



---

Volume 4 | Number 1

Article 1

---

2020

## “Knowledge Puffs Up”: The Evangelical Culture of Anti–Intellectualism as a Local Strategy

Mark Ward Sr.

University of Houston-Victoria, [wardm@uhv.edu](mailto:wardm@uhv.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://mds.marshall.edu/sermonstudies>

 Part of the [Anthropological Linguistics and Sociolinguistics Commons](#), and the [Organizational Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ward, Mark Sr.. "“Knowledge Puffs Up”: The Evangelical Culture of Anti–Intellectualism as a Local Strategy." *Sermon Studies* 4.1 (2020) : 1-21. <https://mds.marshall.edu/sermonstudies/vol4/iss1/1>

Copyright 2020 by Mark Ward Sr.

This Original Article is brought to you by Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact the editor at [ellisonr@marshall.edu](mailto:ellisonr@marshall.edu)

---

## **“Knowledge Puffs Up”: The Evangelical Culture of Anti–Intellectualism as a Local Strategy**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

Mark Ward Sr. is an associate professor of communication at the University of Houston-Victoria

## “Knowledge Puffs Up”: The Evangelical Culture of Anti-Intellectualism as a Local Strategy<sup>1</sup>

Mark Ward Sr.

“Knowledge [does] what?” asked Pastor Lonnie,<sup>2</sup> stepping to the side of his pulpit and cupping his hand to his ear to elicit a response from the audience.

“Puffs up!” answered the 140 souls gathered for the Sunday morning service at Riverside Bible Church, a nondenominational and evangelical congregation located in a mid-sized city of the southwestern United States.

Seated in my usual pew that morning, I was not surprised that Lonnie’s flock could so easily fill in the phrase taken from 1 Corinthians 8:1, “Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that ‘We all possess knowledge.’ But knowledge puffs up while love builds up” (NIV). Though taken out of its context, the simple catchphrase “Knowledge puffs up” served Lonnie’s purpose, as will be seen, of devaluing the head to privilege the heart.

As an ethnographer of religious communication, I observed weekly worship services at Riverside Bible Church for thirty-nine months, starting in September 2013 when Lonnie was installed as pastor. In July 2016, shortly before his third anniversary, I interviewed him about the overall approach to his sermons:

Under [the previous pastor] Riverside was “heady.” He was propositional and logic-driven, while I like to anchor propositions in images. You can’t overlook the emotional for the cerebral. So, there’s been a change in communication. . . . The church had a stable “black-and-white” situation, which gave people clarity. But we didn’t have much “color,” which brings life. . . . So, I had to go slow and first set up changes through my preaching . . . to bridge the gap between “up here” and the people.

When my fieldwork concluded, I had taken fieldnotes on 213 sermons from Pastor Lonnie. In reviewing those notes, I was struck by how frequently he had, in fact, referenced the presumed dangers of intellectualizing biblical instructions and admonitions. Just as he related in our 2016 interview, Lonnie in his preaching had normalized a privileging of the emotional over the cerebral. In the parlance of American evangelicalism, he had raised *heart knowledge*<sup>3</sup> over *head knowledge*.<sup>4</sup>

The anti-intellectual strain of American evangelicalism has drawn journalistic and scholarly attention at least since the Scopes “Monkey Trial” of 1925, the nation’s first nationally broadcast news event.<sup>5</sup> In the aftermath of the trial—in which the American Civil Liberties Union defended a public schoolteacher prosecuted for teaching evolution—journalist H. L. Mencken

---

<sup>1</sup> The study described in this article was approved by the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, University of Houston-Victoria.

<sup>2</sup> All names have been changed.

<sup>3</sup> Words and phrases used in the argot of the evangelical subculture are italicized throughout this study.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Ward Sr., “‘Head Knowledge Isn’t Enough’: Bible Visualization and Congregational Culture in an Evangelical Church,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 14, no. 11 (2018): 1-33.

<sup>5</sup> Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

excoriated religious fundamentalists as *homo neanderthalensis*.<sup>6</sup> At midcentury, Richard Hofstadter won a Pulitzer Prize for *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, in which he described the “evangelical spirit” as a “religion of the heart.”<sup>7</sup> In the current century, numerous studies ponder why evangelicals spurn conventionally credentialed experts to embrace young-earth creationism over evolution,<sup>8</sup> reject manmade climate change as a hoax,<sup>9</sup> claim America is a Christian nation,<sup>10</sup> portray Islam as a violent religion<sup>11</sup> and practice a rhetoric that privileges values over facts.<sup>12</sup>

These studies touch on vital public issues, ranging from science education and environmental policy to interfaith dialogue. The implications for civic discourse are great, as evangelical Protestantism is the nation’s single largest religious tradition<sup>13</sup> and can claim the allegiance of one in four Americans.<sup>14</sup> Yet these studies, though valuable, focus on the preachments of national evangelical leaders and media celebrities—from those well known to the American public, such as Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and Jerry Falwell Jr., to those with high profiles only within the evangelical subculture, such as Ken Ham of Answers in Genesis, David Barton of Wallbuilders, and an army of religious radio talk show hosts heard nationally over vast “electronic church” conglomerates created since 2000 by media deregulation.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, what I heard at Riverside Bible Church over thirty-nine months was unique in the literature. This was not the anti-intellectual discourse of the evangelical movement at the national level with its tropes about “liberal professors” and “so-called experts” that express the movement’s general cultural resentments.<sup>16</sup> Rather, I observed an animus against intellectual elites that functioned as a *local* strategy for constructing evangelical identity.

---

<sup>6</sup> H. L. Mencken, *A Religious Orgy in Tennessee: A Reporter's Account of the Scopes Monkey Trial* (Hoboken, NJ: Melville House, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 53, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Randall J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Susan L. Trollinger and William Vance Trollinger Jr., *Righting America at the Creation Museum* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Wylie Carr, Michael Patterson, Laurie Yung, and Daniel Spencer, “The Faithful Skeptics: Evangelical Religious Beliefs and Perceptions of Climate Change,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 6, no. 3 (2012): 276-99; Robin Globus Veldman, *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism: Why Evangelical Christians Oppose Action on Climate Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019); Bernard Daley Zaleha and Andrew Szasz, “Why Conservative Christians Don’t Believe in Climate Change,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 71, no. 5 (2015): 19-30.

<sup>10</sup> Sean Connable, “The ‘Christian Nation’ Thesis and the Evangelical Echo Chamber,” in *The Electronic Church in the Digital Age: Cultural Impacts of Evangelical Mass Media, Vol. 2*, ed. Mark Ward Sr. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016), 183-203.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Gormly, “Peering beneath the Veil: An Ethnographic Content Analysis of Islam as Portrayed on *The 700 Club* following the September 11th Attacks,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 3, no. 4 (2004): 219-38; Shaheen Pasha, “American Apocalypse: Portrayals of Islam and Judaism in the Post-9/11 Electronic Church,” in *The Electronic Church in the Digital Age: Cultural Impacts of Evangelical Mass Media, Vol. 2*, ed. Mark Ward Sr. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016), 227-51.

<sup>12</sup> Sharon Crowley, *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> *America’s Changing Religious Landscape* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> John Sumser, “Conservative Talk Radio, Religious Style: When You Need Some Moral Outrage,” in *The Electronic Church in the Digital Age: Cultural Impacts of Evangelical Mass Media, Vol. 2*, ed. Mark Ward Sr. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016), 105-129; Mark Ward Sr., “A New Kind of Church: The Religious Media Conglomerate as a ‘Denomination,’” *Journal of Media and Religion* 17, no. 3-4 (2018): 117-33.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

The present study thus argues that an animus against intellectual elites works not only from the top down as a broad norm of the American evangelical subculture. The norm also trickles up from the grass roots, where casting intellectual elites as “other” is an effective strategy at the local congregational level for constructing a satisfying self-identity and organizational identification. Any assessment of why evangelicals reject expert consensus on climate change, evolution, and other issues must therefore take into consideration the dynamic interplay between anti-intellectual discourses at both the macro and micro levels of the evangelical social system. To make this argument, the study will review the literature on the evangelical mind, describe the research methodology, report field observations of Pastor Lonnie’s discourses against intellectual elites, and analyze these discourses to identify their themes and how Lonnie tacitly sought to employ the themes in cultivating a desired social and organizational identity among Riverside church members.

