial products and that they were being treated as consumers by WCA. At one

time the group, after deciding not to watch the rest of a DVD designated for small groups at Sunrise, derisively joked about the fact that the head of the WCA listed his website at the bottom of the screen on the video. Marie, the 40-year old registered dietician, observed that, “there probably isn’t much more to the DVD anyway,” and people laughed. Emma, a 32-year old web administrator, said, “Probably they’ll just ask you to buy the book!” and people laughed again. Franz, a 43-year old editor, intoned mockingly, “Go to lee strobel dot com,” to which Basil, a 34-year old data analyst exclaimed, “I know! I was like, ‘why don’t you just plaster it on the screen?’”<sup>90</sup> Their criticism of the WCA DVDs echoes Shane Hipps’ (2005) observation that employing mass-produced media to develop faith in diverse groups of followers is to use a very blunt and ill-defined tool that will often miss its mark in terms of relevance.

The critical stance Arnold group members took towards the religious media continued when considering another issue, this time not in their church but in the outside world. The following exchange on the issue of war is interesting for several reasons, one of which is the size of the group itself. The large number of members when discussing a potentially polarizing issue like war permitted many different voices and viewpoints to be heard. This exchange provides a detailed view of group members’ beliefs about war, revealing the complexities in beliefs and the way in which these beliefs are shared. This

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<sup>90</sup> The Arnold group members’ continuous criticism of the religious media they were asked by their pastors to watch in their small groups recalls the critical evaluation of religious media exhibited by other small groups members from other churches of religious media, including the Bible, pastors’ videos, and books like the Shack (detailed in Chapter 6). Interestingly, when I asked members of the Arnold group about the mainstream, secular media they use in church (such as movie and television clips) they were wholly uncritical, praising it in the same way their pastors did regarding media’s ability to evangelize and instruct and criticizing media only along the same lines as their pastors (sexuality being the most prominent tension). Thus, in this sense, although group members were very critical of religious media, the criticism stopped when it came to mainstream media, in which they were immersed in their everyday lives, similar to the other groups in this research.



conversation in March 2009 was sparked by a discussion of what moral values represented for members of the group.

*Saul, a 46-year old financial services officer:* Moral values means respect for life in *all* of its forms: not just sanctity of life of the unborn but for elders too.

*Franz, 43-year old editor and research writer (seeming to agree with this):* Yeah, what about what's going on at "Gitmo?"<sup>91</sup> "They [the suspected terrorists] have the right to life too. It's not just a hot button issue here.

*Kathleen, 46-year old PhD Student:* When I think of morals I see what their words versus their actions are. You say you respect life and then you start a war.

*Cash (32-year old **mechanic** - clarify):* We murder them, they murder us. At the end of the day it's still murder.

*Saul:* But if we didn't have war, where would we be? Think of World War Two.

*Cash:* My father was in the military for 22 years. He became an alcoholic to stop having nightmares about what he did.

*Kathleen:* I'm not saying never go to war –

*Saul (interrupting):* Right, 'cause you gotta protect....

*Kathleen (continuing):* – but other things can be explored. We need to see what the options are and also respect other people's ideas.

*Franz (gesturing, hands out to the group):* Yeah. Freedom, your freedom to believe differently from me, and I'm not going to demonize you because you're different.

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<sup>91</sup> His reference to Guantanamo Bay, the controversial U.S. prison camp for suspected terrorists.

Cash: Back on the war thing. I don't mean to go back (*to group, conciliatorily*), but war is a harmful thing. My father killed people that he didn't want to kill.

Me: Which war did your father fight in?

Cash: The Korean War.

Todd (*emphatically, elbows on knees and moving his hands to emphasize*): See, and he felt it was wrong to do that! Makes me wonder what percentage of those in the military say, "That's not the way it should be!"

