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“OUT TO GET US”: CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL EXPRESSIONS OF IDENTITY IN
INTERACTION

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfilment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology
The University of Mississippi

by

Pace T. Ward

May 2020

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ABSTRACT

Evangelical Christianity occupies a dominant position in American culture and politics. This thesis extends previous research on evangelicalism in America by identifying how evangelicals collectively construct their distinction and uniqueness in small group settings. By conducting an ethnography of bible study meetings organized by an evangelical church in North Mississippi, Mercy Church, I examine how church participants collectively differentiate themselves from the rest of the world. Rather than imagining themselves at odds with a single, monolithic Other, this study shows that evangelical identity is formed and crystallized through small battles with numerous outsiders, both Christian and non-Christian. Specifically, I find that evangelicals at Mercy Church not only differentiate themselves from groups that they feel are a threat to their faith, but also groups that they hope to bring to salvation. The first and second findings chapters of my thesis show that non-Christians are described as belonging to one of two distinct out-groups: what I call “the unsaveable” and “the unsaved.” At Mercy Church, the unsaveable are people who are politically or socially liberal and should be eschewed; the unsaved are global Others who are not like them but are in need of the gospel. The third findings chapter shows how evangelicals at Mercy Church come to see themselves as good Christians by pointing out who does Christianity wrong and what is not a Christian thing to do. By examining how evangelicals construct a collective identity in small group settings, my thesis extends previous work on the politics of evangelical identity. However, unlike previous research, my study shows that the

battle lines evangelicals draw between them and ‘everybody else’ are *not* uniform. My findings suggest that evangelicals may be thriving in the US because they envision and engage a multitude of groups that are seldom neatly defined.

DEDICATION

To the Paperback Boys, for never leaving.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express my deepest gratitude for my mentor and advisor, Dr. Amy McDowell. She knew that I was capable of this thesis long before I did, and her unwavering dedication provided me with the reassurance and inspiration that propelled me through to the end of this project. I also express my appreciation for the rest of my committee, Dr. Minjoo Oh and Dr. John Sonnett, without whose teaching and guidance I would never have reached these conclusions.

I could not have completed this research if not for the financial aid of the University of Mississippi's Graduate School, nor that of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One Monday afternoon in the Spring of 2019, I agreed to get coffee with Jerry Ross, the head pastor of Mercy Church, a local evangelical “bible” church in Oxford, Mississippi. I planned to ask his permission to conduct my Masters thesis research at his church. In addition, I wanted to ask if I could participate in a bible study, what the church calls a “Mercy group,” that he hosts at his house every other Sunday. Pastor Jerry paid for my coffee, and we sat across from each other in a booth for close to an hour. I explained my broad research interests in evangelical Christian identity, symbolic boundaries, and subcultural identity to him before describing why I thought that his church would be a good case for my study. I told Jerry that I want to observe how Christians at Mercy Church evangelize to Others and their attitudes about how it should be done.

“So,” he earnestly began after I had finished describing the project, “are you a Christian?” I told him the truth: Yes, I am a Christian; no, I do not affiliate with any specific denomination. I told him that I still struggle sometimes with reconciling some Christians’ attitudes and beliefs about culturally salient movements and issues, such as feminism and same-sex marriage. His response--in an attempt to provide me with some clarity, I felt--was that faith that Christ died for our sins, and to love Him unconditionally, was the “first step”, or the most important criteria for being a Christian. The rest should follow, he said, although I was unsure what exactly he meant. Nonetheless, once establishing that I am indeed a Christian, the pastor

granted me permission to study his congregation and his Mercy group. In fact, he told me he would be happy to have me. “I know now,” he said, “that you’re not out to get us.”

Jerry’s question and response contextualizes one of the driving motivations for this research project; that is, to analyze how American evangelical Christians create their collective identity using group boundaries against both Christian and non-Christian Others in contemporary society. This analysis helps explain how American evangelicals remain one of the most dominant religious and political forces in the country despite the sharp boundaries they draw between themselves and the surrounding pluralistic and increasingly secularized culture (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Smith 1998; Tranby and Zulkowski 2012). I show that evangelicals do not simply embattle themselves against an imagined, singular Other, as some quantitative work on evangelicalism in America reflects (Edgell et al. 2006; 1998). Instead, I find that evangelical identity is cultivated through different numerous small battles waged with secular, religious, and Christian Others. My qualitative study also reveals that evangelical attitudes about Others cannot be accurately captured in survey data. By observing at the group level how evangelicals talk about who they are *not*, I found that the numerous categories they use to describe Others are contained by very fluid, constantly shifting boundaries and battles.

According to the Pew Research Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study, the overall percentage of American Christians has declined since 2007 by 7.8 percentage points. While the percentage of Americans who are evangelical Protestants is declining less rapidly than other denominations (less than 1 percentage point from 2007 to 2014), this decline is occurring alongside a rapid growth in the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans (Baker and Smith 2015). From 2007 to 2014, the percentage of Americans who responded that they are religiously unaffiliated increased by 6.7 percentage points, from 16.1% in 2007 to 22.8% in 2014 (Pew

Research Center 2014). Evangelical Christianity remains the most populated faith tradition in the country, and the faith tradition is retaining members at much higher rates than other denominations and religions. Yet, despite their dominance in the religious landscape, many evangelicals believe that they are ‘under attack’ (Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018). These data reflect the declining prevalence of Christianity in the US, leading scholars to call into question the persistent notion that America is an “exceptionally” religious nation (Baker and Smith 2015; Schnabel and Bock 2017). Despite the population’s dwindling religiosity, though, the overwhelming percentage of white evangelical voters for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election (Marti 2019; Whitehead, Perry, and Smith 2018) and continuing debates about religious liberties legislation (Kazyak, Burke, and Stange 2018) throughout the nation reflect evangelical Protestantism’s lasting influence in American culture and politics. This study sets out to provide some explanation of these seemingly contradictory points by gaining perspective about how evangelical Christian groups develop an image of their position relative to multiple small groups of Others in the US cultural and religious landscape. Sometimes this is an embattled relationship, but not always. Nevertheless, how evangelicals understand this relationship contributes to the development of an evangelical group identity, the dimensions of which result in the denomination’s large population and slower rate of decline.

When we first met, Jerry suggested that my being a social science researcher might have barred my entry to his church had I not been a Christian, which seems counterintuitive to the focus on outreach and conversion in evangelical Protestantism. This interaction with Jerry led me to ask: How do evangelicals collectively define who can or cannot be converted to their faith? Who do evangelicals talk about when they talk about evangelizing to Others? Do they think that some groups are more difficult or impossible to save than others? If so, who? On what basis, or

by what criteria, do evangelicals at Mercy Church categorize secular people and groups, as well as members and groups of other religions or denominations? Finally, how do evangelicals' judgments about who can and cannot become Christian provide a script for patterns of interaction that solidify and strengthen their evangelical group identity? The answers to these questions allow me to accomplish this study's aim of better understanding how evangelicals are faring better than other religious groups in the United States because they construct and protect a unique evangelical identity by drawing group boundaries between themselves and a wide array of religious and non-religious Others. Rather than imagining themselves at odds with a single, monolithic Other, this study shows that evangelical identity is formed and crystallized through small battles with a multitude of Others that reinforce the idea that evangelicals are one-of-a-kind.

Who is evangelical?

Sociologists of religion and religious historians have defined American evangelicals based on their commonly held belief systems such as spirit baptism, the individual acceptance of Jesus Christ as lord and savior (the born-again experience), the inevitability of the 'end-times,' the existence of Heaven and Hell, and the importance of proselytizing to nonbelievers (Balmer 2014). Smith (1998:1) describes modern evangelicalism as "a new religious movement" launched by fundamentalist Protestants which reawakened "a dynamic, activist American religious tradition...that fundamentally altered the landscape of American religious identity and practice." Putnam and Campbell (2010:13) similarly describe "the neo-evangelicals," who "re-emerged from their self-imposed exile" in order to re-engage with American society after retreating following the Scopes Monkey Trial and the derision against fundamentalists which

resulted. In the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study (2014), survey respondents were asked if they would describe themselves as a "born-again" or evangelical Christian in order to gather the data for their population estimates. Hackett and Lindsay (2008:500) criticize the field for this reason, explaining how "the demographic, religious, or political characteristics of adherents are contingent" on the self-classification of respondents' own denominational affiliation, among other methods. In fact, Putnam and Campbell (2010:13) explain that "because they are an amorphous group defined by admittedly blurry boundaries, one can debate just who counts as an evangelical." In other words, it seems as if there is little agreement on who is evangelical and who is not in the social sciences. For this reason, an approach which examines evangelical identity according to how evangelical Christians construct and define it for themselves is critical for this research.

Collective identity, as I have previously mentioned, is formed largely through processes of contrast from out-groups (Elliot 1986, cited in Smith 1998; Gamson 1991; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Taylor and Whittier 1992). In order to identify the opposing forces against whom evangelicals pit themselves, one might assume that Christians must have some sense of their own "core characteristics." However, in line with Smith's (1998) "embattled and thriving" thesis, previous research indicates that who or what evangelicals identify as not Christian, or not evangelical, informs how they develop an understanding of their religious identities and practices (Burke 2016; McDowell 2018; Ward 2018). For example, in her study of Christians in the Hardcore Punk music scene, Amy D. McDowell (2018: 66) found that the Christians in her study understand their evangelical practices as more authentic than the "Sunday Christians" against whom they distinguish themselves because they are more genuine about "connecting with nonbelievers 'where they are.'" Similarly, in her study of Christians who use online forums as

sources for sex advice, Kelsy Burke (2016) found that Christian couples claim that “kinky” sex is still “Godly sex” as long as it is not polygamous, extra-marital, or homosexual. Additionally, my previous qualitative research on a bible study group organized by a Southern nondenominational evangelical church found that bible study members constructed their religious identities during conversations by defining who is not and cannot be Christian by using an “everybody but us” approach (Ward 2018:19-20).

Identity consists in part in locating oneself within social groups, which provide actors with meaning and frameworks that morally orient them to life and the world. Charles Taylor (1989:28,42) writes that “To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good and bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary.” Smith (1998:91) elaborates that it is social groups that provide the “place” wherein people “find, learn, and preserve those moral orientations.” Evangelical identity, like all identities, is characterized by a specific set of normative and moral directions that orient evangelicals to their lives and the world. However, as I previously mentioned, scholarship has repeatedly noted the precarity of settling on one way of defining evangelical Christianity. That said, empirically observing processes by which evangelical Christians collectively form their identities is key to this thesis, and one of these processes, I argue, is how they imagine and talk about interactions that focus on various non-Christian outsiders.

Researchers working with the Pew Research Center conducted a survey of evangelical Protestant leaders and found that there was an almost unanimous agreement over what it means to be a good evangelical Christian (Pew Research Center 2011). 97% of evangelical leaders responded that, in personal and family life, one must adhere to the teachings of Christ, and 94%

agreed that another important part of being evangelical is *working to lead others to Christ*. This second percentage underlines a point of interest which guides this research. Another way to understand the practice of leading Others to Christ is the practice of evangelism itself, of attempting to convert an outsider to the evangelical faith tradition. So the question is: Who are the Others that evangelicals propose to lead to Christ? Are some groups prioritized over others? If so, why? Or, how do these Others shape their own understanding of what it means to be a good Christian? The answer to these questions is important for accomplishing the goal of this research; that is, to examine how evangelicals construct and solidify their collective identity by distinguishing themselves from a multitude of religious and non-religious Others and understanding their relationship to these groups in different ways.