### **The Evangelical Mind**

In his intellectual history of American evangelicalism, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, historian Mark Noll laments, “The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind” and that “modern American evangelicals have failed notably in sustaining serious intellectual life.”<sup>17</sup> This failure is rooted in history, beginning with the First Great Awakening in the 1730s and 40s. American Christianity was democratized<sup>18</sup> as frontier revivals erupted outside traditional religious institutions, led by itinerant preachers whose authority derived from popular consent.<sup>19</sup> American evangelicalism from then on assumed a unique emphasis on emotional piety and individual religious experience.

After a Second Great Awakening broke out in the early decades of the 19th century, three trends ensued. First, where the earlier awakening followed a Calvinist theology that God sovereignly elects the saved and damned, the second awakening adopted an Arminian theology that “whosoever will” may choose to accept Christ and be saved.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the American people, who had recently taken their political destiny in hand, could also control their religious destiny without recourse to institutional elites. Second, the “free market religious economy” that followed constitutional disestablishment of state churches favored the populist Methodists and Baptists whose clergy were drawn from among the people, over the Congregationalists and Episcopalians who required clergy to be educated.<sup>21</sup> Third, evangelicalism became the moral common sense of the early republic and basis for a Protestant establishment that controlled the new nation’s education system.<sup>22</sup> Yet this establishment faced a pressing problem: How could self-government work without a state church to promote public virtue? The solution was found in the Scottish Enlightenment and its philosophy of Common Sense Realism.<sup>23</sup> Experts were not needed

---

<sup>17</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Harry S. Stout, “The Transforming Effects of the Great Awakening,” in *Eerdmans’ Handbook to Christianity in America*, eds. Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, George M. Marsden, David F. Wells, and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 130-31.

<sup>20</sup> Randall Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

to interpret the Bible; people are innately endowed with sufficient reason to read the scriptures and grasp their plain common-sense truths. Thus, the supports of public virtue were available to all.

By midcentury, however, confidence that scriptural truths are self-evident was rocked by the slavery debate as both sides quoted the Bible to support their view.<sup>24</sup> After the Civil War, the Protestant establishment faded and lost control of the nation's universities.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the rise of higher biblical criticism, which applied the tools of modern scholarship to deconstruct the ancient texts, challenged the notion that the Bible could be plainly read by anyone. Evangelical theologians of the late 19th century, caught "between faith and criticism," desired neither to cede the Bible's special status nor the scholarly high ground.<sup>26</sup> Thus, they looked to traditional notions of "common sense science," first articulated two hundred years earlier by Francis Bacon, that conceived of science as observation and classification.<sup>27</sup> They argued that the Bible was a storehouse of facts that could be empirically observed by reading the text. In turn, these observations could be classified to reveal underlying patterns from which divine laws could be scientifically derived. From this claim emerged the doctrine of inerrancy, which can be expressed in a simple syllogism: If God cannot err, and if the Bible is God's Word, then the Bible cannot err.

This doctrine of inerrancy led to "the intellectual disaster of fundamentalism."<sup>28</sup> Darwin's theory of evolution, published in 1859, was at first defended by many evangelical theologians as compatible with the Bible.<sup>29</sup> Yet, by the turn of the century, those who feared the accelerating changes in American life and advocated a return to the "fundamentals" of Christian faith made their stand against "atheistic" science as typified by the theory of evolution.<sup>30</sup> Between the 1880s and 1930s, they built an alternative system of postsecondary Bible schools across the country to train preachers, evangelists, and missionaries.<sup>31</sup> But when fundamentalism lost the battle for public opinion after the Scopes "Monkey Trial" of 1925, the movement retreated inward to build up its own subculture<sup>32</sup> and create a network of four-year Christian colleges.<sup>33</sup> To establish these colleges, founders claimed that secular institutions actively sought to undermine the faith of Christian students. The trope is as old as evangelist Bob Jones Sr.'s 1920s sermon, *Three College Shipwrecks*, in which he told the stories of three students who lost their faith with tragic results, and as recent as the theatrical film *God's Not Dead*, in which a philosophy professor attempts to force atheism on his class.<sup>34</sup> Today, an array of parachurch *Christian worldview institutes* assume that college students face unrelenting attacks on the Christian faith and offer programs that train

---

<sup>24</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.

<sup>28</sup> Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.

<sup>29</sup> David N. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987).

<sup>30</sup> Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>31</sup> Virginia Lieson Brereton, *Training God's Army: The American Bible School, 1880-1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism*; Garth Rosell, *The Surprising Work of God: Harold John Ockenga, Billy Graham, and the Rebirth of Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Adam Laats, *Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Bob Jones Sr., *Three College Shipwrecks* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University, undated pamphlet); *God's Not Dead*, directed by Harold Cronk (Scottsdale, AZ: Pure Flix Entertainment, 2014).

these students to resist their professors' alleged skepticism. In a typical discourse heard over a nationally syndicated evangelical radio talk show, a guest author proclaimed:

When a kid goes off to college—and people who've gone to a secular university know this—you sign up not just for courses but for a systematic attack on your faith. And they [students] come into a classroom, they sit down. Here's the smartest person they've met, the professor, who is maybe slighting and belittling Christian beliefs left and right. And if they don't know why they believe what they believe . . . that makes them very vulnerable to defection.<sup>35</sup>

What does occupy the evangelical mind are *getting into the Word* through *daily devotions* and a *daily quiet time* (personal Bible reading), *Bible study* (attending weekly group meetings), and *preaching the Word* (attending a church *where the Bible is taught*). All three activities are premised on a plain reading of a biblical text. Evangelicals believe that the scriptures are inspired by God and provide believers an inerrant “manual for living.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, the chief aim of evangelical Bible study is making *applications* to personal concerns of the moment.<sup>37</sup> So long as chapter and verse are cited, applications are seen as valid appropriations of biblical authority. Nor are applications constrained by the original historical meaning intended by the author since the Bible is viewed as God's Word for all times and all cultures.<sup>38</sup> *Taking the Bible literally* thus equates to a plain reading of the text; inquiring into its literary provenance or structure, on the other hand, would hinder its accessibility and relevance.

Because the Bible is regarded by evangelicals as self-authenticating and thus *the best interpreter of itself*, teaching and preaching typically devolve either into narrative preaching that cites a proof text and then illustrates it through a series of stories, or into expository preaching that often relies on *word studies* or picking out keywords in the text and then reciting other Bible verses where the same word appears.<sup>39</sup> Since the ability to preach and teach in these fashions is taken as hermeneutical expertise and a special *gifting* from God, congregational “norms [are] created not only, or even primarily, by the *content* of what the leaders said [but], rather, the construction of identities and social structures . . . [are] profoundly shaped by the *form* of suasion that a given leader normalize[s].”<sup>40</sup> Evangelical clergy “derive their power from the expert authority to delimit the logics of the community,” so that preaching “directs social processes by filling in the meso-structure between communal structuration and individual practice.”<sup>41</sup> As will be seen in the case of Riverside Bible Church, Pastor Lonnie pitched his warnings about intellectualizing to an evangelical mind that he believed would be receptive to his applications so long as he claimed biblical warrant and, in so doing, maintained his own authority as an admired hermeneutical expert.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Casey Hart, “The Electronic Church Goes to School: Evangelical Media Discourses on Education,” in *The Electronic Church in the Digital Age: Cultural Impacts of Evangelical Mass Media*, Vol. 2, ed. Mark Ward Sr. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016), 79-102; see 90-91.

<sup>36</sup> Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> James S. Bielo, *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2004).

<sup>39</sup> Mark Ward Sr., “Fundamentalist Differences: Using Ethnography of Rhetoric to Analyze a Community of Practice,” *Intercultural Communication Studies* 18, no. 1 (2009): 1-20.