*Due to the rapid pace of the conversation, none of us had noticed Cash's transformation. Before this conversation began he had been sitting on a couch (next to me), leaning back, one leg crossed casually over the other and one arm dangling over the arm of the couch. Now his posture had changed. He was bent forward, elbows on knees, head cradled in hands, and then spoke again, this time to the floor.*

Cash (*voice trembling*): War took my father from me. Because of what he did, and his drinking, I never got to know my father –

*Cash broke off here, crying, head still cradled in his hands, then suddenly jumped up and ran to the bathroom. We all sat in stunned silence a moment and I closed my notebook. No one spoke for a few long moments. Then someone said, "Wow, he really talks when Dena (his wife) is not around." No one laughed at this but it seemed to break the tension and we were then able to resume quiet conversation while Cash was in the bathroom. People started talking about war. Someone had visited a concentration camp while visiting Europe several years ago and said it was horrific. To this person's story someone else said loudly, "No thanks," indicating that they wouldn't want to see the horrors of a concentration camp. Someone else (I still wasn't writing at this point) said*

*that they believed that the effects of war resonate for a long time. Cash now came back to the living room and sat down next to me, turning to me quietly while others continued to speak and apologized, saying that he hoped that he hadn't derailed my research while gesturing at my closed notebook. I told him he hadn't and quietly asked if he was ok. He said he was, and turned his head away from me and rejoined the conversation on a different topic.*

The Arnold group enables a good view of the wide diversity of opinion on an issue like war in individuals from just one church. Admittedly, war is and has always been a divisive issue in contemporary society, on both a personal and political level. The conversation transcribed above reveals that almost every opinion about war from members of this group is different. Some of the members sat on the fence, like Kathleen, who was unsure about the morality of war but was not willing to condemn it outright either. Saul expressed a complex view as well, clearly believing in a version of the sanctity of life that extended beyond the abortion argument to include the rights of the elderly; however, he then seemed to conceive of death in battle as an acceptable consequence of the need to fight a just war (such as WWII). Franz, on the other hand, advocated clearly for the right to life for everyone, including American soldiers forced to fight in foreign wars and for suspected terrorists held by his government. Finally, Cash's poignant sharing of his story about his father indicated how personal events in his family shaped his views about war – namely that it is “murder,” no matter what side does the killing. His raw statements to the group indicated how “moral values” in terms of faith didn't seem to apply: he wouldn't talk about war in terms of the need to evangelize or as

a moral imperative (as others did in this and other groups). For him, war did not seem to be an abstract concept that could be discussed in that way.

In sum, myriad complex perspectives about war were expressed in this group, underscoring the real diversity within churches that might seem homogeneous (in terms of age, ethnicity, or faith) at a surface glance. Thus far this research has regularly included an assessment of the interactions in these small groups, with some groups being more tolerant of diverse viewpoints than others. This group exchange in particular provides a good illustration of how disparate viewpoints are received in a respectful manner. Clearly, some views were on opposite ends of the spectrum to others, represented by the difference between the belief of a moral imperative for rights for suspected terrorists versus seeing war and death in terms of a more traditional “moral values” issue. As with most of the other groups when talking about war (or gender), no apparent consensus was reached, but this did not seem to be the point of the discussion: it was to share only and not to convert others to certain perspectives. For the final example of war in these groups we now turn to a different small group from the Harvest Church, in which a different type of exchange was observed.

#### The Schneider Group from Harvest: “Not My President”

The Schneider Group was a gathering of people from the Harvest that had met weekly in the evenings in the fall for only a few times before disbanding, for reasons explained below. I first began attending this group in early September 2008 but by late October the group had stopped meeting. As with the other groups from other churches the backgrounds of the members of this group were diverse and included a technician, a

truck driver, a homemaker, a photographer and a graphic designer. Like the other groups as well this group was all white but the average age was a little older: most were in their fifties and sixties. During my first meeting with this group the leader, Dan, a 67-year old former truck driver, told those of us who came that we wouldn't be discussing politics while in the group. It was tempting, he said, because the presidential election was coming up and we would want to talk about it. But he preferred that we used the time for Bible study, discussion, and prayer. Immediately, however, the group began discussing politics and it became clear that there were divergent views on just about everything: from politics to personal faith to war.

