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The Pulpit and the People: Mobilizing Evangelical Identity

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

by

Tim Moser

December 2017

Dr. Joseph Baker, Chair

Dr. Martha Copp

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ABSTRACT

The Pulpit and the People: Mobilizing Evangelical Identity

by

Tim Moser

Using ten sermons from five prominent and politically active evangelical megachurch pastors taken from the 2016 presidential campaign season, this case study utilizes frame analysis to understand the political relevance of modern evangelical sermonizing. An inductive frame analysis allows the concept of a collective action frame to be observed as a process and for patterns to emerge from the source text. Within these sermons, ministers offer self-identifying evangelicals a vocabulary with which to understand and describe their own identity. In this context, the Bible is a powerful cultural symbol that represents an allegiance to traditions that are framed as the bedrock of American exceptionalism. The boundaries that are drawn and vociferously maintained in this sample emphasize exclusion over inclusion, especially in terms of salvation and righteousness, which can emotionally motivate action. In an election year, this sample demonstrates how evangelical identity is mobilized as an electoral force.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the “heathens” of the Plateau. May we know and love the population we serve, but never at the expense of our intellectual dignity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The first and most important people I want to thank are my parents. Both United Methodist ministers, I was raised to be a believer, but also to be a thinker. Although my spiritual journey has taken me places I don't think they ever anticipated or wanted, my mother and father taught me everything I know about right and wrong. My two older brothers also deserve a shout out, so here's to Ben and Zack, I never feel more like myself than when those two are on my flanks.

Dr. Anthony Hickey was my first sociology professor at Western Carolina University. He made me feel okay about having a general disposition that can be characterized by an extended middle finger, and for that I am eternally grateful. Dr. Martha Copp taught me how to veil that disposition in a cheerful smile, which is pretty cool. Dr. Paul Kamolnick and I still don't speak the exact same language, but we communicated pretty well anyway. Dr. Joseph Baker taught me more than I think he knows, and showed undying patience with me throughout my graduate school career—most of which I spent just trying not to disappoint him. Dr. Foster and Dr. McAllister did not serve on my thesis committee, so they owe me one. My cohort at ETSU is a group I will always be proud to have been a part of, I always looked forward to being on campus surrounded by friends.

Finally, I want to mention that I finished this project during the first couple of months of working as an Americorps VISTA on the South Cumberland Plateau. My new friends here “on the mountain” are an eclectic bunch; some have felonies, some have degrees, but all of them have my back. To my program beneficiaries, thanks for teaching me about the other side of the mountain. To the VISTAs—thanks for the card, let's hang out.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“If my people, who are called by My name, shall humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and HEAL THEIR LAND.” (2 Chronicles 7:14, as written on the “Lift the Vote” busses)

The above passage is inscribed on each side of a full-size red, white, and blue bus—along with a large cross and a “Lift the Vote” logo featuring the date “November 8, 2016.” The “Lift the Vote” bus tour, hailing from Nashville, TN, was a voter registration drive that sought to increase the number of evangelical Christians that would vote in the 2016 election. On the “Lift the Vote” Facebook page, organizers note that “over 17 million Evangelical Christians did not vote in the past two presidential elections,” and that “the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) has launched a campaign to register and turn out the votes of one million Muslims in this election.”¹ Co-chair of the “Lift the Vote” bus tour, Dana Hunsinger Gill, adds that “[f]rom the Supreme Court to the protection of religious liberties for all, to issues that directly impact the moral decline that we have been experiencing for too long, it has never been more important in my lifetime for Followers of Jesus to be organized, pray together, and vote.”² “Lift the Vote” was not the only organized initiative to increase evangelical voter turnout in 2016. Franklin Graham, son of famous evangelist Billy Graham, spearheaded the 50-state “Decision America” tour, and former Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson led the “My

¹This was taken from the Lift the Vote Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/liftthevote/> (accessed Nov. 11, 2016).

²www.liftthevote.org (last accessed November 11, 2016)

Faith Votes” group, both with the same basic goals as the “Lift the Vote” bus tour (Hughes 2016). While these “get out the vote” programs did not officially endorse any candidate or party in particular, there was an indelibly conservative slant to them. That political conservatism in the United States has had a close relationship with white evangelical Protestantism over the past 40 years is well-established (Balmer 2006; Sutton 2015; Swartz 2012; Worthen 2015).

The 2016 election cycle offered an opportune moment to further examine the link between evangelical faith and conservative politics for several reasons. First, evangelical Protestants seem to have more staying power than other Christian denominations; as other denominations continue to see their number of members dwindle, evangelicals’ numbers have remained fairly steady over the past few years (Pew Research Center 2016). Second, evangelicals represent a fairly consolidated voting bloc; about three quarters of self-identified evangelicals have voted for the Republican presidential candidate in each of the past three US presidential elections, and as many as 81 percent voted for Donald Trump in November (Smith and Martinez 2016). Finally, as trends in church attendance drift toward the “megachurch” paradigm, the most prominent evangelical ministers are growing their influence as they are now preaching to larger weekly congregations than ever before (Chaves 2006; Willaime and Maddox 2012).

Taken together, these trends—evangelicals’ high rates of church membership, their predictable voting patterns, and the increasing prominence and visibility of their pastors—form the basic premise for researching how evangelical leaders talk about issues that are politically relevant. In the United States, identifying as an evangelical

Protestant now seems almost synonymous with identifying as politically conservative. How is this conservative political ideology maintained by leaders of the evangelical community? In other words, how do these increasingly influential evangelical ministers preach politics from the pulpit, whether directly or indirectly? I address these questions through a content analysis of the sermons of some of the most prominent, and politically active, evangelical ministers in the United States. The initial investigative structure is that of a frame analysis, which is rooted in social movement studies (Benford and Snow 2000). The operative question, then, is the extent to which the ministers in this sample actively participate in “framing wars” over politically relevant issues.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Persistence of Evangelicalism

Polling data continue to show that more Americans identify as evangelical than any other religious category with the exception of “unaffiliated” or religious “nones” (Smith and Martinez 2016). The continuing rise in the number of Americans who identify as non-religious has been well-documented (Baker and Smith 2015; Jones et al. 2016), but evangelicals are experiencing a slower decline than most other denominations. According to data collected by the Pew Research Center, white evangelical numbers shrank by just 0.9 percent from 2007 to 2014, compared to 3.4 percent for mainline Protestants and 3.1 percent for Catholics. The non-religious category saw an increase of 6.7 percent in the same time period (Pew Research Center 2016). But while secularism is on the rise in the United States as a whole, the voting population still tends to be largely religious. The Pew Research Center’s preliminary analysis of exit polls during the 2016 general election shows that those who identify as “born again/evangelical” comprised 26 percent of the electorate, while the “religiously unaffiliated” made up only 15 percent (Smith and Martinez 2016). Not only do evangelicals appear to have staying power in American culture in general, all signs seem to indicate a persistent and even greater electoral influence as well.

The Evangelical Voting Bloc

Part of the reality of evangelical influence in electoral politics is the growing uniformity in the way white evangelicals vote. Weekly attendance at an evangelical

church has become the most reliable predictor of voting Republican in this century (Campbell 2007). In 2008, 74 percent of white evangelicals voted for Republican candidate John McCain; in 2012, 78 percent voted for Mitt Romney (Smith and Martinez, 2016). In the time leading up to the November 2016 election, some pundits questioned if Donald Trump—who is, as Trump himself admitted to his board of evangelical advisors, “by no means a saint” (Gainesville Times)—would garner that same level of support from the evangelical community (Goodstein 2016). Contrary to those doubts, evangelicals voted even more heavily for Trump than they did for Romney or McCain at 81 percent (Smith and Martinez 2016).

Finding an exact definition of evangelicalism is a difficult task. In fact, a key marker of evangelical belief is an aversion to a central denominational authority (Balmer 2006; Bean 2014; Smidt 2013), which makes finding a unifying evangelical doctrine difficult to pin down. Smidt (2013), while placing emphasis on the wide range of evangelical belief, offered a definition that is consistent with the predominance of the literature (see Lindsay 2007), writing that

...evangelical Protestantism is distinguished by the general tendency of its members to affirm that personal salvation is obtained through Jesus Christ, to call individuals to conversion by turning from their old selves into ‘a new creature for Christ,’ and to hold the Bible to be the final authority on all matters of faith and practice. (p. 41)

This definition identifies three beliefs that forge the evangelical identity: individual commerce with God and “born again” self-identities, an emphasis on evangelism (which would seem self-evident), and unwavering reliance on biblical guidance for daily life. None of these tenets seem to require an inclination toward political conservatism, yet

public opinion research has, time and again, found that the vast majority of white evangelicals hold political beliefs consistent with American conservatives on a plethora of issues. From opinions on gay marriage (Gaines and Garand 2010; Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006) to welfare policy (Wilson 1999) and attitudes toward wealth distribution (McCarthy et al. 2012) and social insurance (Scheve and Stasavage 2006), researchers have found that white evangelicals demonstrate remarkable consistency on topical political issues.

These studies have all, in one form or another, used survey data and quantitative analysis to arrive at these conclusions. To reconcile these findings with assertions from qualitative methodologists that there is a great deal of variance in evangelical belief patterns (Balmer 2006; Bean 2014; Smidt 2013) is a difficult task, indeed. How is it that a group that seems so qualitatively diverse can statistically be reduced to such uniformity in quantitative public opinion research? I propose that this dynamic can be more fully appreciated by a systematic, qualitative analysis of elite evangelical discourse—mediated in the sample for this study through sermons.

Megachurches

While megachurches have their historical roots in 16th Century Europe—when Protestant architects first began to design large, multi-purpose church buildings—they did not become a ubiquitous fixture of the suburban American landscape until the 1980s (Eagle 2015), and it was not until the 2000s that Thumma and Travis (2007) offered the generally accepted definition of a megachurch as a Protestant congregation with at least 2,000 regular attendees. The megachurch phenomenon has been described as part of larger cultural movement toward mass consumerism (Eagle 2015; Marie and

Harkin 2010; Sanders 2016; Willaime and Maddox 2012). Fewer people are attending worship services at churches that are tied to their community or neighborhood, a trend that reflects the waning small-town culture that was part of the American mystique of the 1950s (Putnam 1995; Wuthnow 1989). Many of the locally-owned “mom and pop” shops have been replaced by corporate behemoths that emphasize efficiency and uniformity over charm and a personal touch. In this same way, megachurches are replacing the community-based neighborhood congregations—representing the “walmartization of religion” (Wollschleger and Porter 2011).³

Megachurch pastors often do not dispute this observation, but embrace it and deem the megachurch a significant innovation that helps Christianity adapt to the needs of modernity. As Rick Warren put it in 1988,

There’s a trend all across America moving away from the small neighborhood churches to larger regional-type churches. It’s the same phenomenon with malls replacing the mom and pop stores on the corner. People will drive past all kinds of little shopping centers to go to a major mall, where there are lots of services and where they meet their needs. The same is true in churches today in that people drive past dozens of little churches to go to a larger church which offers more services and special programs. (Quoted in Eagle 2015)

The outcome of this trend is that more and more people are attending a small number of churches. And this does not necessarily mean that more and more megachurches are being built, but—in the same way that a large corporation might corner a market and

³ In order to avoid misrepresenting Wollschleger and Porter’s work, I should note that they did not find that megachurches lead to declining numbers for all churches in their area, but mostly just those that “occupy similar niches” (p. 294). A new evangelical megachurch, for example, seemingly pulls much of its congregants from smaller evangelical churches—especially those in adjacent counties, interestingly—while mainline Protestant and Catholic churches seem to be immune to the effect, but a large Episcopal church, for instance, may draw numbers from smaller Methodist churches nearby.

see lopsided profits—the churches that are already the largest are also growing the fastest (Chaves 2006).

Thumma and Bird’s megachurch survey (2015) shows the importance of the pastor to these large congregations.⁴ When asked to rate the importance of several factors in attracting them to the church initially and in retaining their membership, megachurch attendees rated the “senior pastor” as the highest or second highest factor on both accounts. That the largest churches are continuing to grow, coupled with the noted importance of the senior pastor to the worshipers, means the reach and potential influence of the leaders of megachurches is remarkable. As such, it follows that the words spoken each week by these pastors may play a role in establishing or maintaining a coherent worldview within a religious tradition that lacks formal, ecumenical leadership structures. If this is the case, these sermons are an important aspect of the Christian Right and its ability to mobilize.⁵

Christian Nationalism

In terms of evangelical political action, Christian nationalism is a key factor in evangelical social movements. Christian nationalism can be broadly defined “as a belief that America has been and should always be distinctively Christian in its identity, sacred symbols, values, and policies” (Perry and Whitehead 2015: p. 123). Christian nationalism has been criticized because it can conflate romantic ideals of Christian

⁴ <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html> (last accessed on December 5, 2016)

⁵ Clergy’s political behavior has received considerable attention since the Civil Rights Movement, when the most politically active ministers tended to be African American or otherwise adherents of liberal theological principles. This “new breed” of activist clergy was described in contrast to evangelical ministers, whose individualistic beliefs and premillennialist roots often dissuaded political activism (Hadden 1969; Quinley 1974). The rise of the Christian Right as a force in U.S. politics demonstrated that this trend had shifted, or perhaps that previous understandings of the political implications of conservative or individualistic theology were somewhat flawed (Guth et al. 1997).

