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WITNESSING THE WEB:
THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN E-VANGELISM AND PERSUASION ONLINE

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By
Amber Michelle Stamper

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Roxanne Mountford, Professor of English

Lexington, Kentucky

2013

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

WITNESSING THE WEB: THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN E-VANGELISM AND PERSUASION ONLINE

From the distribution of religious tracts at Ellis Island and Billy Sunday's radio messages to televised recordings of the Billy Graham Crusade and Pat Robertson's *700 Club*, American evangelicals have long made a practice of utilizing mass media to spread the Gospel. Most recently, these Christian evangelists have gone online.

As a contribution to scholarship in religious rhetoric and media studies, this dissertation offers evangelistic websites as a case study into the ways persuasion is carried out on the Internet.

Through an analysis of digital texts—including several evangelical home pages, a chat room, discussion forums, and a virtual church—I investigate how conversion is encouraged via web design and virtual community as well as how the Internet medium impacts the theology and rhetorical strategies of web evangelists. I argue for “persuasive architecture” and “persuasive communities”—web design on the fundamental level of interface layout and tightly-controlled restrictions on discourse and community membership—as key components of this strategy.

In addition, I argue that evangelical ideology has been influenced by the web medium and that a “digital reformation” is taking place in the church, one centered on a move away from the Prosperity Gospel of televangelism to a Gospel focused on God as divine problem-solver and salvation as an uncomplicated, individualized, and instantaneously-rewarding experience, mimicking Web 2.0 users' desire for quick, timely, and effective answers to all queries. This study simultaneously illuminates the structural and fundamental levels of design through which the web persuades as well as how—as rhetoricians from Plato's King Thamus to Marshall McLuhan have recognized—media inevitably shapes the message and culture of its users.

KEY WORDS: Digital Rhetoric, Digital Evangelism,
Internet Communication, Religious
Rhetoric, Christianity Online

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April 22, 2013
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WITNESSING THE WEB:
THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN E-VANGELISM AND PERSUASION ONLINE

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April 22, 2013

For my inspiring and beloved husband Scott,
For my endlessly-supportive Daddy-o, Mom, Alyssa, and Annika,
And above all,
For the honor and glory of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
Without Whom nothing is possible

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Chapter One

Introduction

The summer after her senior year of high school, Patricia Calderon's best friend was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Devastated and feeling hopeless, Patricia tried to pray. Though her mother was Catholic, the family had not attended church in years, and Patricia felt no real connection to or relationship with God. Still, prayer seemed like the thing to do. She began by reading through a copy of St. Jude's prayer that she had found online—the only prayer she had ever heard of—and quickly gave up. It felt fake and forced. She was not even sure she believed in God anyway. In frustration, distressed over her friend's rapidly failing condition, and disillusioned over how God—if God even existed—could let this happen to a young girl, Patricia powered up her computer again, went to the popular search engine *Ask Jeeves*, and typed in "Is there a God?" She waited for the results.

The first search result that appeared was *EveryStudent.com*, an evangelistic outreach site designed in 2001 by CRU (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ). About to be a rising student herself at the University of California, Davis, Patricia thought the site seemed promising, so she clicked on the link. The first article she encountered addressed her question exactly: entitled "Is there a God?" it was written by Marilyn Adamson, a self-proclaimed "former atheist" who, like Patricia, had experienced strong doubts about Christianity and had begun a search to discover any available "objective evidence pointing to the existence of God" (Adamson). That night, Patricia read through Adamson's testimony and every other article on the page: articles on topics from religion to relationships to addiction. She read the site's description of Jesus and the "forgiveness

and new life He offers" (Adamson). She read all through the night, and, early the next morning, she decided to become a Christian, or, as the website described, "give her life to Christ." At 2:49 A.M., using the website's email option, she contacted an online mentor and began a long email correspondence with Ana Arias, one of CRU's sixty staff members involved in the *EveryStudent.com* web ministry. When Patricia went off to college in the fall, Ana encouraged her to get linked in with a Christian community on campus. Patricia joined UC Davis's CRU organization and went on to study communication and religion. A decade later, she continues to be involved in discipleship and outreach on campus and is an active web evangelist herself. In her own personal testimony, she expresses amazement at how just that one night online could have so dramatically changed and reshaped the course of her life (Hill).

Patricia's story—though fascinating and, certainly for her, life-altering—is far from unique. According to statistics gathered by Marilyn Adamson, author of the first article Patricia encountered and director of CRU's *EveryStudent.com* ministry, every day this single website receives about 250 contacts from individuals who have become Christians while online ("EveryStudent.com Overview"). In a personal interview with Adamson regarding the creation of this digital ministry, she shared with me an extensive list of testimonies she has collected over the years from individuals similar to Patricia who had conversion experiences via *EveryStudent.com* and its online ministers, daily encouraging email devotional courses, and digital Bible studies. These testimonies of digitally-mediated conversion experiences often come from individuals of very different backgrounds who were searching online for very different things: some had grown up going to church but had become disillusioned and were doubting the "truthfulness" of

Christianity; others were Muslim, Hindu, or Jewish, and several were agnostics or atheists; still others found themselves at a point of despair in their lives and were searching for hope: one individual's mother had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and they had gone online "to google 'Does God answer prayers?'" ; another correspondent described dealing with severe depression only to find that becoming a Christian was, for him, like finding "a light in the dark," like having a new "spiritual birthday"; still others were dealing with addictions, betrayals, and family crises. However, despite the divergent backgrounds and motivations that led these individuals to encounter *EveryStudent.com*, the language used to expression these conversion experiences is unanimously expressed in incredibly vivid, enthusiastic, and emotional language: the testimonies overflow with statements like "i have become a christian and im so. . .Happy"; "I love the peace and joy that I now feel"; "[I feel] fuller and filled with purpose"; and "I have NEVER felt this sort of peace in my life! . . . My heart feels full."

The conversion experiences and the litany of testimonies encountered on *EveryStudent.com* though dramatic are hardly unique. The records kept by evangelical digital ministries and by individual digital evangelists across America—often posted on their home pages—are full of such conversion stories. Digital evangelism—also known as Internet or Web evangelism by its practitioners—refers to employing the Internet in any manner to spread the Christian gospel and is being used by Christian evangelists (from all denominations though primarily of evangelical persuasion) to impact the lives of web surfers all over the world. It includes the adoption of a variety of web-based digital media, from podcasts and YouTube videos of sermons to ministry outreach pages on Facebook and Google Plus to apologetic debates on discussion boards and in chat

rooms to the Twitter feeds, status updates, Instagram and Pinterest pages, and personal blogs of lay Christians reaching out to build relationships and share their testimonies via the Internet. The data, which has been in place but has gone largely undocumented until the past couple of years, is startling not predominately in that it draws our attention to the most current trend in Christian evangelism (a practice as old as the religion itself) but that this particular type of evangelism appears to be having an incredible degree of impact in the Internet medium. In 2012, for example, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's Internet evangelism ministry reported that "nearly 8 million people around the world heard the message of Jesus Christ" and that, of these eight million, "nearly 1.5 million of them said they prayed a salvation prayer," a prayer which, to evangelical Christians, is viewed as a sign of conversion to the Christian faith (Kumar). The ministry further noted that these statistics average out to over 4,100 people responding to their message per day via the ministry's evangelistic website *PeacewithGod.net*. Furthermore, the *Peace with God* ministry, created in May of 2011, has shared the Gospel with over 9.27 million people globally, 1.67 million of whom have indicated that they have "made a commitment to Jesus Christ." What these statistics reveal is that not only are these ministries reaching an incredibly large audience, but also that they are connecting with and purporting to dramatically influence the lives of these people on a daily basis, an influence that appears to be consistently on the rise.

Another digital ministry headquartered in Silicon Valley, California, Global Media Outreach (a partner of Campus Crusade for Christ), completed a study that found that in 2010, over 15 million people indicated a "decision for Christ" online. In 2011, they reported that in one day alone they reached over one million visitors online and that

in two consecutive days they reached over 2.5 million (Lehua). The ministry, which describes their purpose as being "a global ministry presenting the good news of Jesus Christ online 24/7" cites their primary goal as "stay[ing] on the cutting edge of global communication technologies to share Jesus and help believers grow in their faith worldwide" (Lehua). Furthermore, GMO claims to make a point of following up on each and every convert to ensure that they find and are integrated into both live and online Christian communities and that new converts find all the support and encouragement they might need. The ministry's data studies indicate this as well: in a follow-up study based on the responses of over 100,000 people, GMO looked at the long-term effectiveness of online evangelism and found that over 50% of those who became Christians online report that they went on to share their faith with others, that 34% of these new Christians report that they read their Bibles daily, and that nearly 50% report praying for at least ten minutes a day, all signs that the ministry takes to be evidence that the initial decision to become a Christian was not superficial and that this conversion is indicated by behavior changes as well. As Walt Wilson, GMO's founder and chairman stated, "These findings are remarkable because they reveal that online evangelism isn't just an in-the-moment decision, and people continue to grow in their faith after they have indicated a decision" (Black).

In addition, such reports are not limited to only the largest evangelistic organizations with well-established brick and mortar ministries and a dependable financial contribution base: smaller ministries using the Internet as a mission field are seeing similar results. Network 211, for example, an evangelical Assemblies of God World Missions ministry, has created websites to reach over 230 countries within the four

years since their founding and have seen, according to their president Dr. George M. Flattery, "more than 4 million unique website visitors," over 300,000 of whom "made an evangelism response" expressed via an indicated decision to convert and over 100,000 of whom "made a discipleship connection" by expressing an interest in Christianity and beginning a correspondence with an online minister (Touchstone). Dr. Flattery, who attributes these results primarily to the power of the Christian message and what he believes to be its undeniable truth, notes as well the powerful role that the particular medium of the Internet had in sharing this message with the world and the real impact that evangelists globally are having by adopting this technology, stating poetically that "There is a silent explosion going on around us. To those attuned to it, the sound is deafening. To those not involved, the sound is unheard. It's all happening—my colleagues—on the Internet! This powerful tool begs to be used in the cause of the Great Commission" (Touchstone). And echoing Dr. Flattery's words are hundreds of testimonies from converts who speak in amazement at the power of the Internet to have been used with so much impact to change their lives as well, including one by a young woman identified only as "Becky," who wrote, "What a wonderful thing technology is, it can reach out and be so personal. I am not a very technical person, I am learning how great it can be" (Adamson).

What is captured in these mission statements, testimonies, the snowballing amount of data collected on the impact of Internet ministries, and the dozens of books on digital evangelism rolling out of Christian presses across America is not just enthusiasm for these growing ministries but a sense of awe at their effectiveness. The amazement and praise Internet evangelists and converts alike express simultaneously centers on the

power of the message and the power of the Internet medium. As a scholar of rhetoric, the opportunity to engage with, explore, analyze, and learn from such an historical moment so apparently related to issues of persuasion and the role of media in effecting persuasion is compelling. The exploration of the persuasive power of digital evangelism—centered particularly on website evangelism—that I present in this study is an effort to begin this process.

My hopes for the project of studying Christian evangelism and particularly the study of digital evangelism in America are (1) to contribute to the scholarly conversations occurring both in the study of religious rhetoric and digital media rhetoric and (2) to find ways in which these conversations might be interwoven into the broader study of the rhetoric of American religious media. In terms of historical precedent for the study of religious rhetoric, it is fair to say that the historical relationship between Christianity and rhetorical studies dates to antiquity. We have, for example, the very earliest application of rhetorical criticism to the Bible in Longinus's reading of the creation account in Genesis sometime between the first and third centuries C.E., and by the fifth century, St. Augustine, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, had developed an extended set of standards for interpreting and teaching the Scripture as well as a series of instructions for preparing sermons and presenting the Gospel, effectively establishing the foundation of homiletics, or the rhetoric of preaching. Augustine, having observed the Greco-Roman practice of rhetoric as applied to secular persuasive goals, wondered why the power of persuasion should not be applied to a righteous cause like converting people to Christianity. This work set off a long practice of rhetorical interpretation of the biblical text, instruction in Gospel presentation, and analysis of Christian rhetoric in sacred as well as secular spaces,

a tradition that did not fade in popularity until the modern period, only to be revived again in the latter part of the twentieth century (Kennedy 2). As these early instances suggest, rhetoric and religion are undoubtedly a natural pairing. As classical rhetoric and literature scholar George A. Kennedy has noted: "Purposes [of studies in religious rhetoric] cover a spectrum from converting hearers to a view opposed to that previously held, to implanting a conviction or belief not otherwise entertained, to teaching or exposition, to entertainment and demonstration of the cleverness of the speaker," a statement that emphasizes the overlap between the goals of Christian evangelism (in any denomination) and rhetoric (2). Exemplars of contemporary work on the rhetoric of Christian texts and evangelism include Kennedy's *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* and *Classical Rhetoric & Its Christian and Secular Roots from Ancient to Modern Times*, Carl Joachim Classen's *Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament*, and Laurent Pernot's "The Rhetoric of Religion."

Interestingly, however, outside of instruction for Christians in homiletics, the majority of work done with Christian rhetoric has been, as Pernot has observed, predominantly focused on literary criticism of the Bible—the examination of the use of classical rhetoric's tropes, methods, and forms in Scripture (17). The dearth of scholarship by rhetoricians on the particular rhetoric of evangelism is surprising considering the number of instructional manuals for evangelists available and the well-developed and extensive practice of Christian evangelism throughout the world. Pernot suggests that this may have to do with a hesitancy to deal with a process that is considered by Christians to be led by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and effected by the work of God ("The Rhetoric" 235). Nevertheless, while rhetorical criticism of the Bible as literature has

thrived, the examination of the rhetoric of evangelism or the examination of evangelistic strategies has largely been limited to either instructional or observational perspectives predominantly written for Christians. Thus, as Pernot has stated, "it is still necessary to emphasize the usefulness of the rhetorical approach in the field of religion" (236).

While it may still be necessary to argue for the relevance of a rhetorical approach to religious behavior, the study of digital rhetoric is not only widely engaged in but is considered an ongoing and cutting edge scholastic pursuit among scholars of rhetoric. Issues of particular interest—all of which are of central importance to the practice of evangelism—have included how persuasion occurs differently on the Internet than in other media, how the Internet has challenged traditional conceptions of authority, how relationships and trust are built online, and how online interactions relate to our non-virtual lives. Mary Hocks, for example, has identified "audience stance" (how the audience is constructed and approached by web designers), "transparency" (the ease with which a user is able to understand and navigate the architecture of a website), and "hybridity" (or the degree to which a website imitates familiar media forms) as central components of persuasive websites (632). James Porter also has analyzed how even within the short lifespan of the web, criteria for persuasion online have shifted from Web 1.0 (primarily linear and text-based websites with little possibilities offered for interactivity) to Web 2.0 (audience-centered, designed to allow for non-linear reading and hyperlinking, and focused on opportunities for social networking and interactivity) and has argued that the most persuasive content on the web is that targeted to niche audience populations (190). In *Rhetoric Online*, Barbara Warnick has also extensively considered the importance of interactivity for persuasion online as well as for how the ability to

interact and build relationships online is changing and reshaping our understandings of community. Finally, rhetoricians Gail E. Hawisher, Patricia A. Sullivan, and Cynthia L. Selfe have opened up rhetorical studies of the web to a revaluation of visual rhetoric and to an examination of how the highly visual nature of the web is complicating a print-based culture's prioritization of text as primary authority.

As part of the effort by rhetoricians to understand the Internet's function as a medium, categorizing and naming genres online and creating textbooks defining the "best practices" for designing persuasive websites have become popular of late as well. Andrew Dillon and Barbara Gushrowski, for example, have identified the personal home page as the "first uniquely digital genre"; Jack Anderson has helped to define the "digital library"; Mike Edwards and Heidi McKee have explored the genre of student-generated, web-based writing assignments; and Sara Kjellberg, Carolyn Miller, and Dawn Shepherd have studied the genre of the Weblog. Books on persuasive web design have crossed over from the fields of psychology and human-computer interaction to that of popular texts for businessmen and lay designers who want to influence their presence online, taking up the study of Internet-based communications when, as Barbara Warnick has stated, rhetoricians have been slow to respond, likely because any form of rhetorical criticism that is "grounded in neoclassical rhetoric, seemed poorly suited to study these new media forms of communication" ("Rhetorical criticism" 61). Thus, we have a plethora of textbooks and tutorials published by scholars from a variety of fields each attempting to identify the "best practices" of web design that will make a designer's content most persuasive and interesting to users. Among the most popular and most often cited is Aaron Gustafson's *Adaptive Web Design*, which teaches the concept of "progressive

enhancement" in web design or strategies to analyze potential audiences in order to design a website targeting each visitor's projected needs. Mark Boulton's *A Practical Guide to Designing for the Web* focuses additionally on layout and argues for the importance of graphic design for presenting persuasive content, specifically in terms of typography, format, and color. Steve Krug's *Don't Make Me Think* bases its principles on analyses of scientific studies on how users actually behave online, noting eye tracking studies as well as studies indicating which types of images and which image and text locations primarily attract a user's interest. And Tim Kadlec's *Implementing Responsive Design* argues for the importance of providing an ideal viewing experience for users in order to best persuade them to engage with and be influenced by the material presented, especially in terms of easy reading, easy navigation, easy scrolling, and accessibility on a variety of devices from desktop monitors to tablets and mobile phones.

To propose an extended case study of the online work of contemporary Christian evangelists is novel primarily in that, as a survey of literature in the fields of digital rhetoric and media studies has shown, while scholars have been interested in religion and media as independent fields of scholarly interest and—despite the historical precedent for studying the rhetoric of religion and the contemporary practice of studying rhetoric online—the exploration into where these two lines of research meet—in the study of the rhetoric of digital religion—is a subject area ripe for examination. Such a case study can teach scholars of rhetoric—particularly those interested in American religion and/or digital rhetoric—valuable principles of how the Internet functions persuasively as well as how the medium has altered and shaped the practice of Christian evangelism and the evangelical movement in America. For the sake of space and in order to better and more

deeply handle the material, I have limited the scope of this study to the particular brand of evangelical Christianity found in America and have limited the medium of digital evangelism to the website. The argument I make, framed within the context of the history of American evangelism and particularly within the evangelical movement born during the Great Awakening period in the 17th century, centers around three main claims: (1) that a case study of evangelistic websites can teach us more clearly how—on a very fundamental, structural, and design-centered level—the Internet works nearly invisibly to change users’ behaviors and, as in the case of conversion, their ideology and beliefs; (2) that the evangelical presence online models how form and content are hardly separate entities as they have often been presented but work seamlessly together, the design mimicking the ideology and the ideology being a reflection of design choices; and finally, (3) that, just as we might learn from how evangelicals have effected persuasion online, we might also use their work to better understand how the medium of the Internet has in turn shaped fundamental characteristics of their movement and has indeed shaped the very "unchanging" message of the Gospel that they present.

Chapter Two—"The Great Transmission of the Great Commission"—lays out the historical context for contemporary practices in Internet evangelism. The work of Christian evangelism, or the attempt by Christians to grow a community of believers through conversion, is as ancient as the Christian religion itself and dates to the biblical mandate recorded in the four New Testament Gospel accounts of Jesus calling his followers to "make disciples of all nations," a mandate that has come to be termed by theologians as "The Great Commission." With the later focus on digital evangelism in mind, I have centered this historical account simultaneously on an explanation of the

changing goals and approaches of evangelists over the past two millennia as well as the important role technology has played in evangelism with particular emphasis on the most recent manifestations of this approach in radio evangelism and televangelism. Despite the dearth of scholarly accounts of the important role that Christians have played as early adopters and committed users of new technologies from the printing press in the sixteenth century to the Internet in the twenty-first, I will argue that there has always been a large constituency of Christian evangelists who have seen technology not only as a powerful tool of evangelism but as a primary strategy for persuasion. This constituency first became relevant at the moment of the Protestant Reformation. When Martin Luther nailed his “95 Theses” to a church door in Wittenberg, Germany, an act signaling the desire to debate, he set the stage not just for Roman Catholic doctrines and authority to be challenged but for the greatest schism in church history to date (Robles-Anderson). However, even the potential appeal of Luther’s ideals and suggestions for reform would not have taken off and been so wisely adopted without the printing press, a technology invented less than a century earlier in Europe that, for the first time, allowed for the rapid creation of print documents in large quantities and would lead into an assembly-line style mass production of books (McLuhan *The Gutenberg Galaxy* 124). This print technology led not only to the quick dissemination of Luther’s ideas, but also it became a primary tool used by Protestant evangelists to share the Gospel through tracts, print news-letters, newspapers, periodicals, sermon publications, and eventually evangelistic novels. It was the immigrants to the new American colonies and the evangelists who worked there—figures including George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, Lorenzo Dow, and Charles Finney—who popularized mass media evangelism, and from the Great Awakenings to

the present, this movement of American evangelists, which became the evangelical movement, have subsequently adopted radio, television, and all manners of technology to disseminate their message. In addition to drawing scholarly attention to this movement and the influential position of evangelicals as early adopters of all mass media technologies, I will dwell on and challenge the theology behind this technological adoption, a theology centered on the notion that though the medium may change, the message does not. Indeed, a historical approach to evangelical media use allows us to gain perspective on how the priorities, understanding of conversion, and central message of evangelicals has changed as a result of tailoring their message to various media, a trend that becomes even more apparent in the subsequent analysis of Internet evangelism.

Having arrived at the present moment of evangelism in America, the third chapter deals with three specific examples of website evangelism: Global Media Outreach's *Jesus 2020* website, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's *Peace with God* website, and Network 211's *Journey Answers* website. As a starting point for adequately understanding how evangelism is effected on these websites, I adopt the framework of "rhetorical space," a concept first explored by Roxanne Mountford in her essay "On Gender and Rhetorical Space" and subsequent book *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces*. Mountford's depiction of the way the architectural features of physical spaces control and determine the behaviors that are anticipated to occur within the space applies well to virtual spaces. The evangelistic project in these websites is based on strict control over the available options for navigation, decision making, and interaction that take place on the website. Isolating the three key features of "geography," "navigation," and "inhabitants" as components of what I have termed the "digital

architectural space,” I argue that on a very fundamental, design-based level, these sites work to lead visitors to make the decision to become Christians.

The fourth chapter examines the related issue of how ideology is integrated into design as well as how the Internet medium has impacted evangelical ideology. This discussion is positioned as a contribution to the debate over the form-content relationship in webtexts, a discussion led by rhetoricians including Anne Wysocki, Kristin Arola, and J.I. Jasken. Current textbooks on web design often promote the notion that form and content are separate entities, that one can learn a variety of rules of persuasive web design—where to place banners, how to use images, strategies for readability and usability—and fit any message into this template. And indeed, a survey of evangelical handbooks on how to most effectively evangelize on the web promotes the idea that the message of the Gospel is unchanging regardless of web design strategies or the utilization of the Internet medium. Rhetoricians, however, have come to see that—as Marshall McLuhan noted, years before the rise of the Internet—the medium is the message. I argue that the form is integral to the message as well, and I explore how evangelical ideology has been shaped by the use of the Internet.

Having explored the importance of fundamental and architectural features of web design for persuasion and how the impact the Web medium and the form of the website in particular is inseparable from—and indeed determinant of—the message presented, the fifth chapter examines how community formation on evangelistic websites is used as a method of persuasion as well. Though the definition of online community and rhetorical issues of how authority is established in these communities and how persuasion is effected through discourse in these communities has been explored by scholars including

Howard Rheingold and Sherry Turkle, the ability for forum moderators and site administrators to shape the type of community that is formed and the type of discourse that is allowed is my focus in this chapter. Referring to these carefully-shaped forums as “persuasive communities,” I examine how evangelists are using control and tight regulation over online communication to ensure that what they deem the ideal environment for evangelism is maintained.

Finally, in a concluding chapter, I look at the implications for this case study on digital evangelism for future studies into the rhetoric of evangelical media and for studies of religious rhetoric or media more generally. Using the work of communications scholar Marshall McLuhan, I offer suggestions for how we might better understand and teach the ways that the Internet—and indeed all media—impact efforts to persuade. Returning to the particular historical moment of the contemporary evangelical movement in America, I consider as well how implementation of the Internet as an evangelistic tool has already altered the focus of the Gospel being preached, the type of conversion that is valued and sought after, the kind of authority that is established and its importance, and the church’s understanding of community and relationship.

Chapter Two

The Great Transmission of the Great Commission: Evangelical Mass Media in Context

Current trends in American mass media evangelism can only be understood in light of both the history of American evangelical engagement with mass media and the larger historical development of evangelism as a practice of the Christian church. Establishing a clear definition and historical context for the practice of evangelism, with particular attention to its use in the post-Reformation period by American Protestant evangelicals is important as a contextual framework for approaching the ideology represented and the rhetorical strategies adopted by evangelicals online. Beginning with a brief survey of the pre-Reformation practice of evangelism, I describe the evangelistic goals and strategies of the early church, a history that serves as groundwork for grasping the radical transformation in evangelistic practices that the church underwent with the series of media revolutions—print, radio, television, and Internet—that commenced in the 16th century. The central focus of this chapter will be on these later media revolutions. Because the digital revolution of the later 20th century reveals perhaps the most interesting contrast between the earlier ideological and rhetorical approaches of radio and televangelism however, these two moments are more thoroughly highlighted and examined. Saving the digital revolution for greater consideration in Chapter Three, I look primarily at three aspects of each media revolution: the rhetorical strategies used by evangelists within each medium, what these strategies reveal about evangelistic goals and ideology, and how evangelism shaped and was shaped by the adoption of mass media tools. In addition, I use this history to argue for the value of giving greater attention to how various media have impacted the evangelical project of evangelism as a means of

better understanding the intersection of media and faith, an endeavor I find valuable for scholars of rhetoric, communication, media and religion alike.

To begin, to pinpoint a definition of evangelism is—as a survey of theological texts on the subject reveals—far from a simple matter. When the evangelist Billy Graham was asked for his definition, he famously replied: "Actually, that's a question I'd like to ask somebody too!" (Schultze *Understanding Evangelical Media* 21). As a starting point, it is important to differentiate between the related but distinct terms "evangelism" and "evangelicalism," both of which are central to this project. The former refers to the practice—dating back to the New Testament period—of preaching the Gospel message with the goal of conversion (Balmer 207). The term "evangelism" derives from the Koine Greek εὐαγγέλιον ("euangelion") which is translated as "gospel" or "good news." The verb form of εὐαγγέλιον, εὐαγγελιζέσθαι ("euaggelizesthai"), means "to bring" or "to announce good news" and appears over fifty times in the New Testament, often translated as "preach" (Schweer). The term "evangelical," however, refers to a movement born out of the European Protestant Reformation which flourished most famously in the revivals of the American Great Awakenings of the 1730s to 1750s and throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Balmer 204). The practice of evangelism is central to evangelicalism; however, according to Balmer, this particularly American breed of sharing the Gospel has several key traits that are not necessarily characteristic of all evangelistic endeavors: these are (1) "the centrality of conversion," (2) "the quest for an affective piety," and (3) "a suspicion of wealth, worldliness, and ecclesiastical pretension" (Balmer 204). It is important to note that despite popular misconceptions, "evangelical" does not refer to a denomination, nor does it inherently imply particular

political party affiliations. The definition provided by religion scholar Douglas A. Sweeney serves our purposes well: he defines evangelicalism as "a movement that is based in classical Christian orthodoxy, shaped by a Reformational understanding of the Gospel, and distinguished from other such movements of the church by a set of beliefs and behaviors forged in the fires of the eighteenth-century revivals. . .beliefs and behaviors that had mainly to do with the spread of the gospel" (2). I prefer this definition for a variety of reasons: first, that it is oriented towards the specifically Protestant and particularly American practices of spreading the Gospel with which I am most interested; second, that it suggests the centrality of evangelism to the evangelical project; and third, that it highlights the non-denominational quality of evangelism, identifying it as a movement rather than a sect.

As Mark Noll commences in his tome on the history of Christianity in the United States and Canada, "Historical studies. . .are always more than just sources of information," and by selecting what information to include, what trends to follow, and what interpretations to centralize, I have necessarily excluded a variety of alternative approaches (1). The value of limiting this history of evangelism to that of the evangelical American Christian brand and of focusing primarily on the use of mass media is to ultimately best prepare the reader to understand the innovation in and evolving ideology of the evangelistic digital texts that have been produced on the Internet in recent decades. As a result, I begin with an explication of the important biblical foundation for all Christian practice of evangelism, then move quickly to an examination of the particularly American evangelical engagement with mass media evangelism. Along the way, I emphasize the key set of rhetorical strategies that I have found to be central to mass

media evangelism in America in addition to arguing for the value of greater attention to how Christian evangelism has both shaped and been shaped by mass media.

To begin, the practice of evangelism is viewed among Christians as far more than a matter of increasing church membership. Christians view evangelism as a direct response to the biblical call given by Jesus to His disciples to share His message with the world. Known as the Great Commission, the command to evangelism is found in all four Gospel accounts as well as in the Book of Acts (Matthew 28:16-20, Mark 16:14-18, Luke 24:44-49, John 20:19-23, Acts 1:4-8). In Matthew 28:16-20, it appears in this formulation:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

The context of this Great Commission is a post-Resurrection encounter between Jesus and His disciples. In all accounts of the Gospel, the Commission is among the last recorded words that Jesus spoke and has largely been interpreted by Christians as a mission to be carried out through future generations and across the globe. As I have explicated, our English word "evangelism" translates from the New Testament Koine Greek as "the proclaiming of the good news of the gospel" (Abraham 20). To unpack this definition further, however, theologian C.H. Dodd states that we must also understand the apostolic concept of the kerygma, or "gospel message." There are three components of this message: (1) a historical account of the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus as fulfilled prophecy; (2) the conception of Jesus as Messiah, as Lord and Christ;

and (3) the call to repent and be forgiven of sin (Guder 182). The goal of evangelism is thus to present the narrative of Jesus's life, explicate its significance, and call the unconverted to belief.

As William J. Abraham notes, in its earliest manifestations in the New Testament Church, there was no clearly developed "theory of evangelism" (19). However, John Mark Terry identifies at least ten methods of evangelism employed by these early evangelists: mass evangelism to crowds, public preaching, house-to-house witnessing, evangelistic campaigns, personal witnessing, public debate, lay evangelism, literary evangelism, church planting, and home Bible studies (24-26). Central to all methods of evangelism was discourse, both written and spoken. Indeed, historian Averil Cameron argues that it was largely the adept use of rhetoric that enabled the Church to grow so rapidly, effectively resulting in the Christianization of the Roman Empire (5). The early documentation of the various Gospel accounts provided textual stability for the Christian message, and the early Christians' willingness to preach and teach to a variety of audiences, including the poor (Cameron notes that pagan literature primarily targeted the upper class), made their mission unique and attractive. I would add as well that evangelists not only appealed to diverse audience but came themselves from diverse backgrounds. As Michael Green describes in his history of early evangelism, in this period of the first three centuries of the Church, to be a Christian was to be an evangelist: "Christianity was supremely a lay movement, spread by informal missionaries"; evangelism was "the prerogative and duty of every church member," and evangelists numbered among their ranks the wealthy, the destitute, intellectuals, fishermen, gentiles, Jews, and former pagans (380). A prime example of early evangelistic practices is the

ministry of the apostle Paul. Known perhaps most famously for his dramatic conversion experience on the way from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest followers of Jesus, Paul's story is anthologized in biblical tradition as one of transformation from a zealous persecutor of Christians to a passionate evangelist and the writer of many New Testament letters promoting and spreading the Gospel. Not only did Paul's ministry strategy involve broad outreach (he traveled to preach at the Roman provinces of Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia), church planting, the employment of a group of evangelists to travel with and help him (Barnabas, Mark, Silas, Timothy, and Luke), and the training of young evangelists to carry on the Great Commission after him, but he was known for his ability to adapt his message according to the culture and character of his audience. As Green notes, "That there was a basic homogeneity in what was preached we may agree, but there was wide variety in the way it was presented" (105). This strategic use of rhetoric is cited by Augustine three centuries later as biblical justification of the necessity for the church of implementing the "pagan" techniques of rhetoric in homiletics and hermeneutics (47). Paul explains his methodology in a letter to the Corinthians, making clear that though his message does not change, his presentation must adapt according to the audience. He writes:

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some (I Corinthians 9:19-23).

As Cameron notes, what both Paul and Augustine recognized was that "the successful formation of a religious discourse was one of early Christianity's greatest strengths" (42). Even in these earliest of representations of evangelistic techniques, there are several important traits worth highlighting as typical of the practice: (1) evangelists viewed their work as a divine mandate; (2) the practice of evangelism was not exclusive: women, men, rich, poor, and Christians of any profession or background were engaged in the practice; (3) the nature of this mandate encouraged rhetorical strategies aimed at reaching the broadest possible audience and centered on cultural and linguistic adaptation grounded in careful audience analysis.

The Reformation—inaugurated by Martin Luther's famous posting of the Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church in 1517—represents the first moment of evangelistic engagement with mass media (Oberman 190). Though, as I have observed, the tendency in evangelistic enterprises has always been towards reaching the largest number of people, as Martin U. Edwards describes in his history of the printing press and the Reformation, "The Reformation saw the first major, self-conscious attempt to use the recently invented printing press to shape and change a mass movement" (1). Indeed, many scholars argue that the success of the Reformation largely depended upon the press. In Europe, Protestant evangelists were on the forefront of taking advantage of this technology: Edwards notes that the first vernacular Bibles and thousands of pamphlets critiquing Catholicism were published, helping the message of the Reformation spread and gain followers (1). It is at this moment as well that the term "evangelical" began to circulate more widely: Martin Luther referred to his movement as the *evangelische kirche*, which translates as "evangelical church" (Eskridge).

The Protestant Reformers' aggressive insistence on purification of the church and their promotion of lay access to the Bible were central factors to ultimately driving Protestants out of Europe and to the New World colonies in America where mass print evangelism would become a predominate outreach strategy adopted by American evangelicals. The missionary John Eliot arranged for the first Bible to be printed in America in an Algonquin translation in the 1660s; *The New England Primer*, an instructional text in the fundamentals of the Christian faith, was printed between 1687 and 1690 and served as the foundation of nearly all colonial education until the late 18th century; Michael Wigglesworth's 1662 best-selling epic poem *The Day of Doom* called sinners to repentance; and Cotton Mather—known for his incredibly prolific literary career (over four hundred publications)—wrote the *Magnalia Christi Americana* to glorify the American religious saints, including John Eliot, and to call the colonists to live up to their role as "Golden Candlesticks" in the "American Desart" of "Outer Darkness" (540). In addition, publications of conversion narratives, captivity narratives, and gallows literature became popular as genres designed both to enforce Puritan civic and religious codes in New England and to encourage the "unsaved" or backslidden to convert.

It was not until the 1720s, 30s, and 40s, however, during the series of religious revivals known as The Great Awakening that the print medium was really exploited for evangelism and to encourage the evangelical mission on a mass scale. The Anglican evangelical George Whitefield was at the forefront of this project, proving to be what Sweeney has called "the era's greatest media figure" (43). Though Whitefield has most often been noted by historians and rhetoricians for his dramatic preaching style, his tireless work as an itinerant minister was paralleled by his tireless use of the press.

Whitefield promoted himself through advertisements and coverage of his revivals in the public press (including in Ben Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*), published his sermons and religious travelogues, founded the *Evangelical Magazine*, and sold the most publications out of anyone in America at the time. Whitefield saw in the press the ability to make "the whole world. . .[his] parish" and used it to its fullest extent (105).

The example Whitefield set was to be followed by subsequent revivalists, including those in the 2nd Great Awakening (1790-1840s) like Elias Smith and Lorenzo Dow. As Nathan Hatch has written of these 2nd Great Awakening evangelists in *The Democratization of American Christianity*, like Whitefield, they were "enthralled with the potential of vernacular speaking [and] publishing. . .[and] went about discomfiting respectable churches by reinforcing the spoken word with bundles of their own books, pamphlets, tracts, and volumes of spiritual songs" (128). This trend has indeed become a defining evangelical characteristic which persists through the present, a trend which has led Hatch to describe the period of the Awakenings as a "herald" of "an age of mass media" to come (128). While Whitefield's ministry primarily centered on periodicals, the rise of tract publications and the formulation of various non-profit, charity-oriented Bible and tract societies founded by evangelicals was to characterize the early 19th century. The first American tract and book society, the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge was founded in 1803, and the American Bible and the American Tract Societies were founded in 1816 and 1825 respectively, both of which continue to mass produce evangelistic tracts and Bibles today (Nord 7).

Evangelical use of tracts in the early 19th century reveals a second component of their evangelistic purpose: to provide a counter literature to the "the literature of wickedness,

sensation, dissipation, and error” that they found to be represented by “the secular free market” (Nord 7). As a result, evangelicals began to engage with writing evangelistic novels, a pursuit which—by the 1970s—resulted in an evangelical counterpart to every “secular” genre, designed with the goal of attracting a general, non-Christian audience in order to present the Gospel message and garner converts. From the early success of Janette Oke’s romance *Love Comes Softly* in 1979 to the late 20th and early 21st century success of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins’s apocalyptic *Left Behind* series, evangelicals have made a practice of using the novel for evangelistic outreach. Evangelical literary agent Les Strobbe reported in his eNewsletter, for example, that LaHaye and Jenkins Jerry Jenkins had received over 5,000 letters from readers who had converted after reading their apocalyptic *Left Behind* series, and in “A Born-Again Genre,” Melanie C. Duncan describes strategies evangelicals are beginning to employ to address the critique of only speaking to a like-minded audience, arguing that these strategies are successful and should be pursued more widely. Specifically, she discusses the rise in targeting more niche audiences, observing, for example, that more evangelical novelists are writing speculative fiction, replacing demons with vampires in response to the popularity of Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series and citing R.J. Larson’s *Prophet* as an evangelical alternative to Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy (27-28). Indeed, a perusal of genres categorized under the heading of “evangelical fiction” reveals the truth in Duncan’s statement: the evangelical market has shifted from broadly mirroring the genres of the secular market to more closely approximating its trends. It is now possible to find evangelical literature in dozens of genres, including adventure, Amish fiction, chick lit, children’s fiction, fantasy, crime, detective stories, graphic novels, history, historical

romance, historical suspense, mystery, romantic comedy, romantic suspense, Southern fiction, thriller, thriller/comedy, westerns, and women's fiction.

The Broadcast Revolution Part One: Radio Evangelism

Several trends apparent in the history of evangelical use of print media are present as well in evangelical broadcasting. As with print media, evangelicals see the radio as both an incredible opportunity for evangelism and a sphere of influence that they must engage in to counter secular domination of the airwaves. Both visions are natural outcomes of a worldview based on the premise that, as Quentin Schultze quantifies, "If unconverted souls were doomed to hell. . .all possible communications and transportation technologies must be pushed into evangelistic service as quickly as possible" ("The Mythos" 248). In addition, Schultze notes that this mission becomes even more critical in light of the evangelical belief in the imminence of the Second Coming—the return of Jesus—in which all humans will be judged for their actions. Encouraged by biblical prophecy like that in Daniel 12:4 which pronounces that the end of this age will be signaled by a rise in the dissemination of knowledge, the radio seemed to evangelicals like the prime mover for such a prophecy to be enacted, making the necessity of bringing about as many salvations as possible before this moment even more pressing (249). Ironically, a survey of evangelical engagement with radio evangelism reveals that success did not come primarily or even predominantly from their ability to "win souls" over the airwaves. In fact, the greatest critique of evangelical radio within the Christian community is that it is evangelistic in name only, gaining its primary audience from among the already-converted. Nevertheless, as with print evangelism, evangelicals are

constantly adapting their practices of engaging with media, ever-working to perfect their mission.