War came up early and often in this group. As with Sunrise's Arnold group described above, for some members of this group war was not an abstract concept but instead one that held deep personal meaning. A discussion I had with one of the members of the groups on my first night illustrates this well. On the first night of the group Dan had asked us to describe a previous job we had held and what we liked about it. I told the group, when asked, that I used to be a forensic anthropologist who worked for the U.S. government and that I had liked the challenge as well as the ability to bring home the remains of American military to families, bringing closure. After the group had ended and all of us were making small talk as we gathered our things, Randy, a 62-year old technician (and former air assault sniper for the U.S. military), approached me and told me that he had fought in Vietnam. He told me in the presence of a couple of others about his experiences in southern Vietnam (near Saigon). He described for us how he would crouch down in the middle of the jungle in all of his gear, waiting for someone to kill or for someone to kill him. He even noted the position in which he had to hold his

rifle (tilted down slightly at an angle) to ensure that the rain wouldn't get in and he could still fire his weapon if needed. He said that the waiting was the worst. He wanted especially to know what my experience in Vietnam was like, especially in reference to my encounters with the Vietnamese people and I told him honestly: that I had an impression, based upon the media I had seen as a young adult, that all Vietnamese were angry, dangerous people. Instead, my experience in Vietnam revealed that the people were very warm and welcoming, wishing to put their violent past with the U.S. behind them and create friendship instead. Randy agreed, stating that, as he was going through some of the bodies of the Viet Cong, he had opened a dead man's wallet and found a photo of his family. To the man standing before me, the photo meant that "these people, they were just like me... but I didn't want to be killed either," suggesting that the choice for him was a difficult one: to kill someone or be killed himself. Randy also discussed the aftereffects of war for him on a personal level. He said he had beaten his first wife in his sleep due to nightmares, stating that even now (in 2008), his current wife could not wake him up by touching him on the shoulder; if she did, he said he would throw her off the bed thinking still that she was an enemy soldier coming to kill him. He continued by telling me that he continued to have a recurring dream that he was walking through an airport in Vietnam and he looked up to see a banner with a series of numbers and letters on it that indicated that someone died. In the dream he saw that was his own signifier – his initial plus the last four of his social security number – and he realized as he read it that he was now dead.

For Randy, as with Cash in the Sunrise group, death is a highly personal issue. I think Randy came to tell me his story because, in the process of participating in the group

that same night (the group had asked the question of what past job we had that we had enjoyed and why) I had mentioned that I used to be a forensic anthropologist who had worked in Southeast Asia recovering the remains of U.S. military considered missing in action. I believe in his conversations with me he thought he found a kindred spirit. When we recounted together how many American service members were killed in Vietnam he shook his head in wonder and dismay at the number. He seemed to be against war but in general did not pass judgment on it in group discussions, perhaps because he thought his negative opinion on war would have the same reception as in the exchange described below. However, this can't be known as I never asked him.

Like Randy, a few other members of the group appeared to be against war. As a result, like other political issues (that fell mostly along the conservative/liberal divide in impassioned and at times acrimonious arguments), war was a topic that that kept bubbling up to the surface as the group met. The excerpt below was taken from a prayer group that met in September of 2008 where members discussed (or tried to discuss) the war in Iraq.