<sup>40</sup> Ward, “Fundamentalist Differences,” 2, italics in original.

<sup>41</sup> Ward, “Fundamentalist Differences,” 17.

## Method of the Study

Grounded in sociolinguistics, the ethnography of communication takes speaking as a metonym for social interaction<sup>42</sup> and employs fieldwork to observe how a “speech community” constructs a distinctive culture through shared rules for interpreting talk.<sup>43</sup> In the domain of organizational communication, ethnography has become an established research method since the 1980s when scholarly interest in the construct of organizational culture emerged.<sup>44</sup> Subjects for field research range widely: Disney theme parks,<sup>45</sup> family businesses,<sup>46</sup> and firms engaged in office supply,<sup>47</sup> accounting,<sup>48</sup> and multilevel marketing.<sup>49</sup> Ethnographers have also studied nonprofit organizations, including those engaged in education,<sup>50</sup> healthcare,<sup>51</sup> social services,<sup>52</sup> and recreation.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, since the late 1990s the “anthropology of Christianity has begun to come into its own” as ethnographers are “routinely putting the religion of Christian populations at the center of ethnographic accounts.”<sup>54</sup> In line with this trend, many field studies of individual North American evangelical congregations have appeared.<sup>55</sup> Further, ethnographies of religious congregations are “no longer the strict purview of anthropologists” and are “practiced . . . by those in

---

<sup>42</sup> Dell Hymes, “The Ethnography of Speaking,” in *Anthropology and Human Behavior*, eds. Thomas Gladwin and William C. Sturtevant (Washington, DC: Anthropological Society of Washington, 1962), 13-53.

<sup>43</sup> Dell Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974).

<sup>44</sup> Linda Putnam and Michael E. Pacanowsky, eds., *Communication and Organizations: An Interpretive Approach* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1983).

<sup>45</sup> Aviad E. Raz, “The Hybridization of Organizational Culture in Tokyo Disneyland,” *Studies in Cultures, Organizations, and Societies* 5, no. 2 (1999): 235-64; Ruth C. Smith and Eric M. Eisenberg, “Conflict at Disneyland: A Root-metaphor Analysis,” *Communications Monographs* 54, no. 4 (1987): 367-80.

<sup>46</sup> H. M. Haugh and L. McKee, “‘It’s Just Like a Family’: Shared Values in the Family Firm,” *Community, Work, and Family* 6, no. 2 (2003): 141-58.

<sup>47</sup> David M. Boje, “The Storytelling Organization: A Study of Story Performance in an Office-supply Firm,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1991): 106-26.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Kornberger, Lise Justesen, and Jan Mouritsen, “‘When You Make Manager, We Put a Big Mountain in Front of You’: An Ethnography of Managers in a Big 4 Accounting Firm,” *Accounting, Organizations, and Society* 36, no. 8 (2011): 514-33.

<sup>49</sup> Michael G. Pratt, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ambivalent: Managing Identification among Amway Distributors,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2000): 456-93.

<sup>50</sup> Leslie A. Baxter, “‘Talking Things Through’ and ‘Putting It in Writing’: Two Codes of Communication in an Academic Institution,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 21, no. 4 (1993): 313-26.

<sup>51</sup> Marian T. Deutschman, “An Ethnographic Study of Nursing Home Culture to Define Organizational Realities of Culture Change,” *Journal of Health and Human Services Administration* 28, no. 2 (2005): 246-81.

<sup>52</sup> Agnieszka A. Kosny and Joan M. Eakin, “The Hazards of Helping: Work, Mission, and Risk in Non-profit Social Service Organizations,” *Health, Risk, and Society* 10, no. 2 (2008): 149-66.

<sup>53</sup> Heather Mair, “Club Life: Third Place and Shared Leisure in Rural Canada,” *Leisure Sciences* 31, no. 5 (2009): 450-65.

<sup>54</sup> Jon Bialecki, Naomi Haynes, and Joel Robbins, “The Anthropology of Christianity,” *Religion Compass* 2, no. 6 (2008): 1139-1158; see 1139.

<sup>55</sup> For example see James M. Ault Jr., *Spirit and Flesh: Life in a Fundamental Baptist Church* (New York: Knopf, 2004); John P. Bartkowski, *Remaking the Godly Marriage: Gender Negotiation in Evangelical Families* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Lydia Bean, *The Politics of Evangelical Identity: Local Churches and Partisan Divides in the United States and Canada* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Malley, *How the Bible Works*; Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); David Harrington Watt, *Bible-carrying Christians: Conservative Protestants and Social Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).



sociology, communications, media studies, and a host of other disciplines.”<sup>56</sup> This is also true of organizational ethnography, whose literature encompasses a growing number of congregational studies.<sup>57</sup>

Ethnographers of American evangelicalism frequently have personal connections to the movement or to Protestant Christianity.<sup>58</sup> The present study stems from such a connection, as I came of age in evangelicalism following a teenage conversion and have since continued to identify with this community of faith. Riverside was a church that I had regularly attended, though did not formally join, for three years when the longtime pastor announced his impending retirement in 2013. Given my research interest in congregational culture as a species of organizational culture,<sup>59</sup> I saw a new pastor’s ascension as a before-and-after opportunity to observe dynamics of leadership and culture change in situ.

Thus, my standing in relation to Riverside Bible Church was a “complete participant” who was already a culture member able to perceive unarticulated assumptions and meanings not accessible to the “complete observer” (who observes without interaction), the “observer-as-participant” (who interacts with subjects to gather predetermined types of data such as formal interviews), or the “participant-as-observer” (who shadows culture members to learn their ways).<sup>60</sup> Between September 2013 and December 2016, I observed Sunday morning and evening services, took field notes of the proceedings—singing, praying, preaching, testifying, and other rituals—and gathered artifacts such as weekly church bulletins, song sheets, prayer lists, activity calendars, Bible study lessons, and the like. Since Riverside is a “Bible-carrying”<sup>61</sup> congregation, taking notes during sermons was a common, even lauded, practice and permitted me to observe services without disruption. Altogether, I observed 154 Sunday morning services and 59 Sunday evening services, yielding fieldnotes on 213 sermons. Nearly all sermons were preached by Pastor Lonnie since he was seldom absent, the church employed no other pastoral staff, and guest speakers were rare. Since December 2016 when I concluded my fieldwork, I have neither attended nor maintained any contact with the church.

The present study followed Pike’s emic methodology in which the ethnographer, rather than imposing a predetermined analytical framework on the data, allows units of analysis to emerge naturally from the functional relations of the culture being observed.<sup>62</sup> Thus, in reviewing fieldnotes after conclusion of my fieldwork, I was struck by how often Pastor Lonnie referenced elites, mostly secular but sometimes in the church, who would intellectualize what to him were clear and simple biblical applications. My weekly notes recorded each date, sermon text, main points, and any discourses and platform behaviors that struck me as telling cultural details. As Lonnie’s references to intellectual elites and elitism recurred, I began in my notetaking to jot down these instances and

---

<sup>56</sup> Bielo, *Words upon the Word*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Mark Ward Sr., “Organization and Religion: Ontological, Epistemological, and Axiological Foundations for an Emerging Field,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 38, no. 3 (2015): 5-29.

<sup>58</sup> For example see Ault, *Spirit and Flesh*; Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey through America’s Evangelical Subculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Bean, *The Politics of Evangelical Identity*; Bielo, *Words upon the Word*; R. Marie Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Malley, *How the Bible Works*; Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*; Watt, *Bible-carrying Christians*.

<sup>59</sup> Ward, “Organization and Religion.”

<sup>60</sup> Raymond L. Gold, “Roles in Sociological Field Observations,” *Social Forces* 36, no. 3 (1958): 217-23.