The early years of evangelical radio consisted largely of struggles against federal regulations and network policies that were not sympathetic to the evangelical message or approach to religion. The establishment of the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) by Congress in 1927 led to the identification of evangelical radio as "propaganda" and limited it to part-time or low-quality channels, giving preference to "well-rounded" programs (Voskuil 75). As a result, the majority of radio evangelists raised money and took their programs to commercial channels. Among evangelicals, this struggle has frequently been interpreted as a "blessing in disguise," as it forced radio evangelists to adapt their strategies in program design towards presenting their message in an appealing and attractive way to gain an audience and mastering techniques for encouraging donations on the air (Schultze "The Invisible" 289).

Early evangelical programming consisted largely of broadcasts of sermons and religious music; however, in an effort to target a broad audience, it soon diversified. One early station, Chicago's WMBI (founded by the Moody Bible Institute in 1926), proclaimed its primary goal to be evangelism; however, the majority of its programming was classified as more broadly educational and inspirational. They produced the children's Gospel variety show "Young People's Hour," for example, as well as classical music broadcasts and foreign language programs aimed at the immigrant population in Chicago. By 1930, the station had become so popular that it recorded receiving over 20,000 letters per year from listeners encouraged by their work (Schultze "The Invisible" 294). Similarly, KFUE, a station produced out of an evangelical Lutheran Church in St.

Louis, Missouri combined a program called “Views on the News” with Pastor Walter Maier, who provided commentary and critique of current events (Maier 72). In the West, Aimee Semple McPherson started the KFSG station in 1924 and, in addition to broadcasting her sermons, included dramatic series like “The Adventures of Jim Trask, Lone Evangelist,” a variety of music programs, and a talent show for amateurs (Neeb 156). In 1934, evangelical radio station manager Paul Meyers started the show “Haven of Rest” in southern California. Referring to himself as "First Mate Bob" of the "Crew of the Good Ship Grace," Meyers incorporated poetry, humor, philosophy, and folk songs with his sermons (Bruns 297). Dr. T. Myron Webb of the Bible Fellowship Hour was popular in the thirties as well for pioneering a program about health that became an opportunity for evangelism (300). These early efforts at diversifying programming and targeting a variety of audience interests set the pattern for later endeavors like M.G. "Pat" Robertson's CBN Radio Network, founded in 1987, which included a talk show, music programs, and hourly news reports (Schultze "The Invisible" 185).

The evangelical struggle against federal radio regulations and the consequent necessity of fund-raising to stay on the air had several effects on the evangelical ethos in America. One consequence was a more formal sense of unity among evangelicals and the consequential self-identification as "religious outsiders" (Voskuil 69). Evangelicals bonded in their very public critique of the FRC, and a group of leading evangelicals organized "The National Association of Evangelicals for United Action" (NAE) in 1942 to address their concerns and discuss a unified position on various internal theological disputes (85). Their positioning of themselves against both the secular culture and mainstream Protestant denominations is characterized by evangelical Harold Ockenga's

statement in his keynote address to the NAE: "We are discriminated against, because of the folly of our divided condition" (85). Evangelicals saw their "purity"—their refusal to compromise on doctrine—as the cause of persecution and made this their rallying call to unite as a movement (Murch 75). The committee's platform centered on fighting for the right for evangelical preachers to preach "doctrinal sermons" on the radio, to be allowed to buy time on national networks and local stations for "Gospel broadcasting," and for evangelical churches to be considered for inclusion in the sustaining time allotment for Protestants on networks (75). Two years later, 150 evangelical broadcasters formed the National Religious Broadcasters organization to set in place a formal code of ethics for program content, broadcast quality, and financial disclosure for evangelicals on the radio (Voskuil).

This trend towards formal organization as a movement is worth noting as it, along with increased evangelical engagement with politics on the airways and a limited appeal to non-Christian audiences, has had a seemingly negative impact on the evangelicals' original goal of using the airways for evangelism. In an ironic turn, Schultze argues that the majority of donors to evangelical radio may not even listen to it themselves. However, they donate out of the conviction that the evangelical position and the Gospel message deserve a place on the airwaves, working under the belief "that their money [is] being used to spread the Christian gospel" (Schultze "The Invisible" 178). This is a perpetual concern of evangelicals employing mass media. Because of the very nature of the medium, it is nearly impossible to isolate who is being reached; however, the fact that evangelical radio programming depends heavily on financial contributions which come from within evangelical ranks, programmers are put in a position of needing to cater to

this audience. The result has been what Jim Pennington in *Christianity Today* has referred to as the "gospel ghetto," describing evangelical radio as "a clear display of in-group language on an in-group audience" which "probably reached none of those it was intended for. It never left the ghetto" (32).

Chasing the ever-shifting target of a non-Christian audience, evangelicals employed a variety of strategies: one that they have continued to pursue is a strong commitment to contemporary Christian music (Kridel 18). Defined by Contemporary Christian Music magazine publisher John Styll as "any work by a believing artist which testifies to the Truth as found in scripture," contemporary Christian music differentiates itself from Gospel music "because it is not always about the Gospel. You might want to think of it as a 'soundtrack to everyday life'" (Lochte 44). Contemporary Christian music affects a similar goal as the various genres of evangelical novels. There currently exist evangelical parallels to secular country, jazz, techno, folk, hardcore, hip hop, rap, metal, rock, punk, and pop music. By taking on the generic conventions anticipated by an audience for these secular genres but switching in the scriptural or evangelistic message, evangelicals hope both to provide an alternative listening experience for the radio audience as well as to pique interest in Christianity. EMF Broadcasting president Dick Jenkins—who operates the K-LOVE and Air 1 Radio networks—argues that staying on the cutting edge of the type of music secular audiences are interested in has both allowed evangelical radio to survive and has allowed them to break out of Pennington's "ghetto" to attract both Christian and non-Christian listeners. He describes the strategy as a combination of choosing music that stylistically appeals to a secular audience in combination with avoiding aggressively evangelical content: "where Christian music

stations make careful choices to avoid Christian lingo, the non-believer quotient of the audience composition rises dramatically" (16). By meeting the basic felt-needs or immediate desires of the radio listener—to hear good music—evangelicals are in the position to build a following of faithful listeners who will ultimately be presented the Gospel in subtle, non-confrontational ways: through brief Bible verses or testimonies, for example, during breaks between song segments.

K-LOVE, an adult contemporary Christian music programming service, is the most popular of the evangelical Christian radio stations today with over 400 stations across America. Their slogan is "positive, encouraging K-Love," and they position themselves as a music-centered, "good news" alternative to the "bad news" focus of secular radio stations: their mission statement is "to create compelling media that inspires and encourages you to have a meaningful relationship with Christ" ("Mission"). They describe their programming as a combination of "music, people, and short educational features," and their strategy is to "build relationships," explaining that "The currency from these relationships is trust, and through trust we help souls respond to a God who loves you, gave Himself for you, and wants to be the center of your lives" ("Mission"). The majority of the music selection on K-LOVE is in the pop and rock genres, including popular bands Casting Crowns, David Crowder Band, and Third Day and popular singers Chris Tomlin, Mandisa, and Matthew West. Unlike contemporary Christian news stations, the news coverage that occurs between songs involves a positive spin or has an inspirational message. The relational focus is communicated through the warm, sympathetic attitudes of the deejays, who encourage their audience to have faith no matter what they are going through and to call in for prayer. For listeners who call in, K-

LOVE staff members and pastors are available for prayer. The station meets what they perceive as the felt need of friendship. In between songs, listeners are permitted to call in and share their testimonies. A survey of the testimonies of callers to K-LOVE challenges the "religious ghetto" critique of evangelical radio. Since January 1, 2012, K-LOVE reported on air that 6,300 people have contacted them to let them know that they became Christians because of their station ("Scott and Kelli"). Publicly sharing this information with listeners does more than encourage donations (on which the station nearly entirely depends): it serves to support K-LOVE's claim that the Gospel is real. In addition, though many of the phoned-in testimonies one can hear on the air are shared by Christians who have been uplifted by the music, many are also stories of conversion. In a one-hour period of listening to the station one evening, I heard two separate testimonies of conversion shared on air. The first was given by a woman named Laura in Walla Walla, Washington, who described how she had been driving home from work one day and was scanning randomly through the radio stations. She was not seeking out Christian music and had never listened to K-LOVE before. While taking a sharp turn, she needed to put both hands on the wheel, and the radio happened to stop on K-LOVE. The message of God's love she heard in the song that was playing led her to pull over and "give her life to Christ." Another woman, Diana of Salt Lake City, Utah, called in to say that her young son became a Christian while listening to K-LOVE with her. On K-LOVE's website, one can find 1,000 more recorded testimonies of lives changed by the ministry. This influx of testimonies is foregrounded in K-LOVE's programming. In addition to listener's testimonies, K-LOVE plays recorded testimonies of the musicians who are broadcast on their station. The cumulative effect is that of a community. Many of the listener

testimonies describe the feeling of tuning into K-LOVE and experiencing a desire to be a part of what was going on. K-LOVE's message is that the positivity and peace that the deejays and the callers experience is a direct result of their religion, and they firmly promote the idea that the longer one listens to K-LOVE, the harder the message is to resist. Indeed, they often encourage their audience members to take what they call the "30-Day Challenge," which requires listeners to tune in to no station but K-LOVE for thirty days, with the challenge to "see how it changes your life" ("30-Day Challenge").

This relationship-centered focus of K-LOVE's ministry hones in on one of the advantages of radio as a medium: the experience of listeners being spoken to one-on-one in their home or car or at work or on their iPods at the gym. As Raymond Gram Swing, editor of *The Nation* said in 1935 in reference to the power of religious radio: "radio is the only medium capable of delivering the natural, personal, powerful persuasive spoken word directly into the midst of the American family where it can be considered, discussed, and acted upon immediately" (Hangen 6).

A second element of K-LOVE's programming design is their focus on avoiding controversial issues and on using inclusive language that eliminates Christian terminology. Mike Novak, the vice president of programming for EMF Broadcasting (which supervises K-LOVE's on-air programming) states the methodology bluntly, saying that "It's simple. Do what the listener wants. . . We have done research both on specific markets and on a network basis. We know what they want, in all parts of programming" (Jenkins 114). This market research is costly, however: K-LOVE spends over \$100,000 a year on analyzing their audience's listening preferences and feedback, a cost prohibitive for many evangelical radio ministries. Nevertheless, it appears that the

popularity of K-LOVE's programming and the ministry's unique ability to target the ever-elusive non-Christian audience (over one-third of their listeners report being non-Christians) is directly related to their commitment to audience analysis (116). Indeed, this audience analysis must be a near constant process of evaluation and re-evaluation. As Dick Jenkins, former CEO and president of K-LOVE stated:

Ultimately the success of any station or network is determined by what comes out of the speakers. The philosophy at EMF Broadcasting is that the radio station that provides the best listening experience is the one that wins the audience. . . The unique broadcasting, managerial, and revenue model at K-Love is fluid, always transforming to meet the challenges of the future. K-LOVE isn't static. It's alive. It breathes. It changes with the ebb and flow of listeners' needs. It changes to continue meeting our goal to deliver the Gospel in the language of today's culture, to people throughout the world (Jenkins 178).

While K-LOVE seeks to meet the felt needs of friendship and encouragement for the audience members as avenues for gaining trust to present the Gospel, several other evangelical radio ministries have found success in promoting themselves as a family-oriented, wholesome alternative news source to the "mainstream media" (Lochte 107). The American Family Radio station, a ministry of the American Family Association founded by Don Wildmon in 1991, claims to present news that "is unfiltered through anti-Christian, anti-family media" (107). While evangelicals have typically not made denominational association an identifying characteristic of their movement, the formal organizing of evangelicals over the federal restrictions on religious radio ultimately led many evangelicals and evangelical ministries aligning themselves with conservative politics. American Family Radio is a strong voice representing this trend and appeals both to Christians and non-Christians who are interested in updates on news from a Conservative perspective. AFR is also known for its "action-points," or consciousness-

raising calls for Christians and Conservatives to sign petitions or boycott or support various businesses. Their programming is dominated nearly entirely by news shows: "AFA Today," "Focal Point" with Bryan Fischer, and "Nothing But Truth" with Crane Durham. The style of these news programs attempts to imitate secular talk news shows, often with monologues by the host, interviews with guests, and occasionally time for listeners to call in. Stylistically, the hosts present themselves as "hard-hitting," willing to get into debates with callers or guests and showing open outrage over political issues. The format is familiar, but the message is clearly positioned as originating in a biblical worldview. If this strategy is to be called evangelistic, it functions under the assumption that the appeal of the politically conservative position and faith in the Christian ideology that grounds it will be convincing. Much more overtly evangelistic are the apologetics programs on AFR, including "Cross Examined" with Frank Turek, and "Exploring the Word" with Alex McFarland. "Cross Examined" directs itself at high school and college age students and, as a result, takes an "academic" approach to arguing for the Bible and for Christianity. The program's goal is to prove "why Christianity is true" and to show "how to defend it." In a similar manner, "Exploring the Word" works from the perspective that the Bible has answers for the majority of life's most important questions. The format centers on listeners calling in their questions and Dr. McFarland, depending entirely on the Bible, answering them.

K-LOVE and AFR represent two very different approaches to evangelism. Whereas K-LOVE extends itself out to its audience members, focusing on building relationships, encouraging individuals to share their experiences, empathizing with callers who are struggling with family, relationships, work, or any other trouble, and

offering a prayer support ministry to help anyone in need, AFR aligns itself with a political position that automatically will alienate any number of potential listeners, a decision implying that the worldview (versus the personalities or interpersonal relationships) will draw interest. The two stations also represent two very different strategies for employing the radio medium. K-LOVE harnesses the medium for its ability to draw people together and connect people across geographical distance. AFR, by contrast, especially in the case of the AFR talk news programming, uses the medium to carve out a sphere for evangelical speech, taking advantage of the ability to broadcast the Gospel to whoever tunes in, but working according to the mindset that the message and worldview presented are enough to draw interest and a listenership without the necessity of making overt appeals or showing great interest in attracting a potentially hostile or dissenting audience's perspectives. In each case, the broadcast strategy of one-to-many message dissemination results in the creation of programming centered on individual broadcaster and ministry personalities, targeted to model a particular type of entertainment and to serve a particular niche audience.

The Broadcast Revolution Part Two: Televangelism

The term "televangelism" was coined by TIME magazine in 1952 in reference to the Catholic evangelist Bishop Fulton Sheen's talk show "Life Worth Living." The bishop was praised for his "telegenic" qualities, being described by a spokesman for the Archdiocese of New York as "wonderful": "The gestures, the timing, the voice. If he came out in a barrel and read the telephone book, they'd love him." This focus on the visual, the appeal of the physical presence of the preacher, as well as the apparent physical presence of a church service appearing in the living rooms of families across

America was to distinguish televangelism from its radio counterpart. The rhetorical concept of "presence" is applicable: the television medium by nature created a sense of a more "real" or vivid church experience (Perelman 116). Consistent with the pattern established in the early years of radio evangelism, the first evangelists broadcasting on television tended to center their programming around filmed church services. The early popularity of televangelism had largely to do with established revival preachers taking their ministries to the television medium. Billy Graham is the prime example. By 1957, when Graham began a series of television specials, he was already an internationally-recognized sensation (Hoover 56). His popularity as an open-air preacher transferred to first his radio program, "Hour of Decision" (1950) and later his televised presence. The format of Graham's television ministry was a near direct transfer of his Crusade formats to the new medium: a televised recording of a revival, which included preaching, testimonies, and music, culminating in an altar call. The "altar call" transferred to television as an opportunity for viewers to write in and receive prayer, support, and newsletters from Graham's ministry (57). A similar method was applied by Rex Humbard, with his "You are Loved" broadcast begun in the mid-1970s. As in Humbard's live crusades, the program consisted of a combination of songs sung by the Humbard family in addition to a short evangelistic sermon. Humbard made a practice of avoiding political issues in order to centralize the Gospel presentation (58).

Even within the fairly standardized format of the sermon and music combination, the rise of the "electronic church" indicated a shift towards a great variety of preaching styles and a move towards finding niche points of emphasis within the Gospel message: Kathryn Kuhlman, Oral Roberts, and Ernest Angley were known for their televised

dramatic faith healings, born out of the Pentecostal tradition; Robert Schuller and Robert Tilton were known for their self-help prosperity or "Jesus-will-make-you-rich" Gospel message; James Robison and Jerry Falwell emphasized conservative political positions; and Pat Robertson and Jim Bakker adopted a talk-show format, the latter explicitly modeling his programming after Johnny Carson's Tonight Show (Balmer 571).

Pat Robertson's strategy of the magazine style program is exemplified by his show "700 Club" (begun in 1966, although this format was not adopted until 1980) which has proved particularly popular and enduring. In *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church*, Stewart M. Hoover argues that the 700 Club's popularity has to do with how different this model appears compared to what most Americans have come to associate with "religious broadcasting" (77). Robertson intentionally sought to mimic commercial television talk news programs, employing the most up-to-date video equipment and high-tech light, staging, and production (77). In terms of content, however, the 700 Club sets itself apart. The program begins with a current events update. On a recent episode, for example, hosts Gordon Robertson and Terry Meeuwsen began by discussing the recent Vice Presidential debate, a drone strike in the Middle East, and a group of pro-life Democrats, followed by a prayer consisting of phoned-in prayer requests from listeners and centering specifically on prayers about and for America: one prayer was for America to turn back to God, another for a pro-life president to be elected. As these prayers indicate, the "spin" in the news segment is conservative and centered on an evangelical worldview. Though the form is familiar, the content is overtly Christian. Early on in the program, Gordon Robertson speaks to the

audience and explains the Gospel to them, leading viewers through a prayer to help them become Christians.

The middle portion of the program consists of a series of personal interest stories and testimonies, presented in short video format. One testimony was a story of a woman who became a Christian only to find shortly afterwards that in addition to being an alcoholic and addicted to pornography, her husband was having an affair. Ultimately, the woman's husband became a Christian also, and their marriage was restored. The message is one of hope for all marriages, that it was God and the couple's faith in God that allowed them to overcome even the most horrible of fractures. Other stories center on ministry updates: a video on the ministry "Operation Blessing," for example, tells the story of aid to a father in Honduras with six children who was provided with a house and given help starting up a bicycle repair business. Another describes how three Indian children were provided with books to go to school, and their grandmother was provided with a vegetable shop to help increase the family's income. Josh McDowell, a popular Christian writer and speaker, is also the subject of a video sharing his testimony. His story begins with a horrifying account of a childhood where he watched his father beat his mother regularly in addition to sexually abusing him. He describes how out of anger and bitterness, he began to explore whether there could possibly be a God and ultimately decides that Christianity is the most reasonable of faiths. The testimony of a well-known Christian balanced out with the average-American testimony of the married couple and the global testimonies of the Honduran and Indian families suggests to viewers the value of seriously considering a religion that has gained approval and followers in such diverse places and lives across the globe.

In between personal interest stories, Gordon Robertson, speaking directly into the camera, offers the audience opportunities to become part of supporting CBN's missionary outreach and programming by "joining the 700 Club" with a donation. The program ends with a second Gospel presentation, this time by Terry Meuwesen. Like with Robertson's earlier presentation, she looks directly into the camera, speaks passionately, then models a prayer of salvation. Her prayer is tearful, and the program concludes with the opportunity for those who prayed the prayer to call in to the 700 Club's prayer line where they can talk with a mentor or receive a free packet of materials on being their lives as Christians.

This depiction of a standard day of programming on the evangelistic 700 Club speaks to the fact that what televangelists and, to a lesser extent, their radio counterparts have realized is that viewers are attracted to the personalities and drama of the evangelists and the quality of the entertainment as much as they might be to the message. Scholars and critics have often noted, however, that the result of presenting an appealing program in the television format is not inexpensive. The result has been what Michael W. Hughey has called "the internal contradictions of televangelism": televangelists believe in the necessity of using television in order to disseminate the Gospel on a mass scale; however, the cost of television production is exorbitant (33). In addition, staying on the air means competing with and outranking other televangelists or risk losing viewer ratings, income, or even the opportunity to broadcast entirely (34). As Pat Robertson, founder and former president of Christian Broadcasting Network said, "we have to save souls, and to do that, we have to stay on the air, and to do that we have to pay the bills" (24). The contradiction

lies in the necessity of adjusting what is being preached and how it is being preached in order to stay funded and stay on the air.

The transformation of the evangelist into capitalist businessman is a direct consequence of the employment of the broadcast medium, though the seeds of such a transformation have been germinating at least since the 1920s, when evangelical revivalist Billy Sunday referred to himself as an "efficiency expert," claiming to be so cost-efficient in his ministry that he could save a soul for \$2.00 (35). Nevertheless, the competition for airtime that characterized broadcast evangelism took this focus to another level entirely. Several effects resulted from this shift. The most pronounced is that money-raising campaigns became incredibly elaborate and central to the evangelistic programming. A variety of rhetorical strategies were incorporated into the pressure to donate, a pressure that was worked into nearly every televangelist air spot. Instead of referring to the requested money as a type of practical necessity to keep the show on the air, for example, televangelists spiritualized it: Oral Roberts was known to refer to "seed faith," asking people to give "seed-money" (38). The seed referenced both the biblical "seed" of the Gospel (Matthew 13:1-58, I Corinthians 9:11), which he claimed his ministry sought to sow, but also, Roberts was referencing a version of theology now known as the "Prosperity Gospel," or the notion that God's blessings come in the form of wealth and that one of the primary ways of receiving these blessings is to give. Ultimately, the requirements of television actually began to shape the theology preached by evangelists like Roberts and Robertson. The Prosperity Gospel is exemplified, for example, in Roberts's statement that "If you want God to supply your needs, then give seed-money for Him to reproduce and multiply" and in Jerry Falwell's claim that

"material wealth is God's way of blessing people who put him first" (Hadden & Schupe 132; Woodward 35). Similarly, Robertson, in one program, explained how this process might work with the testimony of one woman who had donated to the 700 Club:

She's on a limited income, and with all sorts of health problems, too. She decided to trust in God and to step out in faith on the Kingdom Principles. She was already giving half her disability money to the 700 Club to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. But just last week, she decided to go all the way, and to give God the money she spends for cancer medicine—\$120 a month. And three days later—get this!—from an entirely unexpected source, she got a check for three thousand dollars! (Fore *Television and Religion* 88).

As if to exemplify the "fruits" of believing in the Prosperity Gospel, televangelists have (often correctly) become associated with being personally wealthy (Hughey 39). It is from the apparent contradiction (at least to an outsider perspective) of near-constant calls for donation combined with extravagant lifestyles that televangelists have earned a reputation in the popular culture for being dishonest and hypocritical in their use of resources. Ultimately, to reign in such excesses and to hold ministries accountable, the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability was founded in 1979 and was supported even by Billy Graham, the "elder statesman of contemporary televangelists" (44). The Council established a code of ethics prohibiting bait-and switch and other unethical fundraising strategies and required all members and organizations to share their financial information publically. Though none of the most prominent of the televangelists (save Graham) joined the Council, its formation was a clear indication of the dangers of the medium and of a divisiveness that taking root within evangelicalism in America. Formerly characterized as a unified and non-denominational movement, the engagement with the capital-oriented media of radio and television had pushed the limits of evangelists' ability to adopt and manipulate a medium to their own purposes. Ultimately,

the medium shaped their message in a manner that pitted evangelist against evangelist and redirected the Gospel towards being a route to financial success, requiring increased efforts to rein in excesses (67). Though the Prosperity Gospel does not exclusively characterize televised evangelical ministries today, it is a predominant feature.

In addition, though televised "preach-and-teach" programming still remains common—including the popular ministries of Joyce Meyer, Joel Osteen, Charles Stanley, and John Hagee—evangelicals continue to shift their strategies to reach out more directly to non-Christian audiences. The success of the 700 Club suggests that a "bridge approach" to evangelism, in which a secular genre or set of stylistic conventions is adopted to initially draw the viewer to the subject matter is effective. As a result, evangelicals have forayed into televised dramas and film as well. Shows like *Christy*, *Seventh Heaven*, and *Touched by an Angel*, though not including overt Gospel presentations, are designed to represent and promote the values exemplified by a biblical worldview. The hope is that those who find the entertainment of these shows appealing will ultimately find the spiritual content appealing as well.

This strategy has been applied to evangelical filmmaking in spades. While there are certainly a variety of straightforward Gospel presentation films—*Campus Crusade for Christ's Jesus Film* perhaps most prominent (having reportedly led directly to over 200 million conversions since its production in 1979)—the adoption of secular genres for a sacred purpose has managed to achieve mainstream appeal to the elusive non-Christian audience ("The Jesus Film"). As with print, radio, and television media, however, the original evangelical forays into film evangelism involved more straightforward methods: an adaptation of David Wilkerson's *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1980), starring Pat

Boone as an urban evangelist; the Moody Institute of Science's Sermons from Science; the national Lutheran Council's Answer for Anne; the film series Whatever Happened to the Human Race? by Francis Schaeffer; and Focus on the Family by Dr. James Dobson all take explicit approaches to evangelism (Lindvall 59). In Sermons for Science, for example, which Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke argue "prefigured the intelligent design movement," the argument for Christianity centers on depicting the earth as incredibly designed: examples of what are viewed as miraculous signs of order in anatomy and biology are presented as evidence for God's existence (60). In Focus on the Family, Dobson, a counselor, provides advice to his viewers on how to apply biblical values to raising children, exemplifying his belief that film need not primarily be entertaining as long as it provides its audience with "equipment for living" (Young 460). Indeed, the initial move towards applying films that either presented biblical stories, explicit Gospel presentations, or were centered on education had, in part, to do with the ideological hesitation over the role of images and "fictional" presentations by the Church, a hesitation that has historically proven common in regards to evangelicals and media use. Within the Evangelical community, going to movie theaters to view secular movies was, in the early years of the medium's popularity, commonly condemned. As Lindvall and Quicke describe:

Tribal critics warned believers even into the mid-1900s that a real Christian would not want to be caught in a theater when Jesus returned. Ministers attacked Hollywood companies as sewage factories, spewing forth toxic evils that would contaminate any who came in contact with them. . . They claimed movies portrayed lasciviousness, generated sexual arousal, modeled criminal activity, glorified smoking and drinking, and even taught teenagers how to make out. More recent evangelical critics argue that movies challenge family values and evangelical worldviews (62).

Evangelicals were concerned for evangelists who attempted to adopt the film format for spreading the Gospel as well, worrying that "religious movies turned faith into entertainment, and that motion pictures were opposed even to the idea of godliness" (62). The biblical justification for using the secular format and especially for involving themselves in an industry that was often demonized as perverse or sinful frequently centered on references to Jesus's use of parables (59). As with radio and print evangelism, it was the notion that if evangelicals did not have a prominent presence in the film industry, not only would an opportunity to evangelize a mass audience be lost, but the opportunity to counter what they perceive as negative secular forces dominating the medium would be lost as well.

In the past decade, Sherwood Baptist Church, a megachurch in Albany, Georgia, has become well known for developing the production company Sherwood Pictures to produce evangelistic films that have high entertainment value and the production quality of secular box office hits. The church explains that their motivation for delving into film had to do with the results of a Barna survey that listed movies, media, and music about the church as a predominant influence on culture (Catt). Senior Pastor Michael Catt explained: "we concluded we could either complain about this or address it." The secular influence that evangelicals perceive as a primary force impacting the culture was a motivating force in the church's decision to begin a movie ministry. Sherwood Productions, which draws its cast from Sherwood church members and local schools and community members, produced the dramas *Flywheel* in 2003, *Facing the Giants* in 2006, *Fireproof* in 2008, and *Courageous* in 2011. The films—often a combination of drama with moments of light, family-friendly humor, conflict, or romance—center around

individuals struggling with moments of moral, professional, or relational crisis. Flywheel deals with a used car salesman who realizes that his unethical business practices have led to distrust in his life and especially in his relationship with his wife and son. Facing the Giants tells the story of a high school football coach who flips his team around from a series of losing seasons to victory by changing his coaching philosophy to center on praising God, no matter the challenges he faces. Fireproof recounts a broken marriage that is restored by commitment to God. Courageous follows the lives of four men, each dealing with professional and personal problems, who make a commitment to be better fathers, husbands, and men, and who see their relationships and futures turn around by having faith. The directors and writers of Sherwood Productions' films, Alex and Stephen Kendrick (also staff members of Sherwood Baptist Church describe their goal as representing Christians living out their lives in a Christ-like manner, hoping that the model will encourage viewers to see the benefits of this way of life. Alex Kendrick has stated that "There is one thing we are praying for each time these films are shown. When the movie ends and people walk out of the theater, we want them to think about where they stand with God" (Westbury).

The Ideology of Media and Evangelism

As a historical overview of the evangelical relationship with mass media reveals, any hesitation or concerns evangelists have had over the "corrupting influence" of mass media have been largely dismissed. Indeed, evangelists have been on the forefront of every major media revolution. The manner in which they adopt these media is unique, however. The ideology behind their involvement is particular to their faith as well: it is centered in the divinely mandated Great Commission; it is seen as a project with the

potential to forward the Second Coming of Jesus, and it is seen as a necessity for maintaining the evangelical voice in the contemporary world. Despite the ways in which the media have pushed evangelists towards presenting their messages in particular ways that are most appealing to a mass audience, evangelists have been willing to take this risk. Their belief in the transformative power of the Gospel message which is capable of being experienced just by exposure drives their mission and motivates their constant willingness to adapt the stylistic conventions in which they wrap their message to seek out audiences that are "unsaved." This trend proves no less true as evangelists in the later decades of the 20th century took their ministry onto the Internet. However, as I will explore, the Internet offered a unique, spatially-oriented, interactive but fixed place for evangelists to interact with their audience, a medium environment that would ultimately lead to the shaping of the Gospel message in such a way as to override the celebrity-centered, Prosperity Gospel focus of radio and televangelism.

Chapter Three

Website Evangelism and the Rhetoric of Digital Space

The issue of space is central to mass media evangelism. Evangelists and their ministries are concerned with how to expand geographic reach and bring the Gospel to more and more distant communities across the globe; how to condense space and make a technologically-mediated experience appear intimate, relational, and personal; how to control who is in the space; and how to dictate experiences within the space are of primary interest to mass media evangelists. With every new media revolution, evangelicals have jumped at the opportunity to occupy new geographical and cultural spaces. The most recent of revolutions—the digital—has proved no different. Indeed, according to a study done by Stewart M. Hoover, Lynn Schofield Clark, and Lee Rainie for the PEW Internet & American Life project, “Evangelicals are among the most fervent Internet users for religious and spiritual purposes” (iii). Particularly in the online context, social anthropologists Maura McCarthy and David Lochhead have observed that Christians were also among some of the earliest adopters of the Internet. Their first forays online were in the use of bulletin board systems in the mid-1980s to connect with other local evangelicals online as well as to reach out to non-Christians online (Lochhead 48). In 1985, the “Church of England,” the first virtual church, was created, claiming to be a place in which people for the first time could “worship in spirit and in truth and not be distracted by others,” where “People are pared down to pure spirit.” By 1995, Internet evangelists had established an appreciable presence online (McCarthy 10). The earliest websites—including the Billy Graham Institute of Evangelism’s website and newsletter *Equipping Evangelists Online* and Doug Lucas’s *Brigada* website and newsletter *Brigada*

Today—were predominantly informational resource pages written by real world evangelists for a readership of Christians interested in establishing an online evangelistic presence. Also in 1995, Leadership University created the site Stonewall Revisited, a controversial homosexual deprogramming site that claimed to serve as a source for individuals seeking freedom from homosexual desires through a relationship with Jesus (10). By 1996, the presence of religion online was so noteworthy that TIME magazine published the article “Finding God on the Web,” in which Joshua Ramo and Greg Burke wrote that “The signs of online religious activity are everywhere. If you instruct AltaVista...to scour the Web for references to Microsoft’s Bill Gates, the program turns up an impressive 25,000 references...Look for Christ on the Web, and you’ll find him—some 146,000 times” (As a point of comparison, in 2012, the same search in Google results in over eighteen hundred million hits) (16). McCarthy notes that from 1997 to 2000, it became more and more commonplace for Christian individuals, churches, and organizations to be represented on the Internet, and in 1996, Mark Kellner published the book *God on the Internet*, one of the earliest studies of how the Internet could be used for evangelism. A year later, Tony Whittaker, an online evangelist himself, published his famous Web Evangelism Guide, suggesting ways in which the Gospel could be most effectively presented online. A primary focus of this guide and subsequent similar works, including Andrew Careaga’s popular *E-vangelism: Sharing the Gospel in Cyberspace* (1999) and Vernon Blackmore’s *God on the Net* (1999), was to present ways in which evangelists could use adaptive or bridge strategies to reach seekers online. Internet evangelism became such a priority for the church in the 1990s that in April of 1999, the first Internet Evangelism Conference was held by the Billy Graham Institute, and in the

same year, Ohio's United Theological Seminary established an M.A. program in religious communication with a focus on evangelism that employs multi-media techniques and information technology. Campus Crusade for Christ International popularized the bridge strategy of online magazines, modeling their evangelistic website designs after popular secular web magazines like Salon.com but with content and interactive options that led to the presentation of the Gospel (See, for example, Campus Crusade's Power to Change ministry's Women Today Magazine, Men Today Online, Military Lives, and Retirement with a Purpose websites) (11). Currently, there are bridge websites available on any number of topics from sports (The Goal) to movies (Hollywood Jesus) to science (Life's Big Questions) to health and personal needs (Priority Associates) to body modification/fetish (The Ultimate Love Page) to teen and college student issues (iamnext, Every Student) to apologetics (Apologetics 315) to recovery aid from addictions or help with relationships and sexuality (Real Love Now). The terms "digital evangelism" or "Internet" or "Web evangelism" have come to refer to any method of using the Internet to share the Christian Gospel, whether through websites, email, discussion boards, chat rooms, virtual churches, social networks, blogs or vlogs, or any other means. Evangelicals have effectively sought to occupy every available platform in cyberspace.

Space has also been central to studies of rhetoric; indeed, rhetoricians examining the impact of spaces on the ways in which we persuade, communicate, and are influenced ask many of the same questions: how does the architecture of space control our actions within the space? What does the way a space is designed say about the values of the designer? Many early discussions of rhetorical space were in reference to exclusively physical spaces: Roxanne Mountford popularized the term "rhetorical space" in her

discussions of Protestant pulpit and church spaces, and rhetoricians have subsequently examined how spatial design expresses ideology and effects persuasion in spaces as diverse as prisons, hunting lodges, cemeteries, writing labs, and suburban neighborhoods. Richard Marbeck, for example, examined the Robben Island prison in South Africa as a rhetorical space in his 2004 article “The Rhetorical Space of Robben Island.” Analyzing the space both during the era of apartheid (when it was used as a site for political prisoners) and post-apartheid (when it became a site of memorial), Marbeck conceptualizes the space itself as a “communicative event,” a location of discourse imbued with “cultural, historical, and material geographies” and symbolism (7). In 2007, in “Rhetorical Space—The Hunting Lodge at Venaria Reale,” Hugh Cullum analyzed a 17th century Italian estate in terms of what its design indicates about courtly values and accepted courtly behaviors in the period. In the same tradition, in her 2009 article “Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places: The Cemetery as a Rhetorical Memory Place/Space,” Elizabethada A. Wright considered two spaces—an African American cemetery in New Hampshire and the particular grave of a white woman in a Massachusetts cemetery—as rhetorical spaces, analyzing the ways in which cemetery designs both shape and are shaped by cultural conceptions of mourning and memory. And even more recently, in his 2012 article “Resisting the Fixity of Suburban Space: The Walker as Rhetorician,” Robert Topinka has examined how the street plans of suburban neighborhoods promote consumerism, suggesting walking rather than driving as a way in which citizens might challenge the ideological implications of the space. Indeed, as Mountford has suggested, the consideration of rhetorical space can prove fruitful for nearly any physical or geographical component of a discourse event. She offers, for

example, “rooms, lecterns, auditoriums, platforms, confession booths, MOOS, [and] classrooms” as rhetorical spaces ripe for analysis.

As Mountford’s tantalizing reference to the “rhetorical space” of MOOs suggests, rhetoricians have also delved into explorations of non-physical, theoretical, and virtual spaces. In *Postcomposition*, Sidney I. Dobrin has argued that this is a natural move for scholars of rhetorical space, explaining how even the origins of the term “space” itself suggest that it need not apply to purely physical environments: for instance, the Hebrew word *makom* (literally translated “place”) “denotes a larger concept than just a physical location; it alludes to the manner in which space is politically arranged in province, is occupied by subjects, is occupied and arranged by placement of objects, and is defined by its subjects” (38). In addition, the Greek word for space, as expressed in Plato’s *Timaeus*, refers to an entity that exists pre-creation of physical space, “a preexisting space, space as a priori” and later “space as a receptacle, which ‘provides a position for everything that comes to be’” (38).

The burgeoning field of ecocomposition, for example, has made strides towards understanding space in terms of its nature (“webbed,” or “networked” for example), rather than in terms of its materiality or physical traits. As Sidney I. Dobrin and Christian R. Weisser have described: “Ecocomposition is the study of the relationship between environments (and by that we mean natural, constructed, and even imagined places) and discourse (speaking, writing, and thinking),” a relationship further elucidated in their description of potential coursework in ecocomposition which could “focus on such topics as the way in which city-dwellers develop certain patterns of behavior or how Internet chat rooms allow individuals to come together in ‘locations’ that best suit their needs”

("Breaking Ground" 572; 581). Of particular relevance to the project of examining websites as rhetorical spaces is the notion contributed by ecocomposition scholars of "webbed writing" or—as in the case of hypertextual writing—the notion that space might be defined by the relationships and connections it fosters between locations or information, relationships likened to the types of relationships established in ecological systems in nature. As Jay David Bolter has written, for example, in describing electronic books:

The electronic book reflects a different natural world, in which relationships are multiple and evolving: there is no great chain of being in an electronic world-book. For that very reason, an electronic book is a better analogy for contemporary views of nature, since nature is often not regarded as a hierarchy, but rather as a network of interdependent species and systems (Bolter *Writing Space* 258).

Rhetoricians have also narrowed their focus on the rhetoric of non-physical spaces to deal more directly with the virtual spaces online that will be central to the project of studying evangelistic websites. The conceptualization of the Internet as space or as a medium consisting of many diverse spaces is hardly radical. This association is already encoded in the way we choose to describe our experiences online. Indeed, web users have constructed an extensive linguistic geography to capture our lived existences on the web. We have the places we visit: websites, chat rooms, home pages. We have means of transportation: navigation, searching, linking. We have interpersonal relationships: friends, followers, fans. We can play games in online game rooms, shop in online marketplaces, and take virtual tours of libraries and monuments across the globe. Perhaps the most telling term of all though is "cyberspace," the word we use to describe the complete environment in which we interact and move online.