American heritage with that of White American heritage. Previous studies demonstrate that Christian nationalist belief is a reliable predictor of both anti-immigration stances (McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle 2010), opposition to trans-racial adoption (Perry and Whitehead 2015), and opposition to same-sex marriage (Whitehead and Perry 2015). The latter study in particular has been used to argue that—in some cases—in the ostensible quest for religio-national purity, an embrace of ethno-national purity is laid bare. This argument is problematic in its breadth. While there is overlap between Christian nationalism and white nationalism—especially within white nationalist movements that made national headlines in 2017—the two movements are distinct phenomena.

In terms of identity work (which will be discussed in detail in this analysis), Christian nationalism is a key motivating factor for evangelical social movements in the United States. The idea that the United States has always been, and should continue to be, a nation founded on Judeo-Christian principles can inform a variety of political beliefs. In the 1970s, Jimmy Carter and other prominent evangelicals argued that the United States' Christian roots involve a mandate to foster inclusion and equality (Banwart 2013). Christian nationalism is not an inherently racist ideology, but can be used as a moral justification for selective exclusion from American prosperity (McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle 2010). For my study, Christian nationalism is an important concept because of what it symbolizes: a unified history of American identity. From Christopher Columbus to the Massachusetts Bay Colony to placing “under God” in the pledge of allegiance, Christianity—to the evangelical—is precisely what made America great.

Evangelicalism and Conservatism: A Brief History of a Movement

Before the Moral Majority

The 1980 election was a watershed moment for evangelical political organizing, but even before Jerry Falwell’s “Moral Majority” backed Ronald Reagan over Jimmy Carter (the first self-professed evangelical to be elected president) in 1980, the foundation for a partnership between evangelicals and American conservatism had already been established. An important instance of the impact that evangelical political organization could have on the electoral process was in 1928, when evangelicals were mobilized antagonistically to defeat Al Smith. Smith was the Democratic nominee for president, a Catholic, and purportedly a heavy drinker. Evangelicals had previously organized in favor of prohibition, and then used that fervor to cement opposition to Smith (Sutton 2015).⁶ That victory helped to prompt a concerted effort to organize fundamentalist opposition to modernism in the 1930s and 1940s—an opposition that stemmed from anti-evolution sentiments (ibid)—and led to the establishment of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in 1942.

What had been a discursive movement that almost sporadically found issues around which to organize—the additions of “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance and

⁶Catholicism in the United States was, and to a large extent still is, the denomination of the immigrant. While the opposition to Smith was ostensibly about prohibition, anti-immigration sentiments fueled much of evangelicals’ general distaste for Catholicism in the early and mid-20th Century (Bloom et al. 2015; Nteta and Wallsten 2012; Wickersham 2013), representing an early example of the link between evangelicalism and a discomfort with social change.

“in God we trust” to U.S. paper currency in the 1950s, for instance (Balmer 2006)—found the context for becoming a steady oppositional political force in the culture wars of the 1960s. Anti-Communist sentiment, coupled with a distinct distrust of academia, placed the evangelical movement firmly in opposition to many progressive social movements in the 60s and 70s. It was in this context evangelical leadership began fervently advocating direct involvement in political affairs. One of the founding members of the NAE, Harold Ockenga, encouraged involvement in “world leadership,” saying that “evangelicals should be thrust into political, diplomatic, military posts of responsibility and leadership” (quoted in Sutton 2015: p. 314).

This was a relatively new turn for evangelicals. Their fundamentalist, premillennial roots often discouraged them from getting involved in social or political issues. Premillennialism refers to the belief in a particular interpretation of scripture that asserts that humanity is living in the “end times,” that the rapture is imminent and faithful Christians will soon be instantaneously transported to a temporary Heaven, after which will be seven years of tribulation, followed by the Second Coming of Jesus, who will defeat God’s enemies and establish a thousand year reign (hence, “premillennialism”) on earth.⁷ Every war or economic downturn was surely a sign that the apocalypse was nigh. However, after countless prophecies that foretold specific dates for the rapture proved wrong, and year after year faithful, God-fearing Christians continued to dwell upon the earth, the number of prophecies foretelling the rapture and the Second Coming slowly declined. Partly because of the abeyance of doomsday prophecies,

⁷The imminence of the rapture is the defining premillennial belief. Modern evangelicals still largely believe that this sequence of events will still happen, but often from setting specific timelines. The persistence of apocalyptic belief among evangelicals is the central theme of Sutton’s (2015) “American Apocalypse.”

partly as a reactionary movement to 1960s and 70s progressivism, evangelicalism began to form a powerful political entity.

Prior to the arrival of the “Moral Majority” on the political scene, evangelicalism’s link to conservative politics was not nearly as pronounced. Balmer (2006), Swartz (2012), Worthen (2013) each wrote about the political heterogeneity that existed in evangelicalism in the 1970s, profiling evangelical members of Students for a Democratic Society and highlighting formal groups of left-wing evangelical activists such as Evangelicals for McGovern and Evangelicals for Social Action. When Jimmy Carter became the first US president to identify as evangelical, Newsweek termed 1976 “the year of the evangelical” (Balmer 2006). By the end of Carter’s presidency, however, evangelicals who had organized around pushing for racial and economic justice were pushed to the margins of evangelical leadership structures.

The case of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), offers an example of how this political homology was achieved. In 1967, two emerging leaders of the SBC met at Café Dumonde in New Orleans and discussed their shared concern for the future of their denomination. Paul Pressler, an attorney from Houston, wanted to start a scholarship fund for conservative seminary students. Paige Patterson, an administrator at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, expressed interest and so the meeting was set (Mohler 2005).

As Patterson (2003) himself describes it, much of the conversation that night at Café Dumonde revolved around the bureaucratic machinery of the SBC shifting from “substance to method” (p. 16) at the denominational level. Their fear was that, in an effort to expand its numbers, the SBC had abandoned its identity as a loose

confederacy of congregations to a strong bureaucratic machine with leaders who “were, so it seemed...invincible” (p. 17). Patterson was particularly concerned about the growing number of liberals involved in the church leadership who had “imbibed deeply at the well of historical-critical scholarship” (p. 17) and pointed to a book by a Baptist seminary professor that “employed historical-critical assumptions, conclusions, and methodologies which led the professor to question the historicity of some of the narrative portions of Genesis” (p. 15). Ten years of organizing later, Patterson and Pressler convened with a group of like-minded clergy and laity at the Atlanta airport to develop a strategy to change the theological and cultural trajectory of the SBC.

Several agreements developed out of the Atlanta meeting. Conservatives, it was agreed, had a choice. Either they could stand by and watch a 14 million member, 38,000 church denomination be held captive by a coterie of slick religio-political “denomicrats” or else conservatives could take their concerns to people in the pew and see if the programs and structures of the denomination could not be reclaimed for orthodoxy and evangelism. Most believed that if they did not act immediately, all hope to rescue the denomination from its slow and seemingly inevitable drift to the left would be lost. Already the denominational raft was swept along by the white water currents that propelled American Baptists, British Baptists, United Methodists, and a host of other denominations to a mooring far removed from the havens of their founders. (p. 18)

Over the next decade, conservatives gradually grew their influence in the SBC through a grassroots movement that largely echoed a national shift toward conservatism in the 1980s (Ammerman 2008; Mohler 2005). In 1990 the SBC elected its fourth consecutive conservative president, and the remaining moderates left the SBC to found the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship the following year (Ammerman 2008), establishing a largely uniform political ideology among Southern Baptists.

This example is consistent with those described by Worthen (2014), who included the story of Jim Wallis—founder of the left-leaning *Sojourners* magazine and member of the Students for a Democratic Society. Wallis, who was raised in the evangelical Plymouth Brethren church, was ostracized by the evangelical elites who wished to purge their ranks of alleged communist sympathizers. Balmer (2006), wrote of his personal experiences with the leadership of *Christianity Today*, where he was ousted as an (unpaid) editor after making a public stand for abortion rights. “The evangelical subculture” he writes, “doesn’t suffer rebels gladly, and it is especially intolerant of anyone with the temerity to challenge the shibboleths of the Religious Right” (p. 168).

The Era of the Moral Majority

Jerry Falwell united right-wing evangelicals and other socially conservative Christians, such as Catholics and Mormons, under the banner of protecting and preserving “the family.” The Moral Majority gained prominence and consolidated a large segment of the voting population “by portraying abortion, feminism, and gay rights as a tripartite assault on the family” (Dowland 2009: p. 627); indeed, this manner of framing these controversial issues was “the genius of the movement...after all, who was going to argue against families” (ibid: p. 607)? Local pastors reacted by participating in the newly formed Religious Roundtable, which was formed to aid ministers in encouraging their congregations to vote for candidates who were “pro-family” or “pro-morality.” In preparing for the 1980 election, the Religious Roundtable sponsored a meeting attended by over 15,000 conservative ministers and laity, and the Moral Majority—with

a campaign “war chest” totaling millions of dollars—threw all of its resources into mobilizing voters to support Ronald Reagan (Banwart 2013).

For his part, Reagan fully embraced the support of the evangelical community. He personally addressed that meeting of the Religious Roundtable, the first National Affairs Briefing, and echoed the framing strategy used by Falwell and other leaders of the New Christian Right.

Today, you and I are meeting at a time when traditional Judeo-Christian values, based on the moral teachings of religion, are undergoing what is perhaps their most serious challenge in our nation's history. Nowhere is the challenge to traditional values more pronounced than in the area of public policy debate. So it is fitting that the topic of our meeting should be national affairs, for it is precisely in the affairs of our nation where the challenge to those values is the greatest. In recent years we have seen a new and cynical tactic on the part of those who would seek to remove from our public policy debate the voice of traditional morality. This tactic seeks not only to discredit traditional moral teachings but also to exclude them from public debate by intimidation and name-calling.⁸

If it had not been before, at that point the “framing war” was officially in full swing.

Reagan, Falwell, and a host of other leaders of the Christian Right effectively equated abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, homosexuality, and the “career woman” to an assault on traditional values and unmistakable indicators of America’s moral decline.

This time, rather than retreat into isolation and prayerfully await the rapture, the fundamentalist wing of American evangelicalism hurled itself into political prominence.

By the end of the 20th Century, any liberal bent to evangelical culture had been pressed to the margins.

⁸This entire speech is available as a primary source through the Carnegie Mellon University Digital Collections. <http://digitalcollections.library.cmu.edu/awweb/awarchive?type=file&item=684006> (last accessed December 4, 2016)

This dynamic did not arise organically but was intentionally forged by leaders of the Christian Right, a fact which serves as the launching point for this study. Much has been written about conservative evangelicals' influence on political leaders at every level of government, as well as the purging of liberalism among denominational leaders, but less has been written about how evangelical leaders influence political belief at the individual level. This study is designed to better understand how that ideological consistency is achieved among rank-and-file evangelicals. The overarching premise for this study is that the Sunday sermon is a direct link between evangelical leadership and millions of individual evangelical congregants, thus by examining the content of a sample of these sermons I can offer some insight as to how the Christian Right mobilizes its individual adherents. At its core, this study is specifically examining elite evangelical rhetoric and how that rhetoric is related to "rank and file" evangelicals.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION:

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The key methodological principle that guides this research is “frame analysis.” Loosely following Johnston and Noakes (2005), my first aim was to recreate the “strategic construction of collective action frames” (7). The frame itself, however, is not the end goal of this analysis. Rather, my study aims to leverage the frame analysis method to observe the cultural and emotional characteristics that unify American evangelicalism and link it to expressly conservative political movements. More specifically, I am observing a certain aspect of “subcultural identity work” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996, 117) that not only maintains group boundaries, but allows that identity to become a cultural resource that is mobilized into a social movement.

Though introduced to the social sciences by anthropologist Gregory Bateson in 1954 (Johnston and Noakes 2005), the concept of *frame* has been particularly influential in sociology, largely because of Erving Goffman’s (1974) book on the subject. This idea has been an intricate component of social movement studies since the early 1980s, when Gitlin (1980) explored the media coverage of Students for a Democratic Society. Not long after, Gamson et al. (1982) turned the notion of framing away from the news media and explored how a movement itself could challenge how an authoritative entity frames it, and thus exercise agency in how the movement is perceived. In short, frame analysis allowed a constructionist critique of the prevailing *structural* social movement theories at the time, which centered on resource

mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 1977) and political opportunities in a movement's external environment (McAdam 1982).⁹

With frame analysis, social movement theorists were able to impart social psychological aspects of “meaning work” to the extensive body of literature on social movements (Tarrow 1992). This is a central principle of symbolic interactionism—that meaning is interpreted and modified through interactive processes (Blumer 1969). The application of interaction analysis was offered as a solution to the shortcomings of macro-level theories of social movements. Benford and Snow (1988) lamented the stagnation that had gripped social movement studies because of the emphasis placed on “describing movement ideology” (p. 197), in particular because that emphasis tended to treat “meanings or ideas as given, as if there is an isomorphic relationship between the nature of any particular set of conditions or events and the meanings attached to them” (p. 198). That article provided the most substantial contribution to frame analysis to date (with the possible exceptions of Bateson for birthing the idea and Goffman for bringing it to sociology), elaborating on the framing *process* and developing it as a distinct methodology. Namely, they introduced the analytical concept of “collective action frames.”