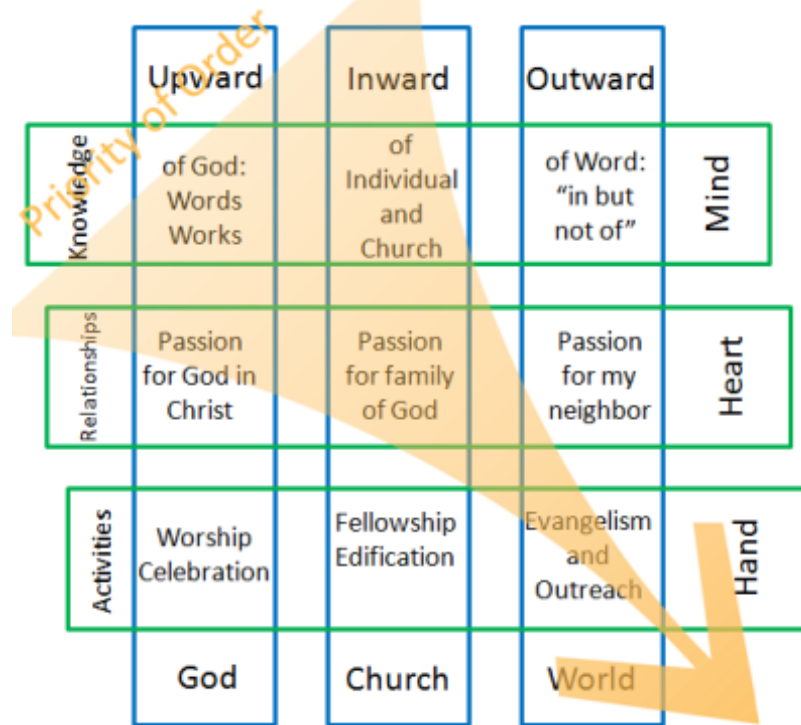
<sup>61</sup> Watt, *Bible-carrying Christians*.

<sup>62</sup> Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structures of Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1971).

record significant words or phrases—in the knowledge that I could later play back any sermon from the audio archives posted to the Riverside Bible Church website.

Given that the project eventually yielded fieldnotes on more than 200 sermons over 39 months, the present study required a data sample that was representative, salient, and yet manageable. To trace the entire arc of Pastor Lonnie’s discourse about intellectual elites and the development of that discourse over three-plus years would be unwieldy. Lonnie began his tenure in 2013 as a first-time senior pastor with an inchoate penchant for elaborate PowerPoint visuals, striking word-pictures, and visualizable metaphors drawn from popular American culture that intuitively privileged the emotional over the cerebral.<sup>63</sup> During the period that he was observed, however, Lonnie gradually worked out the explicit critique of logic-driven propositional truth that he described to me in his 2016 interview. In much simpler fashion, he also articulated his philosophy to the Riverside congregation in a 2015 sermon mini-series accompanied by PowerPoint diagrams, culminating in the slide shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Order of Christian Priorities



Used by permission

The orange arrow in the diagram depicts a *Priority of Order* where the lowest priority is engagement with the *Word* through *knowledge* and *mind*, followed next by exhibiting *passion* through *relationships* and *heart*, and finally proceeding to the highest priority of *worship*, *fellowship*, and *evangelism* as believers engage in *activities* with their *hand*. As will be seen, Pastor Lonnie put this philosophy into practice as his sermons in 2015 and 2016 framed *knowledge/mind*

<sup>63</sup> Ward, “Head Knowledge Isn’t Enough”; Mark Ward Sr., “Sermons as Social Interaction: Pulpit Speech, Power, and Gender,” *Women and Language* 41, no. 2 (2019): 285-316.

not only as the lowest priority, but as a distraction from, and ultimately a hindrance to, attaining the higher priorities of *relationships/heart* and *activities/hand*.

Thus, for purposes of manageability and greater clarity, the present study focuses on the 2015-16 period when Pastor Lonnie preached a sermon series on the Gospel of Mark. The series spanned 54 Sunday morning sermons delivered between September 2015, when Lonnie had been pastor for two years, and November 2016. By this time, Lonnie had not only worked out an explicit critique of head-versus-heart, but increasingly took the next step by integrating into his sermons an overt critique, not only of intellectualizing, but also of intellectualizing elites. The Gospel of Mark and its accounts of Jesus' encounters with scribes and Pharisees offered Lonnie, as will be seen, multiple opportunities to contrast *heart knowledge* and *head knowledge*.

The data presented below were generated by reviewing my fieldnotes on the Gospel of Mark series, noting the dozen sermons where I recorded that Pastor Lonnie had made extended comments on intellectual elites, replaying audio recordings of those sermons, and transcribing Lonnie's comments. Afterward, my analysis first aimed to produce a grounded theory of Lonnie's discourses by following the four stages of Glaser and Strauss's constant-comparative methodology: "(1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory."<sup>64</sup> The method entailed constantly sorting through and comparing the data until common themes emerged. Next, because the identified themes about intellectual elites emerged in an organizational context, I analyzed the themes through the framework of Social Identity Theory<sup>65</sup> as applied to the phenomenon of organizational identification, defined as a "cognitive construct [in which] . . . an individual need only perceive him- or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group."<sup>66</sup> Thus, in contrast to the discourses of national evangelical leaders and media, Lonnie's talk instantiated a "local strategy"<sup>67</sup> for constructing evangelical identity and church culture through casting intellectuals as "others."

### Field Observations

Riverside Bible Church was founded more than fifty years ago by conservative dissidents who left a mainline Protestant church. The low-rise building, constructed by the congregation in the 1980s in what is now an older section of town, is clad in medium-brown metal siding and earth-tone brick. The effect is relaxed, like a community center, rather than projecting an overtly "churchy" appearance. The worship sanctuary features a high ceiling, three pew sections ranged around an elevated platform, and a center-stage wooden pulpit on which all sightlines converge. The approximately 140 weekly attendees were predominantly white and middle-aged, including many retirees. Thus, the congregation skewed at, or somewhat above, the median age of 49 for evangelical Protestants nationwide.<sup>68</sup> Riverside Bible Church is, according to Becker's<sup>69</sup> taxonomy, a "family church" governed primarily by a small number of key families whose husbands rotated on

<sup>64</sup> Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine, 1967), 105.

<sup>65</sup> Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33-47.

<sup>66</sup> Blake E. Ashforth and Fred Mael, "Social Identity Theory and the Organization," *Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 1 (1989): 20-39; see 21.

<sup>67</sup> Gerry Philipsen, "Local Strategies Research: From Knowledge to Practice (unpublished paper)," (2012).

<sup>68</sup> *America's Changing Religious Landscape*.

<sup>69</sup> Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

and off the elder board and whose wives organized church socials, children's ministries, and nursery care. Riverside was led by a pastor who served more than 30 years before his 2013 retirement, at which time the congregation called Pastor Lonnie to its pulpit.

Shortly after his second anniversary as pastor, Lonnie began a weekly preaching series on the Gospel of Mark. After his first sermon provided an overview of the gospel, he launched into the first chapter of Mark and in succeeding weeks drew lessons from Jesus' baptism and temptation, the calling of his first disciples, and the performing of his first healings. By the fourth week, Lonnie reached the final passage of the first chapter in which Jesus, following the breakneck pace of his initial foray into public ministry, finds a private space to pray alone about his next moves. In his application, Lonnie exhorted the Riverside congregation that, like Jesus, they should not be distracted from their Christian mission. At this point in the Marcan account, Jesus had not encountered any scribes or Pharisees—the characters who would, in the coming weeks and months, become Lonnie's metonym for scholars and intellectuals. Nevertheless, among the distractions that Lonnie could have chosen—careerism, materialism, sports, hobbies, or a dozen other diversions common to laity—he chose intellectualizing, a distraction likely common to no one in the audience, as his illustration.