*Dan read an ice-breaker question from the sheet in front of him labeled "Discovery!" that had a logo on the front of the page that looked like the logo for the Discovery Channel (an earth). The question was "Has anyone has been close to someone at death?" Randy shrugged his shoulders and spoke up: "I have, I've seen battle." After a moment Dean, a 57-year old photographer and graphic designer, recounted how he saw a man who had just died in a hospital and that no one there seemed to care. The deceased man had been put in a closet, and so when the hospital staff left he went into the closet with the man and "sent him off" (by which he meant*

saying a prayer for him) noting that he hoped someone had done the same for his father, who passed away among strangers. Dan nodded at this and then turned back to Randy, saying, "You've been in the heat of battle. You've seen combat." Randy nodded and told us how he would try to help his fellow soldiers – "I would try to stop the wound" if I could, he said. Looking rueful, he also added that there were "a couple I've sent off – close and personal." I wondered what he meant by this: had he killed them himself? I thought that might well be what he was referring to.

After finishing with the Ice Breaker questions Dan then began the formal prayer group, reading from the scripture suggested by the Harvest for the group. However, Dean appeared to want to stay on the topic of death and war. He said, "We so quickly embrace the food of others," like Indian, he says, emphasizing the word "food," but "not their belief system. Why don't we interact with them?" he wondered aloud. Jan, 67, homemaker and wife to Dan, the group leader, answered Dean's question with an example of her own. She recently – with other Christians from her church – had met with Muslim women from a mosque near the university in Smallville. They had met once and planned to meet again; however, she stated that none of the Muslim women showed up the second time.

Dean, not seeming to hear Jan's comments, continued on his topic, quietly but in a way that was beginning to feel a bit confrontational: "Why are we going to war? Why are we sending our young people over there to fight?" he asked the group. At this, Jan lifted her right hand up (she was sitting on a couch and he was seated in chair directly to her right) in the "stop" position (palm bent up and facing Dean) and said loudly: "Stop right there! We aren't talking about that. We volunteer!" in a voice that made me cringe



*a little due to its strident sound (that didn't match Dean's quieter tone). Cathleen, seated on the couch with Jan, two spaces to her right (Cathleen's husband Ash was between Cathleen and Jan) responds in a way that surprises me: "I don't know about the term 'we': I didn't vote for war, and I didn't vote for Bush. Bush stole the election: Gore is the real president," she said in the hoarse whisper that characterized all of her speech*<sup>92</sup>. *Jan's other hand flew up in Carrie's direction now in the same "stop position." With a raised voice she yelled "Stop! We aren't talking about that. This conversation has the potential to become heated."*

*Although she indicated she didn't want to talk about it, Jan then continued, saying that "The soldiers that come home say that it [the war in Iraq] needs to be done" and that it is a good thing. "Thought we weren't talking about it," Carrie whispered, a smile playing on the corners of her mouth in a way that seemed not entirely friendly. Gary, a 58-year old computer technician who had been silent until now, breaks in with "My understanding is that we're going after terrorists," and some people nod at this in apparent agreement. With the tension broken somewhat by Guy's comment, the group continued with the remainder of the meeting, although Dean broke in once more to offer to help Dan go to the park to have a barbecue to evangelize, something I noted he refused to do before. After the meeting Cathleen approached Jan and made conversation about the weather and the upcoming week. Dean also went up to Dan and discussed the evangelism effort in the park. After this the group ended and we walked out to our separate cars together.*

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<sup>92</sup> This may have been due to a physical problem; however, this was never explained and I did not ask.

Of the groups I observed during my time in the field with evangelicals, the argument in this meeting seemed to be the most acrimonious and divisive. Dean appeared to care very much about war and clearly wanted to discuss it with the group, even when there were some early signs that Jan didn't want to discuss it. Jan, in her statements, appeared to support war, using as her reason the perception that U.S. soldiers themselves wanted be in Iraq. Carrie's and Jan's exchange was thought-provoking as well, striking in its strident nature and relative lack of friendliness and civility. The conversation had seemed to strike a nerve with Carrie as she immediately jumped into an unequivocal criticism of George Bush, stating that she didn't consider him to be her president. As an outside observer (I had only come to the group a few times thus far) it seemed as though the tensions were always directly beneath the surface, and Dean's comments brought them easily and immediately to the fore.