The history of our use of the term "cyberspace" reveals that in many cases, the term is not intended exclusively as a metaphor to approximate how we experience the Internet. The word was first used by science fiction writer William Gibson in his 1984 *Neuromancer* to describe a near-future reality in which computers across the globe have been connected into a unified network where people can enter through a "virtual-reality grid space" (Woolley 122). Also known as "cyberspace," this space is envisioned as "the ultimate extension of the exclusion of daily life," a place where "you can literally wrap yourself in the media and not have to see what's really going on around you" (122). Though cyberspace in this early conceptualization was different from the real world, it was considered an alternative real world, just as vivid and just as stimulating, although in a different way. In communication scholar Heidi Campbell's formulation, Gibson's understanding of cyberspace was as "a mythical space, a closed reality, and an inorganic area existing somewhere beyond the computer screen. . . meant to represent an otherworldly space where one can lose oneself, where reality is re-created through fantasy and experimentation" (7). In Gibson's own poetic words, cyberspace is "A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding" (51).

Central to the understanding of the Internet as space is, as Campbell further notes, the distinction between "virtual" and "real" worlds. In her discussion of virtual classrooms, Starr Roxanne Hiltz explains that "virtual" is a term used by computer scientists to imply an entity "whose existence is simulated with software rather than actually existing in hardware of some physical form" (188). Though "virtual reality" is

most commonly applied to situations of immersion into a "technologically enhanced reality" as in flight simulation, battle simulation, game simulation, or rollercoaster simulation experiences, it can more broadly be said to apply to any computer-mediated experience we have (Campbell 8). Indeed, as the Internet gradually became more popular and commonly adopted, the term "cyberspace" expanded to serve as a descriptor for how we perceive our relationship to and interaction with the Internet. For example, in his 1992 essay "Cyberspace: Some Proposals," Michael Benedikt describes what Campbell argues represents "an important transition from cyberspace being considered a mythic space to being perceived as an actual space" (10). Benedikt, who variously describes cyberspace as "a parallel universe" and the screen as a "virtual world" (1-3) writes:

Cyberspace has a geography, a physics, a nature, and a rule of human law. In cyberspace the common man, and the information worker—cowboy or infocrat—can search, manipulate, create, or control information directly; he can be entertained or trained, seek solitude or company, win or lose power. . . indeed, can "live" or "die" as he will (1-3; 123).

This trend continued to develop throughout the 1990s, with computer gurus like Esther Dyson of Electronic Frontiers Foundation, Bill Gates of Microsoft, and Michael Dertouzos of MIT labs arguing for an understanding of cyberspace as an actual place and forwarding discourse that implied it as such, including phrase like "surfing the net" or "information superhighway" (Campbell 11). Al Gore popularized the conception of Internet as interstate in 1993 when he described the web as "a network of highways, much like the interstates of the 1950s. . . highways carrying information rather than people or goods" (Adams 158). His understanding of the similarities between physical and virtual spaces was clarified when he subsequently explained that "it's not just one eight-lane turnpike, but a collection of interstates and feeder roads made of different

materials in the same way that highways are concrete or macadam or gravel" (158). The intrigue of considering the Internet as space was so powerful that in 1993, one medium-sized network held seventeen conferences specifically on the subject (Rheingold 44). Later in the decade, the conceptualization of the Internet as a "web" caught on, implying a growing awareness of the Internet's capacities for connectivity, interactivity, and community-building. In addition to seeming like a space, the Internet further became an occupied space, full of potential relationships and discourses. Campbell describes how even the interfaces designed in the 1990s reflected this understanding of the Internet as an inhabitable space: Apple, for example, popularized the "desktop metaphor," and designed an interface in which our screens became a parallel but familiar office space. In *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle describes Apple's desktop interface and the similar interfaces that subsequently imitated it as screen experiences that "modeled a way of understanding that depended on getting to know a computer through interacting with it as one might get to know a person or explore a town" (23). In popular understanding and among computer and internet experts, the question has not been so much if cyberspace might be conceptualized as a place but, in the words of Dave Healy: "What sort of a place is cyberspace?" (57).

Both the language we use and the experiences we have on the Internet are commonly understood in terms of space. In many cases, these spatial descriptions are intended metaphorically; however, while surfing the Web, navigating search engine results, browsing through blogs, and shopping with Internet merchants may only be metaphorically similar to the ways we navigate, browse, or shop in the physical world, I will argue that the way website design seeks to direct our behavior is in fact very similar

to the way physical spaces are constructed to control our movements. The case of evangelistic websites—one manifestation of the latest digital wave of evangelical mass media adoption—reveals the ways in which rhetoricians might begin to examine popular conceptions of the Internet as more than metaphorical space.

As we have seen, the urgency that evangelicals feel in their mission has to do with their understanding of the divinely appointed task to share the Gospel with the world and the simultaneous sense that the time in which to share this message may be running short. As a result, in the context of evangelistic websites, designers are particularly focused on crafting a navigation experience that leads the visitor to make a choice, often indicated by clicking a "Yes, I have accepted Jesus" link. How the designers get the seekers to this point involves a variety of design principles, all centered on what I will refer to as the "architecture" of the site, an architecture that can be read in much the same way that the number of aisles or type of seating or lighting and color-scheme choices might impact our experience in a church, pushing us to behave, think, and respond in certain ways. Specifically, I will argue that evangelistic websites exemplify why rhetoricians should begin to consider websites as rhetorical spaces in a more structural, literal sense. I will approach this argument by first looking at three evangelistic web pages: Global Media Outreach's *Jesus 2020* website (Jesus2020.com), the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's *Peace with God* website (PeacewithGod.Jesus.net), and Network 211's *Journey Answers* website (JourneyAnswers.com). In an attempt to theorize how conceptualizing websites as rhetorical spaces might work, I argue for three design features—geography, navigation, and inhabitants—as essentially spatial elements that direct visitors towards certain types of behaviors and decisions. I will begin by describing

how each of these concepts might be applied, then will examine these concepts in the contexts of the *Jesus 2020*, *Peace with God*, and *Journey Answers* websites.

Spatial Feature #1: Geography and the Rhetoric of the Interface

In *Writing for the Internet*, Craig Baehr and Bob Schaller define "interface design" as "what you see on the screen, including the overall layout as well as any content, tools, or styles found on the page" (156). The interface is the user's first introduction to the website and the first moment in which the web designer has the opportunity to "teach" and begin to train the user in how the space is to be employed. To make a physical world comparison, experiencing a website's main page interface is akin to the moment in which we walk into a café or library or home and must make immediate decisions about how to behave. If you are in a café, you may first observe the rope line set up in front of a display of pastries and beside a counter with two registers and two baristas taking orders, which indicates to you that you should direct yourself between the two ropes if you plan to place an order. If your purpose at the café is, instead, to meet a friend, the presence of the rope line will cause you to direct yourself away from the area where orders are taken and towards the cluster of tables and arm chairs where people are socializing, studying, and relaxing. In a similar manner, in a library, perhaps being familiar with the general layout of such spaces, if you are looking for a particular book, you might immediately seek out small plaques on the wall telling you which call numbers are located nearby; or, if you plan to do some research, you will look for the familiar computer carrels or a large desk with reference librarians behind it. The architectural features of a space indicate to us how the space is to be used. In addition, our familiarity with certain types of spaces helps us know what to look for. The same experience takes

place as we encounter web interfaces. Baehr and Schaller point out four particular aspects of interface that impact how long a user chooses to stay in the space and how they are aided in orienting themselves. These are contrast, grouping, consistency, and usability. Contrast has to do with the ways in which color scheme helps a user assign relationships between objects or know which objects are being prioritized. Grouping has to do with how objects are paired up or clustered to denote an association between elements. Consistency relates to how, within the various pages that are available within the website, consistent design principles are used to create a sense of order or to suggest ways in which various spaces within the website relate more or less to the main ideas or goals expressed on the primary interface. Finally, usability relates to the functionality of the site: the indicators that tell us particularly how to behave (Should we scroll down? Select a menu? Perform a search? Which options are prioritized?) (157). In Johndan Johnson-Eilola's 2005 *Datacloud*, for example, Johnson-Eilola explores the concept of interface as a digital space in which—rather than “merely us[ing] information,” we might instead “inhabit it”—a theory that will play out in the discussion the evangelistic spaces of websites (3). Johnson-Eilola argues that the importance of approaching webtexts in this way lies in the fact that our society is becoming “increasingly networked” and that we are moving towards conceptualizing our identities and lives in terms of space rather than time (9; 15). Looking closely at interfaces, he explores how they provide users with “suggestions and hints about how to work,” directing our behavior and experiences online (45).

As I will explore, discussing interface also involves considering how the various pages within a website are organized. The various internal pages accessible from the main page

of a website effectively create layers of space through which the user navigates. I will suggest that more prioritized information or information that the user is expected to attend to first is found on more surface layers of the website, and more deeply embedded layers are to be given increasingly less priority or attention. In addition, the ways in which these sub-layers appear as they are accessed impacts the user's navigational choices: a website that opens in a new tab or a new window allows for the content on a variety of the website's pages to be viewed side by side whereas pages that appear in the same window require users to make the decision to click "back" to return to their original location or to choose particularly to open the page in another tab or window.

Jesus 2020: Geography

Global Media Outreach's (GMO) website describes the purpose of their *Jesus 2020* project:

By 2020, there will be 8.5 billion people on earth. Current trends indicate that people conducting spiritual searches on the Internet may grow to as many as 12 million a day in this decade. Global Media Outreach wants to meet those searching people at their spiritual crossroads when they are most ready to listen to the Good News.

Jesus 2020 (Figure 1) is the most popular of a variety of evangelistic websites created by GMO. It is a good starting point for analyzing how website design attempts to control the behavior of users because its structure is not elaborate, and the directives being given are readily apparent. A first glance at the website reveals a grey and white color scheme. The only non-neutral color found is in the header, where a blue sky with clouds radiating white sunbeams at the upper-left of the page draws the reader's eyes to the large white text spelling out "Jesus." The second feature to which the user's eyes are drawn is the extremely large, bold sequence of numbered steps, which a smaller heading indicates are

the "4 Steps to Peace." The steps are listed vertically, drawing the reader's vision down the page. Key words within the text are in boldface. The steps read as follows:

1. God Loves You!
2. All of us have done, said or thought things that are wrong. This is called sin, and our sins have separated us from God.
3. God sent His only Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins.
4. If you want to accept Christ as your Savior and turn from your sins, you can ask Him to be your Savior and Lord by praying a prayer like this:

Step 4 is then followed by a sample prayer, exemplifying what a prayer of salvation might look like. On my desktop monitor, only Steps One and Two appear "above the fold," but the numbering encourages me to scroll down to see the final two steps. According to studies on eye-tracking in the field of Human Computer Interaction, the design of this interface is ideally compatible with the way Internet users tend to read websites: the reality is that web users tend not to read; instead, they scan (Nielsen *Prioritizing* 35). In addition, web users read in an F-shaped pattern, scanning left to right for main headings, and then running our eyes down the left margin for navigational clues (Nielsen *Eyetracking* 422). Thus, although beneath each of the "4 Steps" there are verses from the Bible to justify the steps, the small font, the light gray font color, and the fact that these scriptural justifications consist of a minimum of three lines of text make it unlikely that this text will get read unless the user is heavily invested in the material and/or they do not get the information they need from the main steps. Indeed, the way the designers have implemented boldface text allows the reader to not avoid reading the full steps to grasp their meaning. Consider the words in bold: You!; Wrong; sin; separated; only Son; our sins; accept Christ as your Savior. At the very least, a reader skimming through just the bold words will grasp the central point that they personally, as a result of

things they have done wrong, are out of whack somehow, and that somehow this state necessitates a Savior and that that savior is also known as Christ. Though the heavily text-based design flies in the face of "usability" design standards for contemporary web users, the way text has been used and categorized with the four numbered steps and the layers of prioritization in the text (bold and large being most important, large being second most important, and small being least important) allows the reader to move rapidly through the Gospel presentation.

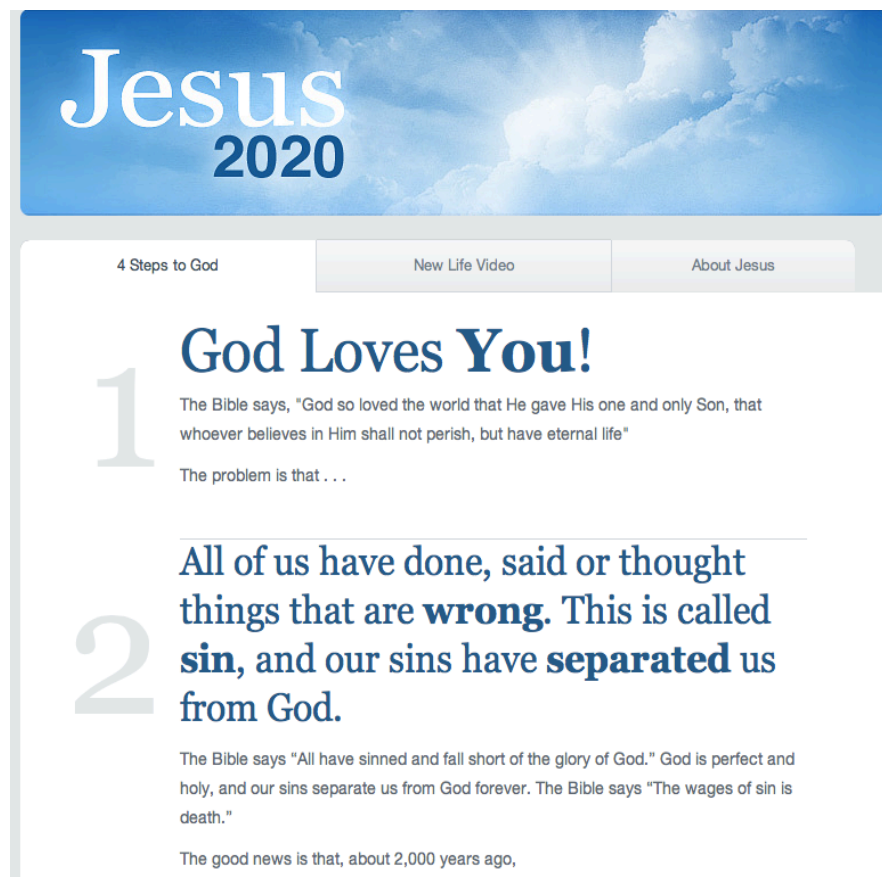


Figure 1, *Jesus 2020*

It would take an average-paced reader no more than thirty seconds to read through the four steps and to scroll to the bottom of the page. Indeed, if one is only reading the

bold words, in the time it takes to click for the page to scroll down, one has been presented with the Gospel. From an evangelist's point of view, this is incredibly efficient. Moreover, it is tightly controlled. The numbering immediately causes the user to want to scroll down; the bold large font immediately attracts our eyes; and, before we know it, we have been exposed to the Gospel. The tight control this design effects is even further exemplified by the question posed below Step Four. At the very bottom of the main page, the user is asked "Did you pray this prayer?" Below the question, the user has the option to click "Yes" or "No." Just as simplified and straightforward as the Gospel presentation are the implications: the user is asked to consider two options only. The consequences of clicking one choice or the other are not made apparent. The user is not told, for example, that when you click "No" you will be sent to a form where you may enter your email address and ask a mentor any questions you have about Christianity. Nor is the user told that if you click "Yes" you will be taken to a page that congratulates you on your "decision to accept Christ" and will also be provided with the same form to fill out for follow-up contact by a mentor.

Though the main page of *Jesus 2020* presents its design structure and its directives for how to navigate in an overt, heavily-controlled manner, if the user hesitates at the top of this page, they might notice that the "4 steps to God" tab is not the only page available within the site. There are two others, labeled "New Life Video" and "About Jesus." The "New Life Video" page is a video version of the four steps. The moment the user clicks on the "New Life Video" tab, a video starts playing without even the requirement of pushing "Play." Just as with the bold, large font in the "4 Steps to God," the Gospel is foregrounded; in this case, unless the user has the volume off on their

computer or is able to click pause quickly, the video will begin, and the Gospel will be presented. Just as with the "4 Steps to God," below the video, the user is again asked: "Did you pray this prayer?" and is again given the same options: "Yes" or "No." For a second time, we find that the website structure is heavily directive of the user's behavior. If the user wants to be within the space of the website, their options for sitting back, relaxing, and absorbing the material are limited. The design foregrounds the Gospel and aggressively directs our eyes/ears to it. If the user is not interested in reading or seeing this information, their only option is to close the site.

There is a third tab as well. In the least-explicit position, in the location where—reading left to right—a user would look last, under the banner to the far right, a final tab exists, entitled "About Jesus." "About Jesus" is, as its title suggests, a series of facts about Jesus. The format is identical to the numbered "4 Steps to God" page: brief summaries of the facts ("The Most Unique Person," "An Amazing Life," "A Sudden Death," and "The Promise is for You") are listed in large, navy blue font, and detail explicating these facts with scriptural support is included in longer paragraphs beneath each point. The "bullets" are in the shape of crosses. Again, via the bullets and the vertical series of bold short phrases, the design works to draw the reader's eyes immediately down the page. There are no marginal graphics, menus, or colors to distract the user. And as with the previous two tabs, as the user scrolls quickly to the bottom of the page, down through the four short facts which, because of their brevity and exaggerated size are nearly impossible not to read, they will find themselves at the third presentation of a sample prayer and the now familiar question: "Did you pray this prayer?" with the options "YES" or "NO."

The simplicity of structure on the *Jesus 2020* website reveals how design attempts to control the behavior of users. Of course, users always have the freedom to leave a website, and some users who are conscious of how the website is attempting to direct them might choose to resist the design's draw and act counter to the design's intent (for example, beginning with the "About Jesus" link, muting the "New Life Video," or disengaging from all content and scanning the margins of the page where, upon close exploration, they might find the small link at the very bottom of the page to information about the Global Media Outreach ministry). However, even a cursory examination of this website reveals that any of these behaviors would not be intuitive and that the layout of the interface on all three web pages accessible off of the main page is directed towards quickly moving the user to a Gospel presentation by encouraging them to scroll rapidly down through a succinct, simple Gospel presentation to the central question: Did you pray this prayer? Or, essentially, did you just commit to be a Christian? "Maybe" or "I am still thinking" are not options, and the large colored "YES" or "NO" alternatives direct the user—if thinking uncritically or navigating passively—to accept these as the only two options.

Peace with God: Geography

Peace with God (Figure 2), designed by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and the Jesus.net ministry, serves as an excellent point of comparison to *Jesus 2020* because, content-wise, it uses a similar approach (varied from "4 Steps to God" to "4 Steps to Peace"). However, the design of the site encourages the user to behave in an entirely different manner. The primary structural similarity between *Peace with God* and *Jesus 2020* is that both websites cater to the design principle of organizing material in an F-

shape to best target the way web users absorb information on websites. However, whereas *Jesus 2020* encouraged vertical motion and only provided three entry points to the website's internal content, *Peace with God* is organized horizontally, with two rows of menu options, offering five and three entry points respectively. These two rows are divided by a vivid, colorful banner with a picture of a woman, sun shining on her face, looking up and out, as if towards the sky. She has a smile on her face, and beside her, to the user's left, is the text "4 Steps to Peace."

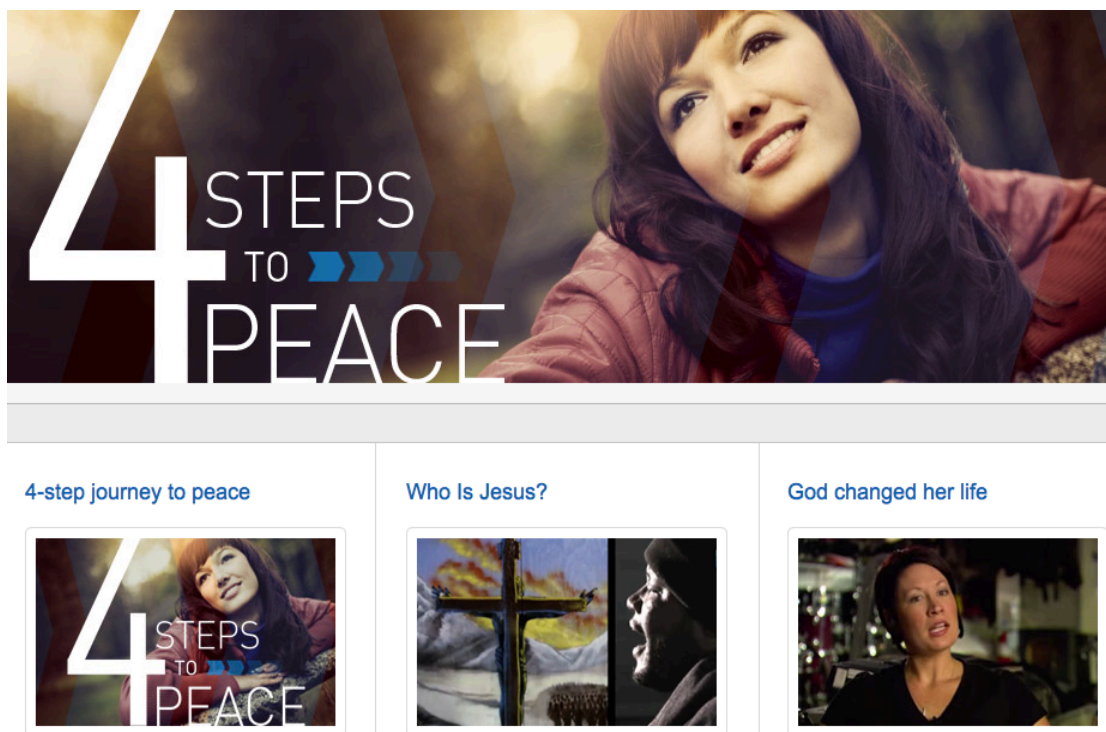


Figure 2, Peace with God

The left-to-right motion on the website is encouraged by the top menu through the titles of the various sub-menus: "God so loved the world," "That He gave His only Son," "That whoever believes in Him," "Should not perish," and "But have eternal life." The user may or may not make the connection that these headings take their titles from the Bible verse John 3:16, but they will easily grasp that syntactically and because of the

horizontal layout, the phrases of the verse are meant to be read in a certain order. The way these links are clustered promotes this reading as well. Though they are separate links that take the user to separate web pages, they are packed side by side with only thin dividing lines inside a horizontal oval figure (Figure 3). This design encourages the user to feel that the links are all individual parts of one unified whole, suggesting they should not be dealt with independently and should be approached in the suggested order.

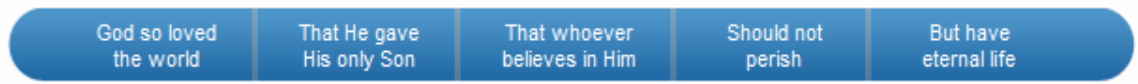


Figure 3, Syntactically-Directive *Peace with God* Menu

By contrast, the second series of links are spread out across the length of the page. Besides basic similarities in font style and size, the user behavior that these links encourage differs dramatically from those in the top menu: these links are presented as independent entities, three separate entry-point options for the user to choose from. They are entitled "4 Steps to Peace," "Who is Jesus?" and "God changed her life." Because the image and text of the "4 Steps to Peace" link mirrors the central banner with the young woman's face, it will undoubtedly draw the user's attention first. However, the blank space between each of these links breaks the seamless flow of left-to-right motion exemplified by the top menu. In fact, because of our attraction to personal interest stories, the final link—"God changed her life"—which (accurately) suggests a testimonial, might be the most appealing. Though the image does not appear as a video feature to be clicked on (no "play" button superimposed on the image as we are trained to expect from the YouTube genre of video, for example), the woman in the image has been captured while speaking; the way her mouth is parted as if mid-speech suggests to the reader that this link will direct us to a video testimony (Figure 4).

God changed her life



Figure 4, *Peace with God* Video Testimony

Finally, though the row of image-based links is the most visually-appealing of all options on the main page of the *Peace with God* website, if the user does bother to scroll past them, they will see three further options that may not even make sense to a non-Christian user, especially in light of the fact that very little content and only hints of a Gospel presentation are available on the main page. They say "PRAY NOW," "I'VE GOT A QUESTION," and "NEXT STEP" and appear in relatively small font, entirely overshadowed by the vivid, colorful images associated with the links above them. The natural questions one might have in response to these links might be "Pray about what?"; "Do I have a question about what?"; and "Next step after what?" Nevertheless, from a design standpoint, this series promotes action on the part of the reader. Even if they are not the most visually-appealing of all entry-points available on the main page, their commands to pray, ask a question, or take a step continue the trend of moving the user to make a selection and enter into the second layer of pages.

Interestingly, despite the main page's appearance of providing the reader with a variety of diverse options for moving through the site's contents, all but one of the links ("I'VE GOT A QUESTION") leads the readers to one of only five options, each centered

around the "4 Steps to Peace," which, as the user will discover, ultimately means "4 Steps to Becoming a Christian." The apparent freedom of choice indicated by the main page is ultimately an artificial sense of choice: each link leads to a fixed series of steps that progress the user through a Gospel presentation in a strikingly similar manner to the format seen on the *Jesus 2020* website (Figure 5).

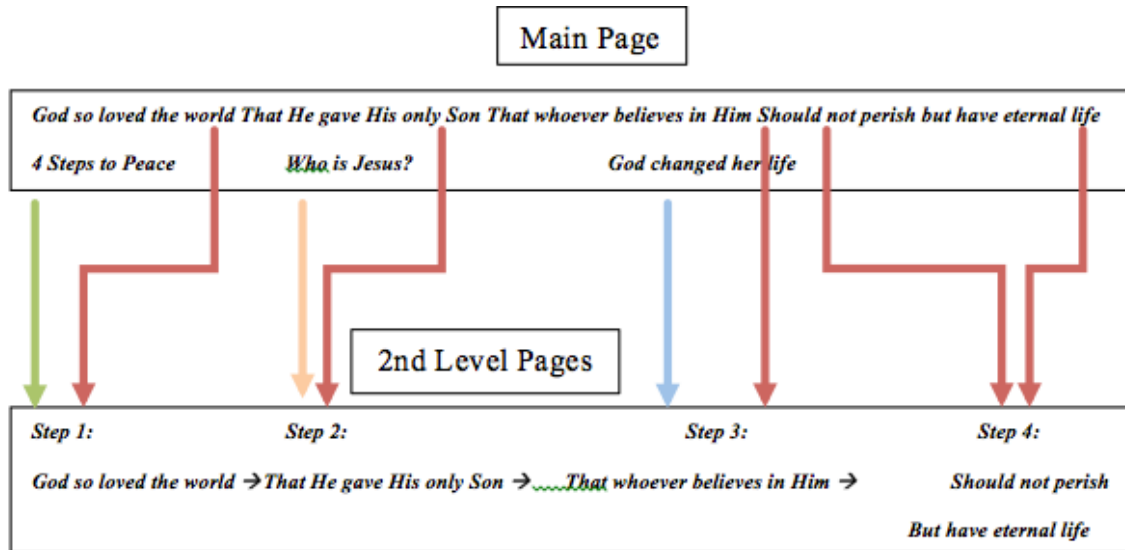


Figure 5, Architecture of *Peace with God*

Once the user has entered the second-level series of pages within the *Peace with God* website, the rigidity of the design, the limitations of the space, and the explicit promotion of certain types of behavior become more readily apparent. No matter which of the four steps the user enters through, they have four available options: they can watch a video presenting the Gospel, they can read a text version of the video, they can proceed to the "Next Step," or they can choose to "Pray Now." The videos differ stylistically, but each consists of music and either audio clips from a Billy Graham sermon or clips of the testimonies of Christians. Their goal, no matter the "step," is to present the Gospel. If a user starts at Step One, then they will experience four different Gospel presentations.

While the numbering of the steps and the clearly demarcated "NEXT STEP" button that appears both to the right of and beneath the video with a right-pointing arrow suggest to the user that the desired movement is "forward" through the steps, the direction to "PRAY NOW" is just as assertive and present an option. As with "NEXT STEP," the "PRAY NOW" link is posted both to the right of and beneath the video. Literally, the Gospel presentation is surrounded by these two choices. The effect is that, having watched the video, there are only two available options: to learn more or to make a decision. However, while the former option suggests choice or a willingness to encourage lingering over or taking time to consider the content, the reality is that once a user has proceeded through the fourth step and clicks "NEXT STEP" one more time, they are taken to what amounts to a fork in the road. Having delayed the option to "PRAY NOW" through the four steps, the options which now frame the fifth and final (text-based) presentation of the Gospel are altered. The user's final options are "Yes, I prayed the prayer" or "No, but I have a question." Making a decision is encouraged by an image of a crowd of people holding hands and praying together. Interestingly, despite the apparent stark opposition of "Yes" or "No," both links take the user to a contact form so that they can be put in touch with a mentor. It is important to note that the wording of the two choices emphasizes a level of control over the user's behavior as well. There are a variety of alternative options that could have been included: while it seems that "Yes" or "No" encompasses the full range of choices, the reality is that "No" is not an option because the "No" provided is qualified with "I have a question." "No, I am not interested" is not presented as a choice. The assumption encoded in these options is that if the user has not decided to become a Christian, it must certainly be because they need more information.

The website is effectively constructed as a funnel. As the user enters, they are provided with the appearance of many choices (the reality, as I have examined, is otherwise) which quickly narrow down to the one choice.

Journey Answers: Geography

Even a cursory review of the main page design of *Journey Answers* reveals a distinct difference between this website and the previously-examined strategies of web evangelism (Figure 6). The first noticeable geographic feature is that the appropriate point of entry is not immediately apparent. The F-shaped design of the previous two pages which caters to the natural reading behavior of web users is complicated. This page's structure centers around a reversed "F," with a long, vertical menu running down the right-hand side of the page. The reader is encouraged to pause yet again and reorient themselves when they realize that the feature which draws our attention first—the rotating banner across the top of the page—is not a link. The banner runs through a series of emotions or trials stated in large, bold text: brokenness, death, deception, despair, guilt, loneliness, rejection, sickness, worry, and worthlessness. Each of these words is mirrored with an image translating the word into a visual: a young Asian girl looking helplessly up at the sky; a young man praying with his head bowed, hands clenched together, and brow furrowed; a spider web glistening with dew; a shepherd in a long robe, hood covering his face, resting on the side of a road; the silhouette of a man in a heavy winter coat walking alone into the sunset; an elderly woman looking despairingly off into the distance; an African American woman with her hand on her heart, her head bowed, crying; and a teenage girl curled up with her head on her knees. Though these images are not links, the designers are clearly asking the users to self-diagnose and

choose a disorder to learn more about. This is indicated by both the menu to the right which consists of a series of links, each one loosely corresponding to each of the disorders listed in the banner (anxiety, brokenness, conditional love, death, emptiness, falsehood, guilt, hopelessness, illness, insignificance, and shame), and the short introductory text below the banner that states:

Welcome to JourneyAnswers.com. Millions around the world are searching for answers to the problems they face throughout life's journey. Many end up disappointed or disillusioned. Others, however, have found the answer. These fortunate ones are able to rise above hurtful circumstances and enjoy life at its fullest. Hopefully, you are one of the fortunate; however, if you are not, there is still hope. We are providing answers to your life issues: anxiety, brokenness, conditional love, death, emptiness, falsehood, guilt, hopelessness, illness, insignificance and shame. So we encourage you to look through this *Journey Answers'* website and discover the answer for yourself.

Familiarity with web design principles will indicate to the user that each of the colored, underlined words are links as well. The effect of this design principle is that the website is literally bordered on three sides (top, right, bottom) with the lists. The user is encouraged in three different manners (scrolling banner, menu, hyperlinked text) to make a selection. Unlike *Jesus 2020* and *Peace with God*, the required motion suggested to navigate the site is not immediately apparent, but it only takes a moment to realize that the primary entry points to the website are to be selected by self-diagnosing. No matter which disorder you select, the pages within the second layer of *Journey Answers* all



Figure 6, *Journey Answers*

maintain a nearly identical format: a video discussing how Jesus can help individuals dealing with emotional trials, a short block of text reiterating the message in the video, and a prayer (which is included in the video as well), followed by two now-familiar links: "Yes, I prayed the prayer" or "I still have questions." However, even within this familiar format, the user is encouraged to believe they are being given a highly-personalized experience with a variety of options for movement within the site and a great deal of freedom of choice. Take, for example, the fact that, with the video, the user has the choice to watch the video with audio and image, or they can listen to audio alone, or they can view a text transcription of the video. In addition, there is an option to watch an alternative "Easy English" video. However, no matter the version of the video or the content that is selected, the user is led ultimately to the same question: Did you pray? And, as with the *Jesus 2020* and *Peace with God* websites, to choose either answer results in being sent to a contact form to be put in touch with a mentor. As the diagram of the website's structure indicates, there is the appearance of many options, but this

variety is quickly reduced to two, both leading directly beyond the space of the website to an e-mail-based exchange with a mentor (Figure 7).

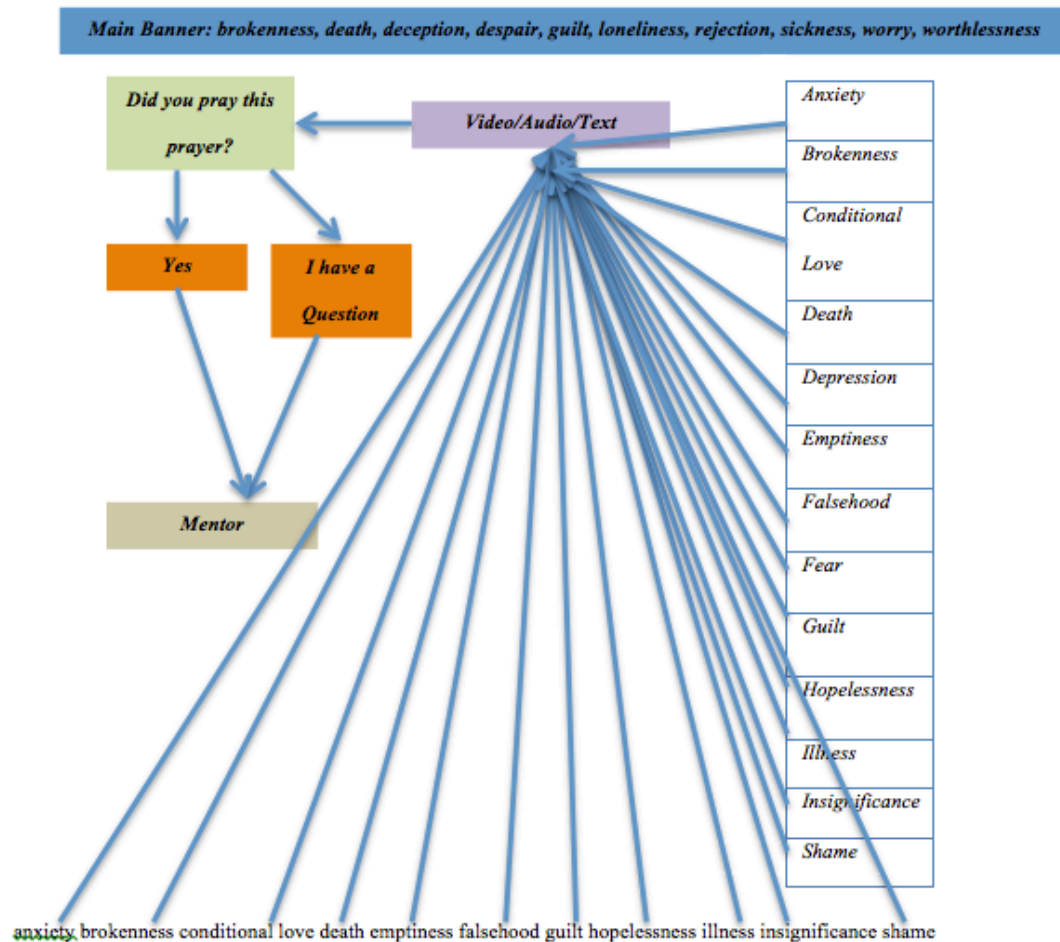


Figure 7, Architecture of *Journey Answers*

Spatial Feature #2: Navigation and the Rhetoric of Hyperlinks, Search, and Content Speed

In "The Web as a Rhetorical Place," Nicholas C. Burbules argues for an understanding of hyperlinks as "both semantic and navigational elements," "avenues of movement and occasions for meaning-making" on the Internet (75; 82). He points out that hyperlinks serve as literal roads presented to the user to travel down or ignore as they choose. The options available to a user to link to external or internal websites are direct

reflections of a designer's hand in attempting to manipulate the user's motion within the space. To provide a physical comparison, we might liken websites with no links, websites with internal links only, and websites with external links to being in a physical space with, respectively, no doors, connected rooms with no exit, and many exits. Obviously, at any moment, a web user has the option to close a window; however, within the space of that website, the available options for how to move within the space are limited exclusively to those avenues that the designer has provided. In addition, web designers have at their disposal rhetorical tools to encourage users towards preferring certain hyperlinks over others or towards choosing first one hyperlink and then another. Burbules calls these design features "issues of access, issues of implicit encouragement of movement along certain paths and discouragement of others, [and] issues of path markers that help users know where they are in the web space" (75).

Search engines are another component of what I am terming the "pathways" of a website: does the designer provide a search option? Are the search results limited to hits found only within the website, or is the search feature set up to access the greater Internet? The answers to these questions have direct implications for how a user's behavior is controlled as they dwell within the site. The absence of the ability to search the content of a website as well as the limitations in what search results appear decrease or expand the available options for movement at the user's disposal, creating what Burbules has called "strategies of channeling and directing navigation" effected as the search results "shape and constrain the range of possible meanings users can derive from their investigations" (76).

Finally, I will use the term "content speed" to assess how the type of content available to the user attempts to control the pace at which they move through the website. A website heavy in text-based content with few indicators of how this content might be scanned quickly—as in the case of boldfaced terms, section headings, or bullet points—encourages the reader to move slowly through the material. Websites with little text, easily-scannable text, or simple images encourage quicker movement. Websites with many menu options, links to external websites, video content, chat features, or discussion boards encourage slower movement by prioritizing exploration.

Jesus 2020: Navigation

Consistent with the limited number of internal pages, brief content, and heavily-directive geographic features of the *Jesus 2020* interface, the options for navigation between and within these pages are extremely restricted as well. Because of the limited content, there is no "search" feature. In addition, the fact that each page does not open in a new window when it is accessed suggests the similarity of the information. It is not essential that a user be able to view two or more internal pages at the same time because they all contain essentially the same information with the same design, the same goal, and the same options. If we were to liken the design of *Jesus 2020* to a physical space, it would certainly be a transitional space: a train station, a bus stop, or an airport, perhaps. The design highly encourages the reader to scan the text quickly, scroll down rapidly, and make a decision: Yes or No. The information on the website is brief and limits itself to the essentials of the Gospel only. The site is not intended to be a place to which the user is likely to return after they have made their decision. Indeed, the longest the user is

encouraged to dwell at any point on the website is exactly sixty seconds: the duration of the brief "New Life" video.