For Benford and Snow, collective action frames are salient analytical tools because they have a constructionist, processual character. As Gamson (1992) put it, “collective action frames are not merely aggregations of individual attitudes and

⁹ McAdam (1982) did allow for some meaning construction. While his primary focus was on the political opportunities—that is, the external sociopolitical structures—that allowed the Civil Rights Movement to gain traction, he also pointed out the necessity for social movement actors to recognize that those opportunities exist. He used the term “cognitive liberation” (1982: p. 48) to describe the phenomenon that necessarily precedes and facilitates that recognition.

perceptions but also the outcome of negotiating shared meaning” (p. 111), which once again evidences the theoretical importance of symbolic interactionism to frame analysis; this type of analysis is focused squarely on the process by which rhetoric becomes a symbolic resource that can aid in—among other things—identity formation and maintenance. When undertaken with due empathy and rigor, frame analysis can help outsiders understand the role of emotions in social movement mobilization (Groves 1995). Emotions can be powerful motivators of action, a fact which is leveraged in framing processes.

To operationalize frame analysis, Benford and Snow (1988; 2000) dissect the process of framing and present concepts applicable to observation and analysis. These core concepts of collective action frames focus attention on distinct “tasks” that framing entails. They are diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing. These tasks served as the catalysts for my frame analysis of elite evangelical ministers’ sermons by largely shaping my initial coding frame. Diagnostic frames identify the grievances of a social movement, or the conditions that members of the movement would like to see change. This include “injustice frames” and “boundary frames” (Benford and Snow 2000). Injustice frames are methods of claiming victimization, or asserting that the group in question has been the victim of systematic injustice. Boundary frames are efforts by movements “to create in-group/out-group distinctions.” What are the grievances claimed by evangelical ministers? How do they describe the injustice that has befallen their group? How do they establish and/or maintain boundaries with the secular world, that is, how do they define membership in the in-group?

Prognostic frames deal mainly with responses from outside the group. This process includes counterframing, or anticipating and addressing criticism to provide group members with the vocabulary to respond. Prognostic frames also demonstrate how one particular social movement organization differentiates itself from other, similar organizations. In the case of evangelicals, the operative questions ask how ministers respond to outside criticism and negative characterizations. How do ministers distinguish their group and give it primacy over other denominations or belief patterns?

Motivational frames constitute what Gamson (1995) calls the “agency component” of frame analysis. How do ministers’ rhetorical devices add to their congregants’ sense of ability to create change in their own sphere of reality? How do ministers try to uplift and inspire their congregants to engage actively in the movement? Emotions are a key aspect of motivational framing because they have been shown to be causal factors in movement activity (see Jasper 2011). As Jasper (2011; 2017) has noted, emotions have long been overlooked in social movement studies largely because of the entrenched legacy of Rational Choice Theory which depicted emotional reactions as irrational. Subsequently, emotions were overlooked in favor of focusing on environmental factors that could facilitate or obstruct movement mobilization. Frame analysis helps to bring emotions into consideration when studying a social movement largely because motivational framing explicitly acknowledges the importance of individual emotions as a motivator of action. That said, emotions are intricately involved in social movements in ways other than just motivational framing.

Of these framing tasks, boundary framing may be most critical to understanding the evangelicalism as a social movement. Not only does the establishment of

boundaries create in-group/out-group distinctions, but the nature of these boundaries—absolute righteousness and eternal life on one side, grievous error and eternal damnation on the other—indicates the importance of emotional aspects involved in these framing processes. Having a traditional identity—such as a has emotional consequences, and those emotional consequences can be operationalized by charismatic leaders (Jasper 2017). Boundary framing also overlaps with what some social movement researchers term “cultural resonance” (Park 1998), or the idea that a collective action frame must resonate within the cultural context from which the movement draws its resources. That cultural context, which includes an incredibly influential collective identity and set of symbols, is crucial to this analysis.

In light of this, I will briefly sketch the general terms that I use to describe culture and its components. Following Williams and Alexander (1994), I define a “movement culture” as “the collection of ideas, symbols, meanings, and values that forms a movement's self-identification” (p. 2). Using this definition, the importance of boundary framing becomes evident. The cultural resources that fuel the evangelicalism revolve around the varying ways each individual self-identifies as a member of that movement. A movement ideology is itself a cultural resource that “must provide adherents with a language with which to attack the evils of the world” (ibid p. 3). Ideologies bridge the group and the individual by establishing a common vocabulary for individuals to use to describe the world around them. Snow and Benford (2000) in describing how framing relates to ideology, note that framing processes consist, in part, of “remedial ideological work” (p. 9). Framing theorists view ideology as a cultural resource—meaning ideology is intricately related to self-identity—that is articulated through collective action frames.

Taking a symbolic interactionist approach, Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) contend that the boundaries that form in-group/out-group distinctions are socially constructed through group interaction, forming “symbolic resources” that group members tap to inform their presentation of self. They term this process “subcultural identity work” (p. 117). As a subculture, evangelicals generate a number of “symbolic resources” that aid in identity construction, not the least of which is perceived conflict and persecution. Smith (1998) highlighted the importance of feeling persecuted to identifying as evangelical. For at least a century, evangelical leaders have asserted that true Christians are dwindling in number and that “worldly” forces are constantly at work against the evangelical Christian. The idea that “true” Christianity is growing less and less compatible with modernity is a familiar tone of evangelicalism, and one that indicates a vital source of boundary construction. Evangelicals espouse more than an “us against them” mentality, in this case it is clearly an “us against the world” mentality that provides a symbolic resource for identity construction. Mobilizing individuals for whom these symbolic resources are crucial to their own self-identity can be an emotional process. In terms of frame analysis, the question for this study is how evangelical ministers use these symbolic to emotionally motivate specific political action.

Studying Evangelicalism as a Social Movement

Social movement scholars do not generally have to belabor the idea that what they are studying is, indeed, a social movement. A frame analysis that is rooted in social movement studies makes certain assumptions about the group in question, or more specifically, makes assumptions about the goals of the group in question. Social

movements are action-oriented; they are seeking a particular end, and almost always petition some sort of government entity to address a set of grievances. Evangelicalism can be conceptualized heuristically as a social movement, but is more a social movement *industry* rather than a social movement *organization*.

A social movement industry (SMI) is a broad field wherein many social movement organizations (SMOs) may exist. Groups like “Lift the Vote” and “My Faith Votes” are specific SMOs that partly constitute a SMI. Social movement industries are typically organized around one specific issue (McCarthy and Zald 1977). For instance the Sierra Club and Earth First! are single organizations that are both part of the larger industry of environmental movement organizations (EMOs); the organizations operate independently but are mobilized around the same issue(s). At the risk of sounding redundant, social movement organizations have a distinctly organizational quality, usually with a leadership structure.¹⁰ Social movement scholars, who tend to favor ethnographic or other qualitative methods, typically place SMOs and the actions and words of the social movement actors—or the media coverage of those words and actions—at the heart of their analysis. Though the exact nature varies, social movement studies almost always center on one or more SMOs, or on groups that can at least be

¹⁰New Social Movements, which sprung up as “lifestyle movements” in the 1960s, often tried to embrace a non-hierarchical structure. These movements (movement industries, technically) tended to reject hierarchical structures as they often were birthed within critical scholarship. Some members of the original New Social Movements would go on to start cooperatively owned radio stations, grocery stores, or anything wherein they could try to make an egalitarian organizational structure work. For more on New Social Movements and how that phenomenon has persisted and evolved through the decades, see Gitlin (2012).

characterized as such.¹¹ Evangelical Protestantism is not purely a social movement, and thus an evangelical church is not purely a social movement organization.

Despite this, sermons serve as a useful medium for examining the evangelical social movement. While not explicitly social movement material, this sample provides a unique insight into the cultural context from which social movement organizers tap resources—in the form of a collective identity—and mobilize individual adherents. As a social movement study, what follows is fairly unique. Jasper (2017) noted a disconnect between social movement studies and social psychological understandings of emotion, especially as it relates to traditional collective identities. Studies of movements grounded in traditional ethnic or religious identities have focused on strategies regarding “power and inclusion” at a *cognitive* level, but tend to ignore “what it *feels like* to have one of these traditional identities” (p. 291). This study hopes to, in some measure, bridge that gap. While cognitive constructs certainly play a role in the construction and maintenance of collective identities, the emotional appeal of living with a conservative Christian identity must be understood. This analysis is not aimed at the direct political rhetoric that would be found at traditional social movement gatherings, but instead seeks to get to the heart of the movement and uncover some of the emotional aspects and consequences of identifying as an evangelical Christian. In terms of symbolic

¹¹ Frickel (2004), for instance, applied frame analysis to demonstrate how a group of scientists effectively established a new accepted interdisciplinary science. Ostensibly, this group of scientists may not appear to be a traditional SMO, but all of the data Frickel analyzed (public lecture, editorials, articles, and expert testimony) were expressly designed to meet a particular end. Frickel’s analysis, then, implicitly characterized this collective effort to achieve a common goal as a social movement organization. This characterization was effective because the collective action was centered on a specific issue and was intended to bring about a certain end.

interactionism, this study seeks to uncover the process of subcultural identity work that occurs within elite evangelical rhetoric.

CHAPTER 4

METHODS

The body of literature on the sociology of religion largely lacks a comprehensive, qualitative content analysis of sermons. Draper and Park (2010) conducted a content analysis of 100 sermons, 50 from mainline Protestant ministers and 50 from evangelical Protestant ministers, but their focus was on the way ministers from each tradition address secular cinema—essentially conducting a study of how ministers from two main denominations maintain boundaries between the religious and the secular. Their sampling technique was designed to claim a modicum of generalizability. By using a more selective sampling technique, I am giving vividness of description primacy over numerical generalizability.

This project is designed as a case study. I selected 5 of the most prominent evangelical pastors in the country, using then-presidential candidate Donald Trump's Evangelical Advisory Board as my initial sampling frame. That criterion narrows the field only slightly, but the Evangelical Advisory Board does not exclusively feature ministers. James Dobson, Richard Land, Ralph Reed, and Jerry Falwell Jr., for example, are all on the board and have a background in ministry, but do not reliably preach sermons every Sunday, excluding them from consideration.¹² Other prominent figures of the board include politicians (Michele Bachmann, for example) televangelists (not the target of this study), and attorneys. Further, the ministers in this sample are all megachurch pastors, expanding the reach and potential resonance of their sermons. Finally, and most

¹² Arguably, each of these men have moved on to full-time social movement activism on behalf of the Christian Right.

simply, this sample only includes ministers whose sermons are available, free of charge, through iTunes podcasts. Only 4 of the ministers on Trump's Evangelical Advisory Board meet all of these criteria. For the fifth minister in the sample, I turned to a similar committee that advised Senator Ted Cruz's presidential campaign. The following list provides a few details about the ministers whose sermons comprise the sample.

Jentezen Franklin is the senior pastor at Free Chapel Church, based in Gainesville, Georgia. Free Chapel has multiple sites, including one in Irvine, California. He, along with his wife, host a television show called *Kingdom Connection*. He has identified himself as “pro-life, pro-traditional marriage, and pro-Israel.” Franklin champions his churches' racial diversity and has the most interaction with his congregants while sermonizing—“Somebody say Amen!” is one of his most common lines.

Jack Hibbs is the only minister in this sample who was not a part of Donald Trump's Evangelical Advisory Board. He did, however, serve on a similar committee for Senator Ted Cruz's bid for the Republican nomination for the Presidency. Hibbs is by far the most politically outspoken minister in this sample—he is the only one to explicitly endorse a presidential candidate from the pulpit. While the other ministers avoid direct political endorsements, Hibbs unapologetically declared his support for Ted Cruz, initially, and then the Republican Party platform after Trump defeated Cruz in the GOP primary. Hibbs often incorporates videos into his sermons, including a montage on September 11 that recalled that day's tragedies in 2001. He also has featured clips of himself as a guest on conservative talk shows in his sermons.

Robert Morris is the senior pastor at Gateway Church in Texas. Gateway Church started the “Vote Under God” website in 2016. Morris, who has authored 14 books, has said the key issues facing the country today are “the definition of marriage, the right to life, government versus private health care, the national debt, and religious freedoms.” Morris is the successful author of “The Blessed Life” and “The Blessed Church,” and speaks of having “quiet time” with God while swimming laps in his pool or relaxing in a hot tub with his wife.