Like all of the other groups discussed in this chapter there were divergent views on war; unlike other groups, however, this difference of opinion resulted in fairly rancorous debate. *Debate*, however, is probably the wrong word. The exchange between Jan, Dean and Cathleen resembled less a debate or discussion and seemed closer to an argument, and a lopsided one at that. Jan, although not the group leader, seemed to be the one who was able to control the exchange, to decide who got to say what. This was exemplified especially when she ordered – in a way that was both strongly verbal as well as physical – Dean and Cathleen to “stop,” to not say more.

Even more telling, perhaps, was that I observed that both members of the group who had the dissenting voices, Cathleen and Dean, approached Jan and Dan individually after the group: Dean to talk to Dan more about setting up the barbecue to evangelize in

the park, and Cathleen to talk to Jan about her upcoming week and the weather. The significance of the exchange between Dean and Dan would seem to be relatively minor: Dean, a member of the group, wants to help his friend and group leader Dan with his project. However, a discussion the week before on going to the park to evangelize had resulted in Dean's flat out refusal to go because he didn't feel comfortable with it. After Dean's comments on war this night, however, and the resulting harsh argument that followed, it seemed that he was looking for a way to calm the waters.

Cathleen approaching Jan is interesting as well, in part because Jan appeared fairly flustered and angry, her mouth set in a hard, silent line, after the argument. Cathleen, in discussing weather and schedules, appeared to want to also smooth ruffled feathers by engaging in a form of *phatic* communication. *Phatic communion*, a phrase coined by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, is a form of small talk, "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words" (1994. 10). The importance of phatic communion here is that it was Cathleen and Dean, the ones who provided dissenting opinions about war, who approached Jan and Dan, respectively. This maintenance of the social order thus seems to be a continuation of an unequal power structure as well, where dissenting members supplicate those who hold the seemingly dominant set of views, in this case views about war.

The group met only a few times after that, with only a few members in attendance each time. The stated reason given by Dan was that there were other church duties that required him and his wife Jan on those nights, but it also seemed that a group with such heated arguments would have a difficult time being cohesive. In other groups, differences of opinion did not seem to create interpersonal conflict, except in the other

Harvest group, the Hunt's. However, even in the Hunt group, which had potentially divisive moments, the group members stayed; in this group, however, the differences, or at least the way of dealing with differences, seemed to prove too divisive, resulting in the discontinuation of the group. This disbanding seems to support Wuthnow's (1994) statement that groups tend to have a built-in mechanism to avoid conflict, which is that members with contradictory beliefs tend to leave the group. In this particular case, all of the members left.

### *Discussion*

Observations of the various exchanges from the prayer groups unearth a few trends, one of which is how a topic like war is discussed in terms of faith. For some, such as Ralph in the River Rock group or Saul from Sunrise Church, the war seemed to be an abstract concept and therefore one that could be discussed in wider terms of biblical prophecy and oil, or tied to the morality of past wars such as World War II. For others who had direct experience with war and its consequences – like Randy, Cash, and Jeanine – the concept was not abstract but was instead a deeply personal, very real event that resonated deeply in their lives and those of their loved ones. As a result, when the war in Iraq was able to be discussed as an abstract concept, the evangelicals in these groups could talk about war in terms of their faith, including Biblical scripture, prophecy and notions of morality; when war – current or past – had affected their own lives directly, individuals seemed to avoid discussing it in terms of their faith, instead addressing the perceived morality of the issue on an individual level, with real examples from their own lives of the harmful repercussions. Put another way, personal experience in these

individuals shaped perceptions of war in a way that seemed to override considerations of faith or political leaning. This does not mean necessarily that individuals who experienced the effects of war directly did not ever consider war in terms of their faith; however, in their discussions in small groups faith did not come up when they discussed the issue.