American Evangelicals: Embattled, Thriving, Dwindling

White American Evangelicals are the largest religious group in the nation, but their numbers are dwindling (Pew Research Center 2014; Putnam and Campbell 2010). This decrease in evangelical affiliation has been accompanied by a rising number of religious “nones,”¹ or individuals who do not identify with organized religion, yet do not necessarily claim themselves to be explicitly anti- or nonreligious, either (Baker and Smith 2015). Religious historians have found that Americans attribute the decrease in religious membership to a number of macro-scale processes. For example, in 1986, Americans listed a decrease in young people’s interest in formal religion, increasing crime and violence, materialism, and the politicization of the church as reasons for the decline in religious observance (Putnam and Campbell 2010). More recently, researchers have specifically looked at the increasing number of religious “nones” in America,

¹ Religious “nones” is an umbrella term used by sociologists of religion to describe individuals who identify as secular, nonaffiliated believers, agnostic, or atheist (Baker and Smith 2015).

an increase that Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith (2015) claim was a result of Christian conservatism and the Republican-Christian coalition, which pushed many away from Christianity and resulted in further political polarization.

Alongside the growing presence of religious nones in the U.S., sociologists and religious historians point out that American evangelicalism is “more than alive and well” (Smith 1998: 20; Bartkowski 1996; Bean and Martinez 2014; Coreno 2002; Fitzgerald 2017, Gallagher 2004, Gallagher and Smith 1999), and that while they are losing numbers, their losses pale in comparison to those of other religious groups (Pew Research Center 2014). Perhaps one of the most prominent explanations for this phenomenon can be found in Christian Smith’s (1998) *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. In this book, Smith (1998: 75) argues that evangelicalism is thriving “precisely *because of*--the fact that it is very much engaged in struggle with the institutions, values, and thought-processes of the pluralistic modern world.” “Those religious traditions will be stronger,” Smith (1998: 120) writes later about his subcultural identity theory, “which better possess and utilize the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant outgroups.” In other words, Smith argues that the more religious and nonreligious subcultural groups there are for evangelicals to position themselves against, the more the religious movement thrives.

Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann (2006) support the claim that evangelicalism thrives because it positions itself against non-religious subcultural groups. In their study, the authors assess whether or not Americans define themselves as “good people and worthy citizens” against the symbolic ‘Other’ that atheists represent (Edgell et al. 2006: 214). While these Americans seem to have a central understanding that their religion shapes their identities as good and worthy people, the authors conclude that “the creation of the Other is

always necessary for the creation of identity and solidarity” (Edgell et al. 2006: 231). This finding suggests that, while evangelicals may have a clear understanding of themselves, or the beliefs, principles, and ideas that characterize them, they must also embattle themselves against those forces which oppose them in order to create their sense of identity and solidarity as a conservative religious movement. The research on evangelicalism, however, has not considered how evangelical Christians draw boundaries between themselves and multiple Christian and non-Christian outsiders and how these boundaries between a large variety of outgroups influence the processes of negation by which evangelicals construct their identities for themselves. While historians and social scientists have defined what it means to be evangelical, it is important in this study to examine the processes by which evangelical Christians use their complex understanding of religious and non-religious outsiders to inform what they consider to be good about being a Christian and, ultimately, come to identify themselves as members of this faith tradition.

Reaching the unreached

The basic sociological principle that social groups form their collective identities largely through processes of contrast and negation informs the current claims that American evangelicalism remains both persistent and strong as a religious subculture (Smith 1998). In my thesis, I aim to take a closer look at variation in the criteria by which these negations are made by evangelicals at a new church in Mississippi. Specifically, I examine how members of the church’s Mercy Groups establish group boundaries that set them apart from Others, or distinguish groups of Others from one another, based on “symbolic markers” such as beliefs, values, and norms that they create through group interaction to construct a sense of self and difference from Others

(Smith 1998:92; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). In other words, instead of solely examining how evangelicals identify who they are *not* as a way of affirming who they are, I am interested in the ways religious group members imagine and assess religious and non-religious Others, as well as how they imagine their relations with groups of religious and non-religious Others. By doing so, I am able to identify additional symbolic identity markers (Hadden and Lester 1978; Smith 1998) that form the basis of the boundaries these groups draw between multiple out-groups. I found that Mercy Christians' group-level interactions shed light on a distinction between two categories of out-groups which I have named the *unsaved* and the *unsaveable*. By *unsaveable*, I mean groups whom Mercy Christians identify and describe as resistant or threatening to the prevalence of Christian values in American culture. The *unsaved*, on the other hand, are groups which Mercy Christians identify as more receptive to or in need of their gospel message.

In addition to studying the boundaries drawn between different out-groups, or the 'unsaved' and the 'unsaveable,' I will also examine how evangelicals in the Mercy Groups identify and define what makes someone a 'good' Christian and what makes someone a 'bad' Christian. I ask: What qualities have evangelicals at Mercy Church determined and agreed make a Christian 'good'? What characteristics do they believe lead to one becoming a 'bad' Christian, and how do they differentiate these 'bad' Christians from non-Christians? How might distinctions between the 'unsaved' and 'unsaveable,' or distinctions between Christians and 'non-believers' more broadly, be reflected in the distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' Christians that evangelicals make? What can the answers to these questions tell us about the formation of evangelical group identity in and beyond Mercy Church?

One detail made Mercy Church stand out from other local nondenominational churches in my community: the church's emphasis on outreach as a part of its mission. On Mercy's website,

there is a specific page entitled “Reaching the Unreached.” When I first visited this website, the first thing I saw when I clicked on this link was a map of the globe color-coded to represent the density of evangelical Christians and churches in a given area of the world. Below it is a statement that describes one of Mercy’s goals to plant churches in “unreached” parts of the world, which they define as areas with less than 2% of people who would identify as evangelical Christians. What this webpage reveals is the fact that opening more churches in these “unreached” areas is one of Mercy’s priorities when it comes to the practice of evangelism. It also reveals that the focus for this effort is international rather than domestic, despite the decline in evangelical affiliation and sharp rise in religious nones in the United States (Pew Research Center 2014). I decided to focus specifically on a Mercy group to empirically observe at the interactional level how the evangelical Christians in attendance are making sense of and responding to changes in the American religious landscape. Because of the value that Mercy Church places on “reaching the unreached” and continuing the global spread of Christianity, evangelicals at this church discuss their own experiences with successful and failed attempts at reaching the unreached domestically and abroad, making this church an ideal case for this study on how evangelicals construct their identity according to how they understand their relationship to religious and non-religious outsiders.

Evangelizing across the boundaries

It has become apparent that American evangelical Christians have found ways to continue to thrive in an increasingly secular and culturally-plural society while continuing to enforce boundaries between themselves--the ‘good Christians’--and the ‘bad,’ more liberal Christians and religious “nones.” It is true that this denomination is losing members, but not nearly as

quickly, or as much, as mainline Protestant denominations (Pew Research Center 2014). The act of conversion, when successful, could be understood as one of the strategic practices of American evangelicals which allows them to remain a dominant religious force in the United States. One of the most unanimously agreed upon tenets of evangelical practice is that of converting those who do not share their beliefs and rituals into someone who does, thus “integrating” them into their religious community (Tranby and Zulkowski 2012: 872). While many studies have concluded that evangelicalism thrives by distinction and that “religion shapes ideas about cultural membership” by drawing “particularly sharp” group boundaries (Tranby and Zulkowski 2012: 872), there has been little work on how they maintain the integrity of what makes them who they are while also trying to convince Others to join their conservative religious movement.

Elizabeth Cherry (2010) explains what is perhaps the most prevailing narrative of evangelicals’ motivation for maintaining the symbolic boundaries between themselves and those they define as outsiders, or, in other words, their ability to thrive by distinction. Symbolic boundary-work can be seen as a strategy “for changing...targets’ mindsets and actions” (Cherry 2010: 452). When considering American evangelicalism as a cultural movement with an influence on political and cultural narratives, this understanding makes sense because of a perceived need to change the mindsets of individuals in an increasingly modern and pluralistic society. While Cherry (2010: 453-4) goes on to explain that, in the case of a movement’s primary goal being outside of collective identity formation, it is also important to understand these actors as “people working to change the lot of others, and not just themselves,” or, in this case, saving Others from what they understand as a path to eternal damnation. While this motivation could very well be one rationalization for conversion work among American evangelicals, it is also

important to note the aforementioned Pew Research study which found that leading Others to Christ is a necessary tenet of good Christian practice. Thus, while on one hand this work can be understood by evangelical Christians as improving the lot of those they successfully proselytize to, they are also simultaneously working to improve their own lot (Pew Research Center 2011). If good Christian practice necessitates conversion, then American evangelicals could very well understand evangelical practice as securing their eternal salvation. Furthermore, the active practice of evangelism, or at the very least valuing this practice as a facet of good Christian identity, may serve as a device for authenticating evangelical Christian identities, both for themselves and other evangelical Christians with whom they interact.

Evangelicals' mutual obligation to engage across the symbolic boundaries they have drawn between themselves and relevant out-groups is an example of what Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman (2003) call "group bonds," one dimension of their definition of "group style." These group bonds "put into practice a group's assumptions about what members' mutual responsibilities should be while in the group context," and interact with group boundaries and "speech norms," which "put into practice" group members' assumptions about what speech is appropriate in the group (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003: 739). The interaction of these three dimensions of "group style" create a shared ground for interaction which, when complimented by the ways group members make meaning, results in what the authors call "culture in interaction" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003: 737). The relationship between the dimensions of group style is reflected in the findings from my research, in that Mercy group members' depictions of interactions with Others were characterized, in certain instances, by the aforementioned tenet of evangelical Christianity: evangelism. Because of this "mutual

responsibility” to “lead others to Christ,” Mercy Christians imagine their engagement with certain out-groups differently than others.

In some instances, the symbolic markers that evangelicals use to differentiate themselves from Others overlap, resulting in complex boundary-making processes involving the conflation of multiple sites of distinction. Jeremy Brooke Straughn and Scott L. Feld (2010) provide a framework that allows for a closer examination of how these boundaries overlap to influence evangelical Christians’ perceptions of who can or cannot be ‘saved.’ The authors conceptualize a process wherein multiple symbolic boundaries align with one another, or “the ‘nesting’ of one symbolic boundary within another” (Straughn and Feld 2010: 283). Indeed, previous qualitative research on evangelical Protestants at the interactional level has found that cultural categories besides one’s religious affiliation (i.e. feminists and professors) can influence the way evangelical Christians perceive and engage with religious “Others” (Ward 2018). Specifically, Straughn and Feld (2010: 283) describe a process of “defining one type of social identity (national belonging) *in terms of* another (religious affiliation).” What this prior research fails to consider, however, is how this “boundary nesting” (Straughn and Feld 2010: 283) affects how evangelical Christians determine which groups have the potential to be converted versus those who do not. Furthermore, this determination may directly influence their overall engagement with the rest of the world.

Prior research has been conducted in an attempt to understand the shifts in evangelical morality which accompany the process of creating a “seeker friendly” atmosphere that maintains the integrity of the organization (Bean and Martinez 2014; McConkey 2001). Bean and Martinez (2014: 401) provide one explanation using ethnographic research on evangelical attitudes towards same-sex marriage, and find that “evangelicals draw on two different scripts about

homosexuality: one to draw subcultural boundaries, and another to engage across those boundaries for evangelism and outreach.” In other words, while evangelical Christians draw distinctions between themselves and those they deem not Christian, these boundaries also provide evangelical Christians with a template for understanding who to evangelize to. This framework can be extended beyond lesbian and gay individuals, and can help us to understand how these and other subgroups that evangelicals may label as the “Other” communicates a need to evangelize to them. Indeed, Bean and Martinez’s (2014: 401) work falls in line with Smith’s (1998) in that they argue that “evangelicalism thrives because it draws strong boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘the world,’ but also equips the faithful to engage with people outside this subculture.” What this research overlooks, however, is how these boundaries may not only be drawn between “us” and “the world,” but also between various subcultures within the broad category of “the world” and within the category “us.” By accounting for the multitude of distinctions evangelicals make when forming their collective identities, this thesis elaborates how we understand the relationship between drawing “group boundaries” and the “group bonds” that evangelicals share (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

Additionally, as Smith (1998) points out in his analysis of evangelical identities, respondents made distinctions between “*evangelical* Christian” identities and other denominations not seen as “real” or “genuine.” This finding reflects the importance of identifying the symbolic markers that inform how these distinctions are made in addition to those between the unsaved and unsaveable out-groups. Smith goes on later to quote Verta Taylor and Nancy V. Whittier (1992:111) to help explain the relevance of symbolic boundary markers for studying collective identity formation “because they promote a heightened awareness of a group’s commonalities and *frame interaction* between members of the in-group and out-group”

(emphasis mine). This point highlights the importance of not only studying how Mercy Christians identify non-religious Others, but also how they identify Christian Others because both of these identifications help frame Mercy Christians' intergroup interactions. Differences between these intergroup interactions, in turn, provide the grounds for analytically distinguishing between the unsaved and the unsaveable.