Distractions, I believe those are the enemy's scheme. Let me close with an illustration. ... Puritans, who were among the most educated people of their day, founded the first and perhaps most famous of the Ivy League schools. ... Harvard College's first presidents and tutors insisted there could be no true knowledge or wisdom without Jesus Christ. ... But today, these institutions lead the way in pulling our country not toward Jesus Christ but hurriedly away from Jesus Christ. So, what happened? Distractions! Distractions happened. We can name many things, but the purpose and the priority of Jesus Christ was replaced. It was replaced.<sup>70</sup>

Thus, a passage about Jesus at prayer became, in Pastor Lonnie's telling, a warning about the distractions of intellectualizing biblical teachings. The following week, Lonnie launched into Mark's second chapter, where Jesus heals a paralytic and forgives his sins. After a highly animated recounting of the scene, Lonnie turned to the scribes who were present at the healing and who complain that only God can absolve sins.

We know for sure that these guys weren't blown away with amazement [at the healing]. Their thoughts were not on the compassion of Jesus or the love that the men [who carried the paralytic to Jesus] had shown to their friend. Naw, they had seen this event and waited through what was for them just the mushy stuff and got to the OBJECTIVE truth: "This guy is claiming to be God." . . . But in the exercise of their intellect, they had overlooked the heart of the matter. God was HERE, there with them—and what was he doing? Forgiving sins! That's the heart of the matter, man! But for them: "IRRELEVANT!"<sup>71</sup>

The precedence of *heart knowledge* over *head knowledge*, of the emotional over the cerebral, could not have been expressed more clearly. Next, after expounding on the divinity of Jesus as demonstrated by his healing of the paralytic, Lonnie could not resist a veiled dig, delivered in a sarcastic tone, at modern critical scholarship about the historical Jesus:

---

<sup>70</sup> Sermon on Mark 1:35-45 delivered October 8, 2015.

<sup>71</sup> Sermon on Mark 2:1-13 delivered October 15, 2015.

Some have said Jesus was not sure of his identity, that he was conflicted and at times doubtful of his call as the Messiah. . . . In the sight of all the people there, Jesus makes a statement, the statement that he is God, and then backs it up with a miracle. Awesome! What was the accusation of the scribes? That Jesus claimed to be God. Did Jesus qualify his response to them? Did he say, like, “Uh, I know you think I’m God and I want you to know that I’m really not God but only a prophet—the greatest prophet ever, I might say, and that I have the ‘Christ spirit’ in me, and that I’m going to die for people to make a way for them to follow my example. In fact, you could call me a god, you know, with a little g, you know, or maybe a semi-capital g. But I’m really not God, you know, I’m not the great I AM. No.” Does he say that? No. He knows exactly what they [the scribes] are thinking and he tells them that he has the authority to forgive sins.<sup>72</sup>

Over the next two weeks of sermons, Jesus’ running battles with the scribes and Pharisees continued as Pastor Lonnie preached through the remainder of Mark chapter 2. As it happened, Riverside’s monthly observance of communion coincided with the gospel account of Jesus’ table fellowship with social outcasts, giving Lonnie the opportunity to assert, “Jesus gave us the bread and the cup as visual symbols because we get mentally and cognitively distracted.” Then in his sermon, entitled “Dinner with a Sinner,” Lonnie sketched a picture of Jesus’ scribal opponents:

And so, word got around [that Jesus was eating with sinners] and the watchdogs of society got wind of it ... Let’s talk about these scribes and Pharisees a bit. The scribes were the ones who’d we call the scholars of their day. ... Included in that was doctrinal integrity. They were the guys who made sure that things were right when it comes to the text, everything that’s written down. ... They used the system, the Bible, the knowledge they were given as a wall to keep others out, to keep them in.<sup>73</sup>

The pedantry of scholars came into greater focus in Pastor Lonnie’s next sermon, which bridged the second and third chapters of Mark. His subject was the gospel account of the Pharisees who questioned why Jesus did not teach his disciples to fast and why he plucked grain and performed healings on the Sabbath when observant Jews should do no work. For the first time, Lonnie made a bold rhetorical move, referencing his own alma mater and Riverside’s ecclesial identity before asserting that unhealthy intellectualizing can “infect” evangelical Christians.

Now, we’ve talked about the Pharisees in our series here in the book of Mark, because we’ve seen them before, but let’s remind ourselves a bit. The Pharisees were a group of conservatives for their time. They dedicated themselves to knowing the Bible, the Bible of their day. They were zealous for correct doctrine. . . . They were the brightest and best of their day. The reason I say that is because, if we’re not careful, we can easily lose the lessons of history. Believe me, if we think that we’re immune, then we’re already infected. We can say that the Pharisees were the conservative scholars of their day. We can even say that they were the [redacted] Seminary guys of the day. They were, what we might call, of the Bible Church movement of their day. Now, I know that I’m getting some upraised eyebrows, but listen to me, listen a bit. *I went to [redacted] Seminary, and I’m speaking to*

---

<sup>72</sup> Sermon on Mark 2:1-13 delivered October 15, 2015.

<sup>73</sup> Sermon on Mark 2:14-17 delivered November 1, 2015.

myself. . . . Joy, good, life, these are things that Jesus was all about. . . . Each instance, the Pharisees initiated the opposition.<sup>74</sup>

Intellectualizing biblical teachings thus steals joy, goodness, and life. The Pharisees, however, drop out of the Marcan narrative in chapters four through six as Jesus teaches in parables and then performs a series of spectacular miracles. But at the opening of the seventh chapter, the Pharisees return with a vengeance. When they sharply accuse Jesus of violating Jewish purity laws, Jesus angrily turns on his opponents to denounce them as religious hypocrites who put legal traditions before God. With this exchange as prologue, Pastor Lonnie's sermon quickly warmed to his recurring theme on the dangers of overthinking. Again, he warned that even conservative evangelicals can take intellectual rigor too far.

Let me give you a modern-day equivalent because I think it is important. My own experience: I went to a school, a seminary called [redacted] Theological Seminary. And I greatly appreciate the rigor and the discipline that was handed down to me through this school. . . . The doctrinal statement for this school where I went, [redacted] Seminary, is detailed and long. There are over 400 words with 21 articles . . . You could even bring it home. Our doctrinal statement here in this church is unusual, it is detailed and long. But it signals our commitment to truth and it matters what one believes, that's important.<sup>75</sup>

Yet, even as doctrinal purity is important, a focus on such purity can become Pharisaic:

As a pastor, if I had been there—or if they had been here today—I would have said to those Pharisees, “You know, I commend you for your commitment to truth. I commend you for your rigor.” I would have commended their desire for purity in a world that's filled with compromise, even in the religious realm. I would have seen the desire to keep the world at bay from eroding your commitment to God. I would have found a kindred spirit in the Pharisees.<sup>76</sup>

Lonnie's rhetorical move placed the intellectual rigor of his seminary education and the doctrinal rigor of Riverside Bible Church as secondary to heartfelt action. He then went further to ridicule the lengths to which some evangelicals may go to parade their scholarly rigor before the world:

So, what did Jesus think of the Pharisees? . . . “You guys are hypocrites because you make sure that your words are right, but you don't do a thing about it.” So, I tried to think, “Well, how is that in our day?” Well, it's like having the right doctrinal statement, making sure it is known that you have the right doctrinal statement. In fact, you will do everything to make sure that people see it. You know, you put it on the Web, you put it in a nice booklet, you get the precise wording, you have the right proof texts. You're meticulous about everything, even maybe the right format, even the right font. Okay, because this is important, right? But it's all done for show. When it comes to doing the statement, well, what you start to get is, “We'll get around to it, eventually. But we've got a good one.”<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Sermon on Mark 2:18-3:6 delivered November 8, 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Sermon on Mark 7:1-13 delivered March 13, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Sermon on Mark 7:1-13 delivered March 13, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Sermon on Mark 7:1-13 delivered March 13, 2016.

Left to itself, Pastor Lonnie preached, intellectualizing necessarily “drifts” into a quest for social status and approval that ultimately turns against Jesus. If anyone in the congregation was still unsure, he “nailed” the application by reviving a familiar trope.