In addition, from observations of group exchanges on both war and gender in different churches it appears as though some groups may be more open to dissent than others and this seems to vary by church. In general, most of small group members appeared to feel not only that they were able to voice their opinions but also that they felt comfortable belonging to a church that had divergent views from their own. Members of Harvest Church seem to be the least accepting of differences in opinion, either in regards to gender relations or to views on war and politics. This was exemplified by the discussion regarding patriarchy in the Hunt group, where Regina's uneasiness with what she considered patriarchal language created strong interpersonal conflict with Shauna, who not only would not listen to Regina's viewpoint but also seemed to try to silence her. It was also seen in the Schneider group in this chapter, where divergent viewpoints about U.S. involvement in war were not allowed to even be spoken in the group. In the Harvest Church groups, then, the tenor of discussions about difficult issues such as gender and war were markedly different from the tolerance if not acceptance of alternate viewpoints on political and social issues in the other churches.

It is important to note that, having identified this potential pattern of silencing in several of the Harvest prayer groups, dissent still clearly existed in the church. Although Regina became silent after her vitriolic exchange with Shauna, and Dean and Cathleen

agreed to stop talking about the war after Jan ordered them to stop, this does not necessarily mean that there is the “spiral of silence” that Noelle-Neumann (1974) recognized. The central tenet of the spiral of silence theory holds that those in the minority often will not speak up for fear of exposing their difference – and thereby isolating themselves – from the majority. However, it is clear from the exchanges that members continue to try to make their opinions known in these groups.

The smaller instances of conflict and potential silencing at several of the Harvest Groups are reflected in the wider church leadership as well. Here it is useful to describe Val, the Hunt Group’s leader, in more detail. Although Val in a previous group had affectionately called one of his group members Regina his resident “radical,” he also referred to himself (on other occasions) in the same way. In other prayer groups both Val and his wife Helen stated that they felt as though they were hanging on “by our teeth” at the church. They had come from a church that emphasized the social gospel, which for them meant fighting social inequality (economic, racial, gender) and caring for those in need. They came to the Harvest because of the church’s emphasis on evangelism, something they felt was lacking in their previous church. They felt like they were hanging on by their teeth because of what they perceived as the Harvest’s lack of concern for the social gospel as well as the church’s conservative stance on other issues. In a case that illuminates the tension, Val wanted to start an environmental group at the church. When he first asked church leadership for permission to start the group he said it created a “firestorm,” receiving much negative (and often acrimonious) feedback, which Val noted seemed to stem from the politically liberal association between environmental causes and the Democratic party (and, specifically, U.S. politician Al Gore).

The importance of Val's example is this: despite opposition from many within the church leadership (due to politically conservative views, according to Val), the pastor ultimately allowed Val to start his group, even promoting it (very cautiously) in one of his Sunday sermons at the megachurch and allowing an environmental fair to be held at the church the same day. Val told me that he believed the pastor had let him create a potentially divisive group within the church because Val was able to justify it scripturally (and he was persistent, he told me with a grin). Thus, even though the church leadership may have disagreed with Val's personal and public politics, they slowly permitted him some freedom and even allowed him the chance to flourish, making him the head not only of some of the smaller prayer groups but also larger, church-wide groups that addressed racial and environmental issues. The church did not shut him out but instead allowed him to make headway on the issues he felt were biblically important. The example is important because, even in a church where dissent is seen often to be silenced in small groups, church leaders still allowed Val, who held significantly divergent views from their own, to do what work he felt compelled (Biblically and personally) to do.