Collective identities are constructed and maintained through processes of creating distinction between the group and relevant out-groups. In terms of evangelical Christian identities, Smith (1998:97) specifically points out that "religious traditions have *always* strategically renegotiated their collective identities by continually reformulating the ways their constructed orthodoxies engage the changing sociocultural environment," which would explain why currently-salient politico-cultural issues are reflected most frequently when these distinctions are being made (Bean 2014). Smith uses this point to illustrate the fallacy in claims about religious "accommodation," or the idea that a religion in the face of secular modernity is in a constant state of compromising its orthodoxies. These orthodoxies are synonymous with the morally-orienting frameworks Taylor (1989) describes. Evangelical morality, then, is not shifting, as other scholars have argued in the past, according to Smith.

This thesis seeks to refine claims about evangelicals' position in American society, and how they remain strong and persistent despite contemporary cultural change that has affected other religions and denominations. While many have argued that evangelicals' embattled position in society is a result of their drawing sharp group boundaries between themselves and the rest of the world, it is undeniable that some form of interaction between evangelical Christians and certain out-groups that they identify is valued as a way to promote the continued spread of Christian influence in the world. How evangelicals imagine these interactions should

be influences and is influenced by processes through which evangelical Christians construct and define their evangelical identities for themselves. If identity, specifically collective evangelical identity, is characterized by how group members understand their own position relative to their surroundings, then the current narrative that evangelical Christianity is defined by sharp, impenetrable group boundaries mischaracterizes how scholars understand evangelical identity by disregarding “working to lead others to Christ” as a required tenet of the faith (Pew Research Center 2011). As a result, prior research has overlooked evangelical Christians’ motivation for continuing to identify with this faith tradition. Evangelical Christians do describe their interactions with other groups across the group boundaries that they have drawn and, in fact, these descriptions constitute part of what defines good Christian practice for them. Evangelicals may feel a sense of embattlement with some groups, but they also feel a sense of obligation to interact with Others, and depictions of these interactions in conversations among evangelicals, I argue, is important for understanding how evangelicalism continues to thrive in the U.S. today.

By conducting participant observations this research aims to show how perceptions and discussions about the practice of evangelism--a generally agreed upon, necessary practice of “good Christianity”--influences how evangelicals differentiate various groups of Others. By examining which religious and nonreligious out-groups Mercy Christians tend to talk about when they discuss this practice, this research will provide important insights about how symbolic boundaries remain rigid in certain instances, while potentially shifting in others. Furthermore, by understanding how, and in what cases, evangelicals may shift these boundaries, this research hopes to illuminate the particularities of evangelical identity construction and its relation to the numerous, nuanced identifications of religious and non-religious “Others.” In the following

section, I will outline the methods I use to identify these processes I have described at the group level, and provide an explanation for why I have chosen to use these methods.

CHAPTER II

METHODS

This thesis aims to examine and analyze how evangelical Christians' talk creates distinctions between different groups of outsiders resulting in the creation of a uniquely evangelical collective identity. By identifying how these evangelicals draw these distinctions, I develop a clearer picture of how evangelicals construct their collective identity at the group level. For this reason, the bulk of this data comes from participant observations conducted at bible studies, called Mercy Groups, organized by members of a local nondenominational church in Oxford, Mississippi: Mercy Church.

Mercy Church began in 2005 as a gathering of several families in one of the founder's homes. According to the church's website, these meetings were organized in order for these family members to study the bible and "to pray for wisdom from God about whether or not to start a new church in the community." These families saw a need for a church led by elders that taught congregants in an exegetic, or expository, fashion and cultivated a small group life, and Mercy Church's founders sought to fulfill that need.

In the fall of 2005, the church opened itself to the public, relocating from founders' homes to a local conference center where they held Sunday morning services. By December of 2009, Mercy had become home to over 200 members and between 600 and 800 congregants were attending every Sunday, including "more children than the facility could handle." In

January of 2015, the church moved out of this facility and began meeting in the auditorium of a local, newly-renovated public middle school and increased the capacity of its children's ministry. While the church has used another facility as an office space since October of 2018, the congregation still meets in the middle school every Sunday for a weekly church service, children's ministries, and seminars for students and adults focused on topics such as church history and theology.

Case Selection: The Rosses and the Martins

When I looked at Mercy Church's website while searching for a good case to study for this thesis, I saw a link that read "Get Connected." The link redirected me to a page with a short blurb describing one of the goals of the church: to be a "family of believers" that shares the "love of God" among themselves and with others. On the right hand side of the webpage were links to other pages such as "Women's Ministry," "Mercy Groups," and "Men's Ministry." I clicked on "Mercy Groups," expecting that these were small groups organized by the church, which I felt would be a good setting for conducting a study about how evangelical Christians distinguish between multiple groups of religious and non-religious Others, and how these distinctions inform how evangelicals construct and affirm their collective identity in interactions.

The description of Mercy Groups that appears on Mercy Church's website begins by describing the churches commitment to fostering the development of "strong, biblical friendships" in the face of isolation's continued normalization. Mercy Group meetings are described as universally including bible study, prayer, and a shared commitment to investment in one another's lives. There are ten groups available to sign up for. The information about the groups provided on the website is sparse: the general location of the meeting (i.e. the

neighborhood where the hosts, or “leaders” live), the group leaders’ names, the day of the week and time of the meetings, and the focus of the meetings. The description of the topic or focus of each meeting is vague, usually described as “sermon discussion,” “fellowship,” “prayer,” or a combination of the three. However, as I browsed the Mercy groups on this page for potential groups to study, one called the Ross Group stood out to me for two reasons. Firstly, the Ross Group was the only group whose description differed from the rest: “Study of the Book of James.” This description piqued my interest because it is most similar to the Apologetics bible study group I previously studied at a different church, Welcome Church, for my Honors thesis, which centered on how evangelicals collectively identified and derided “skeptics,” or those who question or oppose Christianity’s teachings and claims about truth. A Mercy Group that even mentions studying the bible, compared to the rest of the descriptions, seemed to be the best fit for understanding how evangelicals’ collective identity as Christians is created in a group setting. Secondly, the leaders of the group are Mercy’s pastor, Jerry, and his wife, Missy. That said, not only was this group seemingly the most similar case to my prior research of an Apologetics group at Welcome Church, but I was interested in the dynamics of an informal meeting organized by the church’s pastor.

The webpage instructed me to click on the link that corresponds to the description of the Mercy Group I would like to join. The link opened up my email, and I was able to send a message asking for specific details about where and when the group meets. I sent the email, announcing myself as a researcher who was interested in visiting the group to see if it would make a good case for my Master’s Thesis project. I received a response four days later with the address of the meeting. I visited the next available meeting to get a feel for the space and to determine whether or not I would be interested in conducting my research on this group.

The meeting began at 5:30 p.m. on a Sunday evening. When I arrived, pastor Jerry appeared surprised to see me. We had met once before at an event organized by a center on campus, but we had not gotten to know each other very well at the time. I was thankful for our prior meeting, because I had a feeling that he had not been notified about a new attendee prior to my arrival, despite my email. Jerry's surprise did not cause him to hesitate for long before inviting me into his home, introducing me to his wife, and offering me some of the food that other attendees had brought. On this first visit, I noted that there were seven adults in attendance (N = 7), including Jerry and his wife Missy. All of the attendees were white aside from one woman who appeared to be mixed-race, and attendees' ages appeared to range from mid-twenties to late-sixties or early-seventies.

After attending 5 of Jerry and Missy's Mercy group meetings (from June 2019 to October 2019), I was invited by a friend I had made in the church since I began my study, Jacob Martin, to attend his Mercy Group as well. Jacob is Mercy Church's worship pastor, meaning that he was in charge of putting a worship band together, teaching them the songs, practicing with them throughout the week, and leading worship on Sunday mornings as the lead singer and guitar player of the band. I met Jacob in Summer 2019, when a two-month break in Jerry's Mercy group meetings led me to find an alternative way to build rapport and learn about the church early on. I learned through Facebook of a Summer Worship weekly event that Jacob organized at a coffee shop in town. I attended 4 of these meetings (June and July 2019), and got to know Jacob as a result.

Jacob's relaxed demeanor gives him the air of someone who is always happy. He is a young white man with short auburn hair and a neatly-trimmed beard. His wife, Bethany, a short blonde white woman, is around the same age. Jacob's church attire is considerably less formal

than Jerry's. Jacob's plan for the Martin group was to meet at his and Bethany's home every Sunday night at 5:30. I had to inform him that I could only come every other week because I would continue attending Pastor Jerry's group on Sundays. I later realized that while Jacob and Bethany planned for the group to meet weekly at their house, they cancelled, relocated, or rescheduled multiple of these meetings. The first meeting I attended was held at Jacob's, where we met for close to 2 hours to eat and have a discussion about the morning's sermon, using prepared questions as prompts. Two weeks later, however, we met at a Mexican restaurant in town, instead, where we did not discuss the sermon at all.

In total, I collected 40 hours of participant observation data from: 11 biweekly Ross Group meetings (from June 2019 to February 2020), 2 weekly Martin Group meetings hosted by Jacob (from November 2019 to February 2020), 4 weekly Summer worship meetings (from June 2019 to July 2019), and 8 Sunday morning Mercy Church services (from June 2019 to February 2020). I chose to observe two different Mercy Groups in hopes that there would be some observable differences in the attitudes and beliefs discussed between the two on account of the different demographics. While the ages of both groups ranged from early twenties to approximately early seventies, the Ross Group comprised primarily married same-sex couples, college professors, and a generally older demographic. The youngest attendee, aside from myself, was a third-year law student at the University. The Martin Group, on the other hand, was younger on average. Two attendees are both enrolled in graduate school at the University. There were only two attendees who I observed who looked to be over the age of forty: a white same-sex married couple who appear to be in their sixties. Because the makeup of the Ross Group is so different from that of the Martin Group, I decided to attend both for a more comprehensive picture of Mercy Christians' attitudes about non-religious Others, as well as one another.

Over the nine months I conducted ethnographic research at Mercy Church, the size of the Ross Group was similar in size to the Martin Group. On average, there would be around ten attendees to the Ross Group, with a typically equal gender distribution. The Martin Group tended to have the same number of attendees, however it was more often the case that the men would slightly outnumber the women in the Martin Group. All of the attendees to both groups were white, aside from one woman who appeared to be mixed-race who regularly attended the Ross Group, and one man who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent who regularly attended the Martin Group.

Data collection and analysis

I took on a role as a typical participant when researching both of these Mercy groups. I occasionally brought food with me to Jerry's, and I ate with the rest of the participants at each meeting, if only a little bit. I participated in the discussions, listening respectfully as others shared and asking questions when I had them. Initially, I relied on a single method of collecting data: After leaving the field, I would record a voice memo on my cell phone, recounting in as much detail as possible the events of the meeting from the moment I arrived to the moment I left. Within twenty-four hours of the Mercy group meeting, I would transcribe the voice recording into thickly-descriptive field notes. The final product ranged from 5 to 9 single-spaced pages. After attending a few of Jerry's meetings, I decided that the amount of specific information I could remember from the bible study, itself, was unsatisfactory. The next meeting I attended, I used my cell phone to read biblical passages along with the group online, and would covertly type brief jottings and participants' direct quotes in my Notes application. By using both jottings and the voice recordings, I was able to transcribe more complete field notes for analysis. After

observing Summer Worship meetings, I relied solely on voice memos recorded following the event. At Sunday morning service, it was easy for me to make detailed jottings throughout the sermon because the bulletins the church provides has a blank page for taking notes, and it was common for other congregants to do so.