Robert Jeffress is the senior pastor at First Baptist Church of Dallas. Tim Tebow reportedly backed out of a scheduled appearance at First Baptist of Dallas after Jeffress claimed that homosexuality “represents a degradation of a person’s mind.” He was also quoted as saying that “any Christian who would sit at home and not vote for the Republican nominee ... is being motivated by pride rather than principle.” Jeffress spoke at President Donald Trump’s Inauguration “prayer breakfast.” During the fall of 2016 Jeffress preached a 10-part sermon series entitled “A Place Called Heaven,” that entire sermon series comprises Jeffress’s part of the sample.

Ronnie Floyd is a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and senior pastor of Cross Church, based in Arkansas. Floyd was involved in the movement through the 1980s that purged liberals from the ranks of the Southern Baptist Convention. He is politically outspoken, but is cautious in how he addresses politics from the pulpit, never endorsing a candidate specifically but focusing on specific platforms and issues.

My sample for this analysis includes 10 sermons from each pastor, in some cases stretching back as far as March of 2016. According to the database of

megachurches maintained by Warren Bird, these five ministers collectively reach a live audience of over 65,000 each week—not including their online presence.¹³ Most of the sample will cluster around the November election and the weeks leading up to it, but, where available, I also have included sermons from around the time of the Republican and Democratic conventions in July, and even back to the primaries. This selection process should facilitate a frame analysis of the larger social movement. This is not intended to be a representative sample of evangelical ministers, or even a proper representative sample from these pastors. Based on the timing of this study and when the sermons in the sample were preached, the hope is that these ministers would speak more directly about political issues than in less politically volatile times. The pastors themselves, while providing the objects of analysis, are not the point of the analysis. This study is not about these pastors, but what their sermons demonstrate about the remarkable consistency of white evangelical public opinion.

For the coding process, I used Nvivo to sort through several hundred pages of sermon transcripts. My initial coding frame was based on those “framing tasks” described by Benford and Snow (2000). Originally, I listed “boundary framing” as a child node of diagnostic framing. As I coded, I found that boundary framing would be the single most prominent pattern in terms of framing tasks. With over two hundred references, I subdivided boundary framing into different child nodes, including “adversarial framing,” “‘Bible’ Christian,” and “saved/born again.” Importantly, many of the references I coded as “boundary framing” also went into a node I added well into the coding process: identity work. Despite the great deal of overlap between boundary

¹³ <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html> (last accessed on December 5, 2016)

framing and identity work, the latter deserved its own code because it became a central theme of the analysis.

I included a code that I titled “about the author,” which was subdivided into codes that highlighted the use of technology or other sermon aids, as well as moments when the speaker used humorous illustrations or demonstrated scholarly authority. Also in the “about the author” code was what I titled “bumper sticker.” There is an old adage that a good sermon’s general message should fit neatly onto a bumper sticker. For each sermon I coded, I tried to find a brief passage—usually found towards the end of the sermon—that largely sums up the theme of that sermon. While none of those quotes made it into the final draft of the analytical section, this proved to be a useful methodological task because it forced me to focus on each sermon’s context so that each quote I did use was true to its source.

I included a code for “polemics,” which I subdivided by topic to include gay marriage, abortion, evolution, intellectualism, family values, religious freedom, and the media. Those child nodes were, somewhat surprisingly, sparsely used—and none of those issues ever made it onto a sermon’s “bumper sticker.” Despite the fact that these nodes were not as populated as I anticipated, how and when these issues were referenced still proved extremely important to the analysis. I also included a code for Christian nationalism that included references to the nation “turning its back on God,” or instances where ministers advocated taking their evangelical identity with them to the polls.

The codes for diagnostic and prognostic framing were crucial to getting the analysis started, but waned in prominence as I continued the coding process. This was

largely because these codes became so repetitive. Most of the diagnostic framing that I referenced also fell into another category—identity work, boundary maintenance, Christian nationalism—and those other categories indicated some important patterns. The overlap between Christian nationalism and diagnostic framing was of particular import—indicating the link between the perception of eroding tradition and the grievances claimed by the ministers. The prognostic framing code was largely full of platitudes (“Jesus is the answer” for instance), and did not—on its own—produce a wealth of interesting patterns. The motivational framing code, however, was a vital theme to the analysis because the ministers’ motivational tactics almost always made some sort of play on evangelical identity.

Another important code that was added well into the coding process was “descriptions of the Bible.”¹⁴ I used this code any time a minister said “the Bible is...” or “the Bible says...” and noted whether or not a scripture passage was quoted or directly referenced after those words. Ministers did reference or quote scripture following those words more often than they did not, but not by a wide margin. The Bible was quite often given broad, sweeping descriptions. Spiritual warfare also proved to be a prominent code. This included any reference to Hell, Satan, demons, evil, or the apocalypse. However, only Robert Jeffress preached a sermon where one of these ideas fit onto the “bumper sticker.” While this sample of ministers proved willing to use the idea of spiritual warfare as an illustration or motivator, those ideas themselves were rarely the point of the entire sermon.

¹⁴I also included a code for “descriptions of God,” “descriptions of Jesus,” and “descriptions of the holy spirit.” This did not produce a great deal of interesting patterns other than that these terms are largely used interchangeably.

CHAPTER 5

CREDIBILITY AND AUTHORITY

The ministers in this sample display a tendency to describe the Bible in broadly simplistic terms, deemphasizing their role as interpreters of the Bible in favor of describing themselves as simple “messengers,” but they still must legitimize their assertions by demonstrating exceptional knowledge or scholarship. While they do not acknowledge any sort of inconsistency within the Scripture, they do acknowledge inconsistency among interpretations of the Scripture. Thus the evangelical minister’s primary utility—at least from the pulpit—is discerning faithful interpretation of the unchanging Word of God from false doctrines that are tainted by the shifting moral standards of culture at large.¹⁶ In order to do this effectively, they must establish their authority as scholars by demonstrating esoteric knowledge of the Scripture. Most often, this takes the form of referencing the Greek or Hebrew etymology of key words or phrases and/or the history associated with those words or phrases.

A democracy is rule by majority. Let me tell you. If you go look up the definition of democracy, they’ve changed it. They’ll say, “It’s where you elect leaders and the leaders make the laws.” It’s really not what a democracy is. They shouldn’t ask a politician what it is. They should ask a preacher because it comes from two Greek words. (Robert Morris)

Circle the word in your bible there, “whose end is destruction”, circle the word destruction. That word literally means, in the original Greek language of the Bible, the physical, the spiritual, the eternal ruin, it’s nonstop eternal ruin or loss of one’s being, to be damned or to be damnable, the result of being condemned, not annihilated, but forever separated from God. (Jack Hibbs)

Underline that word, judgment seat, saying, “This man persuades men to worship God, contrary to the law.” The word translated judgment seat is

¹⁶This, too, is a key point that should not be glossed over carelessly. Sorting out faithful Christians from fake Christians is a visceral process in this sample of sermons and is more thoroughly examined later in the analysis.

the word, Bema, in Greek. Bema. It refers to a raised platform, on which the governor would sit. (Ronnie Floyd)

There is also a certain manner of presenting the information confidently, or taking the role of teacher, which is demonstrated in each of the above quotes. All of these ministers use various aids to help their congregation follow along with the sermon. Robert Jeffress and Jack Hibbs distribute sermon outlines to the congregation, Ronnie Floyd does the same but calls them “worship guides,” and each minister makes use of projectors and large screens to post scripture passages, bullet points, and sometimes video clips. Note-taking is often encouraged, as is circling words and phrases in each congregant’s personal Bible.

Get your Bible. Look at it with me. Make a few notes along the way. The worship guide you received when you came in the room will help you know where I’m going in the Scripture. If you want to follow along, fine. If you don’t want to write it down, that’s between you and God. (Ronnie Floyd)

Further, this sample has numerous instances of the ministers relying on famous ministers or Christian scholars for quotes or illustrations. Billy Graham, C.S. Lewis, Charles Spurgeon—to name a few—are regularly quoted or referenced by this sample of ministers. This sample also reveals a tendency to legitimate the speaker by referring to other famous evangelicals as “my friend” or even, “my good friend.” Ministers demonstrate the legitimacy of their authority by tacitly characterizing themselves as members of an elite fraternity of Biblical scholars and holy and learned men.¹⁷

My friend Erwin Lutzer says it this way. “Five minutes after you die, you will either have had your first glimpse of Heaven with its euphoria and

¹⁷ The use of exclusive language here is intentional and significant.

bliss, or your first genuine experience of unrelenting horror and regret. Either way your future will be irrevocably fixed and eternally unchangeable.” (Robert Jeffress)

By combining the confident demonstration of knowledge with familiar pedagogical techniques these ministers are able to present themselves as Biblical authorities who are worthy of their congregation’s attention and respect. However, it is important for these ministers to maintain their humanity—after all, they, like everyone else, have sinned and fallen short of God’s plan.

He did not come and die on a cross so He could have a portion of our week on Sunday and then we ignore Him the rest of the week. And I’m not preaching down to you, I’m preaching to me. (Jentezen Franklin)

Through this establishment of legitimacy, ministers gain the admiration and allegiance of their congregations. For so many, they are the primary arbiters of what is and is not Biblical Truth. In the evangelical community, there is a certain irony to the scholarly authority held by the ministers. In order to maintain both their scholarly authority and relatability, ministers must exude intellectualism even while discouraging the use of individual intellect among their congregants. Evangelical thought is centered on the strict obedience to the Word of God. They are taught not to question any portion of Scripture and not to value one part of the Bible over another. The implication is that relying on the Bible for guidance necessarily involves relying on a minister to guide one’s understanding of the Bible, lest an otherwise well-meaning Christian will fall victim to a false doctrine that will undoubtedly lead to their destruction. Evangelicals, according to these ministers, need the guidance of a human authority to properly understand God’s will for their lives and for the world. As Jack Hibbs says,

People don't have the maturity to process information anymore. We need the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. The church is fragmented by non-truths. "Well I think this and I want, and I've come to the conclusion," Christians, stop! Think Bible! Think Bible. God's Truth must be always held preeminent over all things.

Because "God's Truth must be always held preeminent over all things," and because these worship leaders are weekly informing tens of thousands of people what God's Truth means within the context of modernity, evangelical ministers wield a type of authority and influence that necessarily has political implications.

The Polemicist Preacher

Diagnostic framing is the process of identifying the grievances of a movement. For the evangelical, the grievances are clear. The United States has turned its back on God. An important piece of making this claim establishing that the United States is, and always should be, a Christian nation. In this sample, however, that portion of the claim is largely ignored. With a few exceptions, it seems that this fact is assumed. These ministers tend to use phrases such as "turned our back" on God, or "forgotten" God. For the most part, the rhetoric involved in the diagnostic framing task includes an imbedded assumption that the America of old was a religious homology.

She is abused, the lady of liberty, the statue of liberty, in so many ways, has been stripped, has been abused, we are not in the nation and the America that we, many of us grew up in, and we understand that something is happening to our nation.

This quote from Jentezen Franklin's sermon entitled, "Pray, Fast, Vote," represents a ubiquitous sentiment in this sample of sermons. "Something" is happening, and that "something" is that America is becoming a "fallen nation." That it need not be

established that America used to “more Christian” is a telling detail and speaks to the Christian nationalist sentiment that coincides with evangelicalism. The common thread, made visible by examining the diagnostic processes, is the notion that Christianity—not even God or Christ per se, but the institution of Christianity—is what made America the greatest nation in the world. To the evangelical, freedom itself is cognitively and emotionally tied to the practice of Christianity because it is an entrenched tradition. The audiences for these sermons do not need to be convinced that America is changing for the worse, only reminded of it.

In this sense, the diagnostic framing work is inseparable from the motivational framing work. These ministers rely on issues about which their audience seems largely in agreement. When speaking about these issues, they are not only using them as evidence of America’s failings, but also as a means of motivating their congregants to act. Of particular importance is the assertion that there is no time to waste—that the current state of affairs in the country and the world is direr now than ever before.

I’ve been a Christian for 40 years and I’ve never seen a time like this.

(Jack Hibbs)

Because I’m telling you, and you listen carefully; we have never been anywhere close to where we are today. (Ronnie Floyd)

To illustrate this point, ministers rely on a few topical areas that they say indicate America’s moral decline. Importantly, these issues are also staples of the Republican Party’s platform.

Abortion

We're breaking records in America in aborting children.(Jentezen Franklin)

The priority of all this is the sanctity of human life, since 1973, almost 60 million babies have been aborted while in the womb of their mother.
(Ronnie Floyd)

The above quotes indicate how the issue is framed diagnostically and motivationally. Abortion is framed as one of the great evils and displays how far America has come from its "righteous" roots. At the same time, these are also instances of ministers tapping a cultural identity of "conservative" Christianity to instill a sense of urgency among the audience-members.

I'm not going to read the whole thing, but here's one of the party platforms says, "We assert the sanctity of human life and affirm that the unborn child has a fundamental, individual right to life, which cannot be infringed." It goes on to say, "We believe the 14th Amendment protects the newborn child. We do not believe that we should use government funds to pay for abortions." The other one believes that we should use government funds to pay for abortions, that abortions should be legal for their full nine months. That's in their platform.