The Harvest example indicates that although some churches may hold rather rigid views, these churches are not necessarily static, but instead slowly bend and change to accommodate the diversity of viewpoints of its members. During my observations, then, I appear to have caught the church in a moment of change: while small group leaders may still have reflected the rigidity of their church leaders, church leaders themselves were starting to be open to some change. This points to another interesting phenomenon that emerged from the observations, and that is that several of the prayer groups did appear to reflect the views of leadership. I found it unusual at first that members of the two groups

at River Rock I visited said essentially the same thing about war: that it was an inevitability until Jesus returned. I also found it interesting that attempts to silence dissenting viewpoints came from the same church (Harvest). Perhaps this is not so surprising, as churches either draw members with similar views or members, once they come to a church, are influenced by the teaching of their pastors (or both). I believe what surprised me was the observation that, no matter how similar in views some groups might be to their churches, there is still difference constantly bubbling up from within.

Discussing the interconnection between differences of opinion and mainstream media, the exchange at the all-male River Rock prayer group makes clear that one cannot talk about a uniform “cause and effect” of anything, including media and views on a complex phenomenon like war. While Ralph was able to draw concepts regarding good versus evil from *Braveheart* and apply them to his personal beliefs about war, Julius, a member of the same church, had almost opposite views. Although discussions with members of the various small groups indicate that they use mainstream media often for personal and spiritual growth, this relationship is not a phenomenon that lends itself easily to a simple formula as these churches appear to be places of diverse opinions about issues rather than sites of homogeneity.

These observations lead back easily into a discussion of the notion of evangelical heterogeneity, the subject of these two chapters. The manifold discussions and arguments in prayer groups present war as a very real tension and thus a divisive issue for these churches as it is in larger American society in general. This tension is highlighted by the seeming homogeneity of the prayer groups and the churches from which they come: they are almost exclusively white, from the same geographic region, and a fairly



narrow (and older) age range. These findings temper previous research on religion and politics such as Silk et al. (2008), who concluded that the political belief of religious individuals is strongly shaped by geographic region, in which difference is seen to exist in religious belief *between* regions but *within* regions there is general consonance and agreement. In addition, often when diversity of belief (whether political, social, or religious) in evangelicals is acknowledged, it has been seen as an inter-church phenomenon; that is, differences are seen between churches and not necessarily within them. In some contrast to these conclusions, however, what these two chapters on prayer group discussions about two issues – gender and war – have unearthed is significant variance even in this fairly narrow subset of Christianity: white evangelical seekers from the American Midwest.

### *Conclusion*

This section of the research has permitted a glimpse into how evangelicals feel about the political issue of war, in the process revealing the nature of dissent in these churches and how evangelicals try to navigate these issues within church membership. Although the mainstream, secular media in these four churches may contain patriarchal and militaristic ideologies it is clear that evangelicals do not always subscribe to these views. In fact, even though the evangelicals in this study had immersed themselves in mainstream media culture, so much so that these media were inextricably woven into the fabric of their everyday lives, churchgoers were very much active and critical thinkers about the issue of war, which exists in contrast to the media they experienced in church.

## **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**

Ellen Elizabeth Moore is a product of the California public school system. She was born in San Francisco, California and attended the University of California at Berkeley for her Bachelor's degree in Anthropology. Her graduate level work includes receiving her Master's Degree in Forensic Anthropology from the University of Tennessee Knoxville and her doctorate from the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign in Communications in 2010.

In the midst of the quest for numerous degrees spanning a 20-year period, Ellen Moore worked as an archaeologist in Europe and the United States. While preparing to work towards a PhD in Archaeology in the United Kingdom, Dr. Moore was contacted by the United States government requesting her to work with the Department of Defense at Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu, Hawaii recovering the remains of U.S. military service members who did not return from the Vietnam conflict. She spent the next three years excavating plane crash sites in the jungles of Laos and Vietnam while living in Hawaii. Upon completion of her work, Dr. Moore came to Illinois to complete her degree in Communications, particularly interested in religion, media and politics, including environmental communication.

Ellen Moore has received numerous teaching awards, including the competitive "Teachers Ranked as Excellent by Their Students" in 2006, 2007, and 2009. Dr. Moore also has numerous publications dealing with religion and media, as well as the political economy of media and environmental issues. She is currently awaiting her next adventure, this time in teaching.