If, by chance, the user does select the "Global Media Outreach" link, which is placed at the very bottom of the page and listed in very small font, they will be taken to an unexpectedly engaging "About Us" page which arguably is as persuasive of the relevance of the Gospel as the material on *Jesus 2020*. What appears is a large (nearly full-screen size) map of the globe (Figure 8). At any given time of day or night, the map is lit up with five different tags pointing to various cities. The tags, which include an image of the country of origin's flag, indicate places all over the world where men and women are seeing the Gospel, accepting the Gospel, talking to a GMO counselor, or getting disciplined at one of GMO's evangelistic websites. In addition to the tags, there are smaller, teardrop-shaped pointers indicating various other places across the world where these interactions are taken place. The map is in near-constant motion, updating every few seconds. In the past sixty seconds of watching the map, for example, I have seen the following tags appear:

Right now a person from Jakarta, Indonesia saw the gospel at
m.truelove.godlife.com

Right now a person from Changchun, China got disciplined at godlife.com

Right now a person from La Paz, Bolivia saw the gospel at lapreguntagrande.com

Right now a person from Salvador, Brazil saw the gospel at
jesus2020portugues.com

Right now a person from Mali got disciplined at godlife.com

In addition to the map, even more incredibly, are the four counters that appear above it, which claim to be tracking how many people (1) saw the Gospel, (2) indicated decisions to convert, (3) talked to a mentor, and (4) got disciplined today. The figures are nearly always in the thousands. At 8PM, on Saturday night October 20th, 2012, for example, the

counters listed 411,650 people as having seen the Gospel; 54,636 people as having converted to Christianity; 5,186 people as having asked to speak with a mentor; and 21,110 people as having gotten discipled just in this one day. The transition from the very isolated, controlled space of *Jesus 2020* to this literally global perspective of the GMO homepage where suddenly the user is encouraged—it is nearly impossible not to—pause and watch the counters roll and the tags pop up across the map, is dramatic. Nevertheless, non-Christians who finds themselves navigating to this page off of the *Jesus 2020* page will discover what is perhaps an uncomfortable liminal space where they must either click back to get to the *Jesus 2020* page where they will again be asked to make a decision, or they can explore the GMO website, which is explicitly designed for Christians, ministries, and evangelists. The content centers on GMO's various online outreach efforts, describes their many websites, examines the impact they are having, and asks for donations. What has the potential to be a powerfully convincing tool for evangelism is lost because of its location in a space directed at a non-Christian audience. It is likely because of this that the link to the GMO page is so discreetly placed on the *Jesus 2020* website. It is more for copyright and publication purposes (it is located next to the date of publication: 2012) than to actually be explored by a visitor of *Jesus 2020*. For users to find the GMO homepage, they must move outside of the *Jesus 2020* designers' intents and work at cross purposes with the tight control they otherwise attempt to maintain on the page.



Figure 8, GMO Global Visitor Tracking Map

The second external page, however, represents the desired culmination of GMO's purpose with the *Jesus 2020* page: to arrive at GodLife means a user has selected "Yes" or "No" and been redirected to the GodLife website. It also means that they have filled out a contact form, providing GMO with a minimum of their email address and last name (there are additional options to add your first name; age; and specifics as to whether you are a new Christian, renewing your faith, or just have questions). There is also a contact box for you to write a message as well as the option to sign up for a weekly prayer letter. The establishment of contact changes the dynamic of how the space of *Jesus 2020* functions. Up to this point, the design of the space encouraged the user to behave in a certain way, but even the best design requires (1) that a user show up at the website and (2) that a user not try to resist the designs of the space. Gaining access to the user's email address, however, allows GMO to shift the dynamic of the online space from being a pull

medium to a push medium, in which at any moment they are able to send a message that will pop up in the user's inbox. Even if the user chooses to ignore the message or delete it, this change in relationship allows GMO to more actively pursue the user.

Interestingly, just as we can view the *Jesus 2020* website as a transitional space, designed to cause the user to make a quick decision, once the user has made this decision, the *GodLife* website to which they are directed works in more specific ways to get the user off of the Internet and into developing certain habits and involving themselves in certain activities in the physical world. The page within the *GodLife* website to which the user is taken is the Introductory page to a six-part, short video and text-based series designed to help the user grow as a young Christian and learn more about what it means to be a Christian. In a similar style to the *Peace with God* website, the numerical ordering of Parts within the series encourages the user to follow through them in chronological order. In addition, the left-hand alignment of the video and text encourage the user to quickly scroll down. Finally, the large size of the embedded video, which takes up most of the screen in each Part of the series, encourages the user to select it first. The videos are short lectures dealing with whatever the topic is for the lesson (“Begin your journey,” “Jesus has saved me,” “New Life from the Holy Spirit,” “Get direction from the Bible,” “The Church is Your Family,” “God Hears Your Prayers,” and “Help Someone Find God”). It is possible for the user to watch all of the videos and read all of the text in under thirty minutes. However, though the series is presented as educational and informative, and though a closer exploration of the *GodLife* website reveals it as a wealth of resources on Christianity with many articles, testimonies, and options to connect with social media communities on Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus, the lessons consistently push the

user to incorporate their behavior into their lives offline. This is done in four specific ways: Parts 1, 3, and 5 encourage the user to begin a regular home Bible study; Part 2 encourages the user to have an active prayer life; Part 4 encourages the user to find a real life church (*GodLife* even has a link to search for churches near the user's geographic location); and Part 6 encourages the user to find people in their daily lives who are not Christians and share the Gospel with them. These goals are effected structurally in two ways. The first is that, though the video takes up a large part of the screen, there is no image to click on as there would be on a typical YouTube video. An image would engage the user's interest in addition to giving them a clue about what they might be preparing to watch. By having the screen black, the only attraction of the video is its size. In addition, the text below the video is no less appealing. The majority of the text is in small black font, and the one or two lines that are enlarged and placed in boldface do not always aid with effective scanning. For example, in the lesson on evangelism, the section headings are: "Has someone ever helped you with something really important?"; "Have You Two Met?"; "How I Helped Someone Find God"; and "For Today." If the designer was really interested in aiding the user in effectively scanning, these headings might have more explicitly represented the subjects dealt with in each section; for example: "The Greatest Way to Help Someone is to Help Them Find God"; "It Doesn't Have To Be a Sermon"; and "Find Someone to Share the Gospel with Today" are easily scannable headings that accurately capture the meaning of the internal texts without requiring the user to read every word. As a result of the ambiguity of the content of both the video and the text, the designers encourage the reader to scroll down to the bright blue button at the bottom of the page which takes them to the next part of the series. Again, though the interface

design has changed and the options for searching, exploring, and interacting have opened up from the *Jesus 2020* website to the *GodLife* website, the users are again encouraged towards specific behaviors, this time behaviors that take place offline. If the user follows the natural trajectory along which GMO encourages its users to move, they will move quickly through the two websites and shift from virtual space to physical space.

Peace with God: Navigation

The aspect of navigation most worth noting in regards to *Peace with God* is the way in which the format of the site and the navigational options differ according to whether the user accesses the website on a desktop or on a mobile device. On both tablets and cell phones, the entire page is redesigned from the version that appears on a desktop. Instead of the vivid banner, the option to progress through the various steps via individual links, and the opportunities to watch either video or read text, the website is transformed into an entirely textual document. Even more limiting in navigational features than the *Jesus 2020* website, the mobile version of *Peace with God* simply lists the four steps, with each step highlighted in blue and followed up with short explanatory notes and Bible verses. The short list culminates in a sample prayer and the question "Did you pray this prayer?" with the options "Yes, I prayed this prayer" or "No, but I have a question," both of which take the user to the same contact form as provided on the desktop site. These are the only links on the entire page, and there is no option to switch from the mobile site to the full version.

Similar to the *Jesus 2020* website, *Peace with God* consists of almost entirely internal links, limiting the user to only the various Gospel presentations available on the

page. There are two exceptions, however, both located at the very bottom of the page beside the "About" and "Contact Us" links. These two external links connect the user to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) and the Jesus.net Facebook page. While the BGEA homepage functions similarly to the GMO homepage in that it is designed to describe the ministry's project and to raise money, the Jesus.net page offers interesting opportunities for connectivity and community which will be discussed in an examination of the Inhabitant features of this space. Besides these two links, however, the only way provided for the user to get beyond the space of the *Peace with God* website is to follow through with a "Yes" or "No" answer and provide contact information. Subsequently, regardless of the user's response, they are directed to the *Going Farther* website, designed for (similar to *GodLife*) answering questions about Christianity and helping new Christians know what to do next.

Going Farther's navigational features create an entirely different experience than the GodLife website. Whereas we saw that GodLife's options for navigation direct the user constantly to activities, places, and experiences beyond the scope of the website, causing me to identify the space as "transitional," the Going Farther website is what I will label an "educational space," a space with design features that encourage the user to dwell within the space and explore. This purpose is effected through design by providing on-site activities for the user to engage in and by creating a lack of hierarchy in content and navigation structure. In regards to the former point: each of the lessons in the four-part series of lessons for the new believer is divided into two parts: the lesson and "Your Response." In the "Your Response" section, the user is asked to reflect on and record their thoughts on a series of questions into a text box saved online. Unlike on the GodLife

website, all Scripture verses are provided, and the user is not required to leave the website to look up the information.

In addition, once the user has completed the four-part series, the website is designed to continually provide resources for users, serving as a long-term source of information, encouragement, and engagement. Though there are three main menu categories (“Basics of Christianity,” “Common Questions,” and “Life Issues”), within each of these menus there is no clear order of approach pressed on the user. The options under each menu are not alphabetized, nor is there any clear semantic connection between one and the next. Take, for example, the list of links that appear under the “Common Questions” menu: “What is God like?”; “Is Jesus God?”; “Is Jesus the only way to heaven?”; “Does God exist?”; “What is truth?”; and “Is the Bible true?” In this list, it would certainly make more logical sense to answer the question “Does God exist?” before asking “What is God like?”; however, because the designers did not place an emphasis on going through the links in a particular order, the user is put in the position of choosing what issues are most relevant to them in their own personal order of importance.

Journey Answers: Navigation

As with both the *Jesus 2020* and *Peace with God* websites, *Journey Answers* places a heavy emphasis on directing the user through increasingly limited navigational options towards either choosing to become a Christian, choosing to ask a question, or choosing to submit a prayer request. No matter which option is selected, however, the user is directed to two internal pages off of Network 211's ministry home page: “The Jesus Path” and the “Online Church.” This first follow-up page is designed for a broad

audience: though it is no longer a central focus of the website's design, opportunities to convert to Christianity appear occasionally throughout the page. However, as with Going Farther, "The Jesus Path" page could be described as educational for similar reasons: a wealth of resources and no strong design-based directives as to how to navigate these resources. Users are free to explore as they like through the various sections. The diversity of users is further catered to through sections targeted to "Kids" (including games, advice on growing up and homework, and links to music and stories), "Teens" (information on preparing for college, problems teenagers face, and basic apologetics), "College and Career" (with sections on surviving college, building a career, doing research, and self-improvement), "Singles" (resources on divorce, dating, single parenting, and being single as a senior citizen), "Family" (advice on educating children, managing money, and maintaining good health), "Men" (articles on fatherhood, careers, being a spiritual leader, and overcoming temptations like pornography), "Women" (similar articles on motherhood and careers), and "Seniors" (discussions on health, finances, and retirement). The website is clearly designed to be a place that users will return to over and over again as they progress through the various stages of life as well as a place where many helpful resources for Christians can be found. As will be discussed in the upcoming section on Inhabitants, Network 211 has even designed a social media community called Global Friend Link where, after creating a login name, users can discuss faith-related issues with other Christians.

Whereas *Jesus 2020* clearly presented itself as a temporary space designed with the sole purpose of evangelism and integration of new Christians into offline behaviors and interactions, and *Peace with God* encouraged continued online education by

providing online lessons and informational resources for new Christians, Network 211 takes the goal of keeping the new Christians engaged online to an even further extent through their "online church." On the main page of Network 211's ministry home page, they introduce the Global Christian Center as "an online church established to provide a time of worship and ministry every time you visit." Via video, audio, or text files, users are able to access sermons online or by podcast subscription. The goal of the "Global Christian Church" is that "wherever you live, our online spiritual resources are available 24 hours a day to help you as you seek." Though this online church is not designed as a three-dimension virtual world as are the online churches one might encounter on Second Life, it does represent an attempt on the part of the designers to make the site into a location which, like a church, users will return to. There are dozens of sermons available. The emphasis on encouraging users to become attached to the site is effected by the inclusion of sermon series in addition to individual sermons on various topics from theological issues like "The Spirit as Evidence of Salvation" to Christian living issues like "God Enables You to Serve" to ethical and practical issues like "The Issue of Circumcision." In contrast to the individual sermon, the sermon series, each part concluding with essentially a "To be continued" message encourage the viewer to continue to participate beyond the individual sermon.

Furthermore, in addition to the sermons produced by Network 211 which are available in the "online church" section of the website, there is also an entire section devoted to media, that provides links to five different Christian podcasts for the user to subscribe to, links to the websites of six different Christian musicians with previews of their songs and the option to purchase their work, and links to educational videos and

video series. Because of the non-hierarchical design of the website, the visual balance that is created between various menus and link options through the use of identical fonts, font sizes, and font colors, the user is able to find an area of interest to tap into, no matter what their interests. More so even than *Going Farther*, the design draws the user in by creating a sense that the experience is being personalized to their needs. The church is for "you," "wherever you live"; the life regions divide the users according to gender, age, relationship status, or career and provide appropriate resources and information for them. The lack of clear direction in terms of where to go or what to do first gives the user a sense of independence and freedom and, as they discover resources targeted specifically at them, creates the sense that the designers of this space understand them and their needs, ultimately encouraging them to stay longer and continue to engage with the material and the ministry.

Spatial Feature #3: Inhabitants and the Rhetoric of Relationship Design

Web 2.0 is characterized by the capacity for interactivity and social networking that it provides to Internet users. Central to an understanding of Web design as a controlling force over user behavior are issues of how web designers attempt to control who dwells in the space of their website: who enters, what voices are heard, and what voices are silenced. Scholars in online communities have made it a priority to argue for online communities as equally "real" as face-to-face communities. In "Cyberspace and Virtual Places," for example, Paul C. Adams explains the intensity of relationships forged on the Web, writing that the Internet is a space "defined by interaction" and that "People ostensibly come together much more completely in cyberspace than in real space. . . .transcending a lonely individuality and the tragic contradictions of sameness and

difference that are inherent in real communities" (164). Part of this conversation has also included a discussion of how web users become “embodied” in virtual spaces. Donna LeCourt, for example, has examined how technology problematizes our understanding of bodies in space, exploring how—in the context of student discussion groups—the absence of physical bodies impacts behavior and discourse. James E. Porter has also discussed how, even in the absence of a physical presence, individuals still manifest traits of “gender, race, sexual preference, social class, age, etc.” online in addition to creating behaviors that mirror physical behaviors (for example, the use of emoticons like smilies to imitate physical smiles) (“Recovering Delivery” 8). Porter additionally explores how bodies are represented in both static (as in the case of photos on websites) and dynamic (as in Second Life avatars) online and notes the importance for rhetorical scholarship of “understand[ing] the nature of the rhetorical dynamic in those [online] worlds; to develop principles of written production within those spaces;. . .and/or to understand the relationship between RL and VR (Real Life, Virtual Reality)” (9). In addition, scholars including Jeff Rice, Andrea Lunsford, and Heidi McKee have looked at how speaking (projected via audio versus visual texts) in virtual spaces is enacted and how this contributes to persuasion and identity-formation online.

As this scholarship suggests, a variety of work has been done on how individuals effect persuasion online. To take this a step further, in considering “Inhabitants” as a feature of web design, I am able to look more closely at how web ministries use the individuals who appear in multimedia texts, who serve as mentors, and who moderate conversation as a structural feature of persuasion designed to encourage visitors to convert. For example, as I will describe, many evangelistic websites promote exclusively one-on-one contact

between the user and a mentor who is able to be contacted via chat or email. This type of interactivity allows for an extreme amount of control in terms of what information might be shared and what type of feedback the user receives. It also establishes a clear hierarchy in which the mentor becomes the prime source of information and teacher, and the user is positioned as student. By contrast, evangelistic websites that have open discussion boards potentially are more inclusive of a variety of opinions, perspectives, and viewpoints. In addition, discussion boards may allow users to answer each other's questions or engage in discussion without the mediating hand of a designer. The extent to which dialogue is controlled and which perspectives are allowed to appear has implications for the ability of users to exist and behave in certain ways within the space.

Jesus 2020: Inhabitants

As we have seen, the geographic and navigational features of the *Jesus 2020* website are heavily restrictive. The user's experience on *Jesus 2020* is largely one of isolation. However, the "New Life Video" does attempt to create a scene of interpersonal interaction between the user and the man speaking on the video. The fact that the video begins playing the second the user clicks on the "New Life Video" tab without requiring the user to push "Play" creates the effect of being directly addressed. The man speaking is sitting on a couch, appears close to the camera, and is at face-level with the user, all creating the appearance of being in direct conversation. He speaks directly to the "you" who is watching, and the moment in which he prays, inviting the user to pray along with him, is an attempt to draw the user into a feeling of intimacy or closeness with this individual. There is no indication as to who this person might be: his name is not listed, and he does not state whether he is a pastor, a layman, or a missionary. However, as

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca have discussed in relation to the concept of "presence" (based on the concept of "vividness" in psychology), the more lifelike a visual is, the more believable and attractive it is (116). Thus, the presence of a moving, speaking human being amidst the otherwise text-based *Jesus 2020* website is bound to attract attention. The decision to leave this individual anonymous, however, is compelling in that the designers appear to work under the assumption that the individual's authority will be inferred either by extension from the quality of the website or that his identity does not matter in the face of the power of the message he sharing. The risk taken by the designers in giving this speaker no identification other than his physical appearance suggests their prioritization of the Gospel message as well as a concerted effort to foreground this message and limit any unnecessary attention that might be drawn to the messenger, perhaps out of the belief that the speaker's identity might detract from the message or out of the notion that the anonymity of the speaker will be relatable to a larger audience of anonymous viewers.

The limitation of a video, of course, is that it is a one-way dialogue. GMO pushes beyond this limitation, however, by offering to put all users in touch with "one of our trained volunteers" who "will respond to your email and help you grow as a Christian." On GMO's home page, the requirements for being a mentor are listed: a mentor must be at least eighteen years old and must be willing to check their email a minimum of two times per week. To be accepted, they must also share their "journey with Jesus," or testimony, with GMO representatives, and it is a requirement that they have been a Christian for at least two years. Two spiritual references are required to verify the potential mentor's claims about themselves and their faith. Once the applicant's

submission has been evaluated and approved, they must take part in a two-step training process before being allowed to interact with new Christians or *Jesus 2020* visitors with questions or prayer requests by themselves: first, they must study a variety of online training materials, and then they are placed in a "training community" where the "Training Community Leader" monitors their work for a four week period. Once the mentor has passed the training period, they "will be placed in a regular community, and [will] be a full-fledged Online Missionary."

As a result of this fairly-rigorous screening process and strict requirements for response standards, one might expect that a visitor to *Jesus 2020* who asked to be put in touch with a mentor might be guaranteed a fairly rapid turn-around. However, in an examination of how interactive the website is as well as how much community is truly a feature of the *Jesus 2020* environment, I sent a message asking to be put in touch with a mentor. After receiving an immediate form letter directing me to GodLife, explaining that a mentor would contact me soon, and expressly requesting that I not reply to the email, it was an additional week before I received a second form letter, this time signed by a mentor named Sonja. However, the message did not address the question I had asked (regarding the requirements for being a mentor) and simply redirected me again to resources on the GodLife page. Subsequent efforts to initiate contact with mentors yielded similar results. The implication of receiving repeated form letters suggests a possible contradiction between design and function of the website: the fact that the website design repeatedly and in a variety of ways directs the user to make a decision about becoming a Christian and subsequently requests contact information from any user who does so, implies that a relationship is desired, but form letters suggest the opposite,

that the individual is just one of many and that their needs and questions are of identical importance to those of countless numbers of other individuals on the site. Though from a design perspective it is fair to say that the space encourages relationship-building as an essential part of deciding to become a Christian and/or learning how to live as a new Christian, in reality, this priority proves questionable. Whereas the design of the space presents itself as a place where a believer can be encouraged and is free to communicate with other Christians, a user who tests this option may be let down. This contradiction between design and function is undoubtedly a result of the thousands of requests for contact that the website receives every day; however, it is a contradiction nevertheless and becomes a central determiner in evaluating the ethos of the website.

Peace with God: Inhabitants

A comparison between *Jesus 2020* and *Peace with God* reveals both how design can encourage interpersonal interaction and how the nature of the space can be changed according to how this interpersonal interaction is enacted. When a user arrives on the *Peace with God* website, the second their cursor crosses over the screen, a bright orange conversation bubble appears in the bottom right corner. Inside the large orange bubble, there are two smaller conversations bubbles: the top one says "Click here," and the bottom says "to chat" (Figure 9). This aspect of the design is significant for two reasons: the first is that the manner in which the option to chat appears the second the user expresses interest in the site (via moving their mouse on the page) creates the effect that there is someone aware of the user's presence in the space and is waiting if the user has any questions. This experience can be likened to the way in which we might walk into a clothing store and find ourselves immediately approached by an employee who tells us

about any sales, helps us shop, or even just says that if we have any questions to please ask. The second reason this design feature is important is that the actual way in which the icon to chat is designed suggests that conversation is welcomed: the designers could have chosen any shape to pop up; however, the trio of conversation bubbles all connected together visually enacts a dialogue, and the way the two internal conversation bubbles are fitted together—one upright, one inverted so that they link together side by side—suggests a relationship that is comfortable, intimate, and one-on-one.



Figure 9, *Peace with God* Chat Feature

If the user missed or ignored the first option to chat, a few seconds later, a larger blue conversation bubble—designed in the same manner with the two internal bubbles—appears in the upper left-hand corner of the page. In this case, the top bubble says "Need to talk?" and the second says "We are here." The location within the F-shaped pattern in which the user is likely reading the page and the large size of the bubble make it unlikely that the user could miss at least seeing the opportunity. In addition, the phrasing of the chat invitation on its second appearance is already beginning to initiate and enact a conversation: the user is directly addressed in a colloquial manner (the bubble does not say: "Do you need to talk?" but just, as a friend might say, "Need to talk?"), and it is implied that there is a support system ready and waiting whenever the user is ready (the second bubble says "We are here" rather than "I am here" or "There is someone here").

Not only do two opportunities to chat appear within seconds of the user's arrival, but as the user scrolls down the page, the chat bubbles follow them. Furthermore, as the user navigates through the various internal pages, the smaller orange chat bubble appears in the bottom left of every page. The chat option is constantly available. In addition to the opportunity to be put in email contact with a mentor that is provided if the user decides to respond to the option to pray the prayer and select "yes" or "no," there is the opportunity for immediate, live contact. As with the *Jesus 2020* website, I tested whether the design would match the function of the chat box. Within exactly two seconds of clicking on the orange chat bubble (there is a timer that appears to keep track of how long you have waited), I received a reply from a mentor named "Barry." I asked him about the requirements for becoming a mentor, and again, within seconds, he responded to me with two different links to provide me with more information. In this case, the design and function are compatible: the design suggests that a mentor is not just available but is ready and willing to answer questions and provide help, and this promise plays out in function as well.

In an examination of what type of individuals are allowed to serve as mentors, the website Barry directed me to listed a series of fairly-rigorous requirements. To be considered for a position as a mentor, an individual must meet the following criteria:

- A follower of Jesus Christ and believer in the power of the Gospel.
- At least 18 years of age.
- A citizen of the United States.
- Have access to a dependable internet connection and the ability to comfortably navigate online computer programs.
- Agree to serve at least 2 hours a week. Your two hours can be completed in one sitting or broken up throughout the week.
- A person of emotional and spiritual maturity.
- Free of any medication and alcohol that would impair your thinking or activity.

- Ability to keep your conversations and personal contact information confidential.
- Be prepared to share God's hope with others.

These criteria are evaluated via a phone interview with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's application team; in addition, the applicant must provide references, purchase a \$30 background check, and complete a training program.

The individuals involved in mentoring users online are not the only figures within the space, however. The four videos included as part of each of the "4 Steps to Peace" include a variety of clips of sermons, testimonies, and images of individuals that attempt to create a sense of community and a feeling of welcome within the space. Over the course of the four videos, each no more than five minutes long, a viewer encounters clips from sermons given by Billy and Franklin Graham in videos #1 and #4, but the majority of the individuals who appear throughout these texts are not readily-recognizable faces. The people who appear represent incredible diversity: there are Hispanic, African, Asian, Caucasian, and Indian men, women, teenagers, and children; fathers, mothers, businessmen and women, farmers, musicians, poets, and visual artists are represented; there are elderly men, women, and couples. The music that serves as background to the videos ranges from (Christian) rock to hip hop. In the third video, which centers on testimonies, the viewer follows the stories of a teenage Hispanic boy who was addicted to drugs, a young woman who was suicidal, a teenage girl who graphically describes her history of cutting (mentioning even the pages in her journal which she "dribbled in blood"), and an African American woman who struggled with depression. Each explains how they came to be Christians and how their lives were changed. The one exception to the almost universal anonymity is the appearance in Video #3 of Brian "Head" Welch,

former guitarist for and co-founder of the new metal band Korn, who might be recognizable to some viewers. His tattooed body, long black hair and eye makeup might (if one were to anticipate the type of individual whose testimony would appear on an evangelistic site) appear shocking; however, in the context of the other startling testimonies of drug abuse, depression, and self-mutilation, it is not surprising. The designers of the videos have made a clear effort to address as broad an audience as possible and to suggest that no matter an individual's past or present troubles, no matter their race, gender, or age, the Gospel applies to them. In fact, the stereotypical white Anglo Saxon Protestant male that one might expect to encounter in this space is the minority.

Journey Answers: Inhabitants

In her essay "Rhetoric on the Web," Barbara Warnick writes that as communication shifted from written forms to web texts, fundamental elements of how rhetoric is effected were altered (139). One of these changes was how ethos is evaluated. Whereas previously readers were able to evaluate the credibility of an author by their publications, information on the book jacket, or an Internet search for their credentials, online it is possible for anyone from amateurs to experts to publish websites. Many times, it is not even possible to identify the author of the website. Therefore, Warnick notes, web users have adapted to establish credibility through other means, one of which is the usability of design. Nevertheless, the designer's choice to include people—via images, video, chat rooms, discussion boards, etc.—reflects on the type of space they are trying to create. Just as a business carefully selects its employees to reflect the type of business they are attempting to maintain, the individuals or images of individuals incorporated into

online spaces become key elements of the design as well. On *Journey Answers*, the cycling banner scrolls through a series of images of a diversity of individuals—men, women, young, old, multiracial—all of who appear distressed, depressed, or sad. In some pictures, the figures are looking out despairingly; in others, they are crying or holding their heads in their hands or walking in solitude. These images juxtaposed with the multiple series of lists of trials one might be struggling with suggest (1) that the target audience is individuals who can relate to one or a variety of these trials and (2) that there are no limits as to who might benefit from this information. Age, race, and gender appear not to be factors.

Once the user enters into the second level of pages on the website, they will find, however, that the images of diversity have disappeared. In their place is a series of videos centered on presenting the Gospel as a means of dealing with various trials. Each video is designed to discuss a different problem; however, each video is designed almost identically and centers entirely on the narration of a middle-aged, white man with a receding hairline. The man is not identified by name. The man shares few personal details in the videos. However, he is the central feature of the thirteen different videos. Other than the fact that Network 211 has chosen him as a representative of their message on the website, and other than aspects of his appearance that may or may not trigger feelings of reliability in the video, the way this man is given center stage in every single video not only complicates the appearance of caring about a diverse audience conveyed on the main page, but for the viewer to trust this man, they must resist the natural manner of establishing ethos on the Internet and resort to a print-style of evaluation based on focusing on a single source of authorship.

Despite this initial complexity in terms of what kind of authority is being established (whether it is that of the average, nameless, everyman individual of the main page, who suggests that all are welcome, anyone might participate, and each voice is welcome, or that of the white, middle-aged preacher who is also nameless but who dominates the presentation of content on internal pages), the availability of an entire social media networking website (Global Friend Link) to which all individuals who either become Christians or are in touch with a mentor are invited offers a further interesting detail. Of the three sites surveyed, this is the only site that has encouraged user interaction beyond answering a question online and/or being put in touch with a mentor. This social media site, designed with Facebook as a model (you find your "friends" and post "status updates") goes beyond the one-on-one private dialogues between users and mentors to make conversations about faith public. Currently, there are over 1,800 members on the website (the majority of whom claim to be Christian; many of whom are also pastors). As with Facebook, you can follow your friends on your newsfeed, place friend requests for new friends, and share photos or links. The interaction on the site, however, is limited to spiritually-oriented dialogue and interaction.

Website Design as Space: Implications

An examination of three evangelistic websites as rhetorical spaces reveals why this concept proves applicable to the Internet. As in physical space, these websites are designed in such a way as to limit our options for navigation, direct us towards certain types of activity, lead us to make decisions within a limited range of options, and create a carefully-designed experience limiting who visitors are able to interact with, what type of encounters they might have, and how they can respond to the site. In mapping out both

how the concept of rhetorical space might be theorized and applied to digital texts and in supplying the case study of evangelistic websites to depict how this theory might be exemplified in practice, I have effectively encouraged scholars to reevaluate our understanding and definitions of space as well as to think more critically about the rhetorical features of digital space from an architectural or design-based perspective. Indeed, as Margaret Wertheim writes in *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, scholars should at any moment of critical technological transformation be prepared to reconsider our understanding of space, a claim that Sally Munt followed up in 2001 with her claim that "Science and technology have had a profound effect on the way humans perceive space," encouraging us to "think, for example, of the way information technologies such as the telephone have reduced our former perception of the world as inaccessible, unknowable and exotic to a sensibility of nearness, friendliness, fellowship and instantaneity. . .[or] how the invention of the microchip opened up the 'inner worlds' of the body" (Whittaker *The Cyberspace Handbook* 5). A conception of space that is limited to the purely physical, three-dimensional, sensory realm of our everyday lives ultimately leads us to ignore the very similar experience of navigating the world that we have found in digital spaces like that of the Internet.

Examining evangelistic websites is particularly fruitful for revealing how websites work as rhetorical spaces because, as we have seen, their intent—to drive the user towards making what is universally formatted as a "yes" or "no" answer as to whether or not they would like to become a Christian—is so explicit. The value of looking at websites as rhetorical spaces, which will be addressed in more detail in subsequent chapters, is to become more aware (and to make our students more aware) of

how the very nature of the Internet, though giving the appearance of freedom, is actually constructed in such a way as to carefully manipulate our behavior. As David S. Kaufer and Brian S. Butler have explored in *Rhetoric and the Arts of Design*, the value of understanding rhetoric as a design practice or design art allows us to complicate our definition of the term to include an awareness of rhetoric as “the strategic organization and communication of a speaker’s version of events within a situation in order to affect the here and now of audience decision making” (12). As exemplified by the evangelistic websites I have explored, it is indeed possible for decision making to be a function of a carefully-designed structural architecture. In addition, as we have seen, the options for navigation that do not appear on a website are as significant as those which do. When, as in the *Jesus 2020* website, we are repeatedly directed towards one question with only two options for response, we risk forgetting that there may be alternative responses or that we do not necessarily need to make the decision at the moment. As will be examined in the next chapter on the ideology of evangelism on the Web, it is this exact ability of the Internet to cause users to feel as if their choices are limited that makes the Internet so ideal for evangelism, a worldview based on dividing populations into "saved" and "unsaved."

A second important outcome of examining websites in terms of rhetorical space is the contribution such a perspective makes to our understanding of how function and form interrelate in digital texts. To read our contemporary textbooks and handbooks on how to design and write for the web, however, this conversation over form and function might very well seem over and done with. In these texts, readers are taught that form and function are clearly distinct entities, operating predominantly in independence of one

another. In Mark Pearrow's *Web Site Usability* text, for example, he states that website design is a "science" as clear cut as the scientific method and that a distinct dichotomy should be held in place between "form" and "function," "form" being "how pleasing the site looks" and "function" being "how serviceable it is for the purpose for which it was designed" (3). The premise on which Pearrow's design principles are based is that regardless of content or message, good principles of usability and design are consistently applicable. In a similar manner, popular design texts *Envisioning Information* by Edward R. Tufte and *The Non-Designer's Design Book* by Robin Williams make a similar claim. Tufte, an information designer, argues that "principles of information design are universal—like mathematics—and are not tied to unique features of a particular language or culture"; nor, by extension, are they to be altered according to the "content" or "message" a designer hopes to convey (10). Williams as well bases her principles on a set of four key design principles—contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity—which she argues are of universal applicability regardless of the message to be conveyed (10). And yet, despite the guidance of our best textbooks on website design and usability, the application of the concept of rhetorical space to digital texts has taught us that what might be isolated as the message or content of a website (the presentation of the gospel in our case) is in fact enacted in the very structuring of the material and the design of the space created by the page. We have seen as well how the structuring of information, the layout of the site, the types of community that are encouraged or rejected, and the availability of various options (or lack of options) for navigation are essential components of the message presentation and that the particular strategies through which these elements are enacted differ from the website of one ministry to another. Such an observation should

cause both rhetoricians and scholars of digital media to challenge the form-function binary more seriously.

This is not to say that this binary did not develop and solidify without understandable cause. As rhetorician Susan H. Delagrange has observed in *Technologies of Wonder: Rhetorical Practices in a Digital World*, it is undoubtedly because our web design guides have taught us to make "form" so transparent that scholars have had so much difficulty taking an academic and critical approach to the role the digital medium plays in rhetoric online (29). The examination of evangelistic websites that I have presented in this chapter serves to make the role of design "less" transparent in hopes of better understanding its rhetorical features. As I have argued, these features are perhaps best understood in terms of rhetorical space, a theoretical concept that allows us to understand how website design plays a key role in manipulating and controlling user behavior, essential parts of its persuasive power. This understanding should impact not only our scholarship but our pedagogy as well. When, at the 2011 IEEE International Professional Communication Conference, Karl Stolley presented on "Teaching Sustainable Methods of Web Design and Development," he offered an example of what such an application might look like. Arguing for "teaching web design at the source level," he stated that the ignorance most web writers have in regards to why one might choose to communicate with Microsoft Word versus Adobe InDesign or Adobe PDFs versus web pages is troubling. This trouble, as I have noted, is a direct result of the fact that "These formats [are] made indistinguishable because...they feature so many of the same interface elements. And in each of those programs, new blank documents appear identical to one another: empty white expanses awaiting the entry of text." In a similar

manner, Johnson-Eilola describes how if “we are not producing ‘original texts’ but [only] rearranging and constructing” pre-crafted or old texts online, we miss the opportunities to fully understand and explore how the Internet functions persuasively in terms of design (134). Teaching our students about both the ways in which interfaces may function to control user behavior online as well as how to create and manipulate interfaces in creating their own texts allows us to push their understanding of how persuasion is effected online to a deeper level.

Though clearly the sensory experience of navigating a website differs dramatically from the sensory experience of navigating physical spaces (only our sight, sense of touch, and occasionally hearing are engaged online as we scan the monitor; navigate with a mouse, by sliding our finger across a screen, or using a keyboard; or listen to audio or audio-visual recordings), the rhetorical impact is strikingly similar. When, for example, we walk into a lecture hall and sit down to listen to a speaker, there are design features that attempt to control us: we walk down the pathway created by a gap placed between tightly-packed rows of chairs rather than climbing over the chairs; we enter through the main door that is already propped open, perhaps with a "Welcome" sign, instead of coming through the emergency exits or a back door; we sit in the seats facing the speaker rather than positioning ourselves backwards in the seats to face the back wall. Both our familiarity with how to use space (how to sit in a chair) and the way the space teaches us to behave (choose the open door rather than the locked ones; go up the aisle that has been created rather than around the side or over the chairs). In a similar manner, websites teach us how to behave in the space (click here first; scroll down now; this word is available as a hyperlink; this one is not), and move us towards the types of

behavior and judgments desired by the designers (you have four menus, three sub-menus, two choices). In the example of the lecture hall, the implications may seem innocuous: what harm could there be in going in this door rather than that or up this aisle instead of creating our own or in sitting in the chair comfortably? And yet, it is an instance of our being controlled that often passes by unnoticed. In the context of looking at websites as rhetorical spaces, the impact of being more aware becomes clear because we can look at the end goal (conversion) from the starting point and see how the available features, the layout of the page, and the hierarchies of hyperlinks and options for navigation direct us towards this point. Obviously, at any given moment, the user is free to close the browser window or go to another site entirely; however, as indicated by GMO's homepage, literally hundreds of thousands of users are not making this decision. These websites are effective, and one of the ways in which they function is through careful design that directs the user towards making simple choices, one at a time. The senses of freedom we have on the Internet—to explore, search for, and select whatever we want at any time that we want from any place we desire—is, in light of an examination of how design controls us, strikingly more complex than it at first appears.

Chapter Four

Ideology Online and the Unchanging Gospel

The way in which the invisible features of website design are employed as a means of directing and controlling user behavior is, as I have argued, a key component in understanding both the strategy of evangelistic rhetoric online and also the rhetorical potential of websites more broadly. However, beyond the effort to lead an individual to behave in a certain way and to make certain navigational choices online, the issue of spiritual conversion—a shifting in one's worldview, belief system, and ideology—is fundamental to the evangelistic project. Two aspects of how this process is effected by evangelists in the online environment are worth exploring: Using the case studies of *Jesus 2020*, *Peace with God*, and *Journey Answers*, I will argue for and explore a variety of ways in which the Internet is employed to effect religious conversion and also for how the web medium impacts the evangelical project, ultimately contending that the nature of Web 2.0 has resulted in a shift both in theological emphases and rhetorical strategies by digital ministries.