What matters is the right kind of opinion from people, all at the expense of being right. You know, you have to make a convincing argument, or you have to have the right programs in church. All of these things, in the eyes of the right people, in the eyes of mankind, humanity. But what about God? It doesn’t really matter, as long as the right people [inaudible]. . . . It [drift] happens in institutions. Yale, Harvard—at the beginning, they were there to train pastors. That was their mission. It’s still even on their [memorial] stone. Now it’s a completely secular institution, a major force against the gospel.<sup>78</sup>

After the confrontation with the Pharisees, the narrative in Mark’s seventh chapter picks up again with Jesus’ healing ministry. Yet Lonnie was not done with intellectual elites. In a sermon on the healing of a deaf mute, he introduced a new rhetorical maneuver. Along with exegesis or extracting meaning *from* the text, he added eisegesis or injecting meaning *into* the text—in this case, by constructing a binary opposition, where none exists in the passage, between faith and knowledge. To make the application clear, Lonnie capped his commentary by referencing the scribes and Pharisees, although they do not appear in the Marcan narrative.

You know, it’s okay in our day to have knowledge. Many may say that Jesus’ sayings are good, some may believe that he existed, some may even say, “Well, yes, he is God.” But we know that, or we should know that, having knowledge does not equate with knowing its implications or even doing anything about it. I think it’s because we as human beings tend to have weak logic and we dismiss it altogether. It’s a deception that started off in the Garden of Eden. Remember? The deception was that if you have knowledge you’ll be like God. Did he really say that? “Now, look, if you eat from this, then you’ll be like God, knowing good from evil.” “Whoa, why not?” But having knowledge does not mean that we’re accountable for it. Having knowledge does not make us God, it just makes us accountable to him for that knowledge. . . . You know, this is something that the scribes and Pharisees would not do. They had knowledge but they would not submit, they were not accountable to God for that knowledge.<sup>79</sup>

Another eisegetical dig against academics appeared when Pastor Lonnie sermonized on Jesus’ declaration, in the ninth chapter of Mark, that the first shall be last and servant of all. In so doing, he constructed a binary opposition between servanthood and science education:

But, fundamentally, today in our world there are loud voices that say the exact opposite [of the value of servanthood]. For instance, let’s just take it as a for instance—there’s many ways to look at this, but—the philosophy that elevates the theory of evolution. Okay, let’s just look at that. Living by this philosophy means that the fittest are to be valued over the unfit. . . . This philosophy dominates our educational system—survival of the fittest, evolution.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Sermon on Mark 7:1-13 delivered March 13, 2016.

<sup>79</sup> Sermon on Mark 7:24-30 delivered April 3, 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Sermon on Mark 9:30-37 delivered June 5, 2016.

The following week's sermon then contrasted Christians who perform good deeds with those who are stuck on useless and ultimately silly intellectual questions:

For someone else, a theological nuance may be a clincher. "Hey, I'm an intralapsarian and you're a sublapsarian. This church is sublapsarian. I can't do it!" Right? These are issues that the scripture leaves unanswered. No, doctrine is important, very important. That's the point—[we should focus on good deeds,] but not [on] the things [such as useless intellectual questions] that God does not want us to be keying in on.<sup>81</sup>

By the time Pastor Lonnie reached the tenth chapter, I had been listening to his series on the Gospel of Mark for nine months. As an ethnographer of religious communication, I had trained myself to make field observations as neutrally and with as much detachment as possible. Yet here, Lonnie's diatribes against scholars reached a crescendo that I found breathtaking in its rhetorical invention. Over the next three weeks, he would characterize scholars as heartless intellectuals and then, in a tour de force, equate scholars with those who would prevent children from seeing Jesus and with the wealthy who are less likely than a camel to enter heaven. It began when Lonnie preached on Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees over the question of divorce:

Now, the Pharisees, we've talked about them before, and many of you have read about the Pharisees and know about the Pharisees. To put it in a small statement—scholars, conservative scholars of the day—Pharisees. . . . Scholars of the day at best treated this issue [of divorce] as academic, you know. And so, it was not a legitimate question with concern for families or children or the effect this ripping apart of marriages would have on the fabric of society. . . . You know, when we fast-forward into our time, you know, the church has been a place where this topic can be treated likewise, you know, one where it's academic, you know. . . . There are opinions out there, and there are practice out there—and many even in our day would seek to justify their position based on everything except for the word of God. [In a mocking "scholarly" voice:] "Psychological studies have said" or "Sociological studies say . . ." <sup>82</sup>

The theme continued with even greater intensity the next Sunday, when Pastor Lonnie preached on Jesus' famous saying, "Let the children come to me." In Lonnie's telling, the passage is about access to Jesus. And who today prevents access to Jesus? The intellectual elites are culpable:

We're a Bible Church and as such we place value on biblical knowledge. But if it ends there then we are no better than scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day and we have placed on a pedestal a false standard, one that Jesus does not use. You understand that it's not vast and deep knowledge of theology or Bible that gets you into heaven, right? You understand that it's not how much you know. No! As a Bible Church we need to understand that. It's not our vast theological knowledge that's going to get us into heaven. No! It's only a right relationship with Jesus Christ. You know that it's not our knowledge of the Bible that impresses the Lord, right? You know that. He is only pleased when we use that knowledge to do as he did, to love him more and more. He speaks much about reaching the ones with

---

<sup>81</sup> Sermon on Mark 9:38-50 delivered June 12, 2016.

<sup>82</sup> Sermon on Mark 10:1-12 delivered June 19, 2016.



little or no access. We need to take a look at our Sunday school classes, folks. Are we putting it [i.e., the teaching level] up here [raises hand above head]? If it's important, yes, but sometimes that's restrictive [lowers hand to waist]. "You don't have access unless you're willing to have knowledge like us, [and then] we'll give you access." That's completely wrong.<sup>83</sup>

Finally, Lonnie's castigation of intellectual elites reached its peak when he offered an original twist on Jesus' saying that a camel would more easily pass through the eye of a sewing needle than a rich man would enter heaven.

Today this does not bug us, you know, that the rich have a hard time getting into heaven, as much as it did his disciples. But we have parallels today and I want to bring them up. But what if the Lord said this, okay, instead of using the rich, what if the Lord said this, to get us to understand what's going on: "How hard it is for the scholars to enter the kingdom of God. It's going to be very hard for theological scholars to get into heaven." You'd go, "What? Uh, wait a minute?" That's a little bit more like maybe what they [the disciples] felt. . . . You see, we value knowledge. We live in the Information Age. We value knowledge of theology. And there's nothing wrong with this. In fact, it's important. But God does tell us that knowledge—what?—puffs up. All right. 1 Corinthians 8:1, "Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know, we all have knowledge, knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies." And Jesus had very strong words for the scribes, the scholars of the day, and the Pharisees, who valued the mastery of biblical knowledge and all its nuances. That's the kind of thing we're talking about here.<sup>84</sup>

Before the Gospel of Mark picked up its concluding narrative of Jesus' passion, one final passage from the twelfth chapter gave Pastor Lonnie a last chance to expound on the dangers of intellectualizing. In the Marcan account, a scribe agrees with Jesus' statement of the greatest commandment. Jesus then tells the scribe that he is close to God's kingdom. But Lonnie, in his sermon, knew what was ultimately keeping the scribe away from God:

Notice that the scribe here does not ask which [commandment] is the greatest, but which is the foremost. Maybe he was trying to say, "Which one of these actually summarizes best everything?" We don't know. We do know that there was this back and forth between scholars, all right? "How do we categorize these things?" Scribes and scholars love to do that, you know, put things in categories and try to figure out, "Okay, this is better, and this goes here and that goes there." . . . But this process of trying to figure this all [out] can easily degrade. Instead of being a desire to shepherd the flock, it now becomes an exercise that only adds more burden on the people. Because what happens then? The people have to know these categories.<sup>85</sup>

Pastor Lonnie's final sermon on Mark was delivered the week before Thanksgiving 2016, after which he preached messages related to holiday themes. For my part, I continued my fieldwork

---

<sup>83</sup> Sermon on Mark 10:13-16 delivered June 26, 2016.