Here, Robert Morris engages in adversarial framing ("That's in *their* platform") and motivational framing. He uses the issue of abortion to inspire his listeners to believe that action must be taken. To close that sermon, he displays an image on the large video screens in his church of a stillborn fetus, saying "you will never, ever convince me that that is tissue and not a human baby. You will never convince me of that." While abortion is used a diagnostic frame, it is also clearly used motivationally. Perhaps more to the point, when these ministers mentioned abortion they were not trying to convince their audience to change their minds on the subject (it seems largely taken for granted that

their audience is already in agreement on the issue), but were leveraging the audience's *emotions* to form a cohesive collective action frame. They took an issue that arouses contentious feelings and made it a central issue in determining how to vote. They did not have to frame abortion as a negative, they could take for granted that their listeners already saw it as a negative.

Same-Sex Marriage

Same-sex marriage is framed in a similar way as abortion. Ministers do not need to dwell on convincing their audiences that same-sex marriage is a sin, only frame that increasingly socially accepted sin as an indication of America's moral decline. Moreover, it illustrates the need for urgent action on the part of true, biblical Christians—lest competing worldviews drag America further into cultural apostasy. As is the typical style when addressing potentially controversial subjects, they rely on framing the issue as “biblical.”

You think about the collision of worldviews relating to marriage. Bible Christians should believe that marriage is between a man and a woman. The colliding worldview is woman with woman, man with man, or whatever else. You think about the family. A biblical Christian worldview lifts up the family because we know the family is the moral fiber of the future of the land.¹⁸

At the outset of this investigation, I thought I would encounter a great deal of rhetoric involving same-sex marriage. As it turned out, same-sex marriage is more often mentioned in passing, as when Jack Hibbs casually mentions “natural law,” or Jentezen

¹⁸It is important to note that Ronnie Floyd, in the quote above, uses the term “bible Christian” to draw a distinction between the right and wrong way to be a Christian. This language will be discussed in-depth in the section “The Culture of Biblical Literalism.”

Franklin says “pro-family.” This is an indication that these ministers know their audience. In the minds of evangelicals, these are settled issues. It is good enough, for instance, for Jentezen Franklin to mention that “we are legalizing abominations, that the Bible calls abominations.” He does not need to tell his audience where in the Bible homosexuality is labeled an abomination because the sinful nature of homosexuality seems to be a given in the cultural context in which these ministers operate. When same-sex marriage is mentioned, it is used as an illustration of a larger point.

And so now we have one man on the Supreme Court who decides, even though state after state after state, including California, said we do not want to legalize gay marriage, one Supreme Court justice, by a president who put him there, now turns all of that around, and suddenly culture has shifted. (Jentezen Franklin)

In the quote above, same-sex marriage is not the key point. Rather, Franklin is using the idea of same-sex marriage as a motivating factor to convince his congregants to vote in the presidential election because, as Franklin notes in that same sermon, “Three Supreme Court justices will be put on the Supreme Court under the next president of the United States.” Not only is this a motivational framing process, it also hints at the prognosis. Simply put, solving these problems means that all evangelicals have a responsibility to vote, and to vote for the candidate whose platform is most in line with “biblical teaching.” Thus, the whole collective action frame begins to come into view. The diagnosis is that culture is shifting away from true Godliness. The prognosis is that true Christians exercise their right to vote. The motivation to do so is that the stakes are extraordinarily high in the 2016 election, and that the church cannot, as Franklin put it, “stand idly by.” As with abortion, same-sex marriage is not used a key point, but only as an idea that is leveraged in constructing the collective action frame.

Religious Freedom

In this sample, religious freedom is often framed in terms of public prayer. For example, Jentezen Franklin expresses outrage at “the fact that we can’t, in America, pray at ball games anymore. We can’t pray at graduations anymore.” Ronnie Floyd mentioned

The nonsense of not being able to pray before a football game, the nonsense of not being able to pray before a graduation ceremony, or the nonsense of not being able to pray on a field of play, or on a court of play, or anything else you want to play, or the nonsense of not being able to say Merry Christmas at a department store, at Christmas time.

Once again, there was no effort to argue the reasons that public prayer should be allowed. These ministers seemed to assume that their audiences were in agreement that praying to “the God of the Bible” before sporting events was appropriate. On the contrary, because praying before sporting events used to be commonplace, the lack of public prayer seems—to the evangelical mind—to be an indication that the United States is growing more and more inhospitable to Christianity. Ronnie Floyd certainly believes this. After detailing a story where five ministers in Houston had their sermons subpoenaed by the city’s mayor, Floyd painted a picture of a bleak future for the true believer.¹⁹

I mean, we’re at a day and time when it’s not going be comfortable to identify with the People of God, because the more and more government overreaches the more challenging it’s going to be for us. All of you guys and girls that are young in ministry and you’re believing that’s what God wants you to do, there’s a real chance unless God brings awakening you’re going be arrested for your faith one day.

¹⁹ For more on this story, see the Time.com article. <<http://time.com/3514166/houston-pastors-sermons-subpoenaed/>> Last accessed 8/30/2017.

Jack Hibbs also had a shocking story for his listeners regarding the open practice of Christianity.

You want to get in trouble these days? Be a Christian in the United States military. This week a friend of mine retired after 30 years of being a commander the United States Navy. His departure service, his ceremony was on the Midway this week in San Diego. He was told by the United States Navy to shut up about your Christian faith or get out. He opted to retire. 30 years of service. That's okay. He's going to go be a pastor now and serve the Lord.

Not only does the world seem inhospitable to Christianity to the persecuted evangelical, but there is clear connection between the "lack of God" and negative outcomes.

My heart breaks for our military because I love our military but the God of the Bible says, "You honor me, I'll go to battle with you." He says, "You dishonor me, and you go to battle on your own." Just in the last couple weeks, yet again, one of our special operations in the Middle East failed miserably. Did you know? Have you stopped to think that the United States has not won a war since 1945? Have you stopped to think about that?

The Supreme Court

These issues often overlap. Ministers leverage certain ready-made religious beliefs in constructing a collective action frame. Because it can affect laws regarding abortion, same-sex marriage, and religious freedom the Supreme Court is often lightning rod for framing activity, especially motivational and diagnostic. In terms of diagnostic framing, the message is that the Supreme Court has the ability to shift culture is particularly relevant, and once again alludes to the Christian nationalist sentiment that fuels diagnostic framing processes, but this is also a useful motivational tactic.

One of the biggest issues that are right now in the culture has to do with this issue of appointments, appointments, and appointments. Presidents come and go but their appointments, long term, can outlive them by far. A President can affect a generation, but their appointments can literally affect generations... And for our eight years of the next president, he may appoint as many as four justices, according to some estimates. This could tilt America further towards Gomorrah, or put America towards more of a will of God, where God might extend mercy to the nation, rather than judgment.

In this example, Ronnie Floyd blends political and religious rhetoric to formulate a distinct motivational frame. He frames the future of the country in binary terms, saying the nation will face either God's mercy or God's judgement—and who is on the Supreme Court is directly relevant to which of those paths are in store for the United States. In this light, the prognosis is clear. True Christians must vote, and they must take their identity as an evangelical Christian with them into the voting booth. This section has highlighted some of the political consequences of identifying as an evangelical, but now the analysis turns to using the concept of a frame analysis to explore the emotional center of evangelical social movement through the words of their elite speakers.

CHAPTER 6

BIBLE CULTURE

What you need to believe about the Bible is what the Bible says.

-Ronnie Floyd

The Bible always defines itself.

-Robert Morris

I'd rather be found guilty obeying the Bible.

-Jack Hibbs

People change. Culture changes. Churches change. But the Word of God never changes.

-Jentezen Franklin

Adding to or taking away from the Bible is condemned by God.

-Robert Jeffress

Perhaps the most important finding produced by this analysis is how these ministers tap into already existing cultural phenomena to help maintain the ideological consistency of a "biblical" collective identity. One of the defining characteristics of evangelical belief is that the Bible is inerrant and sufficient. The Bible, in its entirety, is the inspired Word of God, and nothing that exists in its pages is subject for debate. Furthermore, the Bible is the only reliable source of information about any spiritual

matter. Each pastor in this sample distances himself from the “message” of the sermon because he is only *explaining* what the Bible says. How these ministers approach the Bible includes a vital distinction between “explaining” what the Bible says and “interpreting” what the Bible says. The principles of inerrancy and sufficiency imply that the Bible is not to be “interpreted,” because the process of interpretation could impute human motives to the text and obfuscate its divine nature. Moreover, the Bible is generally described in monolithic terms. The Bible, as described in these sermons, offers a uniform code of conduct and belief wherein there is no room for nuanced or contextual interpretation.

In reality, these ministers do infer meaning from the text and impute motives by parsing scripture in calculated ways. For instance, in the following excerpt, Robert Jeffress groups three separate verses from three different books of the Bible and weaves them together to claim that Heaven will have hierarchical organization.

The Bible teaches some people are going to receive a special welcome from God, like a ticker tape parade, according to 2nd Peter 1:11. Some people are going to have special access to the “Tree of Life,” according to Revelation 2:7. Some people will even have special treatment by Jesus Himself. Jesus isn’t going to treat everybody the same in Heaven. There’s special treatment according to Luke 12 verse 37.²⁰

Most scholarly literature on the subject terms this phenomenon biblical literalism, which survey researchers have used for decades as a key predictor of conservative

²⁰ 2 Peter 1:11 reads ⁴¹ “and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Revelation 2:7 reads ⁷ “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” Luke 12:37 reads ³⁷ “It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.” (New International Version).

political identity (Franzen and Griebel 2013). While there are important theological differences between biblical *literalism* and biblical *inerrancy*, there is little consequential difference in terms of public opinion.²¹ Jelen (1990) did find that many respondents were able to differentiate between literalism and inerrancy in “ways that seem meaningful” (p. 312), but the general idea that the Bible should be interpreted as a monolithic authority (typically measured as belief that the Bible should be interpreted “word for word”) has consistently proven to be a statistically significant predictor for political conservatism (Bielo 2009). Franzen and Griebel (2013) developed a metric to gauge beliefs regarding the Bible where belief in an “active Bible” refers to a more nuanced reading, while belief in a “received Bible” refers to a more literalist belief. They found that a “received Bible” view is consistent with conservative stances on several key political issues.²² While the terminology varies (literalism, inerrancy, received bible), the central theme is that political conservatives prefer a nominally simplistic view of how the Bible should be read and obeyed. For this sample, ministers leverage that view of the Bible to frame their most politically controversial stances as not explicitly political issues, but as biblical issues. As a rhetorical device, this allows the ministers to mask political speech as religious—or biblical.

For instance, there is no room to debate what the Apostle Paul meant by “sexual perversions” or “abominations.” Homosexual contact is, according to these sermons,

²¹ In the way I use the terms going forward, inerrancy is more of a theological idea, while literalism is more of a cultural idea. Both of the terms point to the idea of strict obedience and downplay or disregard the role of logic and reason in matters of morality.

²² Interestingly, Franzen (2013) found that those who espouse “literalist” views of the Bible report reading the Bible less often than more traditionally “liberal” views of scripture interpretation. According to that study, there seems to be an inverse relationship between biblical literalist beliefs and biblical knowledge.

expressly forbidden by the Bible, and therefore is expressly forbidden by God Himself.²³ The principles of inerrancy, sufficiency, and consistency coalesce to form an impenetrable logic. The Bible is the Truth, is the only source of Truth on earth, is not subject to nuanced interpretations, and is internally consistent in its entirety. Thus, the ministers are able to somewhat distance themselves from their more controversial claims. Moreover, ministers frame those potential controversies as settled biblical fact. The rules they are articulating are not their own creation, they are Biblical Truths. This enables the ministers to avoid a substantive debate about the earthly consequences, for instance, of banning gay marriage because they contend that the Bible is clear on the issue, and that those earthly consequences (dehumanization of a minority group, to start) pale in comparison to the eternal consequences of violating God's law. As Robert Jeffress noted, "when compared to the glories of heaven, the worst suffering of this world will one day be seen to be nothing more than a one-night stay in an inconvenient motel."

This process of masking politicking as dutifully sermonizing is particularly prevalent when ministers address issues that have political implications or are potentially controversial. Jentezen Franklin, when advising his congregants on how true Christians should choose which political candidate should get their vote, offered several broad generalizations about the Bible.

So what you have to do is get some absolutes. Are they pro-Israel? Because the bible's pro-Israel. Are they pro-life? Because the bible is pro-life. Are they pro-family, meaning a man and a woman married raising a family? Are they pro—is it, is it in this book? Cause if they're, if, if we're

²³ In this paper I do not claim to fully dissect the "He God" concept, but acknowledge and highlight its broad implications. In particular, the imputation of male gender to God demonstrates, from a constructionist perspective, an embrace of traditional patriarchal hierarchies.

legalizing abominations that the Bible calls abominations, God's blessing is not upon us.

Franklin then goes on to further deflect the controversial aspects of these assertions by citing his obligation, as laid out in Scripture, to preach honestly and directly.

The Bible said a preacher that won't preach is like a dumb dog that won't bark. That ain't me, that's the Bible!