In the private group settings of Mercy group meetings, it was common for participants to share details about their personal lives from before the study began, as well as those that had transpired since beginning the study. Attendees' discussions in these settings could include an anecdotal highlight or low point of their week, relevant news that they read or heard recently, or an update on a mutual friend or congregant. Because this research project is designed to understand how evangelicals at Mercy Church distinguish themselves as a group from Others, and how these distinctions inform their position within a broader sociocultural landscape, I carefully remembered and/or recorded instances of participants discussing religious and non-religious Others, how they conceptualized their relationship to those Others, and descriptions of whether or not, and how, they interact with them (see Appendix A). This project is also designed to observe how Mercy Christians draw moral boundaries within their own group, and on what basis they do so, so I was also careful to record conversations group members held about other Christians, being sure to note on what grounds participants differentiated themselves from them.

To analyze my participant observation data, I uploaded documents containing field note transcriptions into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. I created three separate folders: one for Sunday service observations, one for Mercy group observations, and one for Summer Worship observations. I began my analysis by open coding my data by reading "fieldnotes line-by-line to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011:172). By using this method, I was able to

identify relevant themes to the research questions at hand. I identified multiple recurring themes and created codes using participants' own language to label them. For example, I used the code "righteous and unrighteous" to identify instances in which participants, either specifically using this or similar language, identify and make judgments about a person, belief, or behavior they understand as wrong, or sinful (unrighteous), or good enough to receive eternal salvation (righteous) (see Appendix A). By identifying when participants drew distinctions between what is and is not 'a Christian thing to do/be/say,' I found that evangelicals at Mercy Church distance themselves from the unrighteous in order to avoid displeasing God and the eternal damnation they believe results. Understanding this, it became evident who the evangelicals in these Mercy Groups see as 'unsaveable,' or not open to their gospel message.

Three additional themes emerged that benefited my analysis of how evangelicals at Mercy Church distinguish themselves from Others in distinct ways. I created the codes "mission work," "persecution," and "globalized Other." I coded any instance in which participants discussed either their own experience with, Others' experience with, or Mercy Church's organization of international mission trips. This code allowed me to identify how evangelicals at Mercy Church describe themselves engaging groups they have defined as an out-group. Both "globalized Other" and "persecution" were used to identify participants' descriptions of both persecuted Christian groups located in other countries, as well as the imagined non-Christian foreign Other. By identifying these themes and analyzing their occurrences, I arrived at an understanding about why evangelicals do not feel threatened by all out-groups against whom they distinguish themselves. Instead, I found that evangelicals in these groups feel sympathy for those who are not Christians for reasons outside of their own control (i.e., state persecution or

inaccessibility to Christian teachings), and therefore identify these groups as in need of Mercy's gospel message in order to obtain salvation.

In addition, I created the codes "group bonds" and "suffering," which I used to identify data which helped to explain how participants understand themselves in relation to, and distinct from, other Christians. "Group bonds" refers to identifiable mutually-held obligations or responsibilities within the group. For example, Bethany, one of the hosts of the Martin group, would often ask others if they made it to service the week prior, and jokingly scold those who were absent and did not have a reasonable enough excuse for missing. I coded instances such as these under "group bonds," because the responsibility to regularly attend Sunday services is something Bethany expects from her fellow churchgoers. Making a note of group bonds like this allowed me to separate behaviors that are 'unrighteous,' and therefore decidedly not Christian, and behaviors that are reprehensible, but only because of the expectations shared among Mercy Christians.

This thesis sets out to answer how and on what grounds evangelicals create distinctions between various groups of Others based on who they believe can and cannot be saved, and how these distinctions create and solidify their evangelical identity. Evangelicals' creation of distinction between groups, their judgments about how can be saved based on these distinctions, their differentiation of themselves from Christian and non-Christian Others, and the formation of their understanding of good Christianity are all processes that occur in interaction. These processes are wrapped up in the collective creation of "group style" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Conducting participant observations of bible study group meetings allowed me to look closely at instances in which difference from Others is referenced or constructed and identify the basis of this difference. I could also examine conversations in which evangelicals in Mercy

Group meetings would negotiate why a group is different from them, and how they should understand their relationship to a given out-group accordingly. Finally, I was able to analyze how determinations of difference could be translated into their own understandings of what makes them evangelical. For example, many discussions in the Ross Group, specifically, centered around “suffering” for being a Christian. By coding discussions like these, I found that this suffering they so often discussed was seen, by them, as an essential facet of a (Mercy) Christian’s identity. Group members would often suggest that this suffering is a condition of living a righteous Christian life, as I will show in the following section. This code served a dual function.

In the next chapter, I show how this Christian form of suffering is used by evangelicals at Mercy Church as a standard against which to measure outsiders’ sinfulness that ultimately results in the creation of groups that I call the unsaveable and the unsaved. Often, liberal college students and professors, as well as atheists, are depicted as the unsaveable. Group members describe these groups in terms of their “unrighteousness,” or their behaviors and beliefs that reflect an unwillingness to resist the temptations of sin. This unwillingness, according to Mercy Group participants, results in eternal damnation. Mercy Group members achieve “righteousness” and avoid this damnation by distancing themselves from the unsaveable--identifying what it is about them and their decisions that makes them decidedly *not* Christian and subsequently deriding it. In the following chapter I describe the unsaved. These are groups of people abroad who, to evangelicals at Mercy Church, are not Christian by no fault of their own. Participants often conveyed their sympathy for the unsaved due to either their persecution or their lack of exposure to the gospel message. That said, rather than avoiding and denouncing the unsaved, evangelicals at Mercy Church convey their compulsion to aid the unsaved. In other words,

participants feel it to be a part of their evangelical Christian duty to bring the gospel to these “people groups,” as Pastor Jerry often refers to them.

In the following chapter, “Good Christians and Bad Christians: Policing Boundaries and Maintaining Group Style,” I examine distinctions that participants make between themselves, evangelical Christians at Mercy Church, and other Christians. In the chapter, I identify the “stuff of human cultural production” (Smith 1998: 92) that Mercy members use to differentiate themselves from bad or inadequate Christians and construct feelings of belonging as good or adequate evangelical Christians. I show how participants develop a strong sense of their identity in group-level interactions by creating explicit and implicit boundaries between themselves and other Christians. In the conclusion, I review the different ways that evangelicals talk about religious and non-religious Others, how these conceptions of the Other pattern interactions to allow evangelicals to solidify their religious identity, and how this results in the macro-scale conditions that informed Smith’s (1998) subcultural identity theory of religious strength as well as evangelicals’ dominant position in the US religious landscape today.

CHAPTER III:

THE UNSAVEABLE: DERISION, ERASURE, AND EVANGELICAL DISTINCTION

Mercy Group Meetings

I begin this chapter by first describing a typical Mercy Group meeting and then move into a discussion of how the Mercy Group envisions and describes what I term “the unsaveable,” non-Christian Others who are avoided rather than engaged because they are seen as opposed to Christianity. Specifically, I analyze the conversations Mercy Group participants have about unrighteous actions that they experience in their lives. Through conversations about biblical interpretation, I show how members of this group come to define who and what is unrighteous and then use those definitions to mark who and what is unsaveable. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of one of Mercy Church’s foundational biblical teachings that provides the site in which its members construct and solidify their distinction from the unsaveable.

Mercy Group meetings tend to follow a somewhat uniform schedule. For the first fifteen minutes or so, attendees will walk through the front door without knocking, and most of them bring a dish that they prepared, like brownies or cookies, or something store-bought like fruit and cheese platters for the group to share. Participants often gather in the kitchen for the first half hour or so, making themselves plates of food and talking about any number of things, whether it be participants’ personal lives, sports, or local news, to name a few. If they are not standing around the island counter in the kitchen, group members sit at the kitchen table in a breakfast

nook adjacent to the kitchen. Sometimes, before the meeting begins, women will talk in clusters at the table, apart from the men.

Having given everyone the chance to eat, Jerry, after moving chairs into the living room to accommodate the guests if necessary, calls everyone in to sit together and have the bible study. Some participants bring their own bibles, others borrow one of Jerry's, and still others simply use their cell phones. Jerry always reminds the group where they left off the previous meeting. He then leads the group in prayer, in which he typically thanks God for allowing us to come together, and then asks that He help the group learn from the scripture. Jerry reads the passage at hand, announcing the version of the bible from which he was reading. Then someone else reads from a different version (i.e., New International Version followed by English Standard Version). Jerry always reminds us at the beginning of the bible study that this is how we read the passages we are covering, though he never explicitly stated why during my study. After a volunteer reads the passage in whatever version of the bible they have with them that evening, group members are given a moment to think about what stands out to them, or what they may have questions about before beginning the discussion.

Discussions about the evening's reading usually last around an hour, during which time group members work through a chapter of text. Depending on the night's conversation and attendees' interest, the group sometimes reads more than a chapter, and other times they read less. Once they finish reading and discussing scripture for the night, Jerry takes a notebook from the coffee table and asks how group members can pray for one another, or if they know of anyone who needs prayer or has a prayer request. As attendees speak up, asking the others for prayers for themselves, a family member, or a friend, Jerry takes note of the requests. Sometimes he refers back to the previous week's requests and asks group members for updates on whatever

it is they asked for prayers about. After recording all of the evening's prayer requests, Jerry once again leads the group in prayer. These are long prayers, because Jerry is sure to address everyone's requests individually and genuinely. Once the prayer is over, the group gathers their things to go home for the night. Jerry is always sure to remind everyone before they leave that the group will meet again in two weeks.

One discussion that came up repeatedly at the pastor's family's home centered on what biblical passages, and sometimes even the group members, would refer to as the "righteous" and the "unrighteous." For Christians at Mercy Church, collective evangelical identity formation occurs, in part, as a result of the distinction made between the two. Evangelicals at Mercy Church identify unrighteous beliefs and behaviors that, if not resisted, result in one's eternal damnation. As a result, they mark unrighteous people and groups as "unsaveable," antithetical to the perseverance of Christian values in US culture. In the following section, I underscore a process in which Mercy Group members arrive at an agreement about how they define righteousness and unrighteousness. These definitions and the process by which they are created shape how they talk about and imagine non-Christian Others. I show that when discussing and interpreting what is and is not righteous according to the bible or the church, congregants use the actions of others as contemporary examples of biblical depictions of unrighteousness. In doing so, they are able to create distinctions between non-Christian Others and themselves as a way to achieve a righteous Christian identity.

"The world is broken": Resisting the Temptations of a Fallen Humanity

According to teachings at Mercy Church, the world is broken. Humanity is "fallen," as members of the Ross Mercy Group often put it. For them, to be "fallen" means that humanity's natural

inclination is to sin. Because of this, even Christians can be, or become, unrighteous. In order to understand the permeable and shifting nature of the boundary between the way the world and humanity *is* and the way it *ought to be*, or what participants would often refer to as the “righteous” and “unrighteous,” it is important to understand how Pastor Jerry Ross presents the nature of humanity to members of his Mercy Group, and how these group members discuss it. At times, all of humanity is fallen, or sinful by nature. However, in his Mercy Group, pastor Jerry also teaches that this sinful nature is something that can be resisted. Jerry often uses a rhetoric of “suffering” when he describes resisting sin: Through their suffering, church members can overcome their unrighteousness, and thereby sanctify themselves and rise out of the ranks of the ungodly, or what I call the unsaveable.

At Mercy Church, evangelicals’ definitions of who is righteous and who is unrighteous are context-specific. There are many instances in which humanity (according to the definition laid out by pastor Jerry) is taught as being sinful and fallen by nature. Therefore, at times, even participants fall into the category of the unrighteous, or the sinful and ungodly. Take, for example, a discussion that occurred during one Mercy Group meeting about 1 Peter 3. This book of the bible is an epistle written by the pastor, Jerry’s, favorite disciple, Peter, and addressed to the early Christian groups throughout modern-day Turkey, or what group members and the bible refer to as “Asia Minor,” that were facing religious persecution at the time. The content of Peter’s letter largely centers around suffering. Peter describes Christ as “the righteous” who suffered for “the unrighteous.” Jerry elaborates this point, explaining that we (humanity) are all “unrighteous by nature,” and it is only thanks to the righteousness of Christ that we can be saved at all. Here, the only person who has ever been righteous is Christ himself. The rest of humanity is unrighteous, or, as Peter describes it in the bible: “the ungodly and the sinner.”