<sup>84</sup> Sermon on Mark 10:17-31 delivered July 3, 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Sermon on Mark 12:13-34 delivered September 4, 2016.

through the end of the season and, after 39 months, concluded that I had exhausted the possibilities for observation and drew the field portion of my study to a close.

### Thematic Analysis

Among the 54 sermons Pastor Lonnie delivered in his series on the Gospel of Mark, twelve addressed intellectualizing in depth, as opposed to spontaneous passing mentions in many other sermons. In particular, of the eight Marcan pericopes (2:1-11, 2:23-28, 3:1-6, 3:22-30, 7:1-13, 8:11-13, 10:1-12, 12:13-17) where Jesus in his public ministry confronts scribes or Pharisees, Lonnie used six (all but 3:22-30 and 8:11-13) as proof texts for discourses about intellectualizing and intellectual elites. Significantly, Lonnie also inserted eisegetical critiques of intellectualizing into six Marcan passages (1:35-45, 7:24-30, 9:30-37, 9:38-50, 10:13-16, 10:17-31) where scribes and Pharisees do not appear. A constant-comparative analysis of the twelve sermons revealed five themes, shown in Table 1, in which Lonnie constructed binary oppositions between what intellectualizing is and, contrariwise, is not. In each, intellectualizing is constructed as a negative quality while its anti-thesis is positive. Since these negative traits are ascribed to elites who practice intellectualizing, Lonnie’s discourse may be characterized as “anti” intellectual.

Table 1: Binary Constructions of Intellectualizing

Intellectualizing is ...	Intellectualizing is not ...	Sermon text	Sermon date
distracted	truth	Mark 1:35-45 Mark 7:1-13 Mark 10:17-31	10/8/2015 3/13/2016 7/3/2016
impersonal	compassionate	Mark 2:1-13 Mark 9:30-37 Mark 10:1-12	10/15/2015 6/5/2016 6/19/2016
exclusive	inclusive	Mark 2:14-17 Mark 2:18-3:6 Mark 10:13-16 Mark 12:13-34	11/1/2015 11/8/2015 6/26/2016 9/4/2016
words	actions	Mark 7:1-13 Mark 9:38-50	3/13/2016 6/12/2016
self-seeking	God-seeking	Mark 7:1-13 Mark 7:24-30	3/13/2016 4/3/2016

*Theme 1: Distraction versus truth.* As early as the first chapter of Mark, before Jesus had encountered any scribes or Pharisees, Pastor Lonnie warned that intellectualizing is not “true knowledge” and is, in fact, the devil’s plan to distract Christians from “the purpose and priority of Jesus Christ.” His illustration was longer than the portion excerpted above as he narrated the story of the Puritans and also quoted the inaugural mission statement and academic standards for ministerial students at Harvard College. The “descent” of the Ivy League colleges from Christian mission to secular apostasy is a longstanding evangelical trope—to which Lonnie returned when preaching through the seventh chapter of Mark. Again, he decried Harvard—a synecdoche for the nation’s university system—in its “drift” to become a “completely secular institution, a major force

against the gospel.” Only true knowledge gains heaven, Lonnie declared in his take on Mark’s tenth chapter, so that scholars, being puffed up with knowledge, miss the cut.

*Theme 2: Impersonal versus compassionate.* Scholars first came up for direct attack when Pastor Lonnie related the story, found in Mark’s second chapter, of the paralytic healed by Jesus. In Lonnie’s interpretation, the scribes on the scene are, notably, neither amazed nor empathetic. Instead, “in the exercise of their intellect” the scribes care solely about the “objective” legal situation—that only God, not Jesus, can forgive sins—and thus see relief of physical and spiritual suffering as “irrelevant.” Their counterparts today, as Lonnie declared in sermons drawn on the ninth and tenth chapters of Mark, are scholars in the natural sciences who espouse the theory of evolution and those in the social sciences who only study family life in laboratories. The former endorses “survival of the fittest” and rejects the unfit (a topic on which Lonnie had much more to say than the sermon portion excerpted above), and “dominate our educational system.” The latter are like the Pharisees who question Jesus’ teaching on divorce; they see the question only as academic and have no “concern for families or children or the effect this ripping apart of marriages would have on the fabric of society.” These experts dismiss the Bible and haughtily cite impersonal psychological and sociological studies.

*Theme 3: Exclusive versus inclusive.* The most recurrent theme in Pastor Lonnie’s discourses on intellectual elites was the pedantry of scholars and how their excessive concern for abstruse—and ultimately minor—details is a device to exclude inferiors. In sermons drawn from the second and third chapters of Mark, Lonnie described scholars as preoccupied with “doctrinal integrity” and as “zealous for correct doctrine,” “the guys who made sure that things were right when it comes to the text” but who ultimately use knowledge “as a wall to keep others out, to keep them in.” When preaching from Mark’s twelfth chapter, Lonnie reiterated that “scholars love to ... put things in categories and try to figure out, ‘Okay, this is better, and this goes here and that goes there.’” Such abstractions, however, “degrade” into an intellectual “exercise that only adds more burden on the people ... [who] have to know these categories.” Most strikingly, Lonnie drew from Mark’s tenth chapter, with the well-known story of Jesus inviting children to come to him, an analogy. Where Jesus “speaks much about reaching the ones with little or no access,” scholars by contrast proclaim, “You don’t have access unless you’re willing to have knowledge like us, [and then] we’ll give you access.”

*Theme 4: Words versus actions.* After narrating Jesus’ denunciation of the Pharisees in Mark’s seventh chapter, Pastor Lonnie paraphrased Jesus’ words as “You guys are hypocrites because you make sure that your words are right, but you don’t do a thing about it.” By this time in Lonnie’s preaching series on the Gospel of Mark, the scribes and Pharisees had been established as stock stand-ins for pedantic scholars and intellectual elites. Again, in Lonnie’s telling, modern-day scholars make a show of their overweening preoccupation with words. They are “meticulous about everything, even maybe the right format, even the right font,” but demur from action. Similarly, in a sermon drawn from Mark’s ninth chapter, Lonnie sarcastically parodied intellectual wordplay (“Hey, I’m an intralapsarian and you’re a sublapsarian!”) as “things that God does not want us to be keying in on.”

*Theme 5: Self-seeking versus God-seeking.* In preaching about Jesus’ denunciation of the Pharisees as hypocrites and comparing them to today’s intellectual elites, Pastor Lonnie added: “What matters [to them] is the right kind of opinion ... in the eyes of the right people ... [God] doesn’t really matter, as long as the right people” are impressed. Later, in another sermon drawn from the seventh chapter of Mark, Lonnie returned to this theme at even greater length. Knowledge, he declared to the Riverside congregation, can be a snare “because we as humans tend

to have weak logic” and thus cannot fully comprehend its implications. To claim otherwise is “a deception that started off in the Garden of Eden.” Although “it’s okay in our day to have knowledge,” Christians must be “accountable to [God] for that knowledge,” unlike the scholarly scribes and Pharisees who “had knowledge but they would not submit, they were not accountable to God for that knowledge.”

The five themes may also be seen as an outworking of Pastor Lonnie’s ministerial philosophy, illustrated in Figure 1, that posits the true priorities of a Christian. *Knowledge/mind* distracts from and hinders the believer’s *upward heart-passion* for a *relationship* with the God of true knowledge (Themes 1 and 5), quashes *relationships/heart* (Themes 2 and 3), and vitiates *activities/hand* (Theme 4). Lonnie did not exhort the Riverside congregation to dispense with all knowledge; he allowed that “it’s okay in our day to have knowledge” and “We’re a Bible Church and as such we place value on biblical knowledge.” Yet his sermons made it equally clear that knowledge also “puffs up” and is inferior, at times even opposed, to heart and hand.