Franklin describes the Bible holistically and with politically charged terminology, offering his congregants a cognitive defense of controversial stances based on the only legitimate source of moral authority. The congregants can, and must, refuse to acknowledge any moral ambiguity because an established arbiter of Biblical Truth has explained that the Bible is clear on the subject. In another instance of distancing the message from the messenger, Robert Jeffress addressed the presence of protesters who were demonstrating outside the First Baptist Church of Dallas one Sunday morning. In the following excerpt, Jeffress, like Franklin, deflects the controversy away from himself and instead champions the absolute moral authority of the Bible.

He says in verse 10, "But why, why do you judge your brother, or why again do you regard your brother with contempt? You are not to judge another." I know some of you are probably thinking, "Well Pastor that's sure the pot calling the kettle black. You're talking about not judging, why haven't you seen all these protesters out here this week? They're upset because you're judging people. The LGBTQ. A few of them were here earlier this morning. They're upset because of what you're saying. You're being judgmental." Oh no, that's not the kind of judgment He's talking about here. When we say, as a church, that marriage should be between one man and one woman, that's not our opinion. That's not our judgment. That's God's judgment. That's what the Word of God has already said. And when these people around here are protesting, they're not protesting me. They're not protesting First Baptist Dallas. They're protesting the eternal and unchangeable Word of God.

This quote demonstrates how framing work can be multi-faceted. Not only does Jeffress frame a potentially controversial issue as a “biblical” issue, he also reinforces collective identity when he states that “we say, as a *church*, that marriage should be between one man and one woman.” All at once, using the issue of gay marriage as a wedge, Jeffress engages in identity work that emphasizes the utter righteousness of the true evangelical Christian. Bean (2014) noted the tendency for “rank-and-file” evangelicals to be “political without being political” (p. 63), characterizing political issues as “moral” issues. Evangelical leaders, as demonstrated in this sample, do not characterize politically controversial topics as *moral* issues, but as *biblical* issues. With the explicit understanding within evangelical faith that the Bible is the only recognized source of moral authority—and that the Bible is inerrant, sufficient, and entirely internally consistent—these sermons demonstrate how ministers help to make certain topical beliefs unassailable in the minds of their congregants.

In terms of social movement framing, biblical literalism offers a cultural context that framers tap in order to maintain their own credibility and reinforce a collective identity. Williams and Alexander (1994) note that a movement culture is the most essential component of boundary formation—distinguishing the “us” from the “them.” The culture of biblical literalism or inerrancy is a defining aspect of the evangelicalism as a social movement because it serves as a key context for framing processes. Evangelical ministers are bound to this culture. While they objectively impute subjective interpretation in their assertions, those interpretations must be consistent with the cultural context from which ministers derive their credibility and authority.

In this way, the Bible—as a symbol—becomes an ideological resource. Biblical literalism, as an idea, gives rank-and-file evangelicals a common vocabulary for articulating their beliefs. There is no need for convoluted political or social exposition if ministers can call forth a singular ruling on a particular issue. The political stances that are most commonly defended as being biblical principles—abortion and gay marriage, specifically—are the very issues that spurred evangelical realignment in the 1970s and 1980s. Now these are firmly entrenched as fixed political stances for evangelicalism and act as a sort of litmus test for true, biblical Christians. The symbol of the Bible is a fundamental piece of evangelical movement ideology because it, recalling Williams and Alexander (2004), “provide[s] adherents with a common language with which to attack the evils of the world” (p. 3). Evangelicals can rely on the language of biblical obedience to define their selves and their beliefs as apolitical. That this language is so often invoked to advance or defend pillars of Republican Conservatism indicates a certain compatibility between “Bible culture” and traditional conservatism that is worth closer examination.

The Cultural Compatibility of Conservatism and Evangelicalism

This past week, we have watched and lived in one of the most historic moments in the history of the United States, and around the world. The ashen faces of the media told the story. Did you notice it? You see what we need to understand is that those who have led and sold their lives out to institutionalism and to the various establishments of our country, along with the so-called intellectual elites. What they have gone through this week is the astonishing and stunning reality of that is not where the heart of America is. I mean we are living in a ‘we the people’ moment in this country. Unquestionably a generational moment.

-Ronnie Floyd, November 20, 2016

Holistic descriptions of the Bible in political terms highlight the intersection between evangelical faith and conservative political ideology. Much attention has been paid to differences in the way conservatives and liberals tend to process information. Hunter (1991) contends that the distinctive characteristic is two general conceptions of “moral authority,” terming the distinction as “orthodox” and “progressive.” An “impulse toward orthodoxy” entails commitment “to an external, definable, and transcendent authority,” meaning that adherents embrace rigid moral codes that are unaffected by historical context. An “impulse toward progressivism,” on the other hand, conceptualizes moral authority within the context of “the spirit of the modern age,” and sees “truth” as a “process” (p. 43-44). Scholarship in this vein has taken a variety of forms. Psychologists have asserted that conservatives tend to have a low tolerance for ambiguity and seek “cognitive closure” (Jost et al. 2003; De Zavala, Cislak, and Wesolowska 2010), and political scientists have articulated the distinction as “reflective liberals” and “intuitive conservatives” (Deppe et al. 2015). While the distinction comes in a variety of terms, the basic gist of this body of literature is that liberals tend to appreciate nuance and subjectivity while conservatives often prefer definitive answers and situate acquired knowledge within rigid cognitive constructs.²⁴ In this sense, tendency for politically conservative Christians to adhere to more literalist interpretations of the Bible seems natural and predictable.

This sample demonstrates that evangelical thought is consistent with the aforementioned descriptions of conservative thought. Evangelicals eschew nuance and

²⁴ These are, of course, “ideal types.” In reality, these two categories are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive, but simply help guide our understanding of an intangible phenomenon.

complexity in favor of fixed, often binary understandings of the social world. This sample of sermons proliferates with speech that illustrates this idea.

Just as Jesus was *literally*, and visibly brought from earth to heaven, one day Jesus is literally and visibly going to return from heaven back to earth. When Jesus comes, as some pagan, so-called Christians say, the second coming of Jesus isn't when he comes into your heart. I heard a well-known preacher from another denomination said well now the second coming of Jesus is when he comes into your heart. Obviously he never came into that preacher's heart, because he would know the truth! The Bible says he is coming back visibly, literally and when he comes every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is lord. Heaven is a geographical location.

In this sermon, Robert Jeffress tells his congregants that Heaven is not a state of mind and that Jesus is not a complex spiritual entity, but that Heaven is physical place and Jesus is a physical human being. There is no room here, as Jeffress explains, for a metaphorical interpretation of scripture. Indeed, Jeffress notes that such an interpretation is a false doctrine, and that its proponents are "pagans" who do not truly know Jesus. Once again, Jeffress invokes the phrase "the Bible says..." to distance himself from a seemingly harsh assertion, taking the role of "just the messenger." Moreover, the principle of strict obedience to the literal Word also indicates that, for ministers, this idea not only serves to maintain the minister's role as mere conduit, it also taps into a cultural identity.

Sociologists of religion have come to describe this literalist interpretation of scripture as a defining characteristic of a deeply ingrained culture (Franzen and Griebel 2013). The idea that there is a single source of moral authority that is fixed and unaffected by new knowledge appeals to the "ideal type" of conservative mind. The Bible is unchanging, and therefore moral standards should remain unchanged as well.

Any sense of shifting moral standards can feel like an assault on this fixed source of authority. This indicates a key facet of a cultural identity that shapes the way its adherents make sense of the world around them. When ministers invoke phrases such as the “the Bible says” or the “the Bible is,” they are tapping a base cultural resource, and whatever words follow “the Bible says” should be unchallengeable on any front. But more important than the actual scripture text is the culture of literalism. The Bible is then used as an idea, a powerful symbol of a cultural identity that is resistant to progressive changes in social structure; or perhaps more to the point, it is a cultural identity that values and longs for the simplicity of having a single source for every answer to every question.

The culture of literalism is larger than any single minister. In late 2016, popular evangelical minister Andy Stanley drew criticism from other evangelical leaders when he downplayed the importance of the Virgin Birth, saying he was less concerned with specifics of Jesus Christ’s birth than he was with Christ’s resurrection. This seemed to show at least some toleration of liberal Christian teachings that call the Virgin Birth into question or disregard its significance. Several evangelical leaders, including the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Albert Mohler, publicly criticized the statement as an unwelcome insertion of a liberal theology that denies inerrancy. In the wake of the backlash, Stanley issued a statement in which he reaffirmed his commitment to the principle of inerrancy, saying “I believe the Bible is without error in everything it affirms. I believe what the Bible says is true, is true.”²⁶ The notion of even tolerating a nuanced, as opposed to literal, interpretation of the Bible was

²⁶ <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/features/19900-the-bible-says-so.html>, last accessed September 23, 2017.

quickly corrected by the larger evangelical community. Stanley's original statement did not inspire a theological discussion, but a stern rebuke. Even the hint of a nuanced interpretation of scripture is incongruous with the culture of literalism.

It is this culture that lies at the heart of the Christian Right—the more explicitly politically motivated movement of evangelicals—and this sample of sermons demonstrates how this culture is mobilized as an electoral force. When political topics are framed as biblical issues, they become cognitive certainties to those who identify with a strict biblical literalist culture. But as much as “Bible culture” provides cognitive closure for its adherents, it also is a source of emotional stability and comfort. Recall that Jasper (2017) noted the tendency for social movement scholars—when focusing on the important role of identity in framing processes—to give primacy to cognitive effects over emotional effects. The overlap between conservative politics and evangelicalism may well be mostly a phenomenon that is cognitive in nature, but the ability for the Christian Right mobilize this overlap as a political resource has a great deal to do with what it *feels like* to be an evangelical Christian for whom the Bible is a symbol of singular truth. The evangelical identity provides a sense of emotional comfort that is driven by the firmly held belief in their singular righteousness.

The Exclusivity of Righteousness: Boundary Framing as Identity Work

Let me make a distinction between the Christians' judgment and the non-Christians' judgment. I've given you a sentence on your outline I want you to fill in. 'The judgment seat of Christ is for the commendation of believers while the great white throne judgment is for the condemnation of unbelievers. The result of the judgment seat of Christ will be eternal rewards. The result of the great white throne judgment will be God's eternal punishment.'

-Robert Jeffress

Broadly stated, the collective action frame constructed within this sample is that true Christianity is in decline in America and that true Christians have an obligation to participate in the electoral process and to vote "biblically." Unpacking that frame involves a dissection of what exactly the "biblical" vote entails. Doing that lays bare the cultural heart of evangelicalism. The "biblical" vote is a vote to protect a cultural identity that is often perceived as being under siege from "worldly" forces. There is a distinct air of defiance imbedded in this collective action frame. Evangelicals who hear these sermons and identify with the larger cultural context from which these congregations draw their large numbers may be emboldened to confidently and defiantly resist any perceived outside influence on that culture.

In modern evangelical culture, the problems facing the country and the world are not complex. The Bible is the answer. That cognitive closure, the absolute certainty of that sentiment, provides millions of Americans with comfort and peace of mind. The social movement that stems from this culture, then, is mobilizing to protect a sense of safety, security, and a confident understanding of their world, the same understanding held by generations of true believers that came before. As Franklin said, "His Word has

not changed! Culture has! America has! But this book has not!” Belief in the static nature of morality and religious righteousness is comforting to the evangelical and conservative mind, and the loss of that comfort can feel like a threat to social order and can produce emotional responses.

In social movement studies, boundary maintenance is described as an aspect of diagnostic framing. The standard blueprint for social movement studies begins with identifying grievances that the movement is seeking to address or is petitioning an authority to address. Boundary maintenance is included in diagnostic framing because many social movements claim that an injustice has been wrought on a particular group of people, thus identifying who is and is not in that group of people is an essential component of diagnosing injustice. In this sample, boundary framing strikes a somewhat different tone and is worthy of its own consideration, independent from diagnostic processes.

As previously discussed, evangelicalism and political conservatism are compatible because the “word for word” interpretation of the Bible is attractive to those who generally seek cognitive certainties that often form binary understandings. For the evangelical, no binary is more certain than salvation and damnation. The dichotomy of “saved” and “unsaved” forms an ostensibly clear in-group/out-group distinction: those who have accepted Christ and those who have not. Despite that fairly simple divide, entrance to Heaven is carefully guarded and represents an important source of evangelical identity. The exclusivity of salvation is a major theme throughout this sample. There are, according to these ministers, far more people who are not saved than who are. Robert Jeffress states it quite plainly. “There is a road that leads to

eternal death and Jesus said most people are on that road.”²⁷ As Jeffress describes it, everyone is born on a path to Hell, and only by being “born again” as a Christian can an individual get on the path to Heaven.

This sample produces evidence that many evangelicals fixate on a particular “born again” moment, or a specific point in time after which salvation is promised and the Christian becomes “saved.” This is an especially major point of emphasis for Jack Hibbs and Ronnie Floyd. Floyd’s sermon entitled “Can I Lose My Salvation?” revolves entirely around that fact. He quotes Jonathon Edwards (whom he says is the smartest man to ever walk on American soil) in saying that “true salvation” is always accompanied by “an abiding change in the nature of the convert.” In answering the question that gave that sermon its title, Floyd declares that for the true Christian, in whom there has been that abiding change, salvation is never at risk. For Floyd and Hibbs especially, true salvation is found at a specific moment in time after which everything changes. Jack Hibbs describes his own experience after being “saved.”