This argument will be positioned as a contribution to the currently-flourishing discourse surrounding the form/content duality in digital texts and will take its approach to handling the evangelical websites from this discourse as well. In Anne Wysocki's essay "Impossibly Distinct: On Form/Content and Word/Image in Two Pieces of Computer-Based Interactive Multimedia," for example, she argues against an approach to rhetorical analysis in which "content is separate from form, writing from visual, information from design, word from image," and provides the example of two interactive CDs as prime cases of why these distinctions do a disservice to the experiences actually

created for the user within these texts (2). The two CDs she looks at are both designed as digital tours of art museums, and Wysocki argues that if we are to look at the content they present (information about the collections) separate from the form in which this content is presented (a digital tour), it might seem that the approaches are very similar and have a near-identical impact on the user. However, this is not the case, and it is only when the rhetorician does not attempt to separate these elements that the full experience and the impact of the CDs can be captured. In the Barnes CD, for example, the art is presented "statically" and "from straight-ahead" via a click-through menu (10). The Barnes CD "asks [us] to see its pieces inseparably from the massive whole of the collection" and thus suggests that "what is important is the art, the paintings by themselves, as collected things" (16). The rhetorical move Wysocki makes in this analysis is from observation of how form and content function simultaneously (the art [content] is presented in click-through menus [form] to an exploration of the impact this design has on the user [asking them to focus on one piece of art at a time] to a statement of the ideology this design represents [a prioritization of art pieces as material and commercial entities]). In a similar manner, in the second CD from the Fondation Maeght museum, Wysocki first describes how within the tour, the user is given "multiple and moving perspectives" as in a "virtual stroll through art" causing the user to "attempt [themselves] to construct the whole—and to construct even the individual pieces that make the whole—out of multiple, small, incomplete observations of different pieces of art," suggesting that the designers place equal weight on the art and the experiencing of art (11). Again we see the same structure of analysis: a description of the design ("virtual stroll"), an assessment of how this design causes the user to behave (they are free to navigate and shape their own course), and what

this design represents about the designer's ideology (they prize the user's experience of art and value multiple approaches to artwork). Wysocki's argument is that, in fact, in digital texts it may not even be possible to fully draw a line between design and information because the design is so central to knowledge presentation. Indeed, she states that "if we understand content as words and understand visual presentation as theme or emotion or useful only as pointers to or supporting information—then we remain unable to see or explain what is asserted" both in the CDs she discusses and in similar digital texts (4). Nevertheless, as she points out, textbooks on digital design continue to teach composition principles such as "Determine what content you need and how you will obtain it. Determine a visual theme for your site based on the content": a set of steps grounded in the assumption that form is derived from content and that content is separate from form (1). While such an assumption may have functioned in valuable ways in the past for print texts, it is certainly no longer useful as applied to digital media. Indeed, Wysocki goes on to ponder whether digital texts might not even encourage us to redefine what we mean by "word": is the "word" really a conveyor of pure content if its font, size, and color might be said to make an argument too? (24).

I would like to take this argument even a step further and suggest that we should expand our understanding of form to include the design components of space that I describe in the previous chapter. It is one thing to suggest that design elements such as color, image-selection, and font style make an argument as Wysocki does, but the more fundamental and often invisible design features of hyperlinks, navigational options, and designed inhabitants of the space should be included as well. While no rhetoricians have examined websites as rhetorical spaces in terms of this aspect of design, Kristin L. Arola,

Anne Wysocki, and J.I. Jasken have all argued that design and ideology are intertwined. Wysocki and Jasken have each encouraged scholars in digital rhetoric to look more closely at design features of the Internet and especially to look at them in terms of the ideology they represent. In Wysocki and Jasken's article "What Should Be An Unforgettable Face," they discuss computer interfaces, pointing out that the real challenge for rhetoricians is the fact that computer interfaces are designed to be invisible; thus, if they are working well and are well-designed, they will not only be hard to detect, but, unless we are consciously making an effort to analyze them, we might forget they are relevant entirely. In Simon Penny's 1995 article on artistic designing in dataspace, he further explains that the quality of programs depend on which program's interface is more "intuitive" or "transparent," stating that "'transparent' means that the computer interface fades into the experiential background" (55). In a similar manner, interface designer Alan Cooper writes that "Good user interfaces are invisible" (135). The implication of well-designed pages then, according to these terms, is that users should not notice the very structures that have been designed to encourage them to behave in various ways. This is one of the reasons why I have suggested that considering websites as rhetorical spaces is so significant: to draw attention to the fundamental framework at work in their design. As Wysocki and Jasken write, "computer interfaces encourage us to see forgetfully" (30). This does not mean, however, that they are not loaded with the same assumptions, values, and ideologies that physical space designs are; indeed, just as architectural features are rhetorical, "interfaces are thoroughly rhetorical" because they "are about the relations we construct with each other—how we perceive and try to shape each other—through the artifacts we make for each other" (33).

For a period of time in the 1990s, the subject of the rhetorical impact of computer interfaces was more actively debated, predominantly in the pages of the journal *Computer and Composition*. Wysocki and Jasken note that this debate can largely be understood in terms of concerns related to the effects of "what is often dismissed simply as 'form' instead of 'content,'" the form being the interface which has been frequently considered to be less relevant to persuasion than content (32). Nevertheless, there were some champions for considering the ideology that underlies interface. In 1990, for example, Paul LeBlanc explained how the design of computer programs is "not neutral" (8). In an examination of two Computer-Assisted Composition programs, he argued that an examination of interface design reveals that each program "operates with an implicit ideology, one that values or devalues certain writing behaviors and ultimately demands adherence to a given view of the writing process," a fact that matters especially in the classroom, where we must be cautious that the programs we use "do not possess an ideological foundation we would prefer to keep out of our classrooms" (8, 11). In a similar claim, Todd Taylor wrote in an article on evaluating software that:

Particularly problematic are software designs that force the user to follow a prescribed sequence. Such sequences range from the merely aggravating (title screens with sound or animations that cannot be interrupted) to the genuinely misguided (tutorials that lock the user into a linear series of screens). Not only do these passive presentations make relatively poor use of the computer's capabilities but they also imply that the user is not very bright and has nothing better to do (46).

The danger, of course, is that if the user does not realize that they are being construed as "not very bright," they risk acting accordingly and taking on these assumptions about themselves uncritically. The ideology of the designers is embedded in the design; the invisibility of the design renders this ideology invisible; and the uncritical user resultantly

is at risk for taking on the ideological assumptions of the designer. For example, Cynthia Selfe and Richard Selfe, in a description of the ideology conveyed in the design of computer screens, for example, talk about the embedded "grand narratives which foreground a value of middle-class, corporate culture; capitalism and the commodification of information; Standard English; and rationalistic ways of representing knowledge" (494). Sean Cubitt also, in an examination of Apple and Windows interfaces, argues that they convey "a culturally specific and. . .interculturally normative visual vocabulary as powerful as colonial English" (2). If we are to look at content to the exclusion of form, if we conceptualize form as distinct from content, and if we only take into consideration the most explicit features of form, we miss understanding how ideology functions in digital spaces. In Wysocki and Jasken's formulation, "we miss seeing how we are rhetorically called into so many of the behaviors and practices we have (and perhaps might not want)" (44).

This issue becomes all the more pressing in light of what Kristin Arola describes as the "the rise of the template" and "the fall of design" (4). Arola observes that, as a direct effect of Web 2.0, users do not design their own pages for the web. Instead, they depend on pre-designed templates to express themselves and establish a presence online. As a sign of this shift, Arola notes the decrease in popularity of formerly-flourishing web hosting services like Angelfire and Geocities in preference for using social network sites as one's homepage (Arola mentions Facebook and MySpace, but Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, or Pinterest could apply equally well), arguing that for all intents and purposes, and particularly in the cases of our students, "the homepage has gone the way of the landline" (5). Arola finds that the rise in the establishment of online presences by

the Net Generation combined with the decline in knowledge of how to design a web page place individuals using templates in the position of adopting the pre-established designs of others and, along with them, the values, assumptions, and ideology built into these designs. Arola explains the process of decision making that an individual designing a website from scratch must go through, noting that when one designs one's own web page, form and content work in sync, and choices made take into consideration both factors as one: in her own experience, as she learned XHTML and CSS, she "was learning how to control both the form and the content. In spite of being coded in separate files, the form and content found their way together again, and I made my own rhetorical choices as to how this melding would appear" (6). By contrast, Web 2.0 renders knowledge of XHTML and CSS unnecessary for the purposes of many users. The trade-off of what Arola terms "the onslaught and impact of the web-as-platform" is that "the only things most users have control over is the content—content in this case being the words, photos, hyperlinks, videos, and sounds" (6). Arola finds this "loss of design agency" problematic for two reasons:

First, by not producing our own online designs, we have little control over a large part of our representation. Even when we can choose a template, something sites like Blogger and Bebo encourage, we are not producing the designs ourselves. Having a choice of design is clearly more empowering than having no choice, yet users remain limited to the predetermined options. Because of the form/content split and the ways in which CSS and XHTML function alongside the databases underlying most Web 2.0 sites, the overall design layout tends to remain the same; the colors and fonts tend to be the only elements that change. Second, composing texts, more specifically making choices about the composition of a page or screen, helps individuals think through the ways in which design functions to make meaning and produce selves. . .[causing concern] that the loss of design production in Web 2.0 might lead to less critical consciousness and not only about the meaning design conveys but also the ways in which that meaning is enmeshed with the world around us (7-8).

In a comparison of Facebook and MySpace interfaces, Arola demonstrates how design driven by template creates meaning. Though there are features within both interfaces over which the user has control, the template itself cannot be altered. For example, on Facebook, a user has control over what their profile picture looks like, what posts they make, and what groups they join, but they have no control over the basic layout of their profile or the basic font in their posts, interface features which Arola takes to mean that Facebook is encouraging its users to define themselves not "through a tightly controlled representation" (because everyone's basic representation is identical on Facebook), but to shape identities through the manner in which users interact with each others: On Facebook, "You are what you post and what others post about you" (9). MySpace, by contrast, allows somewhat more freedom to determine what one's profile looks like. Users can, for example, select between a variety of templates; thus, one can express one's personality through template expression (whimsical, romantic, fun, dark, playful, etc.). As a result, Arola argues that on MySpace, the individual is seen as "autonomous," and the individual self is promoted as a priority whereas the relationship between the user and others "though important, lies below the fold" (12).

The analysis of webtexts in terms of ideology is no new business for rhetoricians. In "Fleeting Images: Women Visually Writing the Web," for example, Gail E. Hawisher and Patricia A. Sullivan examine the differences between representations of women on the Internet when they are depicted by others versus when they represent themselves. They discovered that in both commercial and institutional websites (Victoria's Secret and university homepages are used as case studies), women are homogenized: on the Victoria's Secret website, they argue that women are universally "white, impeccably

groomed, and perfectly formed" and that "The Victoria's Secret webmaster seeks to be the master sculptor of the fantasy version of a desirable woman"; in a similar manner, on university websites, women professors, administrators, and staff appear as talking heads "with a smiling picture, scholarly areas of interest, contact information. . .homogeneous and normalized images" (279). It is only on the personal home pages of women, designed exclusively by the women themselves, that individual personalities are expressed: they take advantage of the freedom to express themselves as individuals "taking risks, pushing boundaries, and proclaiming themselves to be net chicks. . .They doctor photos, use cartoons, animate quirky representations of themselves, and in general play with the visual. . .In displaying their ears, calves, and tattoos, they celebrate their own writings of their bodies" (287). The implication of Hawisher and Sullivan's study is to challenge the assumption that the Internet is—as has been promoted in the press and in academic journals—a space that "is reputed to blind us to appearance and other markers of status which are readily apparent in face-to-face encounters" (269). In fact, many of the same stereotypes and representations of women have been translated directly from other media to the Internet, and Hawisher and Sullivan hope that by calling attention to how ideology is at work online, they might encourage women to take responsibility for and control of the ways in which they are represented on the Internet.

In a similar fashion, in his article "Photographs and the Presentation of Self through Online Dating," Lee Humphreys argues that the identities men and women create for themselves on online dating websites represent an ideology of "exchange" in which individuals use the personal ad format to "advertise their own desired commodity while also articul[at]ing those commodities they would like to exchange it for" (41).

Humphreys observes that what makes online dating (and, indeed, the majority of our online self-representations) unique is the way in which individuals are able to present themselves to each other outside of context (historical, temporal, or physical), suggesting that "time and space are ceding their primacy as organizers of our experience" (39). In a survey of a variety of both male and female member profiles, Humphreys noted that women tended to look directly into the camera, smile, and use images that highlighted their bodies more often than men. By contrast, men were more likely to post photos of themselves doing activities. Humphreys takes these results as confirmation that women on dating sites tend to work under the assumption that their looks are of primary importance to a potential match whereas men work under the assumption that attributes of skill, prowess, and achievement are of primary importance. In addition, the image-based representations of self seemed to be given priority over any text-based descriptions, an emphasis promoted even by the dating website itself which provided tips on how to promote yourself through your images, even offering glamour shot services with professional photo services and digital editing (including teeth whitening and wrinkle erasure). The underlying ideology Humphreys extracts is not only that one's physical image is of primary importance to online dating but that the "truth" of these images is not valued as highly as the ability of the images to provide an immediate attraction and connection.

Other scholars in rhetoric have looked at a variety of different ways in which ideology is represented online from political websites to advertising campaigns to digital news images; however, as exemplified by the two examples I have provided, these ideological critiques tend to focus on content to the exclusion of form: what poses, colors,

people, and attire are used in photos, for example. These "content" elements of a rhetorical analysis are certainly essential; however, as Selfe, Wysocki, and Jasken have argued, they are only one piece of a more complete understanding of how rhetoric works and ideologies are forwarded online, an understanding that seamlessly incorporates form into the equation, considering the ways in which form and content work together to create persuasion. In this chapter, I will build off my work in the previous chapter on how design functions in the evangelistic websites *Jesus 2020*, *Peace with God*, and *Journey Answers*. Using this framework as a starting point, I will consider how the spatial features of design combine with the content of these websites to present a more complete picture of how these websites work to both encourage users to convert and simultaneously shape the nature this conversion takes and the behaviors and beliefs with which it is associated. This will involve an analysis of not only the websites themselves but also an analysis of the statements of faith supplied by the designers and, where available, an assessment of conversion statements and testimony as a method of evaluating how the adoption of certain manners of speaking play a role in conversion.

Jesus 2020

According to Global Media Outreach's homepage, the GMO ministry is a 501 (c)3 non-profit ministry with a three-part vision—(1) "giving everyone on earth multiple opportunities to know Jesus," (2) "seeing hundreds of millions receive Him and building them in the faith," and (3) "connecting them to the Christian community"—and a singular mission: "conducting relationship building, highly personal ministry with people from all countries through thousands of GMO trained online missionaries" ("About Global Media Outreach"). Their statement of faith provides more detail about the ideological

foundation of this mission. Though evangelicals tend to share a common theology on many key points, the diversity of the evangelical movement and its non-denominational status makes the examination of each ministry's Statement of Faith worthwhile. GMO's Statement of Faith reads as follows:

- The sole basis of our beliefs is the Bible, God's infallible written Word, the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. We believe that it was uniquely, verbally and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit and that it was written without error (inerrant) in the original manuscripts. It is the supreme and final authority in all matters on which it speaks.
- We accept those areas of doctrinal teaching on which, historically, there has been general agreement among all true Christians. Because of the specialized calling of our movement, we desire to allow for freedom of conviction on other doctrinal matters, provided that any interpretation is based upon the Bible alone, and that no such interpretation shall become an issue which hinders the ministry to which God has called us.
- There is one true God, eternally existing in three persons — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — each of whom possesses equally all the attributes of Deity and the characteristics of personality.
- Jesus Christ is God, the living Word, who became flesh through His miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit and His virgin birth. Hence, He is perfect Deity and true humanity united in one person forever.
- He lived a sinless life and voluntarily atoned for the sins of men by dying on the cross as their substitute, thus satisfying divine justice and accomplishing salvation for all who trust in Him alone.
- He rose from the dead in the same body, though glorified, in which He lived and died.
- He ascended bodily into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God the Father, where He, the only mediator between God and man, continually makes intercession for His own.
- Man was originally created in the image of God. He sinned by disobeying God; thus, he was alienated from his Creator. That historic fall brought all mankind under divine condemnation.
- Man's nature is corrupted, and he is thus totally unable to please God. Every man is in need of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.
- The salvation of man is wholly a work of God's free grace and is not the work, in whole or in part, of human works or goodness or religious ceremony. God imputes His righteousness to those who put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation, and thereby justified them in His sight.
- It is the privilege of all who are born again of the Spirit to be assured of their salvation from the very moment in which they trust Christ as their Savior. This assurance is not based upon any kind of human merit, but is produced by the

witness of the Holy Spirit, who confirms in the believer the testimony of God in His written word.

- The Holy Spirit has come into the world to reveal and glorify Christ and to apply the saving work of Christ to men. He convicts and draws sinners to Christ, imparts new life to them, continually indwells them from the moment of spiritual birth and seals them until the day of redemption. His fullness, power and control are appropriated in the believer's life by faith.
- Every believer is called to live so in the power of the indwelling Spirit that he will not fulfill the lust of the flesh but will bear fruit to the glory of God.
- Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, His Body, which is composed of all men, living and dead, who have been joined to Him through saving faith.
- God admonishes His people to assemble together regularly for worship, for participation in ordinances, for edification through the Scriptures and for mutual encouragement.
- At physical death the believer enters immediately into eternal, conscious fellowship with the Lord and awaits the resurrection of his body to everlasting glory and blessing.
- At physical death the unbeliever enters immediately into eternal, conscious separation from the Lord and awaits the resurrection of his body to everlasting judgment and condemnation.
- Jesus Christ will come again to the earth — personally, visibly and bodily — to consummate history and the eternal plan of God.
- The Lord Jesus Christ commanded all believers to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world and to disciple men of every nation. The fulfillment of that Great Commission requires that all worldly and personal ambitions be subordinated to a total commitment to "Him who loved us and gave Himself for us" ("Statement of Faith").

This Statement of Faith is notable for several reasons. First, it is notable that while the *Jesus 2020* website lists only four steps to faith, GMO's position of faith includes nineteen different elements of belief by which the ministry abides. This presumably means that either all nineteen elements of belief are inessential to be considered a Christian (i.e., that some are particular to GMO), that some of the beliefs—though not necessarily requisites for conversion—are expected to be adopted post-conversion, or that the "Four Steps to God" represented by the *Jesus 2020* website are a simplification, summarization, or condensation of these nineteen points. It is notable also that whereas the *Jesus 2020* website's "steps" suggest a progression, that one must first believe in Step

One before moving to Steps Two and beyond (a sequence inherent to the use of the term "step"), GMO's Statement of Faith does not indicate any clear order or progression of steps. Instead, it seems that all nineteen of the points must be embraced at once and as a unit and that each point is implicit, somehow, in the others. The explanation for this interpretation is found in the first of the nineteen listed tenets of faith: the notion that all truth is found in the Bible and that all subsequent beliefs (including any differences of opinion) must be grounded in biblical justification. Second, the ministry's theological focus can be summarized as revolving around four major areas of belief: the status of the Bible, the nature of God, the definition of salvation, and the purpose of evangelism. Third is the position that GMO allows for a certain level of diversity of opinions (the issues in which diversity of opinion are accepted are not specified) among Christians ("true believers") on issues beyond the specified fundamentals of faith, a trait typical of self-identified evangelical ministries. Fourth is the language used to describe these elements of faith. The initial challenge at hand is to determine how and to what extent this ideological position transfers into the act of evangelism represented by the *Jesus 2020* website.

In the discussion of the design of the *Jesus 2020* website, I argued that the main page was designed for rapid scrolling and scanning as well as for quick decision making. By focusing on the fundamental/invisible aspects of the website's design, I was able to argue that the layout of the page, the lack of external hyperlinks, the limited options for internal navigation, and the centralizing draw of the Yes/No decision (and its repeated presentation) suggest that the website could be understood as a transitional space intended exclusively for the purpose of bringing individuals to make a decision about the

Gospel. Regardless of the user's decision (Yes/No), they are put in touch with a mentor and are directed to the follow-up website GodLife. A closer examination of these design elements in combination with the visual rhetoric and content contained in the video and text reveals an ideology centered on three main assumptions: (1) that a Gospel presentation has inherent draw, (2) that all individuals are seeking love, and (3) that the Gospel presentation and the appeal of love are enough to override both research on what causes a user to stay on a webpage and what causes them to convert.

1. The Inherent Draw of the Gospel

Jesus 2020 centers entirely on the presentation of the Gospel. Consisting of only two pages ("4 Steps to God" and "New Life Video"), each page contains nearly identical content: The man speaking to the audience in the "New Life Video" speaks almost word for word the language of the "4 Steps to God," and both pages culminate in a prayer. The pale gray and white background and the small, pale gray text (with only the four steps highlighted) creates no visual interest or distraction for the user. Implicit in such a design are several assumptions about the audience. The first assumption is that the audience is literate. Though when the "New Life Video" page is accessed the video with the Gospel presentation immediately begins to play, forcing the user to make a conscious decision to stop it (vs. a conscious decision to access it), this page is not the main page of the website. Instead, the main page is—with the exception of a banner containing the "heavenly" image of blue skies and clouds—entirely text-based. This means that the user must be able to read to be able to accept the Gospel. Though the video presentation would allow a user who is illiterate or who has difficulty reading to be exposed to the Gospel as well, the user must be able to read the words "New Life Video" to realize that

this content is available. The decision to foreground the text-based page shows a clear assumption of the importance of being able to read. If the pages had been reversed, an illiterate or weak reader could easily have been incorporated into the target audience of the website. Because this is not the case, however, the suggestion is that literacy is prioritized. The necessity of literacy for the acceptance of the Gospel on *Jesus 2020* goes beyond the basic ability to read, however. There is a certain level of knowledge about Christianity and familiarity with its rhetoric—a level of cultural literacy—with which the user must already be familiar to be able to understand the content of the website. Though a comparison between the Gospel presentation on *Jesus 2020* and GMO's Statement of Faith reveals that there has been an effort to condense/simplify the material for the "unsaved," the use of direct quotations from the Bible results in the adoption of terminology that is exclusive to the Christian community and may not be readily transparent to an individual entirely unfamiliar with this culture. Rather than paraphrasing or choosing a paraphrased version of the Bible (The Message, for example), GMO uses direct quotations from the New International Version of the biblical text. Though the NIV is generally considered to be one of the more easily accessible translations, there are a variety of phrases adopted into GMO's *Jesus 2020* Gospel presentation that use both antiquated language and syntax in addition to incorporating complex theological concepts (Irwin 61). "Shall not perish," "fall short of the glory of God," "wages of sin," "died on the cross," and "believe on His name" cannot be understood without a priori knowledge of biblical rhetoric and Christian theology. "Perish," for example, has impact only if the reader understands that it does not merely refer to physical death but to spiritual death and is implicitly tied to the Christian understanding of hell as a place of separation from

God. In a similar manner, to "fall short of the glory of God" refers to the inability to live up to God's ideal for mankind; "wages of sin" refers to the assumption that death is the rightful consequence of sin; "the cross" refers to crucifixion, and "believe on His name" means to believe in Jesus as God. To an audience unfamiliar with how these phrases and terms are typically "translated" by Christians, they might very well be misinterpreted, misunderstood, or be entirely impenetrable. In addition, even with the level of cultural literacy required to navigate the biblical texts, there remain terms that will never be decoded, "*Jesus 2020*" being the prime example. "*Jesus 2020*" is presented as the title of the page in large bold font across the top banner. An insider to GMO, of course, knows that this phrase references the ministry's desire to have the Gospel presented to all individuals across the globe by the year 2020; however, to the outsider audience that the page presumes to target, this phrase is undoubtedly meaningless.

Furthermore, not only is the user required to have a certain level of textual and cultural literacy, but they are also assumed to already maintain certain beliefs. This website is not designed for atheists, agnostics, individuals antagonistic to Christianity, or even individuals who have not yet considered Christianity. Implicit in the four steps are the assumptions that the audience already believes in God (Step One), that they already accept the Bible as an authoritative source (the textual evidence provided as support for the steps), and that they already abide by a belief system that acknowledges certain standards of right and wrong (Steps Two through Four). There is no attempt to persuade the audience of these points (the site is firmly grounded in a proclamational rather than apologetic approach to evangelism).

As a result, a more complete look at the rhetorical features of the *Jesus 2020* website reveals an interesting dimension of complexity in contrast to the apparent simplicity of the website design. In reality, GMO is heavily dependent on the simplicity and power of influence inherent in the design architecture—the ability of the format of the page to universalize the material and to push the user to make a decision—to override the real complexity of the material presented and the limited audience that the text targets. While on their home page, GMO depicts the *Jesus 2020* project as an outreach mission to the whole world, including the unreached populations who are unfamiliar with the Gospel, the audience that the content of their website targets is relatively limited. A helpful tool for visualizing the actual target audience is a matrix designed by evangelist Frank Gray of FEBC Radio. The tool is known as "The Gray Matrix" and rates where an individual or target audience is located in terms of both their antagonism/openness to the Gospel message (x axis) and their knowledge/lack of knowledge of the Gospel message (y axis) (Figure 10). Tony Whittaker, web evangelist and author of one of the earliest guides to Internet evangelism, has offered this matrix as a tool for evangelists to employ to ensure that they are best targeting the audience they are attempting to reach. Whittaker promotes this matrix as a useful tool because "Christian evangelistic communication has often failed to touch people who are low down on the scale." "Low down on the scale" in the case of the "Gray Matrix" would be an audience located in the far bottom left quadrant of the matrix. Ways in which a ministry might "miss" this audience of the "fairly resistant" who "lack knowledge" of the Gospel are by using "Christian language and thought-forms" and "not engag[ing] with those it was intended for." The result of using "Christianese" is that the audience shifts towards those individuals who have some

Christian background or knowledge of Christianity. This is the category into which the GMO website fits. Because of the requirements of textual literacy; Christian cultural literacy; and a priori beliefs in God, the Bible, and sin, the range of individuals who may be impacted by the website's content is limited to the very central left area of the matrix represented by the red circle below.

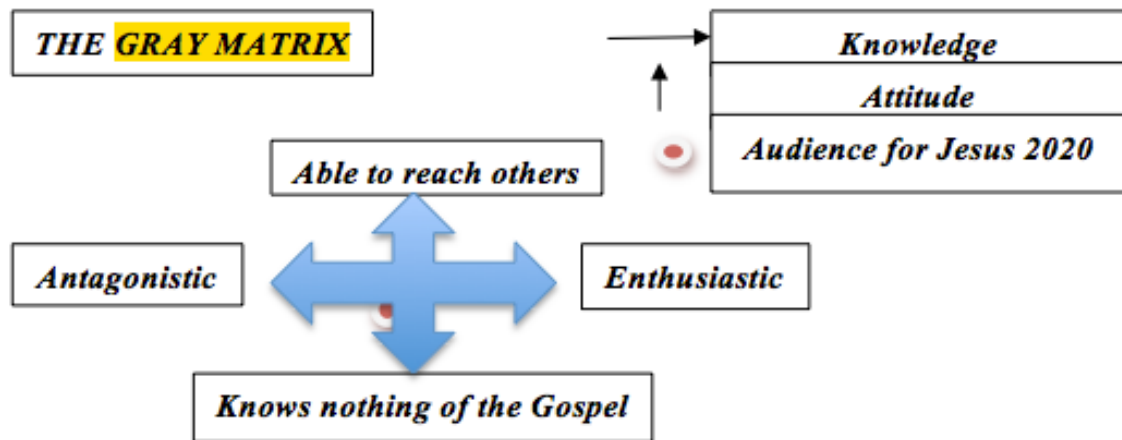


Figure 10, The Gray Matrix

2. Active Faith

The "4 Steps" presented on the *Jesus 2020* website are based on a method of evangelism created by Campus Crusade for Christ founder Bill Bright in 1952 designed particularly to present the Gospel in as simple and straightforward a format as possible. Bright's method is called "The Four Spiritual Laws." The Laws originally appeared as a tract and continue to be one of the most popular tools for evangelism. The slight variations between Bright's version of the "Laws" and GMO's version of the "Steps" are worth noting. The decision to alter "law" to "step" in itself is noteworthy. To refer to a "spiritual law" is to imply that each of the four laws is a tenet to be adopted without question. "Law" implies rules or regulations that must be followed. In addition, as Bill Bright clarifies in his tracts, the "spiritual laws" are to be considered parallels to the

physical laws of the universe, thus suggesting that spiritual laws are not only as fixed and unalterable but that they are universal and established at the beginning of time. By contrast, a "step" suggests a progression. A "step to God" suggests that certain tasks must be performed or beliefs must be adopted in a specific order in order to, in this case, achieve a relationship with God. By choosing "step" over "law," GMO puts the website visitor in the position of feeling as though they have a much more active role in their decision to become a Christian.

This trend of working to empower the potential convert is continued in the ways in which each law has been adapted. The first "Law" in the original tract is that "God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life." The *Jesus 2020* variation is "God Loves YOU!" The emphasis on "you," the individual reading the step, creates a sense not only that the website is particularly designed to present this message to the unique individual on the other side of the screen, but it serves to isolate the individual, to call them out exclusively. The mentioning of the individual's life and God's plan for it are removed. This takes the individual outside of their own circumstances, historical context, personal issues, family structure, heritage, or spiritual background. The result is that the individual is simultaneously isolated, called out as an individual, and detached from the very elements of individuality which might make them unique. The second "Law" is that "Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, one cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life." The second "Step" on *Jesus 2020* is "All of us have done, said or thought things that are wrong. This is called sin, and our sins have separated us from God." This second step forwards the isolation of the individual even further. Though "man" and "he" have been altered to the gender-neutral "us," the use of the

second person hardly creates a sense of unity. The writer, speaking from a position of authority—a position of knowledge, serving as educator—while referring to a former state in regards to their own condition is referring to a current state in regards to the visitor's condition. The further emphasis of the bold font used with the word "separated" encourages the reader into a sense of isolation even further, as it suggests both a difference between the speaker, who has already mastered the steps, and God. In addition, for a second time, the user's life and God's plan for it are taken out of the picture. The focus has become centered entirely on sin and separation. In a similar fashion, whereas the third "Law" states that "Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life," the third "Step" is that "God sent his only Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins." As the individual continues to be pushed outside the context that their life and God's plan for it provide, they are pushed into a position of both isolation (separated from the speaker and from God) and ambiguity (stripped of the identifying features that one's "life" provides). In a culmination, the fourth "Law" is that "We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives," and the fourth "Step" is "If you want to accept Christ as your Savior and turn from your sins, you can ask Him to be your Savior and Lord by praying a prayer." The steps culminate in telling the reader what—after they have accepted the first three premises—they need to do. The transformation from laws to steps reveals an interesting rhetorical strategy on the part of GMO: their emphasis on isolation and separation forces the reader to a point of feeling detached, making them aware of both the difference between themselves and the speaker and the lack of relationship between themselves and God.

GMO then offers a solution to the problem they have created: pray a prayer, and love and relationship can be restored. By creating a problem or pointing out what they perceive to be a problem in the reader's life, GMO creates an identity for them as isolated and lost and then sweeps in with a clear action point for how to resolve this problem. This strategy for evangelism is ideal in the online context where (at least not until the user decides to click "yes" or "no" and has the option to be put in touch with a mentor), there is no face-to-face connection made; no relationship offered; no options for chat, email, to connect with social media, or join a discussion board conversation. Both the design of the website and the manner in which the four steps presented are crafted with the purpose of bringing the reader to a point of crisis. The evangelists would argue that these visitors are already existing in a point of crisis (having not accepted the Gospel), and thus the site forces them to acknowledge a pre-existing condition. From either perspective however, both the form and content work in unison to create the problem-solution scenario in which the reader is first disempowered and isolated and then provided with the power to resolve their situation.

3. Power of the Space and the Role of the Holy Spirit

If at first this apparent contradiction between the target audience suggested by the rhetoric of the website and GMO's stated goal of reaching the unreached seems problematic, the statistics gathered by GMO's website and the testimonies of converts provided on their home page and in their recently-published book of testimonies designed to encourage Internet missions suggest otherwise. According to a press release in August 2012, GMO's online ministry reported that in the first half of that year, 11.6 million individuals clicked the "Yes" button to become Christians, 1.4 million individuals

established contact with a mentor and began a dialogue, and 4.5 million individuals were "discipled," or received regular contact and built a relationship with a mentor (Rembrandt). According to Michelle Diedrich, GMO Chief Marketing Officer, the Internet is now one of the primary places in which individuals come "to find answers about God, get much-needed support and share with others" (Rembrandt). Furthermore, GMO has gone to great lengths to ensure that these statistics are not inflated and that they reflect long-term conversions with clear indication of not only spiritual but behavioral changes as well. In a 2011 study of over 105,000 individuals who were converted via a GMO website which took place at least three months after these decisions were indicated, GMO found that 87% of these converts are "very certain" that Christ is their "personal Savior," 61% have seen their "thoughts/actions changed daily by a prompting from God's Spirit," 62% read the Bible on a daily or weekly basis, 50% attend church or have weekly fellowship meetings with other Christians, 46% spend at least ten minutes per day praying, and 89% have shared the Gospel with others ("Christian Growth Index"). In addition, an extensive collection of testimonies published by GMO reveals that despite the extremely limited target audience indicated by an analysis of the content of the website, *Jesus 2020* does attract a surprisingly diverse audience. One convert identified only as "Everett" explains his past as an atheist and how he encountered *Jesus 2020*, writing

I was born and raised as an atheist. [The] simple message that I found by googling "Jesus" and pressing "feeling lucky" led me to [the] website. It answered some basic questions for me. Did I get lucky? Why is Jesus calling to me now? I have heard His voice, and received an invitation that I did not ask for. . .I just prayed to receive Christ as my Savior for the first time (Global Media Outreach 9).

Other users encountered the website in the form of an advertising link while they were browsing the web for other purposes. Another individual wrote to a GMO mentor "I've been depressed for so long. I found your webpage from an advertisement. I asked Jesus to be a part of my life. . .I prayed with all my heart. I really, really, meant it. I can already feel Jesus making changes in myself" (42). A significant number of individuals also find themselves searching for answers to problems they are dealing with in their lives from relationships to illness to pregnancy. GMO testimonies include stories of husbands and wives in broken marriages who go online looking for how to restore love: a young woman who finds herself pregnant as a result of rape and wants to know "Does God care? Can someone talk to me?" and individuals who feel overwhelmed with guilt over past behavior (one individual from North Carolina wrote "Does god really forgive me for things I have done in the past that I am so ashamed and guilty for, even things I haven't told anybody? I haven't even forgiven myself, so how can He forgive me. . .Does God really love me still, after all that?") (15, 148). What these testimonies suggest is the importance of considering form as an integral part of content in the context of this website. While the content alone suggests certain characteristics of the user (which appear extremely limiting), the way in which the content is presented—the rhetorical strategies of effecting a problem-solution crisis situation and the strongly directive features of the website layout—create a text that users find to be strongly persuasive.

This method of persuasion indicates a shift in the practice of evangelism. Studies of Christian conversion have repeatedly revealed that the most successful evangelistic efforts involve not only an individual finding themselves at a moment of crisis searching for answers to explain their situation or solutions for finding a better life, but they

additionally involve established relationships with other Christians for, on average, a two year period (Bennett 40). As the strategy of the *Jesus 2020* website indicates, however, the former criteria can be manufactured and need not necessarily be a pre-condition which brings the visitor to the website. Perhaps even more interesting is the fact that the second criteria—the establishment of a relationship—rather than being foregrounded, is actually withheld. It is the promise of a relationship (both via a correspondence with a GMO mentor which is only available as an option after the visitor has made a Yes/No decision in response to the prayer) that is held out as a resolution to the crisis.

Peace with God

In an analysis of the architecture of *Peace with God's* interface, I argued that the predominant design strategy centered around creating the appearance of a variety of navigation options that in reality lead to an increasingly-limited range of choices that are progressively reduced down to one decision focused on responding for or against a Gospel presentation. A consideration of the design features in combination with a more thorough assessment of the content of the website's texts, video, and visual rhetoric reveal aspects of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Jesus.net's ideology and allow us to see how the user is not merely led to behave in a particular way but to adopt particular beliefs as well. The *Peace with God* website is a collaborative effort created by BGEA, a well-established evangelistic association that works in a variety of media (print tracts, live "Crusades" or mass preaching events, television broadcasts of current and past Crusade gatherings, and Internet evangelism) and Jesus.net which is a ministry devoted entirely to Internet evangelism. Despite the fact that the website involves collaboration,

an examination of the two ministries' statements of faith reveals that their core beliefs are identical, even worded and listed in the same manner. They read as following:

- The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association / Jesus.net believe:
 - The Bible to be the infallible Word of God, that it is His holy and inspired Word, and that it is of supreme and final authority.
 - In one God, eternally existing in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
 - Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. He led a sinless life, took on Himself all our sins, died and rose again, and is seated at the right hand of the Father as our mediator and advocate.
 - That all men everywhere are lost and face the judgment of God, and need to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through His shed blood on the cross.
 - That Christ rose from the dead and is coming soon.
 - In holy Christian living, and that we must have concern for the hurts and social needs of our fellowmen.
 - We must dedicate ourselves anew to the service of our Lord and to His authority over our lives.
 - In using every modern means of communication available to us to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

It is worth noting that this statement of faith is presented as a type of linear progression: the Bible is first listed as the foundation of all subsequent beliefs; then belief in God; then belief in Jesus's birth, life, atoning death and resurrection; then faith in the impact in and importance of practicing evangelism. This is reflected in the "Four Steps to Peace" around which the website is centered. However, these steps function differently from the "Steps" of *Jesus 2020*. A rhetorical analysis of the *Peace with God* website reveals two central ideological principles: that the establishment of relationships and community are key elements in an individual's decision to convert and that Gospel presentations should focus on foregrounding a message of God's love and de-emphasizing the issue of sin.