### Organizational Identification

In modern industrial societies, personal identities are tied to a significant degree to organizational affinities, either through work or avocation. Thus, scholars of organizational studies have since the 1980s taken a strong interest in the concept of organizational identification—that is, how members of an organization come to *identify* with that organization. Much research on identification follows the work of Ashforth and Mael, who defined organizational identification as a “cognitive construct [in which] . . . an individual need only perceive him- or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group.”<sup>86</sup> Relying on social identity theory,<sup>87</sup> Mael and Ashforth argued that organizational identification is cognitively constructed via the operation of five factors: the (1) distinctiveness and (2) prestige of the organization which, respectively, confers on members a unique self-identity and boosts self-esteem; (3) awareness of and (4) competition with outgroups; and (5) group formation factors including physical proximity, interpersonal relations, attractiveness, similarity, shared background, and common threats or aspirations.<sup>88</sup>

Pastor Lonnie’s organizational discourses—for that is what sermons are, a form of organizational leadership communication—about intellectual elitism tacitly sought to cultivate in members of Riverside Bible Church a desired identification. As Lonnie freely related in his July 2016 interview, he desired to wean the church off its formerly “propositional and logic-driven” culture that “overlook[ed] the emotional for the cerebral.” Instead, through “a change in communication” that emphasized the “color” of “anchor[ing] propositions in images,” he “set up changes through [his] preaching . . . to bridge the gap between ‘up here’ and the people.”

When analyzed via the framework of Social Identity Theory and its application to organizational identification, as shown in Table 2, Pastor Lonnie’s diatribes against scholars and intellectual elites—embodied by the scribes and Pharisees of the gospel accounts, plus the elites of the Ivy League and the scholarly community that advocates theories of higher criticism, evolution, psychology, and sociology—conform to the five factors enumerated by Mael and Ashforth.<sup>89</sup> The present study makes no claims about the social *effects* of Lonnie’s sermons, and

---

<sup>86</sup> Ashforth and Mael, “Social Identity Theory and the Organization,” 21.

<sup>87</sup> Tajfel and Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict.”

<sup>88</sup> Fred Mael and Blake E. Ashforth, “Alumni and their Alma Mater: A Partial Test of the Reformulated Model of Organizational Identification,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 13, no. 2 (1992): 103-23.

<sup>89</sup> Mael and Ashforth, “Alumni and their Alma Mater.”

only argues that his pulpit discourse sought to cast intellectual elites as “others” as a tacit device to instill in congregants a desired organizational identification. Ascertaining whether his sermons did in fact accomplish the desired social effects would require observational data about the language and behaviors of laity that are not presented here.

Table 2: Elitist “Others” and Organizational Identification

<b>We can construct unique self-identities and heightened self-esteem because ...</b>	
(1) our organization is <i>distinctive</i> ...	We have true knowledge (Theme 1) and seek God (Theme 5)
(2) our organization is <i>prestigious</i> ...	We are compassionate (Theme 2), inclusive (Theme 3), and action-oriented (Theme 4)
<b>Our pastor’s sermons ...</b>	
(3) make us <i>aware</i> that ...	Intellectual elites are distracted from the truth (Theme 1) because they speak only words (Theme 4) and seek only their own gain (Theme 5)
(4) alert us to <i>competition</i> with ...	Intellectual elites whose impersonal (Theme 2) intellect dismisses God’s Word and whose pedantic (Theme 3) ways would exclude access to Jesus
<b>We form an affinity for other members of our organization through ...</b>	
(5a) physical proximity and (5b) interpersonal relations ...	We meet together three or more times per week
(5c) attractiveness, (5d) similarity and (5e) shared background ...	We are predominantly White and middle class
(5f) common threats ...	We see intellectual elites as a threatening secularizing force in America
(5g) common aspirations ...	We pray intellectual elites will be defeated and America de-secularized

## Conclusions

Pastor Lonnie's discourse on the dangers of intellectualizing was not a purely idiosyncratic and individual construction. Clearly, he was situated within a larger evangelical subculture whose anti-intellectual norms provided a context for his own discourse. In turn, this context furnished the topoi or "mental map" that made his assertions comprehensible to and consubstantial with his congregation, allowing joint deliberation and identification. At the same time, however, Lonnie appropriated the topoi of his subculture and arranged them in original ways to invent arguments that met local needs. Thus, while the literature on evangelical skepticism of intellectual elites—such as evangelicals' rejection of manmade climate change, of evolution, of higher biblical criticism, and of university culture—focuses on statements of national leaders and their organizations, the present study indicates that an animus against these elites also emanates spontaneously from the grass roots, from the bottom up, as a local strategy.

The dynamic interplay of the national and local levels of the American evangelical social system may be understood through a concept taken from sociology. Thus, as shown in Figure 2, evangelicalism may be conceptualized as a macro level of national parachurch institutions and their mass-mediated representations of communal norms, a meso level of locally public rhetoric and congregational discourses that transmit norms and structure joint local deliberation and social action, and a micro level of spontaneous natural talk and private role enactments that reproduce norms.<sup>90</sup> At the macro level, the material culture of popular evangelicalism supports rejection of secular intellectual elites. Denunciations of university culture as leftist "brainwashing" and "indoctrination"<sup>91</sup> remain a staple trope of a vast "electronic church."<sup>92</sup> The shelves of Christian bookstores bulge with pop theology nostrums such as "Seven Realities of Experiencing God"<sup>93</sup> that appropriate biblical authority to make simplistic "applications" for present needs but demand no critical thought.<sup>94</sup> And the evangelical pop culture industry is now a \$7 billion enterprise that retails "Jesus junk"<sup>95</sup> and "Christotainment"<sup>96</sup> to an insular evangelical Christian "parallel universe."<sup>97</sup>

Yet evangelicals spurn intellectual elites not solely because the national institutions and material culture of evangelicalism portray "secular humanists" as enemies and persecutors. Evangelicals are also "anti" intellectual because this stance is efficacious at the local level for

---

<sup>90</sup> Mark Ward Sr., "I Was Saved at an Early Age': An Ethnography of Fundamentalist Speech and Cultural Performance," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 33, no. 1 (2010): 108-44; Mark Ward Sr., "The Dangers of Getting What You Wished For: What Do You Say to Evangelicals?" in *Constructing Narratives in Response to Trump's Election: How Various Populations Make Sense of an Unexpected Victory*, eds. Shing-Ling S. Chen, Nicole Allaire, and Zhuojun Joyce Chen (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2018), 61-81; Mark Ward Sr., "Television Transcendent: How the Electronic Church Constructs Charismatic Leadership as a Norm of American Religious Life," *Leadership through the Lens: Interrogating Production, Presentation, and Power*, ed. Creshema R. Murray (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2018), 131-49.

<sup>91</sup> For example see Ben Shapiro, *Brainwashed: How Universities Indoctrinate America's Youth* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

<sup>92</sup> Mark Ward Sr., "From a Christian Perspective': News/talk in Evangelical Mass Media," in *News on the Right: Studying Conservative News Cultures*, eds. Anthony Nadler and A. J. Bauer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 17-46.

<sup>93</sup> Henry T. Blackaby, Richard Blackaby, and Claude King, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2008).

<sup>94</sup> Ward, "Head Knowledge Isn't Enough."

<sup>95</sup> Phil Cooke, *Branding Faith: Why Some Churches and Non-profits Impact Cultures* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2008).

<sup>96</sup> Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe, *Christotainment: Selling Jesus through Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>97</sup> Daniel Radosh, *Rapture Ready! Adventures in the Parallel Universe of Christian Pop Culture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).

constructing a satisfying social identify and organizational identification. As Pastor Lonnie’s sermonic discourse indicates, an organic animus against intellectual elites is a form of “othering” by which believers define, in a series of binaries, who they are versus who they are not. In Lonnie’s telling, “scholars” are stock foils against which members of Riverside Bible Church can tacitly construct themselves as truth-loving, compassionate, inclusive, action-oriented, and God-seeking. Seen this way, the evangelical animus against intellectual elites will not be countered by scientific reports on climate change or debates between evolutionists and creationists. Such issues involve, as Lonnie spontaneously pointed out, more than “propositional and logic-driven” arguments. For, as the present case study illustrates, the “othering” of intellectual elites is deeply rooted in local strategies for constructing local evangelical identities.

Figure 2: American Evangelicalism as a Social System