One of the most profound things when you’re a new believer is, I remember this when I became a believer, first time, I remember returning back after becoming a Christian, because I lived right down the street from South Coast Plaza in Orange County, and I used to love shopping there and being there and hanging out there just kind of cool and all this stuff. Then I got saved. I walked back into that glitzy mall and it was so hollow and empty.

A true Christian’s spiritual birth is necessarily followed by a visceral change in behavior and a new perspective by which the world is viewed. This is a key point of defining the boundaries between the in-group and the out-group. Willful nonbelievers, atheists and

²⁷ Note the use of “Jesus said” without referring to a specific passage of scripture.

agnostics as described in this sample, are clearly in the out-group, but false Christians are just as dangerous, probably even more so, to the maintenance of a cohesive evangelical identity. The idea that there is only one right way to be a Christian is, once again, part of the framing process insulates evangelicalism from outside influence. At the same time, it fosters that sense of comfort that represents so much of the value that individual congregants can derive from membership in the in-group.

The guarantee of salvation for the true believer is the ultimate source of comfort. Jentezen Franklin says that “we’re not afraid of anything that the book of Revelation says is going to happen because we are overcomers, by the blood of the Lamb.” As Jack Hibbs puts it, “truly, surely, your name is secured in the book of life if you’re trusting and obeying Christ.” To be “saved” is to know that this life is only temporary, and that eternity will be blissful. Robert Jeffress reminds his congregation that “we think this world is our home. It’s not. It’s not. It is a temporary location.” The comforting nature of salvation also includes God’s forgiveness. While the true Christian is defined by “an abiding change” of nature, no one is without sin and everyone needs forgiveness. The true Christian will sin, but will also confess and ask for God’s forgiveness, which will be granted without end for the true Christian. The evangelical can find powerful intrinsic comfort in belonging to God or Jesus.²⁸ Even Ronnie Floyd, whose admiration of the author of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is unabashed, asserts that, for the true Christian, salvation is an unearned gift from God and that

²⁸For the purpose of this analysis, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are used interchangeably. A theological reading of these sermons would almost certainly provide a wealth of fascinating data regarding the concept of the Trinity in evangelical Protestantism. For this analysis, however, the scope must remain narrowed on the social movement culture that these sermons reveal. An in-depth understanding of the Trinity does not seem to be a defining aspect of that culture.

...sin cannot take you out of Jesus's hand. Not one sin...Satan cannot take you away from Jesus. He can't, he's unable, he is incapable...Once Jesus has you, you're his. So to answer that question. Can I lose my salvation? Absolutely not! It is absolutely impossible to lose what you did not earn! And it's absolutely impossible to lose when Jesus has you in his grip!

But while the guarantee of salvation is a source of comfort, the exclusivity of salvation is a source of trepidation. Since the vast majority of the world is of a culture inconsistent with the more favorable category of salvation, every evangelical lives in a larger culture that is infested with evil forces. This dynamic is central to the collective action frame and the establishment of boundaries. As Robert Jeffress said, "let's face it, it's hard to keep our lives clean in a polluted world like this one, isn't it?" All around the true Christian are forces actively seeking to separate the believer from the Truth.

Importantly, the out-group is not only comprised of atheists and agnostics (who are often treated in these sermons with extraordinary contempt and bewilderment), but of professing Christians who teach false, even "demonic" doctrines. Hibbs warns against the "demonic, shifty doctrines [that are] hard to detect unless you have the truth." In a previously quoted excerpt from Robert Jeffress, he declared a minister who offered a metaphorical interpretation of the Second Coming of Christ was a "pagan, so-called Christian" who does not truly know Jesus. These false doctrines work to splinter and divide the larger church community and separate otherwise well-meaning people of faith from true spiritual rebirth. For many evangelicals, including Jack Hibbs, the intrusion of theological complexity necessitates a clear split.

Do you see the division that's happening in the so-called body of Christ today? I'm just asking you. Do you see it happening among those who claim to be Christians? I do...Can you sense that there is a necessary,

painful though it may be, a necessary separation happening among those who profess to be Christians?

The language that describes the eternal fate of the out-group is harsh, but delivered with a matter-of-fact frankness. Those who are not true Christians will face “destruction,” “damnation,” and will be “cast into the lake of fire.” Unabashed nonbelievers and unsaved church goers will meet the same fate—this notion once again harkens back to evangelicalism’s appeal to minds that tend to deny ambiguity. The question of salvation is not complicated, and any attempt to make it so is a doctrine of demons designed to tear the church, the country, and the world apart.

Often the language that describes the voices of the out-group is apocalyptic in nature. Jack Hibbs warns of “demonic” doctrines, as does Robert Jeffress. Robert Morris, when asserting that Jesus would only return when Jewish people have accepted Christ as the messiah, said

Think about this, do you think Satan knows this? He begins to say, that Jewish people don’t need to be saved. So if this says that when they accept the messiah, the second coming’s coming, then Satan comes around and says well they don’t need to accept the messiah.

Thus, any teaching that is inconsistent with the common evangelical narrative of what is “biblical” is not only erroneous, but could be a ploy by Satan himself to stop or delay Christ’s ultimate victory. Even well-meaning Christians who promote a non-apocalyptic interpretation of scripture may have unknowingly become pawns of Satan. Framed in this manner, the righteousness of conservative Christianity is buttressed by the depiction of a fallen world. That fallen world is separate from the world of the truly faithful. In another sermon, Robert Morris described church as a refuge and the source

of defense against the satanic elements of the world. He referenced several Old Testament passages that mentioned “coming in” and “going out” to and from war. He then analogized this with living as a Christian in today’s popular culture.

When we come to church, if you’ve just lost a war, or lost some battle in your life, in an area of your life, we come in and repent. If we’ve won some war, or some battle, we come in and rejoice. And if we’re still in the middle of it, we come in to God’s presence and we’re refreshed.

Morris, by far the most tactful minister in this sample, implies here that being a true Christian is a constant battle. Later in the same sermon, Morris uses a bit of levity to describe the comfort and protection that comes from fully identifying as a true Christian in a world in the midst of a spiritual war.

See, think about walking around, we’re in a war! But think about walking around with Jesus right there with you. You think a demon’s gonna attack, I mean, God’s right there! Think about, um, you’ve seen this in a movie or a television show, you know, where some bullies are about to beat up a guy, you know. And maybe he, you know, he’s got this tough friend. Alright here’s a good example, Richie Cunningham. And who? The Fonze! And so they’re about to, you know, they’ve got Richie by the coat like this, and they’re about to beat him up and then the Fonze, “heeeeeey,” shows up. “What’s going on here?” And what do they do? “Nothing Fonzy, we’re just straightening his coat, you know,” I’m telling you. Satan comes and he’s about to beat up on you, and you had your quiet time that day, and Jesus comes around the corner and says, “What’s going on here?” And Satan says, “Nothing. Nothing.” And just backs off.

At a glance, this excerpt seems to indicate a classic lesson of general spirituality. Through meditation and belief, a spiritual person can find the strength to overcome obstacles on the way to self-actualization. However, as a framing process, this excerpt indicates how the collective identity of the “saved” is reinforced when he states that “we’re” in a war. He references internal struggles and personal battles, but then he

takes those deeply personal issues and places them in the context of an all-encompassing war for the soul of humanity. Thus, internal battles and struggles that all individuals face are framed as a spiritual war—a war with only one “right” side. There is no way to salvation except through full buy-in to biblical culture’s saved and unsaved dichotomy.

CHAPTER 7

LIFTING THE VOTE

At its very base, the prognostic frame is rather simple. In order to fight against the erosion of Christian values in the country, Christians must form a “united front” (Jack Hibbs) at the polls. To this end, ministers were careful to assert that they were not “being political,” but being “biblical.”

But listen carefully, you need register to vote as soon as you possibly can, and be ready for November. You say “Well, that’s political.” No it’s not political, it’s biblical. God wants us to be involved in this process. We get to live out our faith. One day you will stand before God just like I will, at what we call the Judgment Seat of Jesus Christ, and we will answer to God for our decision making. No matter what it’s about. (Ronnie Floyd)

In another example of multi-faceted framing, Ronnie Floyd gives the prognosis—vote—and also provides a motivational frame that reminds his audience that God’s judgement leaves nothing out. How one votes, as well as who one votes for, will be a decision for which God will hold each person accountable. Other instances of ministers urging their listeners to vote are less severe, but still press its importance in other ways.. Jack Hibbs, for instance, lashed out repeatedly at liberal Christians whom he blames for the political division among professing Christians.

Should Christians be allowed to vote? That’s a note I wrote to myself. You say, “How dare you say that?” Well, hang on a minute. Christians don’t seem to be educated enough to vote. They don’t seem to be Biblical enough to vote. They don’t know what the Bible says about voting.

Here, Hibbs again taps into the broader cultural context by framing the action in the vocabulary of strict biblical obedience. The Bible is used as a symbol around which

evangelicals can rally confidently and can cognitively and emotionally defend their convictions. For those who identify as “biblical” Christian, this is a powerful motivator. Motivational framing from the pulpit, in this sample, almost always features a reinforcement of the evangelical identity—ministers claim that the call to vote is made all the more urgent by the prevalence of misguided believers.

The following is a portion of a sermon in which Robert Morris makes an impassioned plea for his congregation to vote. It is a useful example because it gives context for how these framing processes come together to encourage a specific action.

James, Chapter 2, Verses 15 through 17. “If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to him, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled, but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?’ Thus also, faith, by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” In other words, if we don’t do something, we’re in trouble. There are about 100 million evangelicals in America. One hundred million evangelical Christians. Now, hear me. Less than half of evangelicals are registered to vote. Less than half. In the last Presidential election, less than half registered voted.

The diagnostic frame, in this case, is a lack of electoral participation by evangelicals. That he qualifies this term is of vital importance. He is not speaking to all Christians, only those who *identify as evangelicals*. The binary nature of salvation, though not typically a major point of emphasis for Morris (at least not nearly as much as it is with the other four ministers in this sample), is leveraged here as an identity. He does not define what evangelical means but knows that his congregants identify as such, and thus he is tapping collective evangelical identity as a cultural resource. His audience is part of a culture that believes in a single path to salvation for all people. Morris continues.

Here's what we do so many times. "Well, I don't like either candidate, so I'm not voting for either one." Well, you just voted. I'm telling you again, a non-vote is a vote...Again, I'm going to say some strong things in the message. We're not a democracy. I don't know if you know that. We are not a democracy. We are a republic...Now, I'm going to explain something. Hang on. Hang onto your seats, though. All right? But, what it means is, in a true democratic nation, people actually vote on the laws. In a republic, it means rule by Constitutional law. We are a republic, listen, with a democratic process. We elect leaders, who are supposed to *uphold* our Constitution...for years now, we have sat home and those who are trying to *change* our Constitution are voting. That's right. They are changing it. They are interpreting it. They are saying, "That's not constitutional." For instance, they said, "It's not constitutional to pray in schools." Look's what happened in the violence in our world since we did that. That's right.

Here, Morris demonstrates his authority as an intelligent, studied actor worthy of attention and respect. He pauses several times and repeatedly highlights that he is saying something of urgent import and that his audience should listen intently. Then he makes a distinction that is, at its core, a distinction between conservative and progressive political philosophies. *Upholding* the Constitution is juxtaposed with *changing* the Constitution. This is a boundary framing process wherein an adversary is implied. He repeatedly uses the word "they," which reinforces that the group in question is unequivocally not with "us." The "they" in this case are those who want to *change* the country and the Constitution, and Morris implies that "the violence in our world" is a direct result of those seeking to change the Constitution by removing prayer in schools. Not only does this (not so) subtly reinforce the link between conservative politics and evangelical identity, but casts the out-group of non-believers and misguided Christians as the source of "violence in our world."

It's very, very important that you vote. It's very important.

With evangelical identity firmly reinforced as a natural companion of conservatism, his motivational phrasing here should not be overlooked. He emphasizes how important it is that “*you*” vote. Having already asserted that “those who are trying to change our Constitution,”—the “they,” the out-group—“*are voting,*” Morris has established to whom it is that he is speaking. It is “very, very important” that his audience vote. Next, he finds another way to reinforce the connection between conservatism and evangelical identity by tapping another traditional source of cultural delineation.

Now, I’m going to give you one statement from our Declaration of Independence and tell you that most politicians who quote this, don’t believe it. I’ll show you what I mean. Here’s the statement and you know it. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” You might think that I’m going to zoom in on the word “equal”...that’s not the word that most politicians don’t believe. Here’s the word they don’t believe. The word, “created.” We are “created equal” and endowed by our Creator. Here’s what many politicians believe, “evolved.” Listen to me carefully. If you don’t believe we were “created,” you will never believe we’re equal. That’s right. People don’t evolve equally. They don’t. We learn at different paces. I’m not talking now about race, I’m talking about any person. We were created. It’s the foundation of our government, is that the rights that we have, have not been given to us by the government, but they’ve been given to us by almighty God, our Creator.