Over the course of the next few meetings, as the Ross Group continued through the book of 1 Peter, so did the discussions of how and when Christians suffer and the descriptions who and what is unrighteous. On September 1, after we had moved on to 1 Peter 4, we read a passage in which Peter encourages Christians to persevere through their suffering. I noticed that in the passage, Peter provides that Christians and “the ungodly and the sinner,” alike, experience suffering. I wondered whether evangelicals really believed themselves to be just like the rest of the ungodly and the sinners “by nature,” as their pastor had put it. So, when Jerry asked if anyone else had any questions before concluding the evening’s study, I spoke up. I asked the group why Peter specifies that both Christians and the ungodly suffer. Is there supposed to be a difference in the type of suffering they experience, or the reason they suffer? Pastor Jerry answers me. He begins by stating that his response is twofold. “The world is broken,” he tells me first. It has been broken ever since Adam and Eve at the apple in the Garden of Eden. His second response: he doesn’t know. It is God’s plan, he puts it simply. “Anyone who claims to know” why there is suffering in the world, Jerry concludes, “shouldn’t be trusted.” Jerry, here, suggests that not only is humanity fallen, but also, due to humanity’s fallen nature, the whole world is broken as well. The world’s brokenness is related directly to the original sin, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s commandment. However, in the same response, he attributes the suffering in the world--a result of its brokenness and humanity’s sinful nature--to God’s plan. Even when unrighteousness is defined as either natural, or a part of God’s plan, the boundary around the category is a slippery one.

Despite Jerry’s reminders that we are, “all sinful by nature,” his congregants are in church because they want to achieve righteousness by acting as they believe they ought to, in accordance with church teachings and scripture. To do so, they must position themselves against

the rest of unrighteous humanity. Orit Avishai (2008: 410) describes a similar process in her research on *niddah* to exemplify how religious conduct becomes a performance to achieve “orthodox subjecthood.” Instead of relying on certain religious practices as a way to reinforce their distinction from secular culture as evangelicals, though, Mercy Group members talk about how they and other Christians should opt out of participation in acts that the group considers unrighteous such as drinking at fraternity parties or pursuing an art degree. They define certain practices and the people who participate in them as unrighteous, vocally deride them, and present themselves as abstaining from them. By reinterpreting how they articulate resistance to secular temptations as a mode of religious observance, group members achieve righteousness by resisting participation in the debauchery of the secular community that surrounds them, as well as by voicing their opposition to such behaviors in the company of other Christians. Achieving righteousness becomes a mode of collective identity formation. The distancing from and derision of the unsavable or “unrighteous” Other this achievement entails reflects previous findings about evangelical “embattlement” and moral boundary drawing in the United States (Bean 2014; Edgell et al. 2006; Smith 1998; Tranby and Zulkowski 2012; Ward 2018).

Eliasoph and Lichterman’s (2003) concept of “group style” proves useful for understanding how group members’ discussions about resisting unrighteous temptations allows them to achieve their righteous Christian identity. Ross Group members establish a moral boundary between themselves and their behavior (how people and things ought to be) and what they call unrighteous (what they are told is natural in a fallen world). After making this distinction, they abide by the group’s “speech norms” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) by describing the consequence of resisting temptations to sin as a Christian form of suffering, as opposed to sinful suffering. Christian suffering--or, more specifically, talk about experiencing

this form of suffering--i an important mechanism for forging group bonds (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) at Mercy Church. Ross Group members create a chasm that separates evangelicals from individuals and groups who pose a threat to their worldview. By defining what is unrighteous, and distancing themselves from that behavior by vocally deriding it to other group members, participants create an unbridgeable difference from themselves and those they feel threatened by to achieve the status of righteousness.

“What will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”: Attaining Righteousness and Creating the Unsaveable

Mercy Christians resist the unrighteousness of humanity that they define in order to affirm their Christian identities for themselves and other church members. While observing the Ross Group I learned that its members understand there to be two forms of earthly suffering: suffering as a sinner and suffering as a Christian. Suffering is a common experience among all people, according to discussions we had in the Mercy Group, but the reason one suffers affects the outcome of that suffering. Participants never described or explained why the “ungodly” and the “sinner” suffer in everyday life, only that it will continue in Hell in the afterlife. However, what they do discuss at length is how one suffers as a Christian by resisting behaviors and people they decide are unrighteous.

According to Ross Group members, Christian suffering occurs when Christians resist the temptations of unrighteous behavior. One Sunday evening in August, Pastor Jerry has a conversation with Jason, an engineering professor in his late fifties or sixties who told me about his disdain for the “egos” of professors concerned more with their “vitae” than their students. We had just finished reading a passage from 1 Peter chapter 4 as a group. In it, Peter advises Christians to resist “living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and detestable

idolatry.” Jason temporally contextualizes the passage, describing the social obligations of participating in the “pagan” practices described in the passages. Jesus did not come to earth to obey humanity, Jason explains, but to “obey the will of God and serve us.” Pastor Jerry chimes in and says that, back in the first century, if you did not attend those “pagan parties,” you would be “maligned.” They were set up like “a guild or a union,” the pastor goes on, where each trade was aligned with a specific god that members worshipped. Later, Jerry refers to the “business aspect” of the parties. If you were a silversmith, and you were opposed to these parties and worshipping other gods, your business would suffer. Alyssa, a third-year law student who shares a close relationship with Jerry and Missy Ross, tells the group she is reminded of “college students.” Before she can elaborate, Missy, Jerry’s wife who teaches at a local public school, agrees: “I was thinking of high school.” The two of them describe how, in high school and college, if you do not participate in what Others are doing, you could be “maligned” socially, as Jerry put it.

The discussion participants had about suffering as a consequence of opposing sin reveals how they locate themselves in moral space relative to how they imagine the rest of the world (Taylor 1989). Jason believes that for Christ to obey humanity, or to allow us to participate in pagan parties for the sake of avoiding a form of social suffering, would be contrary to obeying the will of God. In other words, he claims that humanity itself acts contrary to the will of God, which reflects the sentiment that we are “unrighteous by nature.” However, resisting this unrighteous nature is how evangelicals at Mercy Church have agreed to suffer righteously as a Christian. By not participating in “pagan parties,” or “living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and detestable idolatry,” the righteous experience a new form of suffering: you will be “maligned,” and your social networks will be damaged. You will lose out on jobs and

relationships. Missy and Alyssa explain it well: if you do not participate in certain ungodly behaviors, you suffer socially, another illustration of how Mercy Christians imagine their position in and relationship to the rest of the world.

Christians may be subject to social suffering if they resist sin, but it is the price they pay for eternal salvation. Later that same evening, Jason's wife Kay, a soft-spoken woman who talked with me about the novels of Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens, expresses her confusion over a part of the passage which reads: "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" Kay asks for an explanation of this question, and Mitch, a tall kind bearded man who I only met a few times before his health problems prevented him from attendance at the Rosses, offers his interpretation. He says that he thinks the verse is meant to be encouraging; that, when Christ does return, we will feel like we barely escaped the earth when we have been saved. He also tells us that on that day, the sinners will be left to bear the burdens of earthly suffering even before they will be cast into Hell. In his interpretation, Mitch reassures his fellow group members that they will not be subject to the eternal punishment that sinners will suffer in the Apocalypse. By centering around this eternal damnation, Mitch reinforces Mercy Christians' belief in their moral superiority. The reward for living a righteous life is that Mercy Christians will feel elated when Christ returns, whereas those who do not resist pagan temptations will face punishment for their sins. Suffering is eternal when it is unrighteous, but finite when you suffer as a Christian.

Two weeks later, at the next Ross Group meeting, Jerry describes the day of judgment, wherein those who have suffered as Christians will rejoice at Christ's return, while those who have lived sinfully will look on in fear at "the King on his throne in anger." Not only will those who have failed to resist sin be punished eternally for it, but, according to Jerry, this is because

the son of God is angry with them for doing so. Jerry, by confirming Mitch's early interpretation, teaches the members of his group that the earthly suffering that they currently face, resulting from their resistance to sinful temptations, is worth avoiding and finite compared to the alternative: eternal damnation to Hell. To be unrighteous is to compromise one's claim to Christianity. The sinful and ungodly are portrayed as lost causes, or unsaveable. Therefore, in order to avoid eternal damnation and upsetting a God who loves them, evangelicals draw a sharp boundary between themselves and the unsaveable by voicing their opposition to the "broken" world that surrounds them and avoiding interaction with other fallen humans in it. Yet it is by suffering for being a Christian, according to Mercy group members, that one becomes a righteous Christian.

Beyond the security of knowing you will not suffer eternally for leading unrighteous lives, there is another, more implicit benefit to enduring this earthly suffering: the ability to identify as a Christian and with the evangelicals that make up Mercy Church. Jerry describes one of the verses we covered during our discussions of suffering, 1 Peter 4:16, as "the encouragement verse." He tells us that he's had it memorized since he was a child, and repeats it quickly, without consulting the bible in his hands, to prove it: "However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." The earthly suffering that Mercy Christians face will be rewarded by avoiding eternal damnation and pleasing God and his Son, "the King," who will return, angry, at those who do not suffer righteously. In addition to this incentive, though, suffering as a Christian, at the very least, is worthwhile because one should be thankful that they "bear that name": Christian.

While Avishai (2008:413) describes how Orthodox Jewish women "do religion" for the sake of cultivating an "authentic religious subject against an image of a secular Other," Jerry

exemplifies a slightly different process. He is not describing the creation of a righteous self by performing a religious identity through a mode of being. On the other hand, his behavior recalls work by J. Edward Sumerau and Ryan T. Cragun (2015: 62) on “righteous women” in the Mormon church: “Religious leaders, for example, advocate specific ‘practices’ women (and men) should and *should not* engage in despite their apparent belief in essential gender” (emphasis mine). While Sumerau and Cragun (2015) are pointing out an inconsistency in Mormon teachings on gender, their claims help explain what Jerry is teaching now. In Cragun and Sumerau’s (2015) study, while femininity is taught to be essential to Mormon women, one must also engage in and avoid certain practices in order to *be* a woman. Jerry, on the other hand, is claiming that to *be* a Christian one must avoid these practices, regardless of the suffering that comes through that resistance. He reinforces the claim that suffering as a Christian is righteous suffering because, regardless of what happens when Christ returns, being a Christian and distinct from the unrighteous, or the “ungodly” and the “sinners,” is a point of pride. This pride, combined with escaping eternal damnation, is what motivates evangelicals to resist unrighteous behaviors and, ultimately, what allows them to “bear that name,” or *be* Christians. In other words, Jerry has created an incentive for evangelicals at Mercy Church to resist sinful temptation by emphasizing the benefits of being able to call oneself a Christian. Speech norms about group boundaries, such as the rhetoric of suffering and pride, create shared assumptions about group members’ responsibility to vocally deride and dissociate from the unsaveable (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). The evangelicals at Mercy Church understand that their righteousness begets their claim to Christianity, an attitude which helps justify the political and cultural dominance of evangelical Christianity in the United States today.

Here, we see examples of how Jerry, as well as some of the other Mercy group members, advise against certain behaviors or practices that would hinder their ability to self-identify as Christian. In this specific example, it is the “pagan practices” that are described in the book of 1 Peter. Mercy group members first created a boundary between unrighteous suffering (suffering for being a sinner) and righteous suffering (suffering as a Christian). The behaviors of those who suffer for being sinners are unrighteous because they are defined as “sinful and ungodly.” Suffering for being a Christian occurs as a result of the resistance to the temptation of these sinful and ungodly practices. Not only is the resistance itself a cause of earthly suffering, but there is also a degree of “social suffering” that a righteous Christian experiences for not “doing what everyone else is doing.” However, this form of righteous earthly suffering becomes worthwhile for evangelicals, because they are not only promised immunity from the eternal damnation that sinners will face when Christ returns, but also--and perhaps most importantly--because it is this very resistance, and the suffering that comes with it, that creates the boundary between the righteous and the unrighteous and makes one a Christian (Smith 1998).