1. Relationship and Community

I interviewed Dave Hackett, associate director of the visionSynergy ministry which helps evangelical organizations collaborate on outreach projects, to find out his understanding of the impact the Internet has had on evangelism. In the course of our conversation, he described an interesting phenomenon that he has observed in online evangelism practices: the fall of macro-celebrities and the rise of micro-celebrities. Whereas radio and television ministries have predominantly tended towards featuring central personalities—Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyers, and John Hagee—following in the line of the traditional sermon-pastorate model that one would find in a typical church building on any given Sunday, Internet evangelism has moved in a different direction. The celebrity preacher model is based in a clear hierarchy of authority in which the preacher is positioned as the bearer of knowledge, and the audience is placed in the position of receiver where they are typically not expected to question or respond beyond signs of support (raised hands, "Amen"). The *Jesus 2020* website, as I argued, did not tend in this direction, focusing instead on the power of forcing an individual to feel isolated and driving them to a point of crisis; the *Peace with God* website, however, is a prime example of this burgeoning tendency towards micro-evangelism. The fact that the website is designed by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, an organization centered on one of the most famous of preacher personalities, Billy Graham, makes the ministry's turn towards micro-celebrity in the realm of Internet evangelism even more interesting. The four main pages of the *Peace with God* website are populated with a variety of statements, testimonies, songs, poems, descriptions from individuals who are not named and who, in many cases, are depicted as the "average man/woman." In each,

the primary goal is to reach out to the visitor to the website with a message that God wants a relationship with them. This approach is nearly opposite to that of the *Jesus 2020* website. Whereas on *Jesus 2020*, the evangelistic strategy centered on encouraging the visitor to—out of a sense of isolation—reach out to find the company of God (and, with it, the company of mentors from GMO), *Peace with God* surrounds the visitor with a community of support and friendship from the moment they arrive at the website. The emphasis of *Peace with God* is repeatedly centered on the claim that God loves us and is just waiting for us to be ready for a relationship with Him. God is presented as patiently waiting for the moment when an individual decides they want to begin a relationship with Him, a relationship which, the website promises, will bring with it the internal peace it is assumed we are all seeking. An exploration into the history of the “Four Steps to Peace” used on the website reveals that they are based on a tract created in 1954 by Charlie Riggs, former Director of Counseling and Follow-Up for BGEA. It was Charlie Riggs's own conversion experience that led him to create the steps: after becoming a Christian at the age of fifteen, Riggs received no follow-up contact from other Christians or encouragement to grow in his faith. It was not until over a decade later that he found a spiritual mentor through the Navigators ministry and realized the importance of this type of relationship among Christians. As a result, the Steps he created centered on relationship—the restoration of a relationship between God and individuals—and are meant to be supplemented with a mentor relationship. Their focus on relationship and love was also a direct response to what he perceived as an extreme focus on hell and damnation in preaching and evangelism. Instead, Riggs believed that a more loving approach might be more effective. In an interview about his choice to focus on such an

optimistic message, he stated that "God put a hunger and thirst in me to think about what happens if people don't live for God. . . [His] plan for us is peace and life, and the only way to have that peace is to accept Jesus" (Phillips). This emphasis on peace is based on what Riggs perceived as a felt-need, or a need which individuals all experience but may not—according to Riggs—realize is actually a spiritual need directly related to their need for God. Referencing Blaise Pascal's description of how each human is born with a "God-shaped vacuum" in our hearts, Riggs stated that "People need to know that God loves them. . . Most people don't think that God does, or that He has a real plan for their lives. People just line up and follow others who don't know God because they don't know any better. It's sad when people think they've just been born to live and die, with no purpose but to follow daily routines. So many don't have a concept of heaven, hell or eternity" (Phillips). Riggs saw similarities between his interest in foregrounding evangelism with a message of love and the strategies used by Billy Graham in his Crusades, so he joined with the organization, and the tract "Steps to *Peace with God*," which has been translated into dozens of languages over the past sixty years, was the result. As with CRU's "Four Spiritual Laws" tract, the "Steps to *Peace with God*" were revised when incorporated into the *Peace with God* website. Five major differences are worth noting as indicative of how relationships are foregrounded in *Peace with God*'s evangelistic strategy. The first is that *Peace with God*'s main page banner titles the website "4 Steps to Peace." This transformation from "Steps to *Peace with God*" is both a simplification of the message and an attempt to broaden the audience for the text. By noting that it is only four steps, the process to peace seems very manageable, short, and simple. By eliminating the prepositional qualifier "with God," the felt-need is foregrounded—the need for peace—

and the solution—a relationship with God—is reserved for once the visitor has engaged with the website, either through choosing one of the options to chat or through beginning to proceed through the four steps. In the tract, the four steps are listed as follows:

Step One: God's Purpose: Peace and Life
Step Two: The Problem: Our Separation
Step Three: God's Bridge: The Cross
Step Four: Our Response: Receive Christ

On the website, the steps have been revised to fit into the phrasing of John 3:16:

Step One: God so loved the world
Step Two: That he gave His only Son
Step Three: That whoever believes in Him
Step Four: Should not perish
[Step Five]: But have eternal life.

The impact of this transformation is to even further simplify the "process" of achieving peace. Rather than emphasizing the uniqueness of each individual step, the steps are unified syntactically to create a seamless flow from one to another. Central to this transformation is also a greater emphasis on God reaching out to the individual out of a desire to bless them with "eternal life." As a result, the issue of sin and separation are even further de-emphasized.

This focus on relationship is mirrored in the visual rhetoric of the website as well. As I argued in my analysis of the architectural features of the website, the option to chat with a mentor is a central design feature. The chat bubble features repeatedly pop up in two different places on every page that the visitor accesses, and in testing the chat feature I found that clicking to engage with chat results in an almost immediate response from a mentor. These mentors are, of course, included under the heading of "micro-celebrity" that I am using to refer to the individual viewpoints and voices represented on the

website. In addition to this, however, is the way the series of videos work to draw the visitor into a sense of companionship and community. The first video, which accompanies Step One, is centered on the argument that God loves the viewer more than they could ever imagine and that He recognizes them as an individual. The text of the video is drawn from sermon clips from Billy Graham and Franklin Graham sermons; however, the evangelists are not identified by name. Instead, their ethos is established through their assertion that they (and God) understand the viewers deepest needs. The first statement made by Billy Graham in the first video is "God loves you, and He loves you with a love that you don't even know anything about, because there is no human love comparable to divine love." By stating that God's love is something that humans cannot even fathom, he establishes his authority as a speaker not by positioning himself as a bearer of ultimate wisdom and knowledge but as someone in the same position as the viewer. He does not claim himself to fully comprehend God's love. In addition, the emphasis is firmly placed on the viewer's uniqueness and importance to God. The viewer becomes the star of the show: "God loves you" is repeated ten times in the short two-minute video, and it is made clear that this love is unique to the individual, not just any generic love for mankind, but a love targeted at the specific person on the other side of the screen. The viewer is told that "It doesn't make any difference how far you tried to run from God. He loves you. His eye is on you. He sees you," that "God is listening, and God loves you. He's your friend. He'll put His arm around you, and He understands, and He answers, and He's sympathetic to your problem," and that "[Jesus] would've died had you been the only person in the whole world" and that "[God] loves you. Don't ever forget He loves, loves, loves, loves you." These statements depict the emphasis on God's

love that is a centralizing feature of the evangelistic message of *Peace with God*. The individual is isolated, but not in the manner of *Jesus 2020* where they are made to feel alone: on the *Peace with God* website, they are set at center stage. They are taught that they are valued, unique, loved, and precious. This is effected through the content of the text, the support structure of the chat feature, and the inclusion of a diversity of voices all sharing the same message and offering the same hope. This diversity of voices is exemplified in the third video in which the viewer hears testimonies from a teenage boy and a former rock musician who suffered from drug addictions, a young woman who tried to commit suicide by wrecking her car on the highway, a teenage girl who cut herself with safety pins and blades, a man who broke the law, and a woman struggling with depression and self-loathing. The individuals represented range from teenagers to adults, include men and women, and are racially diverse, including a Hispanic boy, an African-American woman, and a man with a thick Southern accent. One teenage girl has multi-colored hair, another woman is dressed as a polished business professional, and the former rocker is wearing thick make-up and is covered in tattoos. The rocker speaks to the viewer from a living room couch and then from a recording studio; the teenage girl is sitting on her bed in her bedroom; the Hispanic boy stands in front of a chain link fence with a graffiti-covered wall in the background. The effect is to create the sense that there is no "standard" person for whom God is relevant. No matter who the viewer is, their problems and their needs fit in. The freedom with which the individuals in the video are able to speak about their pasts serves to encourage the viewer to open up about their problems too. Unlike the *Jesus 2020* website, this video creates the sense that despite the

uniqueness of an individual's problems, each person is the same in that they all are able to find *Peace with God*.

These micro-celebrities, or personas representing the average person, serve a purpose beyond merely foregrounding a sense of community and helping forward the argument that a relationship with God has brought peace and healing to the lives of the individuals who share their testimonies. In addition, the voices of these micro-celebrities serve to teach those considering Christianity or those who have converted to Christianity via the website how to speak to God and how to speak as a Christian once they have converted. What I will call the "rhetoric of faith" promoted by the micro-celebrities is concertedly colloquial. These individuals speak to God as if He is a friend: the Southern man says that one night, when he had hit rock bottom, he wanted to talk to God but "didn't know what to say, " so he said "God, I don't know who you are, and I don't really know how to find you, but if you're God and you're there, maybe you can find me." The former rocker first spoke to God by saying "Jesus, you know, if you're real. . .take these drugs from me." The former rocker describes how he was taught by a pastor to speak to God in this way, suggesting that this rhetoric of friendship and intimacy is one that has historical precedent, giving his testimony further credibility; he says "The pastor, he's like, 'You know, if you hang out with Christ and talk to Him, then all of the stuff in your life will start to fall away one by one. It's His job to get rid of it.'"

This type of rhetoric is carried over into the language used by mentors chatting with visitors to the *Peace with God* website. Wendy, a mother in South Carolina, who serves as a volunteer mentor for the ministry, describes how, while in our everyday lives, "There might be times we wouldn't as easily talk to the person who has tattoos all over

them or look like they have a drug or alcohol problem," on the Internet, this becomes easy: "When you are on the computer, background is leveled. . . You are just loving that person no matter what their situation is" (Jothan "God Uses the Internet"). In describing her interaction with a teenage girl from North Carolina who came to the website and initiated a chat, Wendy speaks specifically to the role of rhetoric: "The girl initially came to the chat session with a lot of anger but knew the Bible. She had been to church and knew Christian terms. She might've had the right words, but was 'as lost as can be'" (Jothan "God Uses the Internet"). This statement indicates that one's spiritual status can be identified through the language one uses: knowledge of Christian terminology or being able to describe theological concepts are not necessarily indicative that one has been converted. Instead, the testimonies promoted by BGEA in statements published by the ministry represent the same type of conversion depicted in the videos—a salvation from life's problems—and a similar rhetoric, centered on colloquial language suggesting an intimacy in relationship between the individual and God. Some examples include a fifty-seven year old woman from Alaska named Norene who was living in poverty and had just gone through a series of difficult experiences: her fifteen year old daughter had a baby, her father passed away, and she divorced her adulterous and alcoholic husband. In describing her life before becoming a Christian, she said that "My life, my world, had totally fallen apart. . . No matter how far I ran, I could not outrun the hurt. I was sitting here, crying my heart out because I was so sad and lonely. No matter what I did or didn't do, things only kept getting worse." After encountering the *Peace with God* website, she described her transformation by saying "I am so happy. . . My heart is bursting with joy, love and happiness." A similar testimony comes from a man, also fifty-seven years old,

from St. Petersburg, Florida, who said that becoming a Christian via the *Peace with God* website involved realizing that "God is always there for me. . . I need God in my life to show me the right way" ("Internet Evangelism" Jothan). Another forty-two year old man from Florida stated that "When I searched online for wanting to die, [the] site came up and I read the prayer. For the first time in over 10 years, tears came from my eye. I knew." The sign of salvation for him was the release of the floodgate of emotion that had been blocked and the feeling of being valuable and wanted for the first time ("Online Evangelism" Jothan). Another woman from Washington said that visiting *Peace with God* led to her realizing for the first time "that Jesus knows and cares, that I don't have to run from Him," and a woman from Texas said that "I couldn't have clicked on this at a better time. It was relieving to read after what I've been through." What these testimonies have in common is that, like the testimonies in the videos on the *Peace with God* website, they depict salvation as a solution to major life problems; they indicate that their post-conversion lives are uncomplicated; and they employ language that suggests an intimate and personal connection with God.

The implications of forwarding the message of God's love, positioning God as ready and waiting for a relationship, and describing God and the way in which one speaks to God as intimate and colloquial results in what I see as a modification of the Prosperity Gospel: God is ready to give exceedingly to us in exchange for nothing but our desire to have a relationship. While there are certainly no promises of material prosperity offered on the *Peace with God* website, the prosperity comes in the terms of what is presented as uncomplicated and thorough peace and hope. When one man says in his testimony that "God proved to me that He hears the heart cry of desperate people regardless of where

they are," it is notable that God is put in the position of providing a service (offering proof) to the individual. The same man states as well that "When I came to Jesus, all I had to bring Him was junk." The junk is exchanged for hope and peace, but the ideology represented here is that God will take away all of our problems in exchange for nothing but a desire on our part to give up these burdens. The reasons why such a message might appeal to a visitor to the website is obvious; however, in the process of both simplifying the Gospel message, simplifying the choice to be made, and implying that the peace provided by becoming a Christian is uncomplicated, BGEA and Jesus.net risk suggesting a false reality to the visitor. However, both the structural features of the website's design and the content—especially exemplified by the testimonies presented in the videos—push the evangelistic strategy towards driving users to an “easy” decision. While the design features rapidly winnow the user's options for navigation to one choice regarding an acceptance or rejection of the Gospel, the chat options and the sense of community built through the video and textual content promote a simple life on the other side of the decision, a sense of peace and healing that will reconcile any present troubles the visitors are experiencing in their life.

Journey Answers

The Network 211 ministry is unique among the evangelical ministries examined so far in that it claims a denominational affiliation. Whereas Global Media Outreach, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and Jesus.net concertedly refer to themselves as evangelical movements and identify only with the most general tenets of Christian Protestant theology, even particularly noting a willingness to accept doctrinal differences to the extent that they align with the Bible, Network 211 claims allegiance to a very

particular, denominationally-based set of ideological principles. The Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal denomination worldwide, originated with the famous Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, California in 1906 (Melton 53). Inter-denominational conflicts have tended to center around the issues of "sanctification" (the experience of "perfect love" in this life, given as a gift by the Holy Spirit to the believer) and "baptism of the Holy Spirit" (a sign of a believer's salvation, revealed in speaking in tongues). The current statement of the "Assemblies of God Fundamental Truths" indicates the American AG's position on the fundamentals of their faith, including their present position on sanctification (Fundamental #9) and the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Fundamentals #7 and #8):

1. WE BELIEVE. . .The Scriptures are Inspired by God and declare His design and plan for mankind.
2. WE BELIEVE. . .There is only One True God—revealed in three persons. . .Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (commonly known as the Trinity).
3. WE BELIEVE. . .In the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. As God's son Jesus was both human and divine.
4. WE BELIEVE. . .though originally good, Man Willingly Fell to Sin—ushering evil and death, both physical and spiritual, into the world.
5. WE BELIEVE. . .Every Person Can Have Restored Fellowship with God Through 'Salvation' (trusting Christ, through faith and repentance, to be our personal Savior).
6. WE BELIEVE. . .and practice two ordinances—(1) Water Baptism by Immersion after repenting of one's sins and receiving Christ's gift of salvation, and (2) Holy Communion (the Lord's Supper) as a symbolic remembrance of Christ's suffering and death for our salvation.
7. WE BELIEVE. . .the Baptism in the Holy Spirit is a Special Experience Following Salvation that empowers believers for witnessing and effective service, just as it did in New Testament times.
8. WE BELIEVE. . .The Initial Physical Evidence of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit is 'Speaking in Tongues,' as experienced on the Day of Pentecost and referenced throughout Acts and the Epistles.
9. WE BELIEVE. . .Sanctification Initially Occurs at Salvation and is not only a declaration that a believer is holy, but also a progressive lifelong process of separating from evil as believers continually draw closer to God and become more Christlike.

10. WE BELIEVE. . .The Church has a Mission to seek and save all who are lost in sin. We believe 'the Church' is the Body of Christ and consists of the people who, throughout time, have accepted God's offer of redemption (regardless of religious denomination) through the sacrificial death of His son Jesus Christ.
11. WE BELIEVE. . .A Divinely Called and Scripturally Ordained Leadership Ministry Serves the Church. The Bible teaches that each of us under leadership must commit ourselves to reach others for Christ, to worship Him with other believers, to build up or edify the body of believers—the Church and to Meet human need with ministries of love and compassion.
12. WE BELIEVE. . .Divine Healing of the Sick is a Privilege for Christians Today and is provided for in Christ's atonement (His sacrificial death on the cross for our sins).
13. WE BELIEVE. . .in The Blessed Hope—When Jesus Raptures His Church Prior to His Return to Earth (the second coming). At this future moment in time all believers who have died will rise from their graves and will meet the Lord in the air, and Christians who are alive will be caught up with them, to be with the Lord forever.
14. WE BELIEVE. . .in The Millennial Reign of Christ when Jesus returns with His saints at His second coming and begins His benevolent rule over earth for 1,000 years. This millennial reign will bring the salvation of national Israel and the establishment of universal peace.
15. WE BELIEVE. . .A Final Judgment Will Take Place for those who have rejected Christ. They will be judged for their sin and consigned to eternal punishment in a punishing lake of fire.
16. WE BELIEVE. . .and look forward to the perfect New Heavens and a New Earth that Christ is preparing for all people, of all time, who have accepted Him. We will live and dwell with Him there forever following His millennial reign on Earth. 'And so shall we forever be with the Lord!' ("Assemblies of God Fundamental Truths")

The majority of these tenets will be familiar from the statements of faith provided by GMO, BGEA, and Jesus.net; however, in addition to the AG's current position that sanctification occurs in the moment of salvation as well as that the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or speaking in tongues, is a sign that necessarily follows salvation, it is also noteworthy that Fundamental #12, or the divine healing of the sick, is incorporated into the AG's statement of faith. These fundamentals are particular to the AG and are important tenets to understand for analyzing Network 211's evangelistic strategy.

Furthermore, both the baptism in the Holy Spirit and divine healing are included in the more consolidated "Four Core Beliefs" of the AG. These Four Core Beliefs, according to George O. Wood, general superintendent of the AG, are considered unique because of "the key role they play in reaching the lost and building the believer and the church." The manner in which these self-avowed essentials of evangelism are ultimately translated into the online mission strategy of Network 211 is important for consideration. Indeed, I will argue that because of the particular nature of the AG's ideology—the qualifications it puts on the exact nature of the salvation desired—there is ultimately a conflict between the behavior directed by the website's design and the message to which the ministry lays claim. This conflict is noticeable only if one takes the time to research the denomination and is not—if a visitor comes to the website without any prior knowledge of the denomination—indicated within the scope of the content presented on the *Journey Answers* website. It is only once the visitor has made a decision to click "Yes" in response to praying the prayer of salvation and is redirected to the "Jesus Path" website and the Global Christian Center online church that the issue of the role of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is gradually introduced throughout the various lessons that a new believer can access. While both the *Jesus 2020* and *Peace with God* websites presented salvation as a complete act unto itself with no subsequently required specific behaviors or beliefs that must be adopted, a position consistent with the ministries' Statements of Faith, *Journey Answers* provides the visitor to their website with only the first step in the progression to full faith that is requisite for membership in the AG denomination. Instead, the *Journey Answers* website does not reveal its AG associations nor does it mention any of the distinctive features of this denomination which a new member would be expected

to adopt. There are undoubtedly ethical issues to be examined in the decision to conceal central portions of their theology; however, for the sake of the discussion of how ideology is represented through design, I will focus on how the AG belief in divine healing for believers plays out in the seamless intersection of form and content on the *Journey Answers* website.

1. Illness and Healing

An initial assessment of *Journey Answers*' target audience might indicate that Network 211 is using a similar approach to that of BGEA and Jesus.net in the *Peace with God* website. However, though the focus on an individual's felt needs as a bridge to offer the necessity of accepting the Gospel message is a common feature, the felt needs being targeted differ. *Peace with God* functions under the assumption that all individuals who are not believers are existing with a certain level of discontent or lack of peace in their lives. This discontent might come from any number of sources, but the examples provided on the website include lack of peace derived from broken relationships, drug use, self-mutilation, depression, self-loathing, or a life of illegal behavior. By contrast, *Journey Answers* targets very specific conditions, many of which are clinically diagnosable disorders: anxiety, depression, and illness, for example, are specific issues that medical professionals might treat with medication or therapy. Nevertheless, they are included in the ranks of the problems which becoming a Christian can solve along with the more general conditions of feeling broken, empty, guilty, shameful, fearful, or insignificant or specific circumstantial trials like facing death or dealing with falsehood. The audience then for this website is clearly positioned as dealing with physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual trials. On the main page of the *Journey Answers* website, these

conditions are referred to as "life issues," suggesting that even the issues that might require medical intervention are related not necessarily to hormonal or chemical imbalances but to one's lifestyle.

The lifestyle "issue" that is at the core of the conditions according to the AG fundamentals of faith is sin. Strangely, however, when this doctrine is translated onto the *Journey Answers* website, sin is not a focal point of the discussion. On the *Jesus 2020* and *Peace with God* websites, all the discontent individuals may experience in life is seen as a symptom of the underlying problem of sin, which has caused a severance in our relationship with God; on the *Journey Answers* website, by contrast, each symptom is treated as a unique condition. In some cases, sin is listed as the primary "cause" of the condition; in other cases, it is not. For example, "Anxiety" is said to be caused by not having a trustworthy companion to guide one through life; "Brokenness" is caused by not having the courage to "deal with your pain"; frustration with "Conditional Love" is caused by not having loved the right person; "Fear of Death" results from not having assurance that one is going to heaven; frustration with the "Falsehood" and deception one sees in the world has to do with not recognizing the existence of "absolute Truth"; "Illness" is caused by one's lifestyle and by not trusting God to heal one spiritually and physically; and feelings of "Insignificance" come from not recognizing that God has a purpose for each person's life. By not making clear the connection between these conditions and sin and by offering intermediate causes as primary, the AG theological fundamentals are changed in the context of the website.

A further problem ensues with the attempt to pigeonhole visitors to the website as sufferers of one of the thirteen conditions listed. It is one thing to broadly suggest that

humans may experience discontent at some point (as is suggested by the *Peace with God* website), but it is another to suggest that all are experiencing at least one of a limited number of specific maladies. This drastically limits *Journey Answers'* audience to individuals who have already observed a problem in their life and have already diagnosed it as one of the thirteen conditions. The theological claim that *Journey Answers* ultimately makes is that God is available to help us deal with circumstantial problems. Dealing with the loss of a loved one, suffering the impact of being deceived, experiencing bouts of anxiety, and even illness are all conditions that in many cases are temporarily plaguing to an individual. Even in the event that they are chronic, however, God is presented as the solution to helping individuals deal with immediate trials. Though this is perhaps not the ultimate position that Network 211 or the AG church would like to take, it is the consequence of a website design that attempts to gain an audience based on very specific felt needs. It is the consequence as well of the decision to treat each condition as unique rather than symptomatic of the same (sin) problem. This ideology—that God is an instantaneous cure to whatever currently ails us—is brought about both through the content and the structural features of the website. While the text and videos teach the visitor that their problems—even physical illness—are reconcilable with the simple saying of a prayer, the architectural features of the website push the visitor from a variety of different directions towards the limited choice of saying "yes" or "no" to becoming a Christian. The ultimate effect is not only a limited range of navigational options but a limited version of the AG's full theological position.

The Ideology of Design

As examining the *Jesus 2020*, *Peace with God*, and *Journey Answers* websites reveals, to understand how rhetoric functions in digital texts is a complex matter. As I argued in the previous chapter, recognizing formal features as relevant to persuasion must go beyond an observation and assessment of the non-transparent elements of form (color, font, imagery, etc). Instead, rhetoricians must delve into the elements of design that guidebooks suggest should be as "transparent" as possible: the features I have referred to as architectural and spatial and which include fundamental navigational features, options for hyperlinking, and the layout of image-based and textual elements. Extending this re-valuation into elements of content, I have subsequently argued that form and content in the website context must be considered as part of a unified project of persuasion and the forwarding of ideologies. In this chapter I have looked at how the content of the *Jesus 2020*, *Peace with God*, and *Journey Answers* websites work with the formal features to create powerfully persuasive environments in which visitors are encouraged to make what is depicted as a "simple" decision to become a Christian.

In the process of arguing for a more unified evaluation of the persuasive power of form and content on the Internet, I have emphasized as well the role of an ideological critique of webtexts, noting that Global Media Outreach, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Jesus.net, and Network 211 have all found unique ways to implement the design possibilities of the Internet to forward their ideologies. While all of the ministries share an understanding of humanity as divided into two populations—saved and unsaved—they have unique understandings of what leads an individual to convert: GMO believes in the value of isolating an individual, highlighting their loneliness; BGEA and

Jesus.net believe in the impact of creating a sense of community; and Network 211 believes in targeting a specific range of problems in an individual's life that salvation will presumably resolve. In each case what is perceived by these evangelical ministries as the unchanging message of the Gospel is shaped into very different forms when translated into the online context. For visitors to the *Jesus 2020* website, the Gospel becomes an opportunity for relationship; for visitor's to *Peace with God*, it is a road to peace; and for visitors to *Journey Answers*, it is a cure to various ailments. This is not to say that Christianity cannot provide different functions for different Christians, but it is noteworthy that while, in some ways, the evangelical designers of these websites were able to harness the nature of the Internet to promote their worldview, the nature of the Internet shaped their ideology as well. While embracing the ability of a website to limit a visitor's range of available behaviors and convince them through layout and content that they are being presented with a full understanding of a subject, this same process of simplification necessarily impacts the ideology presented as well.

Evangelicals have long been willing to adopt various media and transmission strategies to present the Gospel; however, they have also long been under the impression that dressing up the message in different ways does not change its essential nature. This may ultimately be the case, but what this examination of the rhetoric of evangelistic websites has revealed is that the media of choice forces evangelists to highlight certain aspects of the Gospel over others, to promote certain types of conversion over others, and to emphasize certain features of God's nature over others. Inasmuch as evangelists are able to promote their understanding of humanity through the design features made available by the Internet medium, the Internet shapes ideology as well, a fact that is

undoubtedly true not only for evangelicals but for all efforts towards ideological persuasion which take place online. This element of the nature of the Internet, however, is only revealed in light of a revalued understanding of how persuasion functions online: through the interwoven rhetorical characteristics of both form and content and through the manipulations of content that necessarily result from these design decisions.

While scholars like Anne Wysocki have, as I have described, framed the discourse surrounding the relationship between a message and the channel through which it is conveyed as an issue of form vs. content, arguing that form and content are inseparable in the digital context, another important way of contextualizing this issue is illuminated in the work of Marshall McLuhan who is perhaps most famously known for his claim that “the medium is the message” (*Understanding Media* 7). In McLuhan’s formation, the message itself is of minimal consequence in light of the medium through which it is conveyed. Offering the case of the technology of automation, for example, he argued that “it mattered not in the least whether [the machine] turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs”; instead, what was of consequence was “the personal and social consequences of any medium” (8). Adding McLuhan’s perspective on the medium/message relationship to rhetorical studies into form/content allows us to explain perhaps more clearly what we have seen occurring in the ideological transformation exhibited in evangelical websites. Just as we saw that form and content, as Wysocki has argued, must be observed in unison and function simultaneously in digital texts, it is the medium of the Internet itself which has caused evangelicals to approach the Gospel in the particular manner and via the particular strategies we have observed. Though the differences between the theologies represented online and the theologies delineated in each ministry’s statement of faith are

interesting in terms of how the evangelical worldview has manifested on the web, what is perhaps more interesting are the similarities in the alterations that have taken place. While I have argued that the form of the website and the consequences of selecting certain elements of web design have caused each ministry to present a theology that focuses on various types of conversions (e.g., quick or relational) and certain motivations for conversion (e.g., discontent, loneliness, sickness) directly supporting Wysocki's claim that form and content work together to effect persuasion in digital texts, two major similarities in the type of theological transformation that is taking place emerge from an analysis of these texts. The first is a conceptualization of audience as a single type of isolated individual ("unsaved"); the second is a conceptualization of God as "solution" or divine answer to any query by any seeker. In Shane Hipps's study of Christian media, he has argued that with each media revolution that impacted the church, approaches to faith and theological emphases were impacted: with the rise of the printing press, for example, he claims that faith grew to be focused on the individual and centered on objective, abstract, linear, and rational thinking (53-60). The later broadcast revolutions of radio and television reversed these trends "bringing about a new tribalism in the church" created by the communality of many people listening to or watching the same event simultaneously and additionally turning the church "back to tribal ways of knowing that are experiential, oral, and corporate rather than rational, visual, and private" (66). With the Internet, a medium that maintains elements of both print and broadcast media, we have not surprisingly found a combination of the print and broadcasting effects: the focus on the individual we have seen most explicitly in the *Jesus 2020* and *Peace with God* websites is similar to that found with print media. In both cases, the evangelists took advantage of

the fact that the individual on the other side of the screen is alone, experiencing the message in isolation, a position that allows the ministries to target the particular worries, concerns, or needs of the individual and offer God as a unique solution for fulfillment. In addition, however, a quintessential trait of the Internet is its capacity for networking and relationship, its ability to develop a communality similar to that of broadcast media with the additional trait of allowing interactivity within the communality: dialogue through chat or email between members of a community. As a result, we have seen the web medium transform evangelism to focusing on the individual as a potential member of a relationship which will serve as a bridge to conversion. Isolation as a precursor to community becomes a key components of online evangelism.

As a second point, the nature of the web as a space of interrogation and research, a tool that “extends”—to use McLuhan’s terminology—our ability to explore and seek out knowledge has led to the development of a conception of God focused primarily on His role as provider. In the case of each website, God is depicted as ready and waiting to give the seeker whatever particular need they are experiencing as unfulfilled whether that be the need for love, the need for companionship, or the need for any other emotional longing. The distinction between this emphasis and that of the Prosperity Gospel popularized via broadcast media shows that while the emphasis on the individual’s need has been maintained, a shift from God as material provider to God as emotional provider has taken place.

It is only through considering the broader view of the Internet as a medium in addition to conceptualizing form and content as inseparable components of persuasion in digital texts that the full impact of Internet evangelism on the evangelical message can

begin to be understood. Appreciating how each ministry's message is imitated in the form allows us to see the importance of better understanding the role web design plays in persuasion, and looking more broadly at how the nature of the Internet has encouraged a specific type of conversion and a specific version of God to be emphasized in the evangelical project helps us to better understand the relationship between the medium and the message as well.

Chapter Five

Persuasive Communities Online and the Changing Face of Evangelistic Outreach

The evangelical movement has historically thrived because of its willingness to resist denominational categorization, its eagerness to reach out to diverse populations across geographic boundaries, and its commitment to adopting cutting edge technologies to spread the Gospel message. This adaptability, flexibility, and forward-thinking attitude towards technology has extended to the establishment of an evangelical presence on the Internet over the past four decades. I have examined how, in the context of evangelistic websites, this movement has harnessed the unique features of the Web medium to its advantage and have argued that, in fact, the opportunities to tightly control a user's decision-making process actually matches the evangelical worldview in an unprecedented manner. I have also argued, however, that as evangelicals have adopted the persuasive capacities of web design, they have allowed the Web medium to shape the nature of their ideology in return. This impact on ideology is more than just the result of attempting to target a variety of audiences, taking advantage of the "long-tail" marketing strategy that rhetoricians like James Porter have argued are so successful in the Internet marketplace (176). Instead, they are shaping their message in ways that reflect fundamentally different understandings of what conversion should look like, what brings an individual to the point of conversion, and which characteristics of God are most likely to attract a non-Christian's interest. Such a transformation of message as a result of the medium through which it is presented is no new phenomenon to rhetoricians who have long understood that the situational context in which a communication event occurs has fundamental implications for how the message is conveyed; in a similar manner, evangelicals as

well—though working under the assumption that their message remains unchanged regardless of context—have long justified their variety of evangelistic strategies as an adoption of the mandate of I Corinthians 9:19-23 to "become all things to all people, that [they] might by all means save some." Nevertheless, an analysis of the overtly persuasive context of evangelistic websites has enabled me to both show how the persuasive nature of the Internet might be theorized in terms of its architectural features as well as to explore how ideology shapes and is shaped by the Web.

Persuasive strategies and ideology are not the only aspects of the evangelical project that have been impacted by a move to the Web, nor are they the only aspects of evangelistic Web discourse from which rhetorical studies might benefit. Issues related to community—community formation, community outreach, community dynamics, and community gathering—are central to the evangelistic online presence. Though the evangelical movement is largely characterized by a fierce commitment to non-denominationalism, the establishment of relationships with other Christians and the transitioning of new converts into a local church where they can be supported and begin to worship with other believers have always been key elements of the mission (Dyrness 298). Naturally, the central role of community integration to evangelicals has been included in their efforts at digital evangelism as well.

Indeed, the significance of the Internet for both evangelism and for subsequent religious community formation in recent years is striking, especially in light of current statistical trends in the American Protestant church. According to Gallup poll results from 2011, 95% of all Americans who have a religious identity are Christian (78% of all American adults), and the self-reported importance of religion to American citizens has

remained predominantly stable over the past four decades (Newport "Christianity"). These numbers might suggest that church attendance and gatherings of Christian communities would reflect the popularity of and commitment to the faith as well. However, this is not the case. Instead, both church membership and confidence in organized religion have been in steady decline since mid-century. In a 1937 poll conducted by Gallup, 73% of Americans reported church membership, a number that generally remained stable throughout the remainder of the decade. However, beginning in 2002, membership dropped to between 63% and 65%, and in 2007, only 44% of American Christians reported regular (weekly or almost every week) church attendance (Newport "Questions"). In addition, whereas in 1973, "the church or organized religion" was reported to be the most trusted institution in America—a position that the church continued to hold through the early eighties (surpassing even the military and the United States Supreme Court)—by the late eighties, confidence in organized religion dropped to below 60%, a shift that Gallup speculated to be a result of the media attention given to the scandals surrounding televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart (Saad). What these statistics point to is the strange complexity of an American population that both claims to be Christian and strongly believes in the importance of religion but simultaneously is losing faith in organized religion.

One possible explanation that may be offered for this apparent contradiction involves the rising role of Internet communities for American Christians searching for fellowship. In 2004, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that 64% of Americans have used the Internet for "spiritual or religious purposes," and two-thirds of American adults have used the Web for faith-related matters (at the time, representing

approximately 82 million people) (Hoover i). The most popular religious online activities were email correspondence regarding spiritual issues (38%), sending and receiving religious holiday cards (35%), reading news reports about religion (32%), looking up information on religious holidays (21%), seeking out religious services to attend (17%), using email to organize religious gatherings (14%), downloading or listening to religious music (11%), asking for or responding to online prayer requests (7%), and making monetary donations to religious charities or organizations (7%) (4). Half of these "online faithful" self-identified as evangelicals, a group of individuals whom the Pew report described as "a significant subgroup of the American religious landscape" and as being "among the most fervent Internet users for religious and spiritual purposes. In addition, they are more likely than other religious Internet users to engage in a variety of religious activities online, including using the Internet for personal spiritual enrichment as well as to find out about and dialogue with those of other faiths" (iii).

An interesting parallel to these findings on the evangelical online presence are the strong levels of online interaction regarding spiritual matters and orientation towards religious community formation online. There is also a significant amount of evidence that "seekers" (to use the terminology of sociologists Wade Clark Roof and Robert Wuthnow) are browsing the web in large numbers, looking both for answers to their spiritual questions and for the community that religious affiliation might provide (Hoover 7). The Pew report indicated that 26% of people doing searches related to spirituality were looking for information about faiths other than their own (7). Even more encouraging to digital evangelists has been the subsequent finding that, in fact, individuals reporting that they are "neither religious nor spiritual" and those reporting that they are "spiritual, but

not religious" are among the heaviest of overall internet users for any purpose, suggesting that the target audience for evangelism is indeed turning to the Internet regularly and as a primary source of information (11). In addition, both of these populations have reported high interest in using the Internet to learn about various faiths (57% of the "spiritual, but not religious" individuals; 82% of the "neither religious nor spiritual" individuals) (18). Though statistics are only able to take us but so far, what these numbers suggest is that what evangelicals have historically viewed as the ideal mission field (a population consisting exclusively of non-Christians) is present and that these non-Christians are curious about religion.

Even before this statistical information was made available, however, finding ways to use the Internet for community-building and outreach was a priority for Christians. As with the evangelical commitment to being early adopters of print, radio, and television media, the Internet was seen as a medium in which, if they did not represent themselves, they risked being made irrelevant by the presence of popular secular adopters of the Web. Though evangelicals were involved in using even the very earliest bulletin board systems as opportunities both to evangelize and to converse with other evangelists, sociologist and Christian pollster George Barna's studies in the 1990s recommending that churches work quickly to establish a presence online or risk losing their status as authorities on spiritual information encouraged the more rapid adoption of the medium (Helland 26). The response by evangelicals to online missions opportunities was so great that Barna subsequently predicted that by the early 21st century the cyber-church would be a major force for Christianity and, indeed, his prediction came to pass: between 1986 and 2006, the number of congregations with Web sites almost tripled, and

in each subsequent year, approximately 10,000 more congregations post a Web site (Farrell 73). And this is just church websites: the evangelistic presence represented in other Web genres—including social media, blogs, vlogs, non-church websites, chat rooms, and discussion boards—makes the Christian commitment to the web as a place for spiritual activity even more convincing. In particular, especially in light of the rise of the interactivity-encouraging Web 2.0, evangelicals are now, more than ever, using community-formation as the basis for evangelism and not always as the traditional transitional step towards a face-to-face religious community.

It is interesting that, though scholars in religion and sociology have taken an interest in online religious communities, the discussion of online religious communities—Christian or otherwise—from a rhetorical perspective has largely been overlooked. There are, to my knowledge, no examinations of the discourse of these communities by rhetoricians. As Dawson and Cowan have written, "The consequences for religion [of the Internet] are as yet largely unknown" and yet rhetoricians have yet to approach what is posed as a question of central importance: "Will this new way of being religious make a difference in how religion is conceived and practiced in the future?" (1). Though rhetoricians have not specifically approached religious online communities, however, there are a variety of interesting and relevant studies of the rhetoric of a diversity of other sorts of both physical and online communities that will prove helpful as a starting point for extracting the central issues surrounding the translation of communities to the web, the formation of new communities online, and the relationship between on and offline communities.

In addition, scholars in other fields—including sociology, anthropology, Internet studies, communication, and even geography—have shown interest in the nature and role of Internet communities in contemporary society. In the 1990s, research into the social aspects of the Internet became a predominant area of interest in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) studies. One important aspect of this scholarship centered on how to define community online. In 1993, Howard Rheingold defined virtual online communities (VOCs) as "social aggregations that emerge when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships (in cyberspace)" (5). In 1997, Whittaker, Isaacs, and O'Day identified five key traits of online communities:

1. members have some shared goal, interest, need, or activity that provides the primary reason for belonging to the community
2. members engage in repeated active participation and there are often intense interactions, strong emotional ties and shared activities occurring between participants
3. members have access to shared resources and there are policies for determining access to those resources
4. reciprocity of information, support, and services between members
5. shared context (social conventions, language, protocols) (27)

Two years later, in their book on the formation of online educational communities, Palloff and Pratt attempted to theorize both how online communities form and how these communities develop and grow. They argued that the establishment of an online community requires, first, that the purpose of the community must be explicitly defined; second, that leadership roles and rules of conduct should be clearly established; and, third, that the roles of members of the community should be apparent. Once an online community has formed, Palloff and Pratt then argue for five distinct stages of community development: forming (the establishment of the community), storming (a period of

conflict in which the community resolves problems and achieves stability), norming (the beginning of the establishment of close relationships and regular productivity), performing (high level of productivity), and adjourning (the ending or termination of the community) (36).

An additional aspect of this discourse has centered on identifying the traits that make online communities thrive or fail: In his article on how trust is built in virtual communities, for example, István Mezgár identifies three key traits of a "successful virtual community," writing that, to thrive, "there must be high social capital, meaning there must be low structure, high trust, and common goals," traits that "can be organized independently of nationality and distance" (5). By "social capital," Mezgár—referencing Blanchard's research from 2000—is referring to the community members' "ability to collaborate effectively" (5). As in offline communities, the central feature of communities online is a sense of common commitment to the goals or services of the community; however, the particular requirements for this community to thrive—low structure, high trust, and common goals—are worth unpacking further. By "low structure," Mezgár states the importance of having "no real social hierarchy" among community members (5). This is not to say that there are no administrators or moderators present in successful online communities, but the sense that individual members are all required to work according to the same rules of behavior and are all impacted by the same privacy policy creates a sense of trust in the community that is essential for discourse and commitment to develop. Mezgár further argues that trust, as in offline communities, can be established in online communities in a variety of different ways, but that the establishment of trust is actually one of the most difficult tasks online because of the issues of anonymity and the

inability to apparently detect deception; thus, trust is most often built up by observing the online behaviors of other community members over a considerable period of time, with attention to how much and how often others are willing to disclose personal information and provide helpful responses.