This is an example of a framing process that serves as “remedial ideological work” (Snow and Benford 2000: p. 9). Evolution still provides a useful resource to tap in the framing process because it indicates a literalist worldview. In order to accept evolution as a scientific reality, Christians must alter their reading of Genesis to allow for at least some amount of metaphorical or nuanced interpretation. Evangelical rejection of evolution speaks to the air of defiance that fuels the enthusiasm of the evangelical social movements. When Morris referenced his church’s collective rejection of evolution, he was reminding them who they are: God’s people, warriors fighting in the only war

that has ever truly mattered, holding in their hearts the only path to eternal salvation, and grievously outnumbered by people in the world who think they are—as Jentezen Franklin is fond of saying—“smarter than God.”

That evolution can be used as another issue to reinforce the evangelical identity shows that this belief among evangelicals is grounded in a specific culture and tradition. Less important than the science of evolution is what it *feels like*. Not only does it speak to the defiant nature of evangelical identity, but shows how that identity can be emotionally tied to political action. The adversarial framing work that Morris undertakes in this instance—the “they” that seek to *change* the Constitution—is an essential aspect of the larger collective action frame. Evangelical social movements are pitted squarely against progressivism because, at its core, evangelical identity hinges on a uniform concept of tradition. That tradition is largely expressed through Christian nationalist sentiment, and manifested in political action that opposes progressive social change in almost any form.

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

Within this sample, each of the core framing tasks, or processes, involved in constructing a collective action frame are observable. The first task, diagnostic framing, includes both boundary framing and adversarial framing. By tapping into an already established cultural identity, this sample demonstrates how in-group/out-group distinctions are made, and how those distinctions reinforce that base cultural identity. Adversarial framing occurs simultaneously; any person or phenomenon that is not expressly of the literalist culture is a spiritual enemy. Once the boundary lines are drawn, the diagnostic framing process—in large part—comes in characterizing current events as consequences of the key issue. In this sample, natural disasters, civil unrest, “inner-city” violence, abortion rates, gay marriage, terrorism, intellectual elitism, and changing rules dictating the practice of Christianity all are framed as symptoms the larger problem of the loss of Christian hegemony in America.

Christian nationalism is the sentimental root of the diagnostic framing process. The notion that America has “turned its back on God” indicates the esteem with which evangelicals hold traditional social patterns. Diagnostic framing work emphasizes the problems with recent social changes—same-sex marriage is a perfect example—that may feel like an erosion of the tradition that, to the evangelical, made America great. Imbedded in this frame of “traditional family values” is a fervent desire to maintain social

institutions—male-headed households, for instance—that progressive movements have intentionally sought to change.

The prognostic framing task, then, dictates how movement adherents—in this case constituents of a cultural identity—can act to make a difference. Except for Robert Jeffress, who still engaged in all of these framing processes, each minister in this sample dedicated at least one entire sermon to encouraging their congregants to vote, and to vote “faithfully,” or in the language of the culture, to vote “biblically.” Each minister, without specifically endorsing a candidate by name, identified key issues that should inform the righteous Christian vote.²⁹ Finally, the process of motivational framing takes the form of describing the extreme nature of the central problem. This sample produced a plethora of instances where ministers referenced the enormous “stakes” of the 2016 election, and described the current time period as unlike any other in history. Moreover, motivational framing included detailing the dire consequences of inaction.

Contrary to my expectations at the outset, I did not find explicit defenses of key wedge issues. At times, the similarities between these sermons and a Republican candidate’s stump speech are striking. However, these instances are—to varying degrees—fairly isolated. The majority of the political framing work is much more layered. While it is worth noting that ministers engage in predictable political polemics from the pulpit, it is of far more sociological value to understand the cultural foundations that undergird and give credibility to this type of sermonizing. It is important to note that

²⁹ Jack Hibbs represents something of an outlier in this sample in terms of how far he was willing to push the envelope in terms of candidate endorsement. Still, he never explicitly told his congregants to vote for a particular candidate, but was far less subtle than the others in identifying which party platform was more in line with a “biblical” worldview—and the others were not at all subtle.

this political rhetoric did predictably occur during the 2016 election cycle, but the deeper question is why the evangelical church is such a welcoming platform for this type of speech.

At no point did any of the ministers in the sample offer prolonged explanations for why issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage are incompatible with biblical teaching, these issues are only referenced in an appeal to emotions. This points to the interactional nature of identity work. While this study maintains a focus on elite rhetoric, broader evangelical culture operates as a discursive field from which ministers draw legitimacy and influence. Despite their status as leaders of evangelical movements, ministers are bound to some specific cultural contexts. At once, these contexts limit the ministers and also serve as symbolic resources that can be tapped in framing processes.

Symbolic interactionism, as it turned out, became a far more important theoretical perspective than I anticipated. Resource Mobilization Theory of social movements tends to focus on tangible resources such as money, supplies, or personnel. That conceptualization still proves useful to frame analysis because, through the construction of a collective action frame, emotions prove to be crucial resources that can mobilize movement adherents—especially when the prognosis is as simple as voting. Although I did not find explicit, scriptural foundations for those key wedge issues, how and when these ministers referenced those issues was foundational to my findings. These issues serve as emotional resources, as when Robert Morris displayed an image of a miscarried fetus. His purpose there was not, I infer, to convince anyone to become pro-life, but to tap deeply held opinions to evoke an emotional response.

The argument that I have advanced in this study is limited by the type of speech I elected to analyze. To varying degrees, each minister in this sample is bound by the 1954 Johnson Amendment which mandates that tax-exempt organizations refrain from endorsing a candidate or political party “directly or indirectly.”³⁰ Each of the ministers in this sample arguably violated the Johnson Amendment at some point during the election cycle, but to focus solely on those instances is disingenuous to the general themes of the sermons. For the most part, these ministers give earnest advice to their congregants, each striking their own balance between offering comfort and challenge. Because this rhetoric is not explicitly political, it has its limitations in terms of understanding a political social movement such as the Christian Right. Rather, the focus was narrowed to the cultural context from which the Christian Right draws its resources. My findings and conclusions are limited in that they are largely inferred, and the framing work not necessarily undertaken intentionally—at least not one hundred percent of the time.

A second limitation that I must note is that this study can only speak to white evangelicalism as a general characteristic. This is not a simple categorization. Evangelical megachurches—newer ones especially—are among the most racially diverse congregations in the country (Thumma and Travis 2007), and the numbers of Black and Hispanic evangelicals remain high. In fact, Black evangelicals are one of the few categories of religious participation that saw an increase from 2007 to 2014 (Pew RLS 2014). Ministers in this sample tend to embrace “feel good” rhetoric regarding race.

³⁰At the time of the final revisions to this paper, Rep. Walter Jones (NC) has introduced a measure to repeal the Johnson Amendment. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/172/text> last accessed 11/5/2017.

For instance Jentezen Franklin passionately told his congregation that he would not let anyone “divide us up” by race, and Robert Morris often speaks of his love for his multiracial grandson. On the whole, this analysis shows that popular evangelical ministers are careful to use inclusive rhetoric, remaining adamant that God’s love and Christ’s sacrifice is for absolutely any person who will accept it. However, despite the diversifying congregations, these churches still fall into the general category of “white evangelicals” because they are distinct from black or Hispanic evangelical churches, which have their own distinctive characteristics. The diversity within the evangelical megachurch is an interesting dynamic that should be further examined by sociologists of religion and race studies.

Conclusion

This study has been an examination of elite evangelical rhetoric and what that rhetoric demonstrates about evangelical political participation. The overlap between evangelical faith and conservative politics did not occur naturally but was intentionally forged through decades of denominational restructuring and political maneuvering, but the success of the Christian Right in the United States depended (and still depends) on more than just the actions of the evangelical elite. By examining the content of the sermons of a few of the nation’s most prominent evangelical ministers, I conducted this study to better understand the link between the evangelical elite and the “rank-and-file” evangelical whose collective action continues to have a remarkable influence on electoral politics and public policy in the United States.

The collective action frame, when broken down into specific framing tasks, exists to increase the voter turnout of self-identifying evangelicals. Even when ministers are

not actively engaging political topics, they are at work reinforcing and defining evangelical identity. As a part of the diagnostic framing task, evangelicals come to see themselves as separate from the world in which they live—a world that is “corrupted by sin.” At a larger level, the remedy for this problem—the prognostic frame—is for evangelicals to live their lives in obedience to the Bible and to spread the message of exclusive salvation whenever and wherever possible. In an election year, the prognosis also includes describing voting as a Christian or even biblical duty. Furthermore, the prognostic frame includes directions on how to “vote biblically.” To motivate their congregants to do this, ministers in this sample used various methods of operationalizing evangelical identity. Observing and analyzing this process produced several key findings regarding culture of evangelical identity.

The first key finding produced by this analysis is that the Bible—as an idea more than as a book—is a powerful cultural symbol. The Bible serves as the rhetorical standard for defending politically precarious stances; but more than that, the *idea* of the Bible serves as the marker of true righteousness. “Biblical” Christians are juxtaposed with “pagan” or “false” Christians. Congregants are advised to “vote biblically” and, in times of struggle, to “think Bible.” In terms of framing processes, biblical inerrancy or literalism is far more a cultural artifact—as an object of identity work—than a theological principle. Time and again, ministers in this sample use the idea of the Bible to reinforce boundaries, diagnose the root of national concerns, and motivate specific political action. At each step in this process, ministers are mobilizing evangelical identity as “Bible Christians” to advance the political agenda of the Christian Right. Done in this way, ministers are able to engage in polemics while still claiming to be apolitical.

According to these sermons, evangelical ministers are not advancing a political agenda when advising which political platform is closer to “biblical standards,” but are advocating eternal, inerrant Truth.

This leads into the second key finding of this analysis: the overlap between evangelical faith and conservative politics is largely a cognitive phenomenon, but is operationalized through appeals to emotion. Conservatives tend to seek cognitive closure and search for absolutes. The infallibility of biblical teaching, when coupled with the assertion that the Bible is entirely internally consistent, appeals to those who have that need for cognitive certainty. As a part of that need for certainty, conservatives place a high value on fixed moral standards; this lends itself to the idea that the Bible is the only valid source of moral wisdom because the Bible, as noted repeatedly in this sample, “has not changed.” The notion of fixed morality and biblical inerrancy form the context for most of the framing work in this sample. The issues facing the country are not portrayed as complex, but can be reduced to rhetorical descriptions of a nation that has “turned its back on God,” or—perhaps more to the point—turned its back on the Bible. Thus the solution is even simpler than the diagnosis and is summed up nicely by Jentezen Franklin: “The church is the only answer! The Bible is the only answer! Jesus is the only answer!”

Imbedded in this frame (that the country is moving away from God and that the Bible is the answer) is the idea that the nation’s past was more Christian or more biblical. That this fact need not be established indicates that the cultural resources that are being tapped in these framing processes are conservative by nature. In the 1970s, there were prominent evangelicals who would likely point to (moderate) advances in

social justice as being consistent with the essence of Christ's teachings. As evidenced in this sample, any advocacy for a "social Gospel" where equality is given primacy over tradition is not a point of emphasis by the evangelical elite. Rather, the boundaries that are drawn and vociferously maintained emphasize exclusion over inclusion.

The modern world, as it is described by these ministers, is a sinful and wicked place, corrupted by evil, and is determined to lure away true believers with false teachings that might "feel good" but are actually demonic doctrines. True believers, according to these ministers, are called to divorce themselves from their "feelings" and "do what God says is right," a frame that works exceptionally well in a culture that lauds singular authority. In an election year, "what God says is right" is defined rather narrowly in terms of supporting party platforms. Four of the five ministers preached at least one sermon where they specifically mentioned party platforms, and none of them showed any equivocation. As appeals to the cultural context that is the source of modern evangelical identity, there was one—and only one—clear option in the 2016 election.

The roots of evangelical sentiment—the emotional core of evangelicalism—is imbedded in a traditionalism that is largely typified by Christian nationalism. Throughout this analysis, traditional values have been framed as the bedrock of American exceptionalism. To the evangelical, protecting that tradition goes beyond politics, but is part of American and Christian identity alike. The comfort and peace that identity provides is a source of certainty in what *feels like* an uncertain world (and framing processes reiterate that uncertainty). Like Ronnie Floyd says, when Jesus has you, he has you and he won't let you go no matter what. But the reward of salvation is not for everybody, not even everybody that goes to church, and can only be secured by full-

fledged commitment to *biblical* Christianity as a master status. Jack Hibbs over and over again uses phrases like "if you're a Christian," or "if you're saved," often even providing the telling adjective "really," saying "if you're *really* a Christian you will..." That ties that sentiment to an identity that, in turn, is tied to eternal salvation *and* earthly happiness, which—understandably—has serious emotional consequences at the individual level, and can be a powerful motivator of collective action.

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