While this discussion describes how Mercy Christians create the boundary between themselves and Others on the basis of righteousness, this research also sets out to understand how evangelical Christians draw boundaries between different out-groups, whether they be religious or non-religious, Christian or non-Christian, or even different evangelical churches and groups. To do so, it becomes necessary to understand on what basis, or according to what “symbolic markers” (Smith 1998: 92), evangelicals draw these boundaries, and how depictions of interactions with out-groups varies accordingly in group settings. It is necessary to uncover what qualities out-groups share, and those they do not share, in order to understand the “symbolic logic of exclusion” (Edgell et al. 2006: 231) that evangelicals share. However, by

understanding how evangelical Christians collectively differentiate out-groups, this research may also uncover how evangelicals imagine their relationship to the rest of America and the world, and what this imagined relationship reveals about their power in contemporary American culture. In other words, we now know how evangelicals at Mercy Church achieve their righteousness, and how the unrighteous become unsaveable in the process. Now, it is important to explore who they talk about (i.e., liberal college students and atheists) when they talk about the unsaveable.

“I hope no one in here is an art instructor”: Marking the Unsaveable

Mercy Church is one of many churches scattered throughout a Mississippi college town. As a result, Ross Group members often used the University and academia as examples of a “liberal” institution whose faculty members lead innocent students down what one participant, Debbie, called “the liberal path” to developing oppositional views to Christian teachings. In addition, evangelicals at Mercy Church cite the normalization of heavy drinking and the nature and frequency of on-campus parties as examples of the University’s negative influence on the community. I have shown how evangelicals’ conversations about righteousness and suffering results in the formation of the unsaveable out-group. In this section, I show the different ways evangelicals talk about the unsaveable in order to reiterate their belonging in the group. Members of Pastor Jerry’s Mercy Group made distinctions between themselves and the university culture in different ways during our discussions about 1 Peter. In some instances, they did so based on assumptions about college students’ activities or attitudes. In other instances, they describe the negative influence that liberal University professors have on their students. In doing so, evangelicals at Mercy Church mark those liberal students and professors as the eternally damned unsaveable group whose temptations the *real* Christians of Mercy Church must resist.

Depending on the scenario, evangelicals at Mercy Church distinguish themselves from (1) progressive college students, who are assumed to be more prone to taking offense to biblical teaching, (2) liberal college professors whose non-biblical lessons foster opposition to Christian teachings in the minds of their students, and (3) the institutionally- and culturally-promoted attitudes and behaviors of the broader university community.

A large portion of Mercy Church's congregation is composed of college students. It is nearly impossible to drive through the parking lot of the middle school where Mercy's Sunday services are held without seeing several University decals and stickers of Greek letters signifying membership in a fraternity or sorority. Still, congregants assume that college students should have an aversion to biblical teachings. One mid-August Sunday evening, Gary, who told me about his passion for scoring and grading soil, asked Pastor Jerry a question about his sermon that morning. Gary wondered if the pastor's "controversial" teachings on gender and sexuality have driven people to leave the church mid-sermon. Jerry responded that he tries not to upset anyone, but he thinks that those who would have been offended this morning had already left the church long ago. Gary said he believed that there were probably some "college students" who would have found his teaching offensive, demonstrating a boundary that evangelicals at Mercy Church perceive between themselves and University students. Jerry responded by clarifying that, in his pastoral experience, families are more likely than college students to leave mid-sermon when offended. Mistaken assumptions like Gary's inform an image at Mercy Church of college students as a group that is not amenable to a gospel message because they are too offendable. As a result, they are eschewed.

Ross Mercy Group members do not necessarily blame the students for the aversion to biblical teachings that they are assumed to possess. Rather, University professors--depending on

their department and discipline--are to blame. At a meeting in early August, Debbie requested a prayer for her son. She was seated next to her husband Zack, and she was wearing a sweater with Jesus stating in a word bubble, "That's how I saved the world," to the Marvel comic book characters seated around him. Debbie asked that we pray for both of their sons, who would be home to visit the following week. She went on to tell the group that her son and daughter-in-law had "gone down the liberal path." They both have art degrees from two different schools, which she says "tends to push people to that side."

"I hope no one in here is an art instructor," Debbie said with a wince while she looked around the room. "Oops." She told the group she was worried that her son and daughter-in-law had "fallen" away from their faith as a result of their education, and asked us to pray that the three of them would get along and "love each other unconditionally." In her prayer request, Debbie attributed her son and daughter-in-law's trip down the "liberal path" to their earning an art degree. After saying so, she unapologetically explained that she hoped there aren't any art instructors in the room, reflecting her belief that being led down this path is due to the instructor's influence. Not to mention, she suggests that she would prefer art professors not enter this space; that this Mercy Group is not the place for them. Debbie also sees the "liberal path" as the reason she and her daughter-in-law struggle to get along and then asked us to pray that they can love one another unconditionally. Tellingly, she does not pray for her and her son's relationship, which is also suggestive of her belief that their estrangement is his wife's doing, if not the art professor's. In her remarks, Debbie creates a sharp, impermeable boundary between Christians and liberal professors. First, she claims that a church meeting is not for professors and makes clear that she hopes there are no *art* professors in the room. Other professors, such as Jason, a Chemical Engineering professor, are welcome in this group. Debbie's comment reveals

that there are certain disciplines and departments that cannot permeate the boundary that she has drawn, but others who can.

At a later meeting, Mark, a young-looking white man with two young children that he and his wife brought with them to group meetings, began describing how busy his job kept him in high school. Jerry had just shared with us that his son is enjoying his job at a fast food restaurant. The point Mark was making was that because of how much he worked, his grades suffered. Missy called to Mark from the kitchen: “Must’ve helped you stay out of trouble.” Mark nodded, and said it did. He went on to say that he maintained about a B average through school. Gary, who advises doctoral candidates in soil engineering, chimed in to tell us that he would rather have a graduate student working for him who “knows how to work” than one who makes straight As. Gary created a false dichotomy between the two, suggesting that, for some reason, to make straight As would remove the possibility of one’s being a hard worker. I argue that this false dichotomy is created as a result of an assumption that graduate students who have straight As are more invested in and heavily-influenced professors’ non-biblical teachings.

Lydia Bean, in her book *The Politics of Evangelical Identity: Local Churches and Partisan Divides in the United States and Canada* (2014) describes how boundaries between “us” and “them” turn into boundaries between “us” and “liberals.” Bean (2014) finds that this is due to a general consensus among evangelical Protestants that an essential part of evangelical identity is voting Republican on “moral issues.” Gary exemplifies what Bean (2014: 63) describes as liberal professors being “blamed... for America’s moral decline,” a moral decline that is now embodied by successful undergraduate and graduate students.

When it comes to avoiding and deriding unrighteousness in a college town, Ross Group members’ attitudes varied, which made the boundaries between righteousness and

unrighteousness nonstationary and permeable. At one meeting in September, I met Lisa, a tall, brown-haired white woman who laughed often and described her disapproval of the community's "greediness." That night, before Lisa made her point about this greediness, I could hear Jerry from where I stood in the kitchen talking about The Hoka Cinema in the living room. The Hoka Cinema was an eclectic movie theater/restaurant/venue that a well-known community member owned in Oxford in the 1990s. It was known as a counter-cultural hub in Mississippi at the time, hosting punk shows and midnight screenings of pornographic films on weekends. The conversation that Jerry, Lisa, and I had about The Hoka Cinema and another business that opened later with the same owner, Shelter shows that the boundary between evangelicals at Mercy Church and the broader cultural landscape is not as sharp in some contexts as it is in others.

I was about to head back into the living room when I overheard Jerry mention something about the Hoka Theater. I had not heard anyone talk of the theater since I first learned about it when I worked at a bookstore in town, so hearing it then grabbed my attention. I turned to look at the pastor as he stood up from his seat in the living room to come into the kitchen. As he walked toward me, I told him that I always wished I could have visited the Hoka, and he told me he felt the same way. I felt delightfully surprised at this kind of opportunity to build rapport with Pastor Jerry, and asked him if he had seen the documentary that a local news channel that no longer broadcasts had made about it. He said yes, and told me how I can watch it online. I was planning on telling him the same. He lowered his voice and leaned toward me slightly: To tell you the truth, I've probably watched that thing twenty times." While neither of us ever mention the punk shows and pornographic films, his shared interest in the theater shocked me. It suggests that

some moral boundaries that separate Mercy Church members from counter-cultural movements in the community may not be so sharp and static.

While I was talking with Jerry, Lisa had been sitting with other group members at the kitchen table. She stood up and entered the kitchen. Lisa had overheard us. She began describing how she would always come into Shelter, asking the owner about the “stir fry.” Because I had seen the documentary I asked Jerry about, I knew that the Hoka was known for staple food items like stir fry and fudge pie. Lisa goes on, smiling as she explained to us that, according to the owner, she was one of two Oxford natives who always asked. “He would always make all of these excuses,” she told me, like that the restaurant could not get the “gas” required to cook everything. She concluded that she believes that the owner of Shelter merely occupied that position for the namesake, but that there were other community members who really ran the business. Lisa’s familiarity with the Hoka Cinema’s famous menu items and the organizational behind-the-scenes information about the owner’s later business ventures is evidence of her frequenting the business. Perhaps this is what Lisa was describing when she urgently reminded us of her activities when she was a student. For Jerry, the boundary is not so sharp as long as evidence of crossing it is reduced to whispers, like when he informed me about how many times he has watched the Hoka documentary. For Lisa, the boundary shifts as time goes on. She can talk about her familiarity with the Hoka Cinema and its owner because her experiences with them occurred before the cultural shifts that have made Oxford so “greedy.”

In many instances, group members would refer to drinking, especially college students’ drinking, in negative terms, comparing fraternity parties to paganism and vocally disagreeing with the normalization of drinking at bars and alcohol sales on campus. However, during a conversation held at the Martin Mercy group, organized and hosted by the church’s worship

pastor Jacob Martin and his wife Bethany, I realized that there is a little more nuance in Mercy Church members' views on drinking. It is not always drinking in itself that forms the boundaries between evangelicals and the unsaveable, but instead how those around them partake in the activity. On my first visit to the Martin Group, I asked a couple of group members about the church's denominational affiliations. An outgoing, older white woman named Renee overheard the conversation, and approached me to explain that Mercy Church is a Baptist church when it comes to partnerships with mission work organizations and the like. Renee went on to explain that their "governance" is Presbyterian. A smile grew on her face as she enthusiastically said: "Which means we can still drink!" and she and I laughed together. Renee may have been relaying this story jokingly, but it became clear that evangelicals at Mercy Church "can still drink" the next time I met with the Martin Group. We all went to a local Mexican restaurant for dinner, and Renee was describing to me how she had had a bad week. She told me that she was grateful that the Mercy Group decided to meet at the restaurant this week, because she had determined earlier that morning that all she needed that day was "a beer and some food."

Mercy Group members may vocally deride the *behaviors* they deem unrighteous in some settings, but Renee's explanation shows that the cultural context of Mercy Church's setting influences how its congregants understand themselves in relation to the surrounding community. In other words, drinking is allowed based on their "Presbyterian governance," but their descriptions of how college students and other community members drink is what marks those groups as unsaveable. In the following section, I show how evangelicals at Mercy Church distance themselves from another group, namely transgender individuals, using a different boundary process. As a result, rather than being marked as unsaveable as a result of liberal beliefs or drinking habits, transgender individuals are dehumanized in a process that J.E.

Sumerau, Ryan T. Cragun, and Lain A.B. Mathers (2015: 2-3) call “erasing” transgender experience in their research on the cisgendering of reality in the Mormon Church.