Trust is established as well by less inter-personal, more technical features of the discourse space in which the community exists: the extent to which community members feel that the environment is secure can create or diminish trust (Mezgár 6). "Access control (passwords, firewalls), protecting integrity and privacy of messages and databases (cryptography) and identification of user" are all cited as elements impacting the level of trust in an online community (6). Henderson and Gilding have also contributed to studies on trust-establishment online by arguing for four sources of online trust: reputation (built up either on or offline), performance, pre-commitment through self-disclosure (which tends to lead other community members to more willingly share as well), and situational factors, including the "close-knittedness of the community" and "historical conditions" in which some members have more established trustworthiness than others (494). Finally, by common goals, Mezgár notes that at the very least, community members need to have a shared commitment to the continued functioning of the community, especially in terms of the belief "that communities can only truly be built through interaction and participation among community members based on trust, privacy, and freedom of expression" (5).

What these examinations of online community formation reveal is that virtual communities—more so than their face-to-face counterparts—appear to require a greater degree of intentionality from members, administrators, and moderators. Specifically,

scholars have consistently identified the importance of regular content contribution, clearly-defined and reliably-enforced standards of behavior, and a well-designed and trustworthy space as key components of a thriving virtual community.

Yet another type of early research on online communities has centered on attempting to determine if—and, if so, in what ways—online communities are real. As early as 1976, scholars including Short, Williams, and Christie were attempting to quantify the differences between on and offline experiences, arguing that because of the audiovisual inferiority of online experiences, encounters online should be considered lower in social presence, thus being less "real" in the sense that people online do not "feel" as present to us (70). Such early claims led to a general sense that online communities lacked the vitality of their offline counterparts and that Internet relationships in general were simply weak parallels to "real" life engagements. By the 1980s though, scholars began to realize that rather than being "weaker" than offline communities, online communities merely worked in different ways and that alternate methods of establishing rich levels of trust, closeness, and self-expression were in fact possible if understood from a different perspective. In 1986, for example, Davft and Lengel created a "media richness hierarchy" to capture the level to which various media are able to provide rich communication experiences. The criteria include the quickness with which feedback is provided, the ability of the medium to provide multiple communicative cues (voice tone, inflection, or gesture, for example), the implementation of natural language, and the extent to which the medium encourages and focuses on the personal (560-561). It is possible that some online communities might possess all four criteria of richness: for example, instant feedback might be found in chat conversations;

multiple cues can be effected through the use of multimedia, images, text, or the implementation of italics or capital letters; emoticons or the use of Web-lingo like LOL or BRB suggest a well-developed Internet language; and web communities might encourage personal interaction by centering on issues or concerns of common interest. As a result of such revisions in understanding of how online communities function and in light of ethnographic studies more closely examining the interactions within and commitments to online communities, the debate over the "realness" of online communities has ultimately resolved in favor of online communities as real networks of interpersonal relationships, social dynamics, and discourse.

Additional research has involved that attempt to evaluate how online and offline communities relate and impact each other. Sherry Turkle has, for example, described virtual communities as extensions of the individual members' self-identities and as unique but parallel aspects of their lives and has argued as well that the appeal of virtual communities is that web surfers can enter into them and be whomever they desire, escape from reality, and are given the liberty to speak more openly than in face-to-face communities which are limited by social constraints (177). Turkle writes: "When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass" (177). G. Valentine and S. Holloway have also identified two trends in studies of Internet communities: one—labeled as "boosters" and represented by the work of Bingham, Valentine, and Holloway—is based in an understanding of online community as an extension of and improvement of off-line reality; the other—labeled as "debunkers" and represented by McLaughlin, Osbourne, and Smith—centers on the view

that online communities are not authentic and only serve as inferior imitations of the real world (304).

A final area of scholarship in internet communities relates to identifying the unique traits of these communities and exploring how they challenge our traditional practices of discourse. Three areas of discourse which have been particularly targeted for consideration are anonymity, accountability, and authority. In the mid-nineties, Branscomb and Singer worked towards understanding how anonymity functions in online communities, noting that in place of physical presence, individuals online are able to identify themselves in a variety of other ways, including screen names, avatars, profile pictures, or self-descriptions. Of course, though anonymity allows for individuals to speak about, confess to, or share on topics they might never feel comfortable broaching in offline interactions, and though anonymity eliminates potential barriers to relationship encoded in traits like geographic location, economic status, race, or gender, it also has the potential to invite trouble into communities, especially in terms of issues of accountability. Branscomb has noted, for example, that for some anonymous posters, "the ability to remain unknown removes many of the layers of civilized behavior as they realize that they can escape responsibility for negligent or abusive postings" (1642). Authority figures online often serve an important role in moderating these problematic aspects of anonymity and accountability. Their authority is most often established either structurally by way of holding the position of moderator or administrator (and the resultant ability to screen posters and material posted) or through trust built up as a contributor via regular posting, providing reliable content, or proving useful and helpful to other members.

All of these issues—the definition of online communities, the "real-ness" of these communities, the relationship between on and offline communities, and the unique traits of these communities—have all been adopted by evangelists as well as they take their ministries to the web. As with all prior instances of evangelical engagement with "secular" culture, there have been detractors among the evangelical ranks. The primary concern has been the fear that online religious communities will replace the necessity of the local church. This has hardly proven to be the case, however. In fact, the Pew Forum has found that the most active members of online religious communities also tend to be the most regular churchgoers. These online religious communities seem to be predominantly—though certainly not exclusively—seen as supplemental communities to offline church experiences.

Because of the diversity of forms in which religious communities appear online, I have narrowed my focus to Christian communities with an evangelical orientation, organized by American ministries, with a self-professed evangelistic intent. In addition, I am interested in communities that do not purport to be supplemental to offline faith or as part of transitional experiences with the goal of moving new believers into a local church. However, in hopes of preserving some of the diversity of the evangelical community presence online, I studied three very different manifestations of community: the discussion board and chat communities of *Talk Jesus* and the community found on the Oklahoma megachurch Life Church's online church, *LifeChurch.tv*. In each case, I explore how authority is established, how new members are attracted and engaged, the nature and rhetorical features of the discourse, and how dissent is handled. I will argue that a rhetorical perspective on evangelistic online communities is advantageous to

rhetoricians because it adds an interesting perspective on how persuasion is forwarded via and as part of community formation to the discourse regarding online community. In addition, I will argue that an examination of the evangelical community presence online reveals a shift towards democratization among American evangelicals, a shift that is in part a response to the nature of Web 2.0 but also can be seen as an attempt to distance from and revise the impact of the negative associations between evangelism and televangelist scandal. Just as the Internet environment has been seen to shape both evangelistic strategies and evangelical ideology, it is also having an impact on evangelical community.

Talk Jesus: Bible Café

I entered the *Talk Jesus* "Bible Café" chat room for the first time on a lazy Saturday afternoon. Six other people were already there, in the middle of a rapid-paced discussion over the challenges of praying "aloud": they were debating over how comfortable they felt with typing out prayers. One participant was explaining how typing out prayers is as difficult for her as speaking prayers: she just feels awkward doing it. Another encouraged her to try it, that nobody was going to judge her, and that it is a good thing to learn how to do. Before I even had a chance to orient myself or to figure out how to enter the conversation, I was being greeted: within seconds of arriving, an automated greater sounded a chime and shot out the message "Welcome to Bible Café, Amber Stamper!" This was quickly followed up by "Welcomes" from "jubilant," "shy," and "childoffaith." Immediately, I felt exposed and vulnerable: All of the attention was suddenly on me. And I was the only one who had chosen to log in to the chat room through my Facebook account. This meant that whereas everyone else had a nickname or

first name only attached to a graphic avatar—childoffaith was a bulldog, eskimosuzy was a pool of running water lit by moonlight, jubilant was a lion, etc.—both my first and last name and my Facebook profile picture were posted. The "real" me—name and face—were right out there! Someone immediately asked, "Is Stamper your real last name, or do you just like to stamp things?" followed by a bright yellow grinning smiley face. I confessed I was new and had not realized that everyone else had registered accounts. Everyone "lol'ed" about it and showed me how to create an account and choose an avatar for more privacy. Within minutes of entering the chat room, I was convinced that any concern or hesitation on the part of scholars regarding if online communities are "real" could not possibly be based in any firsthand experience. These people were in relationship and were invested in each other's lives: though I tried to keep up and contribute where I could to their chat—when Trisha had a question about Netflix pricing, I was able to answer, and, at another point, I explained how Kindle book downloads work—there were a couple of moments where my outsider status was apparent: At one point, for example, several of the members seemed to pick up on an older conversation about struggles one participant had been having in school, and I had to just sit and watch them type. They also had nicknames for each other: "Swordsman4jc" was referred to by his friends as "Swordy," and "jubilant" was "jube," for example. Though it was a "Bible Café," the conversation ranged all over the place: from problems with cell phone data plans to which is the best TV to buy someone for Christmas to the live broadcasts of Francis Chan's "Multiply" ministry experiences to whether or not it is weird to eat cheese by itself. When I asked if anyone else was new, I learned that most were not: their replies ranged from one year of active participation to the general "long time." When I asked if

the community was mainly Christians, I learned that the majority of individuals at any given time in the chat room tended to be Christian, but that it is not uncommon to find guests who enter to ask questions about Christianity. In fact, two of the participants in the chat room—"Shy" and "eskimosuzy" (just "suzy" to her friends)—became Christians in the chat room and continue to participate in regular conversation and chat evangelism.

Talk Jesus, a web ministry consisting of discussion boards and a chat room, states its dual goals of spiritual encouragement and evangelism boldly on its main page: "Our Purpose: spread the Good News to the ends of the Earth [Mark 16:15]. We're also here to edify the church [Ephesians 4:11-12]. . . We love you and are glad you are here!" A "Statement of Faith" thread found in the forum section of the website was posted by the site's Administrator and regular participant "Chad," who self-identifies as a thirty-two year old American man who works for a company called LogicWeb and who was "born again" in 2002. The Statement of Faith he provides is similar to the variety of evangelical tenets of belief that we have seen and includes his hopes for *Talk Jesus*:

Talk Jesus is like a virtual online church, a body of believers that join together in spiritual fellowship, [to] praise and worship our Lord Savior Jesus Christ. It's purpose is to edify believers and reach out to those who do not yet know the truth about our Jesus Christ and the need for salvation.

The chat room portion of the website is clearly designed to create a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere for dialogue. Perhaps the most notable feature is the "radio" option. Along the left-hand side of the chat room interface is a playlist consisting of one hundred contemporary Christian music tracks: all of the most popular songs played on Christian radio are available, in a range of genres, including live recordings from Jesus Culture and Hillsong; popular rock artists like Casting Crowns, MercyMe, Tenth Avenue

North, and Third Day; solo artists like Steven Curtis Chapman, Josh Wilson, and Chris Tomlin; and hip hop artists like Lecrae.

In the *Talk Jesus* chat room, the individual is made to feel simultaneously that they are having an extremely personalized experience—that the space has been created particularly for them—and also a very public and communal experience. The personalizable features include the music selection as well as the option for the user to change the color of the background of their interface, elements of their personal experience that other participants cannot see (Figure 11). Options are not limitless for personalization: the user must select from a limited set of colors and themes; however, this is the type of feature that has been shown to make users feel comfortable in and willing to trust an online space (Mezgár 5). In addition, users are given a good deal of control over how they appear to each other in both image and in text: as I quickly learned, logging into the website via Facebook allows for photographic representation, a real life depiction of an individual. Logging into the website via a registered *Talk Jesus* account allows for the selection of an avatar, a choice that at first appears limiting, but allows for the provision of a textual description of one's self through the creation of a profile. Profile creation is actually a requirement for creating a *Talk Jesus* account: to register, an individual must be willing to identify themselves as "saved" or "unsaved" and share their age, hobbies, and a brief biography. The trade-off then is about equal: either a user reveals information about themselves by linking to their personal Facebook account, or they reveal information through the creation of a *Talk Jesus* profile. Posting entirely anonymously is not an option. Users of the *Talk Jesus* chat room unanimously prefer the *Talk Jesus* profile for self-identification, suggesting that the areas of an individual's

identity of utmost importance in the community are spiritual and biographical characterizations rather than the physical traits made available by a Facebook profile picture. Choosing the *Talk Jesus* profile also shows commitment to long-term engagement with the community. On my second day visiting, an older man, a preacher named "macca" from Australia advised me that "It may be easier for you in here if you register and become a member." When I asked what he meant, he explained that it is usually only temporary visitors or spammers who have been banned by the *Talk Jesus* administrator who try to use Facebook to get back in. Users are also provided with control over how they represent themselves textually: they can select from a rainbow of font colors; make their words bold or italicized; include a range of animated or static emoticons; post links to videos, images, and articles; and change the background color of their text box.

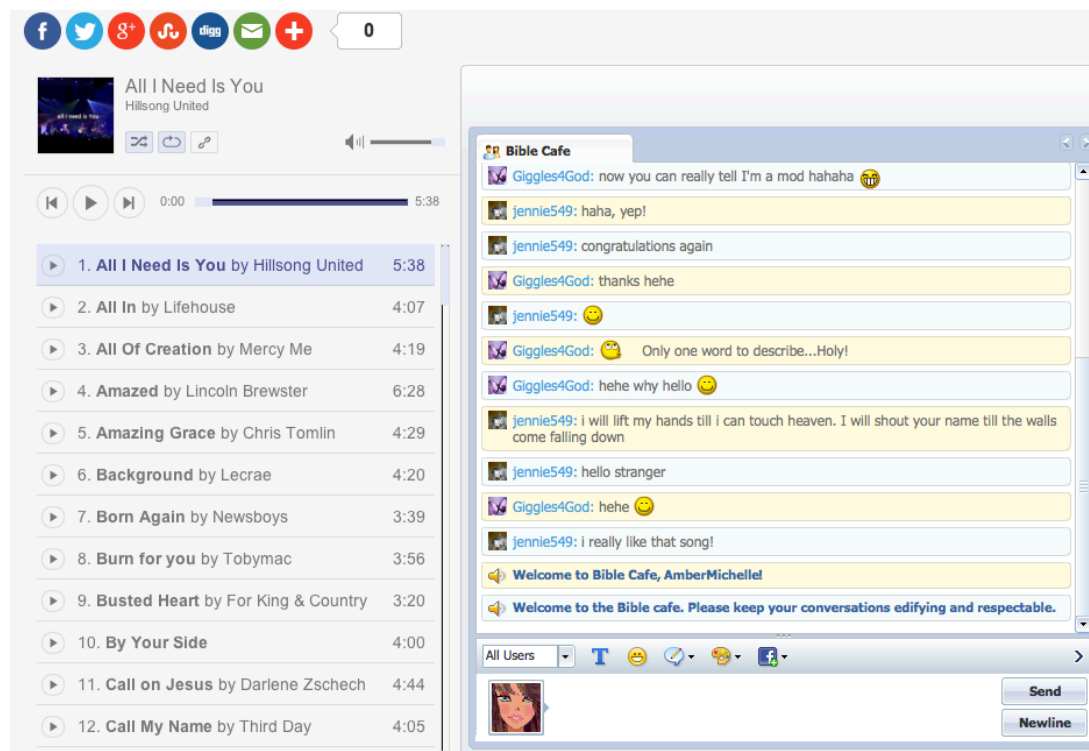


Figure 11, *Talk Jesus Bible Café*

The ways in which users take advantage of these options suggest that this level of control over their self-representation is a large part of the appeal of the chat room: participants regularly change avatars, switch font colors, and use the various emoticon expressions to convey their moods, within a single conversation even. They have even developed standards of etiquette for these expressive capabilities as well: they never, for example, make a font selection that someone in the chat room is already using, allowing each person to be unique in their self-selected representation for the day. This level of freedom of expression only carries over to the subjects of dialogue to a certain extent, however. Though Chad, the site administrator, has not posted rules specifically for the chat rooms, I was told by one of the participants that the rules he has posted for the forums apply. Though the list of regulations is extensive, their general focus is threefold: (1) users must keep their language and subject matter "family-friendly"; (2) users from non-Christian backgrounds are welcome as long as they are "seekers" of Jesus and not seeking to evangelize their own faith; and (3) no user may interfere with another Christian's attempts to evangelize.

Though these rules might sound restrictive, the type of evangelism and general conversation that I observed taking place in the chat room was firmly in the camp of "relational" or "friendship" evangelism. Though technically, Christian chatters will not be banned for evangelizing aggressively or in a proclamational or apologetics-based style, this is not the preferred method of choice. The individuals in the chat rooms feel as if the space is their own—an effect created by the design as well as the friendships that have been established there—and they work to keep it peaceful. Watching participants evangelize and share their faith with each other and with non-Christians over a period of

months, I observed several general stages they went through in building relationships: (1) sharing personal details about their lives, (2) sharing personal details about their faith, and (3) attempting to encourage, uplift, and provide answers to the questions of others. Within minutes of the first time I logged in to the chat room, I felt welcome: because I was new, I was the center of attention. Having participated in many chat rooms in the past—chat rooms for marathoners, personal trainers, equestrians, and free-trade coffee advocates, for example—I was acutely aware of how rare this is. In general, my experience has been a period of feeling slightly unwelcome and on the edge of a tight-knit community that I am trying to break into before finally starting to learn the language, subject matter, and people involved well enough to feel comfortable, at home, and an asset to the community.

In the *Talk Jesus* chat room, the goal of evangelism drives chatters to seek immediately to discover the spiritual state of new members: however, they nearly always lead with seeking to discover information about the new member's background, family, and interests. Before I was asked about my faith, for example, I had already been asked: "Are you married?"; "Where are you from?"; "What kind of job do you have?"; and "Do you have kids?" While these questions at first appeared to me just general polite things to ask a new member of a group, I realized over time that the particular type of information they generate gives evangelists an idea of the support system that a new member has around them: what they were really wondering was, "Are you isolated?"; "Are you lonely?"; "Are you emotionally, financially, or otherwise in distress?" Answers to these questions provide a very clear path to evangelists for how to approach sharing the Gospel with someone. Once they found out that I am a Christian, they immediately began to

discuss with me their experiences with chat room evangelism, providing me with tips for how to talk to antagonistic visitors, how to "Ignore" someone entirely if they seem to have malicious intents, and how to ask a lot of questions and listen to the stories of those who seem to be genuinely seeking spiritual help.

This strategy of first establishing personal connections, then spiritual connections, then sharing the Gospel does not seem to be a consciously-articulated plan, but it is used incredibly consistently in the chat rooms. Part of the reason for its effectiveness in opening people up to dialogue I believe has to do with the willingness on the part of the various chatters to respond both by opening up with personal details about their own lives as well as their willingness to couch the evangelistic conversation into more general conversations about mundane issues and everyday interests. On the former point, for every question that is asked of a new visitor, the questioner responds with their own answer, regardless of whether or not the question was asked back of them or not: For example, when Trisha asked me if I was married, I responded with "Yes, that's my husband in my profile picture," and she immediately replied with "I'm divorced and have lived on my own for eight years now." She then quickly followed up with "I have two grown and married kids and one grandson. Do you have any kids?" This second question reveals an alteration on the "you share-I share" strategy by reversing it: by providing me with information about herself first, she encouraged me to share more. Even in cases where I observed antagonistic visitors enter the chat room, this same approach was used. One girl named "moller" came in and immediately introduced herself as "Satan's girlfriend"; I was also told stories of regular chat visitors in the past named "Elijah" and "Enoch" who pretended to be reborn incarnations of these Old Testament men and tried

to convince people in the chat room that the Bible is "half myth, half truth" and that drugs should be legalized. Eventually, an administrator banned these individuals for being troublemakers and not "seekers." However, in the chat room, there appeared to be an unspoken rule that when individuals like this appear, the best way to handle them is to avoid arguing with them and to attempt to have a civil conversation, but if this is not possible, to just ignore the person and let the administrator take care of the problem. In the words of one regular chatter, the real-life radio preacher "Swordsman4JC," sometimes it works to keep trying to witness to them, but "mostly its pointless cause they are trying to start an argument and that's not good. I wont argue with no one about the bible. I say what i need to an believe thats it. . .lord tells me to hush i hush!" Indeed, another aspect of the chat rooms discourages intense theological or apologetics-centered debate as well: responses cannot extend past eighty characters without having to edit the text box to create more space, making it difficult to build up the verbal momentum that might be possible on a forum post.

Talk Jesus: Forums

By contrast, the community found on the *Talk Jesus* forums has a very different feel than that of the chat rooms: to engage in dialogue, you must not only register and create a profile, but you must read the extensive list of forum rules and create an introductory message to post in the "New Members" forum to introduce yourself to the community. Because of the nature of a forum, the structure, pace, and subject matter of the discourse are more organized; however, the *Talk Jesus* forum—unlike the chat room—also has an influential hierarchy of power that is apparent in the regular "moving" and "removing" of threads as well as the active role of content and doctrine regulation

that Administrator "Chad" and a group of ten regular posters who have been granted the position of "Super-Moderators" for their commitment to the community and doctrinal consistency play in the interactions on the forum. Nevertheless, there is a clear sense of community. Whereas in the chat room members' commitment to and familiarity with each other were expressed through an awareness of each other's daily lives and struggles and through regularly following up on life events, in the forums, relationship is expressed through knowledge of other members' theological positions, areas of religious expertise, or intellectual or spiritual authority. It is a regular occurrence on the forums for a person to ask a question and a responder to direct them to several other relevant threads on the website, revealing a familiarity with the space that suggests long-term and in-depth engagement. Forum members also tend to be similar in a variety of other ways: according to polls conducted on the *Talk Jesus* website, a majority of respondents attend church at least two days a week, identify themselves as evangelical, are between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, and became Christians later in life (at age nineteen or older). Since its inception in early 2003, over 17,000 members have joined *Talk Jesus*, and over 800 remain active, regular posters. In administrator Chad's testimony, posted as a sticky thread on the site, his initial desire to create *Talk Jesus* was born out of frustration over the ads, flammers, and gross disrespect for Christians that he saw on other forums online. He wanted to create a place where Christians could be open about their faith without entirely cloistering the community. Evangelism is as much of a priority for him as is spiritual encouragement for Christians. Indeed, part of the appeal of the site to its regular users is the balance it maintains between welcoming outsiders and tightly patrolling the content and nature of the discourse. By limiting non-Christian visitors to "seekers" only,

the goal of conversations involving nonbelievers is predominantly centered on answering their questions rather than debating. In fact, it is a rule on the site that debate is forbidden. Questions are welcomed, but only if they are perceived to be sincere and not intended to stimulate argument.

It does not come as a surprise then that, as the demographic statistics suggest, the vast majority of individuals regularly posting on the forums are Christian. However, considering the strict policies for involvement, there are a surprising number of committed, involved non-Christians as well. Because creating a profile—which requires answering the question "Are you born again?"—is a requirement for posting on the forums, who is who spiritually is easy to identify. In a survey of all active members who have posted over sixty times, I discovered eight regular non-Christian posters who ranged in engagement from having posted sixty-nine times to one hundred and thirty. Though there are many aspects of this community that could be explored, I will focus my discussion on how the tightly-knit, demographically-similar community of Christians practice evangelism on the forum. There are four levels of engagement on which this occurs: (1) establishing trust, (2) establishing authority, (3) offering prayer and spiritual guidance, and (4) community incorporation.

Trust is built up in a variety of ways on the website: besides the level of security for members that the administrators and moderators provide by keeping content clean and making sure rules are enforced for everyone, the administrator—who goes only by the first name Chad, a selection that conceals the authority he wields over the site—is regularly engaged in the forum. He responds nearly daily to threads posters have started as well as starting his own threads and polls (he has over 12,000 posts as of November

2012). In addition, he regularly gathers user feedback about their experience on the website: any time he makes a design change, he creates a poll to see whether users liked or disliked it. He also takes suggestions: should I delete the profiles of inactive users? Should I change the site's color scheme? Perhaps most powerfully, however, is Chad's willingness to humble himself before the forum members. Though the majority of his posts are confident statements of his theological position on various issues, full of scriptural justification, he does, at times, confess his weaknesses and share intimate details about his personal life. In one especially intimate thread entitled "My Prayer Request," for example, he writes:

Greetings brothers & sisters,
I am asking for prayer request for me and my wife of 2 years. We have been struggling with many complicated issues, unfortunately involving abuse on my part and some disagreements as well. Things have been become extremely complicated and involves issues with in-laws / relatives as well as. We have gone to a few counselors the past 2 years and while it has helped, things are still going very rough at this stage and volatile. Please pray for a miracle in my marriage and for GOD to just help us both be the husband and wife we're called to be.

Thank you, GOD bless.

In response to this post, Chad received over thirty messages of encouragement and prayer as well as other stories of individuals going through similar circumstances. The respect community members have for him is expressed as well in their creation of threads like "What does *Talk Jesus* mean to you?" which is full of praise for the site. Chad's position of both administrating the forum and taking advantage of the spiritual resources suggests a real investment in the community. He has not just created it, but he values it and wants to be a part of it as well.

Though Chad has a built-in position of authority, other forum members establish their authority in similar ways: through regular posts, balancing thread-creation with thread-response, sharing their testimony, and offering their prayers to others. Non-Christians entering the site for the first time find themselves in a space where users respect each other as experts: if not experts in theology, then experts by nature of having first-hand experience of Christian life. To exemplify how this establishment of trust and offering of prayer function as evangelistic, I will look at the case of Krista, known online by the screen name "nicolek," a young married woman and teacher who came to the forum from British Columbia and became a Christian during her time on the website, a period of three years from June 2005 to her last post in July of 2008. When Krista first joined the site, she stated on her profile that she was "just here to learn :)" and stated that her interests are "soccer, running, NBA, reading, shopping. . ." Her avatar was a smiley face with bright blushing pink cheeks. The first post that she responded to was a long testimony shared by a young college-aged boy named Chris who described how he came out of a past of drug abuse where he contemplated suicide to be called into ministry. She explained in her comment that she related to a lot of his experiences and that it was "encouraging to see that [he] got through it all." The very next day she was on the forum again, starting her own thread to introduce herself, entitled "so bored. . .so though I'd write in here and introduce myself :)" Having spent time reading the testimonies of others and even taking part in the chat rooms, in her introduction she felt comfortable enough in the company of the *Talk Jesus* community to share intimate details about her past and her thoughts on Christianity. She wrote:

06-16-05, 06:10 PM

Hi anyone who is reading this.

I am from British Columbia Canada. I live at the south tip of a beautiful island and I absolutely love it here! I have been away at school for 4 years so it is really nice to finally be back home (as of last september). I am a teacher. This year I work as a Learning Assistance teacher and I help kids with Learning Disabilities, but I really hope to one day get a job as an elementary teacher. I am married to a truley wonderful man. He puts up with a lot because I am a big pain in the butt! But we have a lot of fun together. . .we are best friends. I have always believed in God and I went to church as a child. I was baptised as a baby in the united church and later did my first communion/confirmation in the catholic church. I went to the Christian University (called Trinity Western) for a year and I saw how totally different Christianity could be than what I saw as a child. Wow I was in shock. I saw students singing, clapping, dancing, and really really passionate. They new everything about Christianity. . .but it really showed how I didn't know much. It was a year of struggles for me. I had some really good Christian friends who dragged me to church once in a while and tried to wake me up for daily chappel, but something in me resisted every step of the way. After that year I could no longer afford to go there so I went to another school (public) and finished post secondary education. My husband and I don't go to church (except for holidays with my family), but we both believe in God. We took an Alpha course last year which was interesting and we learned a lot. I am here to learn more. It is hard because I feel all these feelings at are wrong when I come here sometimes. I start to question it all, I look at it as a cult. . .but I dont want to think like that. My mind is so mathematical I always need proofs and so it is hard sometimes. It is hard because I understand the first step has to be a leap of faith and I dont know how you get the faith to start with! I have asked God into my heart many times. Each timme I hope to feel something but I never did. But I think theroetically I must be saved because I did what you are supposed to do right? I don't know! Anyhow I love it here and I think it's a great website. I like chatting with people while I am at work (helps pass the time when there are no kids in my room) and the conversations are always interesting! I spend a lot of time sitting and listening :) Anyhow my hand is getting tired so I will post this :) hope to talk to you soon!

Krista's willingness to open up and share such personal details about her life and faith within days of joining the site reflect her level of comfort with community members. Her introduction received fourteen responses, all from Christians on the website, all encouraging, and all uniquely characterized by their equal willingness to respond by

sharing details about their own lives: Jesuslovesu shared that she is a "mom of three," "married for almost 11 yrs," and mymakersdaughter shared that her "hubby is an engineer," for example. However, lest it appear that these responses are simple matters of politeness, it is noteworthy that, in each case, personal revelation is directly related back to addressing the spiritual problems with Christianity that Krista has stated—her uncertainty over whether or not she is a Christian and her inability to rationalize Christian faith, feeling sometimes that Christianity is like a "cult"—and establishing the Christians on the website as authority figures who can explain her predicaments and show her the resolution to them: Jesuslovesu said "I understand what you mean about thinking that things are like a 'cult' but let me tell you this place is far from it! See the devil will feed ya all sorts of lies to keep ya so dont let that happen"; mymakersdaughter continued with "My hubby is an engineer so his mind is always questioning looking for imperfections. He is grounded in his faith though. We are not a cult, but we know there is more to life than here and now, that there is an after life and we want to be prepared." Other respondents explained "We are just normal people of all walks of life that have our faith in Jesus Christ in common. God wants you, and that is why he will not leave your heart alone!"; "God is working in your life, and he knows your innermost needs and desires, if you pray to him, he will hear you! He has lead you here, to these forums for a reason. . .God loves you and wants you to be saved, he will make his presence known to you when the time is right"; "Your not addicted to this web site, you are seeking Jesus Christ. You keep coming back because your spirit wants to know the Lord. We are not a cult, when you get to know us, we come from all different denominations and walks of life. We don't always agree on everything here, but we all agree Jesus is Lord." In addition to

mirroring Krista's self-revelation to encourage trust and establishing authority by offering reasons for her feelings, these evangelists sought to further involve her in the community and provided her with clear action points for what to do next. Jesuslovesu suggested that Krista begin by reading her Bible and praying everyday and defined for her what praying is: it is "not. . .just for what you want. . .[it's] talking to God and really listening"; mymakersdaughter suggested that she read books by R.C. Sproul, John McArthur, and John Stott, "great theologians [who] will help you ground your faith"; and burgeon directed her to a sticky thread on the forum, providing the link, called "Simple Steps to Salvation" and also recommended that she visit the blog he keeps on *Talk Jesus*. Many members told her that she was welcome to private message (PM) them to ask more questions or talk with them privately. This advice not only suggested that becoming a Christian is possible through educating oneself but encouraged Krista to educate herself according to the recommendations and within the context of the *Talk Jesus* community. A few weeks later, Krista's education within the community culminated in joining a public Bible study on the forum created by burgeon with Krista specifically in mind to help her read through the whole Bible with a community who could direct her reading and answer her questions along the way.

Over the next few weeks before Krista made the decision to become a Christian, an analysis of her interaction with the forum reveals the fruits of each of these evangelistic strategies and further directives from Christian participants encouraging her to continue in the directions of bonding over the common ground of life-details, building respect for the authority of the Christian participants, taking part in specific action strategies to lead her towards becoming a Christian, and incorporating more deeply and

identifying more closely with the community. The series of posts before her conversion reveal the sincerity of her spiritual inquiry and exemplify a gradual transition from an ever-growing dependence on the community as a company of guides and teachers towards, after her conversion, experiencing the community as a camaraderie of equals and friends. Shortly after Krista shared her introductory post, she began a series of threads inquiring into various aspects of Christianity that troubled her or that she did not understand: at one point, she asked if anyone had read the book *Conversations with God* and wondered how Christians on the forum experience God's voice; at other points, she asked about the role of fasting and what Christians imagine death being like. The community encouraged her in this type of inquiry, providing her with long scriptural responses, challenging her misconceptions, and asserting their position of authority by repeatedly claiming that once she has decided to become a Christian, many of these troubles will be resolved as God will provide her with His enlightenment to understand or accept the lack of full understanding of the complexities of life. Though in her initial post, Krista stated that she was not certain whether or not she was a Christian, after several weeks of interacting with the *Talk Jesus* forums, she concluded that "I am not a christian." Her dependence on the community at this point for leading her out of this position, however, was made clear in her subsequent statement that "I am here [on *Talk Jesus*] day and night lately. . .because I want to understand how you are all so passionate!"

Three months after her first post, Krista posted a thread entitled "I did it!!!" describing the story of her conversion. She and her husband became Christians on the same night, and she attributed her ability to make this decision directly to the *Talk Jesus*

community and the knowledge she learned there that she shared with her husband. Her conversion was especially interesting in that it involved resolution of all of the specific concerns about Christianity that she had expressed. She first described being overwhelmed by a fear of death in the days leading up to her conversion: "well a couple of days ago someone on here told me they felt urgency about my situation and they told me to think about where i will go when i die. . .the word 'urgency' it really scared me"; at first she was afraid that this urgency was prophetic, but quickly "a thought came into my head and told me it is not that way. that th[e] urgency exists because i need to help other people before they die" and explained her initial thought away by assuming it was "the devil telling me weird things." Then, she experienced what she described as a conversation between herself and God: her lingering discomfort with the rhetoric of the *Talk Jesus* Christians is revealed by her reference to the various roles in the conversations as "thoughts" rather than people—"me" and "God"—however, her experience of a conversation was moving her in that direction, and, by the end of her description, she had arrived at this point:

then another thought came to me telling me 'why would the devil [tell] you to help people beleive in Me?' and the thought also asked me if i feel better now than I did before I listened to my heart (God talking to me). . .and the answer was that . . .id feel better knowing it was not all about me dying. . .well then i thought why would the devil [make] me feel better. . .he wouldn't! So therefore I deduced that 'the thoughts' must have been put in my head by God. . .So then my 'conversation' went on. . .Krista do you beleive in God-yes. . .Krista do you beleive in Jesus my son-Yes. . .Krista do yu beleive that Jesus died on the cross so all of your sins may be forgiven-Yes. . .and on and on. And in the end I had answered all of the questions I needed to answer. I didnt really even know I believed it all. . .but I do . . .i just dont understand it all. There is a difference. So I knew I was right with God and I new I would go [to] Heaven if i asked him to come into my heart.

The moment in which Krista stated "There is a difference" exemplifies the culmination of her knowledge of conversion and her transition from learner to teacher in the community. This is the process the community has forwarded by—until the point of her conversion—urging her to become committed to being a regular communicator on the forums and to depend on them and their scriptural and practical suggestions for becoming a Christian. Once Krista became a Christian, the community shifted its relationship with her, and Krista adopted a new relationship to the community.

Krista is not unique: the process that she went through—from entering the community as a "seeker" to becoming a Christian and then continuing to serve others and build friendships within the community—has been repeated with many other conversion experiences on the forum. This transition—exemplified both in the types of questions asked and the types of interactions had with Christian forum members as well as the way Krista's rhetoric shifted towards adopting the rhetoric of the Christian community ("asked jesus into our hearts," "ultimate sacrifice for our sins," and "the only way to heaven is through jesus")—was exemplified as well by the shift in the types of contributions she began to make to the forums. Though over the course of her time participating on the *Talk Jesus* forums Krista did occasionally ask for theological clarifications or advice on spiritual matters, for the most part her role became one of community support and encouragement: she began to post "just for fun" threads, asking people about their favorite childhood songs, their favorite movies, and their favorite NBA teams. She also began to mentor new members by—as was done with her—first relating to them on a personal level: when one woman named Ruth posted about a suicidal friend, Krista shared a similar experience of her own and gave her advice on helping her friend find a

counselor, for example. She became an advocate for the value of the community to others.

The evangelistic nature of the *Talk Jesus* forum results in a particular and unique type of community that I will term a “persuasive community.” This type of community expands by incorporating new members either by adding Christians who already testify to the values the community represents or by converting new members who are then integrated into the role of community advocates and evangelists. It differs from the forum in the more overt presence of hierarchy and control that is in part effected by the nature of a forum which allows for the record of past interactions to be kept but which is also effected through the regular intervention of the administrator and super-moderators to direct discussions and ensure that dialogue is not destroyed by debate or argumentation and that the doctrine stated in the Statement of Faith is promoted. This type of online community is unique in the history of technologically-mediated evangelism: at no other moment have evangelicals been able to control their audience in such a direct way while simultaneously maintaining interactivity and creating and building community. This type of evangelism is born out of the nature of the Internet medium and serves the ideology of the evangelical community particularly well: it allows for a dualistic worldview—in which individuals are identified as saved/unsaved and the lost are divided into seekers or disinterested—to thrive. In addition, while the perpetual quandary of evangelists employing mass media technology has been the problem of targeting an audience that is both unsaved and seeking, the forum environment is an example of a case in which it is able to resolve. The forum and chat media appear uniquely fit for evangelism.

LifeChurch.tv: Online Church

In addition to the innovations in evangelism and evangelical community formation found in the chat and forum communities of *Talk Jesus*, evangelicals online are also shaping communities online by finding new ways to practice churchgoing and using the act of attending church as an online opportunity for evangelism. Since the 1970s, one of the latest phenomena in religious community sweeping through the Protestant church has been the megachurch. The most general descriptions of megachurches identify them as Protestant churches averaging over two thousand weekly attendees; however, megachurches are often more specifically associated with large suburban church sites; a "uniquely modern response to society" with multimedia sermons and audio, television, and web broadcasts; popular pastors; and a particular brand of preaching which director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College Alan Wolfe has said centers on a message that "tends to be more upbeat, one of empowerment" (Thumma xviii; Armstrong). Though there have certainly been large churches with high attendance rates throughout Protestant church history, the megachurches attract significantly larger attendance: megachurch pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback church noted, for example, at the Pew Forum's Faith Angle Conference in 2005, that in 1963 in the United States, there were only ninety-three churches with a weekly attendance over one thousand, while slightly over four decades later, there were over 6,000 churches that exceeded this amount and 750 exceeding two thousand ("Myths"). The number of these megachurches and their individual congregations continue to grow, resulting in the development of church models that include small groups, life groups, or community groups for more personalized fellowship.