One Sunday morning in August, Pastor Jerry began a series of sermons on relationships, explaining that we were to start with what is “fundamental” to understanding biblical relationships: what we can “learn” from being human. Towards the end of the sermon, Jerry referred to an Old Testament reading taken from Genesis: “...in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”. He told us that being made in the image of God, according to scripture, means that we were designed to be either male or female. This means “fixed genders,” he said, and called this claim “fundamental.” Jerry “erases” transgender experience by “enforcing a reality wherein” it is “foundational” that humans are created male and female, and that congregants are taught that this is true according to a divine (masculine) order (Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers 2015: 2-3). What he said would have been “totally uncontroversial” in America sixty years before, Jerry explained before concluding that this does not mean he believes that boys must like football and girls must like dancing. By emphasizing that (1) male and female are the only two categories of humanity that exist, and that (2) these categories necessarily align with identification as women and men are both “fundamental,” Jerry suggests that any other experience or existence is thereby unorthodox according to the bible and God’s will. Members of Mercy Church understand what it means to be human in cisgender terms, and this fact affects the logics with which they enter into conversations about the differences between righteous and unrighteous humanity. According to Jerry’s interpretation of the biblical definition, many may become righteous if they ignore liberal influences and resist everyday temptations to sin. Those who do not fit into the definition of humanity that Jerry outlined (transgender individuals), however, are erased from the conversation and eschewed.

In this chapter, I have discussed the various ways that evangelicals at Mercy Church create boundaries between themselves and groups they identify as unsaveable. I show that a process occurs in interactions between Mercy Group members wherein certain groups are marked as unsaveable because of a shared expectation that group members signal their avoidance of these groups. Because of their unrighteous behaviors like drinking or pursuing an art degree, participants vocally disapprove of the unsaveable, and compare them to biblical depictions of the “ungodly” and the “sinner,” whose fate is eternal damnation. During Ross Group meetings, evangelicals would distance themselves from liberal University students and professors for various reasons, marking these groups as unsaveable as a result. The boundaries that evangelical Christians draw are characterized by the assumptions they make about certain groups. In the case of the unsaveable these are often assumptions about Others’ attitudes towards Christianity or their behaviors and cultural practices. In Part Two of this chapter, I show how evangelicals at Mercy Church distinguish themselves from non-Christian groups that I call the unsaved, a group of people who are often talked about in empathetic terms in conversations about mission work and the spiritual state of other nations or regions.

CHAPTER IV

THE UNSAVED: SYMPATHY, ADMIRATION, AND EVANGELICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Every Sunday morning, Pastor Jerry prays for a different “people group” before delivering his sermon. He names the group, like the “citizens of Nepal and India” for example, and provides a brief description of their geographical location and whatever it is about the cultural climate that prevents these groups from accessing the gospel. These “people groups” constitute an additional non-Christian out-group that is distinct from the unsaveable. I call this group the unsaved. In this chapter, I describe how participants distinguish themselves from the “unsaved.”

While the unsaved are not derided and avoided like the unsaveable, they are still an out-group. The difference in the two groups lies not only in the fact that the unsaved are saveable nonetheless, but also in how participants talk about their role as evangelicals in relation to these groups. I have shown the oppositional relationship Mercy Group members perceive between themselves and the unsaveable. But because an important facet of evangelical Christian practice is working to lead Others to Christ (Pew Research Center 2011), and Mercy Church’s mission includes “reaching the unreached,” the unsaved as a group is marked as a result of the creation of group bonds (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) relating to spreading the gospel to those “unreached” groups. In other words, evangelicals at Mercy Church verbally mourn that these groups have yet to be saved, be it as a result of their remoteness or of their susceptibility to persecution or forces of evil, and this functions similarly to using vocal disdain to create distance

between themselves and the unsaveable. In both instances, they achieve their evangelical identity through adequate participation in the group (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). In the case of the unsaved, though, they achieve it by signaling empathy and well-wishing other groups that for them do not seem opposed to Christianity so much as they are withheld from it or have yet to encounter it.

“Spiritually dry places”: Creating Difference by Imagining Experience

Some of my first experiences with Mercy Church congregants in the Summer of 2019 were not at Ross Group meetings, nor were they in the public school auditorium where the church met every Sunday morning for service. Instead, they were Wednesday nights at a coffee shop, where local evangelicals between the ages of 18 and 40 from multiple congregations around town would come to fellowship, worship, and pray together. These Wednesday Night Worship meetings were organized by Jacob Martin, Mercy’s worship pastor, who was also responsible for preparing the church’s band to perform on Sunday mornings and singing along with them. By getting to know Jacob, I began to see that Mercy Church doesn’t see itself as embattled against the *rest* of the world. There are many “people groups,” as Pastor Jerry often refers to them, with whom churchgoers say they wish to share the gospel.

After one Wednesday Night Worship meeting, I spoke with Jacob and a friend of his, Shane, about their attitudes and experiences surrounding mission work, or engaging social groups internationally in order to plant churches and convert Others to the evangelical faith tradition. I had just finished telling Shane about my study, and he began describing to Jacob and me his hopes to go on a mission trip and his mother’s hesitations about sending him on one. She worries he would not be able to raise the funds, or that he would not take it seriously and would

make a “fun trip” out of it, as Shane put it. Jacob seemed excited by Shane’s enthusiasm for mission work, and described the “best” mission experience he ever had when he travelled to Italy. The reason he enjoyed it so much, Jacob explained, is because Mercy Church works directly with another church “on the ground” there. We continued talking, and Shane told us about a thought he had a few days before about missionary families. I interpreted a “missionary family” to mean a family that commits to a life abroad for the sake of working to plant churches and spread the gospel. Shane told us about how bad he feels for those families stationed in “spiritually dry places,” whose “only source” of spirituality is themselves. He concluded that this must be a difficult position to be in.

Shane shares this conception of missionary destinations with other evangelicals at Mercy Church. The groups that brave missionaries travel abroad to share Christianity with them are located in these spiritual deserts Shane describes. Evangelicals look up to those who dare to travel to these deserts, especially when they have a family to raise and must rely on themselves as the only spiritual source. His admiration for missionaries and hopes of going on a mission trip himself is not only a way that Shane creates difference between himself and the non-Christian Other he imagines in some spiritual desert, but also a way for Shane to signal to Jacob and me that he really is an evangelical. The unsaved who await the grace of American evangelicals are not seen as unrighteous, and the evangelicals at Mercy Church long to build relationships with them, which directly contrasts their purported feelings toward the unsaveable.

One conversation Mae and Carson, an older couple who organize mission trips to Brazil once or twice a year, shared with Pastor Jerry and Jason, the long-haired engineering professor, exemplifies how evangelicals at Mercy Church make judgments about spiritual deserts and express their empathy for the inhabitants of those regions. Jason had been talking about a student

he knew who studied abroad for a period of time in Brazil. Carson had claimed that “There’s no suffering in Brazil.” His first thought of Brazil had been of the beach, as he specified when Mae corrected him, reminding him that there certainly is suffering in Brazil: “There’s no suffering on the beach.” Jason smiled at Carson before he clarified that the student he was describing saw a corpse on her walk to class one day. Carson and Mae share that they, too, had seen a corpse one day while they were there. Mae lamented that it was too unsafe to stop in order to report what they had seen to the authorities. She described the relief she felt when she saw a police cruiser pass by soon after the discovery, before providing the caveat that she understood the chance that it was not a police officer driving the cruiser. Jerry joked with Mae that she was unable to “be the Good Samaritan,” that day, and Mae concurred.

Mae was quick to remind Carson that there is plenty of suffering in Brazil, and Carson agrees with her. There is enough suffering, in fact, that there are corpses in the street, and no one can even be sure that the police are really police. As a result, the couple could not emulate “the good Samaritan” that Christ describes in one of his parables. According to Mae and Carson’s description, for them, the external cultural forces in Brazil at the time were so strong and non-Christian that not even they, American evangelical mission workers, could practice their faith tradition according to a standard implicitly suggested by their pastor. The conversation in this example shows how evangelicals at Mercy Church arrive at conclusions about which regions they talk about as spiritual deserts. They differentiate themselves from the unsaved inhabitants of these deserts by comparing their everyday experiences in the United States to those they have or hear about when serving as missionaries. That is to say, because Mercy Group members do not see corpses when they walk to school or drive in the United States, the fact that this occurs in Brazil is evidence of the nation’s spiritual dryness. It is up to the missionaries to bring

Christianity to the unsaved, and, as Christians, evangelicals at Mercy Church should agree with that sentiment and admire those who accept the challenge to do so.

“Demonic Things”: Sympathy for the Unsaved

Some definitions of the unsaved emerge as a result of talk about spiritual deserts and their need for outside forces to bring the gospel to them. There were other instances, however, in which the unsaved were not described in these terms. In these examples, the unsaved are described in relation to popular stories or rumors of instances of supernatural cases of the emergence of Christianity. Because these stories are seen as special cases of otherwise unsaved persons being exposed to Christianity through divine intervention, inhabitants of the regions where these stories take place are then implicated as unsaved in interactions between evangelicals due to their lack of exposure to Christianity or their susceptibility to evil forces like demons.

At one Ross Group meeting, Mae shared her point of view that “Christians today” do not think about Satan as if he prowls around like a “lion.” A discussion followed about the declining popularity of the belief in Hell and near-death experiences. Jerry shared with the group his understanding that there is a field of study dedicated to “NDEs,” or near-death experiences. Jerry’s statement prompted Mae to share her belief that “demonic things” are much more prevalent in other countries. Her comment suggests her understanding of the exceptional spiritual state of America, where “demonic things” do not seem to happen. Gary, in turn, is reminded of a story set in Ethiopia that he had recently heard, wherein a “witch doctor” experienced a “vision.” Since then, this “witch doctor” has spent every day at the top of a hill in prayer. With each day, Gary went on, the “witch doctor” was joined by more people. Thousand had been converted, according to Gary, and he urged us to be on the lookout for more news out of Ethiopia. Gary

seemed grateful for the “witch doctor’s” conversion, which underscores the obligation evangelicals feel to aid in and applaud the global spread of Christianity and speaks to attitudes they say they have toward the unsaved. Jerry then told us about the many people abroad who come to Christianity by experiencing visions. He said this is especially true for “Muslim countries,” where it is common for people to report that “the man in white” comes to visit them in their dreams.

For the evangelical Christians at Mercy Church, it is not that Brazilians or the citizens of other countries that Mercy group members discuss are opposed to Christianity like the Americans they see and interact with every day. Instead, they reflect an understanding that the “suffering” and “spiritual dryness” in other countries is not because of a refusal to convert to Christianity but the lack of access to or knowledge about the Gospel. Christians at Mercy Church understand themselves in relation to these other “people groups.” They see their ability to practice their faith as privileged in relation to the unsaved. In other words, the way that evangelicals position themselves against Others is qualitatively different when the Other is unsaveable than it is when the Other is unsaved. Evangelicals at Mercy Church sympathize with the unsaved based on what they imagine their conditions are like. This sympathy also explains how this understanding of the Christian’s relationship to the unsaved is upheld. There is an expectation shared among evangelicals that they will “work to lead others to Christ” (Pew Research Center 2011), and because the unsaveable are eternally damned for being unrighteous, the unsaved become the group on which evangelicals center these efforts to proselytize. Even if they do not do the work themselves, evangelicals at Mercy Church express their gratitude and admiration for missionaries as a way of abiding by the “group style” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) and achieving evangelical Christian identity in group settings. The way Mercy group

members see it, the unsaved need to be told about Christianity. Who better to tell them than evangelical Christians?