Though the implementation of the most current technology for entertainment-centered programming and wide audience potential has historically been a characteristic of these megachurches, more recently, a few megachurches have begun to employ the Internet arm of their ministries for community-centered purposes that extend beyond the broadcast model that had been their primary medium of choice in the past. The megachurch that has received the most media attention for its forays online has been *LifeChurch.tv*, a church affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church which "values the Bible as the Word of God, the gift of God's grace and ever-deepening spiritual life that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, the importance of extending God's love and compassion to a hurting world, and the strength that comes from unity within diversity," distinguishing itself from other denominations in that "while it strongly affirms the clear teaching of the Word of God, it allows believers the personal freedom to have varying interpretations on theological issues that are not clearly presented in Scripture" ("Beliefs"). Founded by senior pastor Craig Groeschel in 1996 at what is now known as the "Oklahoma City Campus," the church quickly expanded, establishing campus locations throughout Oklahoma and then in New York, Oklahoma, Texas, Tennessee, and Florida, totaling fifteen campuses to date. As early as 2002, *LifeChurch.tv* was incorporating satellite broadcasts of Groeschel's sermons into their ministry, and by 2006 they had launched their "Internet Campus," which employs the innovative strategy of combining broadcast sermons at various times throughout each day of the week with interactive chat features that allow online visitors to the site to respond to the sermon and talk to each other and to "hosts" working for *LifeChurch.tv*. In addition to *LifeChurch.tv*'s effort to create community online through their "Online Church" chat community, they

also founded a campus on Second Life, holding their first service there on Easter Sunday of 2007. Modelling itself after *LifeChurch.tv*'s offline campuses, the virtual campus is large—sixteen virtual acres—and includes a coffee shop, lounge, play rooms for children, and members can receive free virtual *LifeChurch.tv* t-shirts in addition to hearing messages preached throughout the week. *LifeChurch.tv*'s Second Life community—though one of the most popular and successful of its kind—is hardly unique. A search for "church" among Second Life destinations results in over one thousand results. Of course, these results include parody churches like "The Church of Apathy" and "The Church of Elvis," but many are real extension campuses of offline evangelical churches created with the explicit purposes of evangelism and fellowship among Christians. There are a variety of aspects of Second Life religion that have been examined by theologians, including whether these virtual churches are "legitimate" and how the role of evangelism changes when one is conversing with an avatar in a space used by many people to create alternative personas that are to varying degrees related to their offline personas. However, I am specifically interested less in whether or not what is being effected in these spaces should be called "church" or whether evangelism can take place among avatars and more so in how the types of community created in the online churches should impact our understanding of the evangelical project as well as how the web medium is changing conceptions of community. I will argue that *LifeChurch.tv* is establishing a new type of evangelistic online community: a community that is temporal, highly-structured, and, because of the urgency created within this persuasive space, highly-effective in bringing about conversions.

Though I discovered *LifeChurch.tv* by word of mouth and by reading about its ministry in magazines and news-letters about evangelism, the majority of visitors to the website come by it via social media. From the Online Church homepage, links are provided for visitors to share the page via Twitter, Facebook, or email to invite friends to church. Visitors are also finding out about the website from church attendees who post about it on tumblr or personal blogs, through Google searches, and through ads *LifeChurch.tv* has posted online. *LifeChurch.tv* also has a presence on Facebook and Twitter where they encourage people to come to the online church. One fan of their facebook page named Nathanael described his recent encounter with *LifeChurch.tv*: "I was alone in my hotel room after a hard night of trying to drink to forget about how my life was so on the wrong path. About to give up on it all. Because there is no way god could love me after all my sins. And if he couldn't love me who on earth could really even care. I got a invite link from a friend and saw how Samson a holy man turned away from god 3 times and God still loved and forgave him." He goes on to explain how his decision just to access that link his friend sent him changed his life: attending online church left him asking "what if that voice that told me I was unclean and unlovable was a lie. Just what if god who was waiting on me to call on him. Would he help me stand again?" Ultimately, Nathanael decided to become a Christian that night, describing how "I began crying as I sat on my motel bed. Then I got on my knees and asked him to help me to change my heart and restore my life." What is expressed here is the truly unique phenomenon of online evangelism at work: from the technologically-mediated connection of one friend sending a URL to another, to one man sitting alone in a hotel room feeling connected to hundreds of other viewers throughout the world as he watches

a sermon and participates in a live chat session via a computer and an internet connection, to this same man finding a supernatural connection with God, choosing to radically change his perspective on life, and experience conversion. The evangelistic challenge of overcoming geographic borders, the difficulties of face-to-face evangelism, and the social stigma seekers fear about coming to church "as they are" seem to have been overcome in the ideal medium of the Internet. Whereas Nathanael felt comfortable attending church drunk and depressed from the safety of his anonymous place in his hotel room, he would undoubtedly never have attended a brick and mortar church in this state in the offline world. And yet, this experience led him not to stay anonymous but to become a member of the community of *LifeChurch.tv* supporters and followers on Facebook, even feeling bold enough to share his story with others, a testimony that was encouraged via a series of "likes," Facebook's equivalent to a sign of approval or support.

The first time I attended *LifeChurch.tv* was on a Friday afternoon. In my experience over the past sixteen years of being a Christian, on Fridays at 12PM, the activity you are most likely to find in a church building at this time of day at the end of the week is administrative and organizational work. Most adults are at work; most children are at school. The traditional Sunday morning services are still two days away, and the traditional Wednesday evening service is two days past. Needless to say, I expected a small gathering at best. I was certainly in for a surprise. Several minutes before the service started, I accessed the Online Church website. Already, the chat feed was up, and I could read through the conversation from the service that had gone on earlier that morning. There were two hosts already logged on welcoming guests to the service, and a few visitors were already greeting the hosts and each other. The hosts

encouraged everyone to invite their friends on Facebook and Twitter, and they supplied the audience with links to update their friends as well as links to earlier sermons in the sermon series that was to finish up with the upcoming message. To participate in the conversation, a visitor can choose to create an account and a regular user name, or they can choose a temporary user name just to participate in that day's conversation. If a visitor would rather not talk at all, they do not need to select a name at all, and they are still able to watch the sermon though they cannot participate in or watch the chat feed. On the first day that I logged in, there were nine active participants who dialogued throughout the sermon. However, a visitor can view a map lit up with locations across the globe indicating where people are watching (Figure 12). The day I visited, there were viewers from 110 different countries, including places as diverse as Mongolia, the United Kingdom, Iraq, India, Sudan, Fiji, and Puerto Rico. The map alone creates a sense for the visitor that they are not alone. Though an individual might initially be drawn to the site via recommendation, the professional and usable layout of the site makes it welcoming. The running chat stream creates the effect of walking into a gathering of friends. The hosts are extremely welcoming, going out of their way to greet everyone who engages with the chat feed. Among the visitors who arrived in chat on this first day I observed was an antagonistic guest who logged on, made some dirty comments, and waited to see how the hosts would respond. Whereas in the chat rooms and forums of *Talk Jesus*, this type of behavior would immediately have been silenced and removed from public view, I was surprised to find that the hosts made a concerted effort to engage this obvious troublemaker, despite his disruption. They did not address the vulgar statements he had made. Instead, he was greeted just like everyone else, welcomed to the service, and asked

to share where he was watching from. He wasn't blocked; his crude comments were not deleted from the conversation; instead, he was treated kindly and encouraged to listen in no matter what his intent. Eventually, he stopped interrupting and was silent for the duration of the sermon.

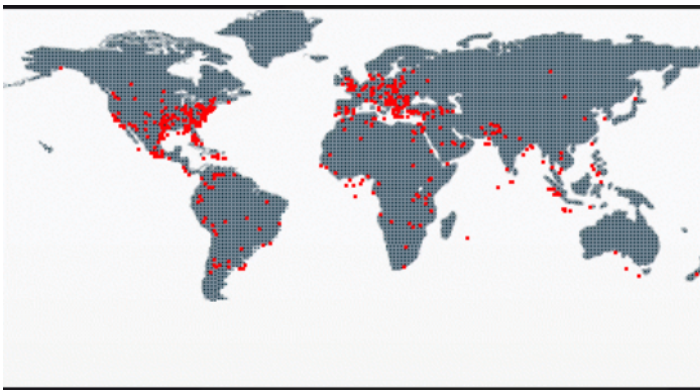


Figure 12, *LifeChurch.tv* Global Church Attendance Map

The chat feed was most active during the beginning and end of the sermon. However, as Craig Groeschel preached—on this particular day he was winding up a sermon series on the End Times—chat members commented on things he said that were particularly interesting or inspiring to them, asked questions, and interjected with "Amen" when they were especially moved. The way the sermon itself had been filmed was unexpected. My familiarity with the televangelist-style format of video recording in which the viewer sees various shots of the audience and different angles of the stage led me to expect a similar video format in the Online Church. Instead, the sermon was filmed as if Groeschel was right there in the room with us. He is shot from the shoulders up for a large part of the sermon, and occasionally we are able to see him walking back and forth and interacting with the screen behind him where Bible verses he references are projected. Groeschel was dressed in a plaid flannel shirt; there was rock music before and after the sermon; and the feel of the "experience" (as *LifeChurch.tv* calls their services)

was of an event clearly designed to both entertain and engage, simultaneously creating an environment in which the visitor feels spoken to as an individual and recognized as part of a larger population of viewers. Groeschel acknowledged both his offline and online audience at various moments throughout the sermon by asking his offline congregation to invite their friends at work or family members and asking his online audience to click the links below the video feed to share the service with their Twitter followers and Facebook friends. This attempt to create a sense of community between on and offline listeners tuning in at church buildings and on computers across the country carries over throughout the sermon as Groeschel at various points asks his audience to raise their hands with him and pray. As he raises his hand on the screen, online viewers see a button appear that they can click to indicate that their hand is raised. As online hands are raised, a counter appears indicating how many people online are participating: one hand raised, two hands. The digitally-raised hands are often paralleled with comments in the chat feed: "Amen" and "Yes, Lords" and "Thank you Jesuses" (Figure 13).



Figure 13, *LifeChurch.tv* Experience

While it may at first seem that this type of environment—though certainly promoting engagement and interactivity—could not necessarily be considered a community, an examination of the dialogue taking place on the chat feed reveals that the hosts are familiar with many of the guests. Though they greet everyone who joins—newcomers included—equally, there are particular members with whom they are familiar. Before one service, as people began to log in, comments like "Hi Hellen, great to see you again sis!"; "How you doing girl? hows that little girl of yours?"; and "Hey Slater, havent seen you on here in a while, great to see you again" rolled across the screen. There is a sense of accountability to the community signified in these statements: visitors who come back a second time and regular attendees who miss out on a weekly service are noticed. Though the church is online, has many more daily and weekly services than any offline church could maintain, and allows for a great deal of anonymity, the hosts work to encourage attendees to come back and keep records of who is returning. An additional advantage provided to encourage a sense of community during the sermons is that only during the period in which the sermon is live are visitors able to access live prayer with a mentor. At other times of the day, if a visitor comes to the website, they are able to submit a prayer request to which they are promised that within 24 hours they will receive a reply, but during the live experiences, they are guaranteed immediate access to live communication with a mentor. Though individuals who miss the live experiences or who encounter the website for the first time during a "between experiences" period are able to watch the videoed sermons, the chat feed and the live prayer are not accessible (Figure 14). Attendance during the live experiences is encouraged as well by a clock that appears at the top of the page alerting visitors to the site how long they must wait before

the next experience begins. If the viewer comes to the site during the experience, they immediately find themselves in the middle of the service, as if they had walked into an offline church: the music is playing, Groeschel is preaching, and the chat feed is running. In addition, online viewers are encouraged to continue their engagement with the community by keeping up with *LifeChurch.tv* on Facebook, a place where *LifeChurch.tv*'s website describes "We have a vibrant community. . .where it is safe to ask spiritual questions, find new steps in faith, and connect with others" ("What's Next Kit").



Figure 14, *LifeChurch.tv* Experience Countdown

What the *LifeChurch.tv* Online Church experiences exemplify is both a revised understanding of what constitutes "church" and a complication of traditional understandings of what online religious community might look like. In both cases, the distinguishing feature is the porous and what I have called temporal qualities of the community. In a traditional offline church experience, standards of etiquette traditionally encourage visitors and members to come on time and either sit quietly throughout the sermon or interject in ways that do not disrupt the flow of the preacher (in most mainline Protestant and evangelical churches, interjected "Amen," for example, are accepted and welcomed). In Online Church, however, not only do guests come and go as they please, but dialogue takes place throughout the entire sermon often in ways that in an offline church experience would be distracting: guests regularly ask hosts for clarification on points being made or state how they are relating what is being said to their own personal

experiences. In addition, disruptions are not shut down; in fact, the disruptive guests, as I have noted, are treated with kindness and welcomed as friends, a strategy that, over the six months that I regularly attended Online Church, works effectively for ending the disruptive behavior. Furthermore, though the option is available to watch sermons in between the live experiences, the vibrant multimedia and interactive functions that come with selecting the live experience promote this particular moment and the sense of community that is born out of it. By including the map of places across the globe where individuals are logged in, by the hosts' recognition of familiar people and welcoming of new members, and by the encouragement to get involved in the Facebook community, *LifeChurch.tv* creates a novel experience of church that maintains traditional features like regular sermon times and a gathering of people in one place but has employed the capabilities of the online environment to create a sense of community across geographic borders and to personalize the church experience for visitors in an unprecedented manner. In an offline church, if an individual has a question about the sermon, wants to share a testimony, or wants to seek out immediate prayer, they must wait for the appropriate moment. At the Online Church, these needs can be expressed and fulfilled immediately.

The shape that Online Church has taken is directly a result of its evangelistic purposes and the Internet medium. The customizable nature of the experience, the constant availability of mentors for prayer or conversation during live experiences, and the support of a community all work to encourage seekers to take part and make a decision about becoming a Christian. Indeed, at the end of every sermon, Groeschel presents the Gospel and asks both on and offline listeners to commit to becoming Christians. Online viewers are provided with a link to click to indicate their decision and

be put in touch with a *LifeChurch.tv* mentor as well as links to find a local church networked with *LifeChurch.tv* and a local Bible Study, or they can indicate their decision in the chat stream, or they can share it in a private statement with a mentor, or they can simply indicate their decision by raising their hand. Though Groeschel speaks on myriad subjects from finances to marriage to specific theological points like the End Times, his messages always conclude in the digital equivalent of an altar call, a moment in which he encourages visitors to go beyond merely listening and to become incorporated fully into the church community.

A New Type of Cyberevangelism

In 1999, in their book on communities in cyberspace, Marc Smith and Peter Kollock wrote: "Technology has its most profound effect when it alters the ways in which people come together and communicate" (4). Studies of online communities have been approached by scholars in a variety of fields and from a variety of different perspectives: the first wave of concern over whether or not online gatherings can be considered communities has given way to more focused consideration of how these communities form, how they are different from offline communities, and what the relationship between on and offline community looks like. This examination of evangelistic online communities has added to this scholarship by looking at a particular type of community—what I have referred to as a "persuasive" community—which serves the primary goal of drawing in new membership via religious conversion. Each of the various communities I have examined—the *Talk Jesus* chat room and forums and the *LifeChurch.tv* online church—has revealed a variety of important insights into the practice and gathering of communities online. These insights have direct implications for

scholars in both digital and religious rhetoric in terms of how religious conversion is effected in a technologically-mediated community environment, how ethos is created in group interactions, and how boundaries are set and enforced on discourse within these communities. We saw, for example, how the careful construction of the community boundaries in the *Talk Jesus* forums—the allowance and disallowance of certain topics of discussion, theological viewpoints, and even the requirement that all contributors be either Christians or “seekers”—created a digital space primed for the specific project of evangelism. We have seen as well how members come to trust this space and the other participants through the allowance of visual identity customization via music, font, background, and avatar selection; through the attentive and consistent enforcement of rules; and through the status gained by members who post new content and respond to the content of others on a regular basis.

I have argued as well that an examination of evangelistic communities online also has implications for studies of evangelism and the evangelical movement in America, noting how the pastor-celebrity model of televangelism has been replaced by a democratized community-model of evangelism in which a variety of voices are heard and work together for the purpose of evangelism, the only significant defining feature of these voices being their status as Christian, authority being established by commitment and contribution to the community. During the *LifeChurch.tv* “experiences,” for example, the allowance of guest participation during the service and the encouragement of “spoken” responses to the experience in the live chat stream represent a revision of the standard hierarchy of preacher-congregation typical of traditional church services. In addition, the megachurch model of church has been transformed by the creation of an interactive,

multimedia Online Church focused on user desires and a personalized church experience targeted specifically at meeting visitors with answers to whatever questions, problems, or needs they have. The internet has dramatically changed the way evangelism is effected as well as how evangelicals interact, work together, and worship as a community as well.

To return again to the context of rhetorical and communication scholarship on community and religion online, I am reminded of Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan's proclamation less than a decade ago that "The Internet is changing the face of religion...[but] the consequences for religion are as yet largely unknown" and Heidi Campbell's even more recent query regarding religious communities on the internet in which she asked "Because of the internet and the emergence of the online community WHAT WILL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY BE LIKE in the future? How are people and religious communities being transformed because of online religious communities?" (1; xviii). The case studies of *Talk Jesus* and *LifeChurch.tv* have provided us with several key responses to these questions. Though evangelism is only one of many practices central to the Christian church, this study has indicated the importance of creating what I have called "persuasive communities" as a key element of the rhetorical approach to evangelism online, the significance of balancing the appearance of member control with clearly-defined and carefully-enforced boundaries and regulations for the community, the minimization of overt hierarchies centered on the central figure of the celebrity preacher, and the promotion of laymen and women community members as primary and valuable contributors to the evangelistic project.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

Concerns about technology and the impact of various media on the effectiveness of our ability to communicate, on our culture and ethics, and even on the ways our minds function are as old as the art and study of rhetoric itself. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, likely written sometime in the late 4th century BCE, for example, we find one of the earliest critiques of the newest communication technology of the time: the written word. Socrates, narrating the story of the two Egyptian gods Thamus—a king—and Theuth—the inventor of geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and writing—describes Theuth's enthusiasm as he reports the use of each invention. When it comes to describing the invention of writing, however, Theuth exclaims, "Here is an accomplishment, my lord the King, which will improve both the wisdom and the memory of the Egyptians. I have discovered a sure receipt for memory and wisdom." Instead of the resounding praise Theuth expects, however, Thamus skeptically replies:

Theuth, my paragon of inventors, the discoverer of an art is not the best judge of the good or harm which will accrue to those who practice it. So it is in this; you, who are the father of writing, have out of fondness for your off-spring attributed to it quite the opposite of its real function. Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of by their own internal resources. What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant. And because they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society (96).

The skepticism that Thamus expressed over the impact of the development of writing on the ability of citizens of an oral culture to retain their skill at memorization goes beyond

pedagogical concerns. Thamus is worried that the loss of the skill to retain information and literature by memory will not only result in a culture of individuals who believe they are wise because they have written records but will also cause these individuals to become a “burden to society.” Such a concern was undoubtedly natural in a world shifting from an oral culture to one dependent on writing, though it may seem extreme to us in retrospect. Nevertheless, communication scholars throughout the two and a half millennia since Plato have sounded repeated calls of alarm at the potential threat to culture of each new and rising technology.

The rise of digital communication has certainly not escaped critique and serious concern over its impact on culture. Perhaps most famously is the 20th century communications scholar Marshall McLuhan who made the oft-repeated claim that “the medium is the message,” effectively stating that regardless of the subject of communication, the medium used to communicate will have the same impact on the audience and, ultimately, on the culture, an impact that most likely will take place without the culture's consent or even awareness (Understanding Media 7). Furthermore, he argued, it is only through a careful scrutiny of a medium that we are able to become aware of the impact—for good or ill—that it has on us. Focusing on the content expressed via a medium alone or even as a primary component of a communication event only distracts us from the real impact, which is found in the medium itself. In a critique of the traditional content-centered focus of communication scholars, McLuhan wrote: “Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. The ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind” (Understanding

Media 18). At another point, he was to reiterate even more assertively that “The content or message of any particular medium has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb” (*Essential McLuhan* 238). As new studies from Human Computer Interaction and psychology specialists continue to roll off the presses informing us that the Internet is actually reshaping the way users read, write, communicate, and relate, we are coming to recognize that McLuhan’s words could not have been more prescient or relevant. Indeed, with the rise of the Internet in popularity, McLuhan has returned to the attention of communication scholars, and his emphasis on the medium over the message has begun to be re-evaluated and validated: scholars have begun to see some truth in his claim, including—perhaps most vocally—communication scholar Sherry Turkle, who has noted that “we construct our technologies, and our technologies construct us and our times” and Shane Hipps who has argued that “[w]henver methods or media change, the message automatically changes along with them” (46; 30).

The notion that the medium is the message is, as we have seen, nothing short of antithetical to the evangelical reasoning for being attracted to diverse technologies for communication of the Gospel. Megachurch evangelical pastor Rick Warren summarizes the majority perspective when he writes that “[o]ur message must never change, but the way we deliver that message must be constantly updated to reach each new generation” (Hipps 29). As we have seen however, the reality is that this is hardly the case. Not only does the use of websites for evangelism change the nature of the message being presented, but it is also changing the nature of the evangelical church structure, community, and approach to evangelism. McLuhan foresaw these problems. Though

McLuhan's religious views are often ignored in analyses of his work, he was a devout Catholic who, in the words of Shane Hipps, "often used his cultural commentary as a form of stealth theology, which was profoundly informed by his faith," insights that "were largely ignored and rarely heeded" (32). One particularly powerful prediction was that digital communication would ultimately cut down the megachurch movement that was taking off in the 1970s. Imagining the future of the evangelical church, he wrote that "Christianity—in a centralized, administrative bureaucratic form" as found in the evangelical megachurch, will become "certainly irrelevant" (85). Indeed, as we have seen reflected in the evangelical use of the Internet, this prediction is coming to pass. In the Internet environment, not only traditional authority structures but also traditional hierarchies have been challenged and reorganized as well.

In light of McLuhan's predictions, it is possible to look back on the history of the evangelical church in America and see exactly how the media of choice for evangelism has shaped theology. The printing press revolutionized Christianity by allowing for individuals to access the Scripture individually and to read it in the privacy of their homes. As a result, as exemplified in the Great Awakening revivals which centered on individualistic, immediate, and powerfully emotional conversions, we find that—as Hipps has noted, "printing [amplified] the notion of a personal relationship with God. It nurture[d] individual spiritual practices" (60). The communal and ritualistic nature of the Catholic church was replaced by these Protestant evangelicals with a version of Christianity centered on the individual: individual testimonies were prized as signs of conversion, and the itinerant ministers were the first celebrity preachers who traveled from community to community—preceded by advertisements for revivals and followed

by published conversion reports—leading hundreds of individuals to conversion without emphasizing the need for integration back into a local church (Plude). Indeed, as during the Second Great Awakening when many revivals were held in rural areas, in backwoods gathering places, and at extemporaneous moments in fields and on makeshift stages, many miles from any formal church, the main focus was on nothing but the individual “souls” and the preacher’s desire to convert individuals in all their diversity. The variety of individuals who gathered at these revivals—rich, poor, African, Native, white—emphasizes this point.

The later rise of radio evangelism would prove no less revolutionary for evangelicals: as the radio sermon experience encouraged listeners to gather in their homes and later cars to share a common experience of mediated preaching, there was a sense in which “retribalization” occurred, an awareness of unity, of a community of like-minded Christians across geographic space (Hipps 71). However, this new sense of community was what Hipps has called “a tribe of individuals” in which, while experiencing the same message at the same moment, individuals are sharing it from a variety of different locations—some in isolation, some in small groups—but rarely if ever together in a traditional church format held in a brick and mortar building with a physical pastor’s presence. In addition, at the same time, the nature of the radio medium and the restrictions put on evangelicals that required them to raise money to keep their stations on the air led to a “commercialization” of the Gospel, the need to make the Gospel “popular” and “appealing” according to entertainment standards (Boerl 69). Whereas Jonathan Edwards was known to have preached sermons up to four hours long on a regular basis, the sermon length became controlled by the amount of airtime allowed, only one

indication of the shift the radio medium affected on the evangelical movement (Hippis 57).

These same trends—the sense of distant community paired with a commercialized approach to evangelism and the rise of the celebrity preacher figure—were amplified by the visual medium of the television. The “prosperity gospel” perhaps would not have evolved if not for the financial demands placed on pastors and ministries attempting to maintain a regular television program spot. These preachers gained viewers by promising that conversion would bring success in all areas of one’s life, including financially. Such a version of the Gospel benefitted the evangelical ministries in at least two distinct ways. First, regular viewers become hooked to the programs for the same reason they found secular advertisements attractive: the hope that they brought of a life or future better than the current present. In addition to keeping viewers, the emphasis on finance allowed the programmers to receive regular monetary contributions. By referring to donations as “seed money” or by incorporating the message that blessings would come to those who gave to the ministry, these prosperity gospel preachers and ministries create a double assurance that they will keep their jobs: T.D. Jakes, for example, has promised Christians that they are “positioned to prosper”; Joyce Meyer assured converts that they “can expect an abundant harvest in [their] own finances”; and Creflo Dollar has claimed that “God wants his people to be wealthy” (Swanson 37). Regardless of one’s perspective on the ethics or validity of this version of the Gospel, it is hard to argue against the role that the television medium clearly played in this transformation.

Each one of these media and the impact they had on the practice of evangelism in America and the sort of Gospel that was preached, the type of conversion valued, and the

sorts of communities and relationships fostered is worth further scholarly attention.

However, in focusing my research on the particular medium of the Internet, I have been able to show that the evangelical church is at yet another moment of cultural transformation, a moment that Elizabeth Drescher has referred to as a “Digital Reformation” (1). Though Drescher does not limit her study of Christianity online to the particular practice of evangelism, her understanding of this Digital Reformation certainly applies. She understands this moment of cultural transformation in the evangelical church to be at least as radical as that of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century; however, she writes:

Unlike earlier church reforms, the Digital Reformation is driven not so much by theologies, dogmas, and politics—though these are certainly subject to renewed questioning—but by the digitally enhanced spiritual practices of ordinary believers with global access to each other and to all manner of religious knowledge previously available only to clergy, scholars, and other religious specialists. This pretty much puts everything in play—our traditions, our histories, our understanding of the sacred, even the structure and meaning of the sacred texts that we thought had been secured into an enduring canon way back in the fourth century (2).

Though Drescher, writing from the perspective of both a communications scholar and a digital evangelist herself, does not go so far as to acknowledge the way the Internet has shaped the message of the Gospel for evangelists and converts online, her statement does recognize that a transformation is occurring, a transformation that I have argued is due particularly to the web medium and that is altering prior understandings of hierarchy, authority, salvation, and community in the church. And this transformation is not happening exclusively in the social media networks that Drescher examines. Instead, as we have seen, it is happening through websites as well and, more broadly, across the Internet at large.

In analyzing evangelical websites from a rhetorical perspective, I have focused on two primary questions: what can these websites teach us about the ways the web medium is being used to effect religious conversion? And how has using the web medium for persuasion impacted the theology and character of American evangelists and converts? The former question has led me to the concept of rhetorical space as a productive framework for analyzing the ways websites become powerfully persuasive. What I observed in many evangelistic websites—including the GMO, BGEA, and Network 211 websites—was a seemingly simple design that somehow was impacting hundreds of individuals in what they reported to be a very dramatic way. What I discovered was that while we tend to think of the Internet as a place of great freedom, where endless information and resources are at the tips of our fingers, where we are in complete control of our navigation experiences, and where we may represent ourselves however we want and interact with whomever we want whenever we want, within the rhetorical spaces of the evangelistic websites, the appearance of freedom and control actually conceals a very tightly-moderated blueprint designed to repeatedly and from a variety of different directions and through a variety of different strategies lead the user to make a decision for or against (yes or no) the Gospel. This is done by, first, catering to the way users read online. As we have learned, web users do not read online, at least not extensively. This is a result of their awareness of the vast amount of information that is available to them on the web. Web users know that if they do not find the answer to their questions or the material that they are interested in immediately, that they will be able to find this information much more quickly and efficiently somewhere else. Studies of web behavior have taught us that users will note bold or large phrases and will only read more fine print

if they are sufficiently engaged by the highlighted points. Instead of reading in a linear fashion like they might if handed a religious tract or a Bible, web users scan, quickly scroll, and within seconds decide whether or not a page is worth engaging, a fact that evangelical web designers have taken advantage of: their pages do not have more than four or five main points; these points are always highlighted with color and large, bold font; and users are rarely required to scroll to get the information they need. In addition, these websites, while creating the appearance of a variety of choice and freedom of navigation through presenting the users with options varying from a series of short videos to watch in any order of the user's choice to a variety of links addressing various questions the user might have or problems they might be struggling with, the reality is that each of these options ultimately works to funnel the user back to a very simple "Yes" or "No" question: "Did you accept Jesus Christ?" Indeed, this appearance of choice masking tight control becomes even more apparent in that the option is not even "Yes, I accepted Jesus" or "No, I did not," but "Yes, I accepted Jesus," or "No, but I have more questions." Within the space of the website, the designers do not allow for "No, I do not accept Jesus" as an option. The user, of course, might exemplify that the latter is their choice by leaving the website entirely, but if they want to stay on the page, they must ultimately make a more positive choice. By limiting the variety and type of hyperlinking the user has access to, evangelists create a rhetorical space strongly directed towards making a decision to convert.

Along the same lines, we saw how the nature of relationships and community on these websites is controlled as well. According to studies done on which factors contribute most to an individual's decision to become a Christian, the most significant

factor was determined to be a long-term relationship with another Christian. According to a study done by Dave Bennett on how adults become Christians, 92% of adult Christians surveyed had a relationship with a Christian before becoming a Christian themselves, and 86% had at least one relationship with a Christian, which they cited as a significant factor in their own decision to convert. In examining what in particular about these Christian friends were considered influential traits, the primary response was “lifestyle.” In addition, Bennett discovered that these relationships lasted an average of two years and three months before the conversion took place. What these statistics indicate is that in most cases, a long-term relationship with another Christian—in which this Christian's lifestyle is observed on a regular basis—is key in leading someone to convert. Website evangelists take this into consideration as well, and the ability of Web 2.0 to promote interactivity and relationships creates an easy form in which they can do so. As we saw, the GMO, BGEA, and Network 211 sites all had options for the user to be put in touch with a mentor, and all had follow-up services involving regularly-mailed Bible studies or contact with a mentor. Network 211 has created a fully-developed social media site, and the BGEA site has mentors available for chat twenty-four hours a day. The nature of the web—in which individuals tend to feel more comfortable expressing their deepest concerns and fears and in which anonymity allows seekers to be open about personal details of their lives more quickly—helps make these opportunities for relationship work. However, as with web design, the openness and freedom of discourse that appears to be taking place in the context of these evangelistic websites is also tightly controlled. Not only are the mentors carefully vetted and trained to make sure their theologies are in line with the ministry's and that their approach to evangelism is appropriate according to the

ministry's terms, but in the more open community sites—such as the discussion forum on TalkJesus and the live chat stream on *LifeChurch.tv*—the type of discourse allowed is closely moderated and manipulated to provide what the evangelists deem to be the prime environment for a conversion to take place. I have called the control evangelists are effecting over their online communities the creation of “persuasive communities,” indicating that the nature of these communities themselves are an aspect of persuasion. This type of community is unique to the Internet. At no other point in evangelical history have evangelists been able to so tightly control who enters and exits the realm they have created as they have with the web medium.

As the history of American evangelism has shown us, a constant problem for evangelists has been determining who their readers, listeners, or viewers are. In the online environment, these evangelicals see what they believe to be an opportunity to nearly entirely avoid the problem of “preaching to the choir.” In the TalkJesus forum, for example, we saw that the administrator—Chad—carefully moderated the forum to ensure that only those he deemed to be Christians and those seeking to know more about Christianity and considering conversion were admitted. Individuals who wanted to engage in debate were banned. By wielding this type of moderated control over the forum, Chad is able to effectively design his perfect target audience: the limited set of interested seekers who are willing to listen to and seriously consider the Gospel message that he desires.

In terms of the second research question that has driven this case study, I have examined how utilizing the Internet for evangelism has impacted the theology of evangelicals. Despite evangelical ministers’ frequent refrain that their message is

“unchanging,” an examination of the type of Gospel that is created as a result of the nature of the web shows that, in fact, this is not the case. We must recall that prior to the rise of the Internet as a tool for evangelism, evangelicals’ previous media of choice for evangelism were the radio and television, media which, as I have described, led to a Gospel presentation centered around celebrity preachers, commercial and entertainment-based strategies for gaining audiences, and the rise of the Prosperity Gospel. As William F. Fore has written of the high hopes for evangelism expressed by the early televangelists:

Expecting to use the enormous power of television for their own purposes the televangelists have instead been used by it. They had to conform their message to meet the demands of TV—demands to get larger audiences to get more money to get more stations to get even larger audiences. In order to get larger audiences, their messages had to please the audience, and never offend them” (*Mythmakers* 80).

By contrast, what I have found in the case of Internet evangelism is a quite different theological focus. First, because the cost of maintaining a website is minimal to entirely free, the profit-driven aspect of evangelism has been nearly entirely eliminated. There are no evangelistic websites that I have encountered that encourage donations on any part of the evangelistic portion of their website with the exception of some “About Us” pages in which the online ministry is linked to a brick and mortar organization requiring funds for other projects. As a result, the version of the Gospel that emphasizes personal wealth and financial gain as a reward for conversion has not transferred over to the web. Instead, what we find is a depiction of God as an answer-source: He is represented as the solution to those seeking peace and love and to those dealing with anxiety, worry, depression, loneliness, and a variety of other trials. It is understandable that, considering the purpose

the Internet serves in our lives and its characteristics as a medium, that this would develop. The Internet is a network of information, a source to which we can go to search for answers to any question we might have. The transformation of the popular search engine Google's name into the verb "to google," which means to use Google to search for answers, epitomizes our understanding of the Internet as a database of solutions or responses to queries. For the God of the Internet Gospel to be presented as a solution, the answer to a search request, makes sense.

In addition, the Internet has shaped evangelical theology by effectively doing away with the celebrity preacher. Though early concerns about credibility online centered on how users would know whom to trust when anyone can be an author and publish their thoughts or beliefs online and when many texts do not even list an author at all, Web users have adapted to this lack of traditional authority and instead have found other ways to assess the credibility of a website: professionalism of design, regularity of posting in discussion boards, willingness to help others, and the provision of current and accurate information, for example. In addition, in a medium in which everyone can be an author, a democratizing effect has occurred in which an individual's professional or financial position is no longer a primary marker of credibility. Instead, web users are looking for relatability. As a result, the majority of evangelistic websites attempt to portray a lack of hierarchy and a sense of equality in community by including images of anonymous "every men" men and women of all races and ages. When chatting with mentors, users usually receive only the mentor's first name or screen name, creating a sense of familiarity and camaraderie rather than hierarchy. This is not to say that hierarchy has been completely done away with (as we have seen, the tight control on the interactions

that take place suggests that the moderator or designer will always be in a position of power), but it has certainly diminished in importance as a direct result of the fact that, in the Internet medium, anyone can be an authority.

Finally, the nature of evangelism is changing in that it is becoming recentered on interpersonal relationships. In the past, a friend might hand someone a tract, but the reading of the tract was an isolated experience. In a similar manner, radio and television take the format of one-to-many broadcasting in which the listener or viewer is only one of many being broadcast to and is not able to respond back to what is being said during the event of the sermon or program. Online, however, through chat features, discussion boards, and mentor-based email programs, the building of relationship has been foregrounded as a key element of evangelism. Though this has always been practiced in face-to-face evangelism, never until the Internet were mediated relationships able to be adopted as part of the evangelistic mass media mission.

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Regardless of whether or not one views the evangelical message as compelling, antiquated, disingenuous, or true, if we step back from the particular case study of evangelistic websites for a moment, the two key research questions I have outlined above and have explored throughout this study might be broadened to provide productive suggestions for future research into digital and religious rhetoric. We might, for example, continue to press the questions: how does the Internet on a very fundamental level, as a medium, persuade us? With over 77% of Americans online, such questions become compellingly relevant ("United States Internet Usage"). And how is the Internet changing our individual ideologies, behaviors, and ultimately the nature of our culture? Some



fascinating research is already being done suggesting the ways the Internet is altering the manner in which we read and absorb information (Carr). Findings suggest, for example, that our attention spans are shorter and that we scan instead of read. Eye-tracking studies show that we read in predictable F-shaped patterns, that material “below the fold” tends to get overlooked, and that certain sizes, colors, and placement of material attract our attention more than others (Nielsen *Eyetracking*). Christianity certainly is not the only religion using the Internet for evangelism, nor is evangelism the only spiritual purpose the Internet serves for evangelicals. Further research might examine and compare how other religions are using the Internet and how it is impacting their cultures. Even the Amish have an established online presence with a digital version of “The Budget,” a community newspaper established in print form in 1890. Within Christianity, it will be interesting to explore the long-term impact of Christianity online on brick and mortar churches: we have seen that, for example, although church attendance and membership has declined, the number of Christians using the Internet to find spiritual community, to listen to or watch sermons, and to explore various aspects of faith has dramatically increased. It will be interesting as well to return to earlier media revolutions in the Church and examine more closely the impact these moments had on evangelism, theology, community, notions of salvation, and worship (The Barna Group).

Furthermore, regardless of whether rhetoricians choose religion online as a lens through which to examine how the Internet is involved in rhetoric, we should continue to keep in mind the importance of taking a critical approach to the media we use to communicate. In Marshall McLuhan’s masterful retelling of Edgar Allen Poe’s “Descent into the Maelstrom” in the Preface to his 1951 book *The Mechanical Bride*, he describes

the story of sailors who are swept into a maelstrom, one of whom survives by observing how the maelstrom behaves and figuring out a strategy to escape from it. McLuhan interprets the tale as a metaphor for the way we should approach media studies: we are all trapped in the maelstrom of technology, but just as “Poe’s sailor saved himself by studying the action of the whirlpool and by cooperating with it,” we can also understand media’s impact by scrutinizing its nature in order to discover possible negative repercussions (*Essential McLuhan* 21).

Finally, we should allow this research to impact our pedagogy. In the template-driven world in which we are creating and representing ourselves through Facebook, Twitter, Blogger, YouTube, and any number of pre-made layouts over which we have little control, we should encourage our students to be analytical towards the architecture of websites and the options the medium allows for navigation and community as well as helping them consider the values these structures encourage. Education in HTML5, CSS3, or JavaScript may not be necessary, but certainly pointing out the difference between this level of online creation and the template-driven creation that is the predominate option of choice today is worth noting. McLuhan described the goal of criticizing the persuasive power of media well, stating at one point that:

The huge vortices of energy created by our media present us with similar possibilities of evasion, of consequences, of destruction [as the maelstrom]. By studying the pattern of the effects of this huge vortex of energy in which we are involved, it may be possible to program a strategy of evasion and survival (*Understanding Me* 285).

He also wrote that "Media are agents of change. . . They must be studied for their effects, because the constant and inevitable interplay among media obscures those effects and hampers our ability to use media effectively" (*Understanding Media* xv). This is not to

say that all effects of new media are negative and require evasion—indeed, as we saw, the minimization of the Prosperity Gospel when evangelists moved online could easily be viewed as a positive cultural shift. It is just to say that awareness of the nature and implications of media matter. My hope is that this study has allowed us to deepen this understanding.

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