In this chapter, I discuss the unsaved: a distant group of international Others. They exist in the conversations at Mercy Church as recipients of gospel-spreading endeavors--a fundamental practice of evangelical Christianity. The unsaved are not seen as opposing Christianity because, unlike the unsaveable, they are either ignorant to it, or so heavily persecuted that they know little to nothing about it. Evangelicals at Mercy Church do not describe feelings of embattlement against the unsaved. In fact, the case is quite the opposite. In conversations, they suggest that they owe it to the unsaved to let them know the good news, and they praise God when they hear news of Christianity appearing in a country where it previously was not practiced. They sympathize with the unsaved, either because of the persecution they face, the spiritual deserts they inhabit, or their susceptibility to “demonic things.” Mercy group members describe their engagement with the boundary that separates them from the unsaved as an adherence to a requirement of their Christian practice. My findings represent a new way to understand how evangelicalism “thrives” in America, especially in the face of rapid secularization. Yes, evangelicals are still “embattled and thriving” (Smith 1998), but understanding how evangelicals create distinction from Others and bonds to signify belonging in the group underscores how evangelicals engage with Others differently. Sometimes, they distance and protect themselves from the liberal and secular forces of the unsaveable, so that they remain unthreatened. Other times, they express sympathy and share responsibility for the unsaved so that they remain engaged with and relevant to the rest of the world.

CHAPTER V
GOOD CHRISTIANS AND BAD CHRISTIANS: POLICING BOUNDARIES AND
MAINTAINING GROUP STYLE

The first time I heard the term “good Christian” at Mercy Church was during one of the Rosses’ Mercy Group meetings. We were discussing a passage from 1 Peter, in which the author outlines the duties of the husband and wife in a Christian marriage. Pastor Jerry had asked a question about our family life, and lessons we may have learned from our parents’ marriages growing up. Gary and his wife, Rebecca, described Gary’s mother’s life and how it influenced Gary’s own experiences growing up. Gary shared with the group that his mother was adopted into an “evil, satanic family.” Without listing any specific examples, Gary and Rebecca both referred to the “baggage” that Gary’s mother carried with her as a result. This baggage would manifest in some “abusive” moments, Gary explained, but despite this abuse, his mother was nonetheless a “good Christian woman.” The fact that Gary went from describing the “evil satanic” upbringing of his abusive mother, to explaining that she was still a “good Christian woman” underscores an important distinction to be made when examining how evangelicals understand their position in “moral space” (Taylor 1989) and how they cultivate their collective Christian identity at Mercy Church. In the last chapter, I have shown that Mercy Christians identify symbolic markers of distinction between themselves and non-Christian Others, and described how they engage the

boundaries between themselves and these Others in various ways. In this chapter, I turn to how congregants differentiate themselves from Christian Others.

This chapter draws on Eliasoph and Lichterman's (2003:737) model for identifying "group style," or "recurrent patterns of interaction that arise from a group's shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation in the group setting." It identifies two processes through which Mercy Christians distinguish themselves: Explicitly according to declarative statements made about what good Christians can and cannot do, and implicitly according to shared responsibilities that are collectively articulated at group meetings. In some instances, participants explicitly described "bad" Christians by making declarative statements about what "good" Christians do or do not do. Group members made abstract descriptions of bad "Christians" in general, explicit identifications of what one *cannot* do if they want to be a "good" Christian, or talked about other denominations and practical or theological differences that distinguishes Mercy church from other churches.

In other instances, I identified processes of implicit boundary drawing, wherein participants would identify mutual obligations or responsibilities expected of members of the group and then identify themselves as adherent to those obligations or responsibilities. This, in turn, suggested that a failure to adhere to these expectations would be inadequate Christian practice. "Speech norms," which "put into practice a group's assumptions about what appropriate speech is in the group context" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003: 739) emerged in these processes. Speech norms such as ambiguity in biblical interpretations or joking about failures to fulfill the responsibilities expected of church members helped the group create a boundary not simply by articulating what makes a 'good' Christian, but also by subtly confronting fellow congregants about their failure to adhere to the church's expectations.

“You can’t be a good Christian and...”: Who Bad Christians Are

Evangelicals at Mercy Church rarely name what a good or adequate Christian would or should do, but they do make explicit what one *cannot* do or be as a good Christian. Or, as Smith (1998:91) explains, they create “collective identities through “contrast and negation.” Sometimes, these explicit statements take the form of describing an imagined out-group comprising individuals that participants do not know personally such as Roman Catholics or other Protestant denominations. At other times, participants drew boundaries between themselves and specific people, whether they knew them personally or not, like the University’s former head football coach whose public claims to Christianity, in their opinion, reflected poorly on the church. In the former case, Christians at Mercy Church tended to refer to groups at the organizational or denominational level, such as Southern Baptists who preach on tithing or new-age Christian communes who arrange marriages for their members. In the latter instances, participants would distinguish good and bad Christianity based on the actions of a specific person, but cases differed in terms of the outright declaration of one’s bad Christian practice or belief.

There are many examples in my data of participants drawing an explicit boundary between themselves and other Christian groups or denominations. One evening in January, for example, we read a passage from Acts which describes all of the members of the church at the time as being “one in heart and mind.” Debbie, an outspoken retired healthcare professional who has known Jerry since his childhood, reflected on this point verbally: “I wonder if I’ve ever been in a church like that.” “You haven’t,” her husband, Zack, said with a smile. The group laughed before Zack went on to explain that he was raised a Southern Baptist, and that his experience taught him that there is very rarely agreement on that level in the church. While Zack reiterates

that he was raised as a Southern Baptist, he also highlights that Southern Baptists are understood by Mercy group members as unable to achieve a church environment that is prescribed by scripture. While Ross group members still identify Southern Baptists as Christians, they also seem to agree nonetheless that Southern Baptists are practicing Christianity inadequately. Vagueness, the speech norm at play here, functions as both a dimension of the group style in this setting, and as a mechanism for achieving distinction. While Zack seems certain that, even after his and Debbie's time at Mercy Church, his wife has never experienced a church body unified to such a degree, there persists a shared understanding that Zack's experiences as a Southern Baptist has granted him insight into why that is the case. Why? I, the researcher, don't really know. However, the rest of the group members respond as if they do, and this response functions as an interactive symbol of belonging.

While evangelicals in Mercy Groups tended to position themselves against other Christian groups, they also identified specific Christian individuals who get Christianity wrong. One Sunday evening in December, I overheard Pastor Jerry and Zack talking about the University of Mississippi's previous head football coach, Hugh Freeze. Jerry had been describing his unhappiness with the football coach, who, for reasons he explained later, not only made himself look bad, but the church as a whole. Zack began telling Jerry about how Freeze took his players out of their church homes because he had organized Sunday morning services just for his players to be held in the team meeting room. Jerry compared this to the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), a non-profit Christian sports ministry, except for the fact that the FCA promotes athletes' involvement with a church. In response to something inaudible that Zack had said, I heard Jerry say, incredulously, "That's blasphemy." Jerry went on explaining that he had debated

on writing Freeze, but that the football coach would not have known who the pastor was, anyway.

“Wait, what did he say?” I asked the two men as I approached them in the Rosses’ kitchen. Jerry explained that one Sunday, Coach Freeze staged an invitation.

“Have you ever been to a church where they had an invitation?” he asked me. I nodded, and he went on to explain that Freeze held an invitation. The only difference was that, when the players approached the altar to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior, Freeze instead asked his players to proclaim their commitment to the football team. The conversation about football coaches continued, as Jerry explained that in the past, coaches would not disclose whether they were a Christian or not. He said that he is unsure, but that he feels this was because they were worried that onlookers would believe that a Christian football coach wouldn’t be tough enough to get the job done, or, as Jerry put it, these coaches would not “still be an S.O.B.” Today, though, Jerry told us that he feels as if all the coaches want to announce that they are Christians. Jerry told us that he thinks this is because these coaches want to present themselves as “someone you can trust your kids with.” Following this point, Jerry asked us to make our way into his living room for the bible study. On his way into the room, he stated, loud enough for all of us to hear and with a smile on his face: “You can’t be a good Christian and sell your soul to football.” Despite Jerry’s staunch disagreement and unhappiness with Coach Hugh Freeze’s Christian practice with his players, what he declares to be “blasphemy,” he still refers to Freeze as a Christian, just not a “good” Christian.

Jerry’s discussion of football coaches in the past compared to now suggests that a “good” Christian should either withhold their Christianity, relegating it to solely a private matter, or, if one is going to make their Christianity public information, they should be representing the

religion as a whole positively. In the previous chapter, I outlined what evangelicals in the Ross Group identified as “unrighteous” behavior and practices, which became the symbolic marker of the boundary between Christians and non-Christians. However, as this example shows, it is evident that certain acts, such as blasphemy, do not constitute behavior that is unrighteous enough to result in an individual slipping from Christian to non-Christian in the minds of Mercy Group participants. Freeze’s identification as a Christian persists. In addition, this is an explicit boundary process because Jerry not only describes Freeze’s representation of himself (as a Christian, by claiming his Christianity publicly), but also of the church as bad, suggesting that Jerry still shares his identity and bonds as a Christian with Freeze. Jerry’s treatment of his anecdote about the coach reveals a process evangelical Christians undergo that is similar to how they distance themselves from the unsaveable. Freeze’s public alignment with Christianity made the church look bad, as Jerry expressed. To outright distance themselves from Freeze, a public figure who became well-known for his Christianity in the community, churchgoers risk actually differentiating themselves from Christianity. So, declaring that Freeze is not a “good” Christian allows Christians in the Ross Group to simultaneously maintain their feelings of their own righteousness as Christians without having to align with the Christians that make the church look bad.

Coach Hugh Freeze was not the only individual that Pastor Jerry invoked when attempting to provide an example of bad Christianity, though he was the only figure explicitly named, which is most likely due to the salience of both college football and Christianity in the South and, more specifically, in a Mississippi college town. For example, about a month after Jerry’s denouncement of Freeze, the Ross Mercy Group read a story from the book of Acts about Ananias and Sapphira. Annanias and Sapphira were a married couple who decided to sell their

property in order to pay tribute to Peter and the rest of the church. Their choice was not based on need, but rather rooted in an understanding of the praise they would receive for their selflessness. However, Ananias and Sapphira dishonestly withheld some of the profit from the sale of their property. When Peter learned of their dishonesty, he confronted them about it. They attempted to maintain their lie and were struck dead by God as a result.

After we read this passage together, Jerry smiled as he explained that he has heard pastors use this story to preach on tithing, or paying one-tenth of one's income to their church. "That is a misuse of this passage, by the way," Jerry said dismissively, almost as a joke. He creates a boundary between himself, a pastor who doesn't misuse this passage, and those who do for the profit of their church. In other words, by verbally identifying how this passage is misused by bad Christian pastors, Jerry secures his claim to good Christianity and the proper teaching on this passage. Simultaneously, he creates an explicit bond, that the passage should *not* be interpreted this way. In this instance, Jerry uses joking as a gracious method of informing group members about the correct interpretation of the passage. By feigning the obviousness of his statement, "That is a misuse of this passage, by the way," Jerry allows those participants who already knew this to feel as if they're in on the joke. At the same time, for those who may have interpreted the passage the "wrong" way, Jerry is softening the criticism inherent in this statement. In doing so, he solidifies joking as a speech norm that can be used as a way to inform others of adequate biblical interpretations without making anyone feel scrutinized.

Following the discussion about tithing, Jerry posed a common question about the story of Ananias and Sapphira: Why were they denied an opportunity to ask for forgiveness for their sin. He joked that he knows plenty of Christians who have gotten away with "far worse financial wins," and were not struck dead immediately. His use of the phrase "far worse" reflects that

Jerry, again, is creating a distinction between good and bad Christians. Zack laughed at this statement knowingly. Jerry makes this distinction, again, by making a joke that signifies to those group members who are ‘in on it’ that they belong. By describing the misuse of this passage, and the “far worse” financial wins of other Christians, Jerry explicitly creates a boundary between good and bad Christianity, which, as I have shown, can be an important factor for understanding how congregants create their unique evangelical identity. In the next section, I provide examples of how this process occurs more implicitly during group interactions among participants, as opposed to explicit boundary processes being largely driven by Jerry’s pastoral authority. I will also analyze how implicit group boundary drawing becomes closely interrelated with and a consequence of the creation of group bonds due to their creation largely by congregants instead of leadership.

“You can still get up for church!”: What Good Christians Do

In addition to attending the Ross Mercy Group, I also attended a smaller, younger Mercy Group hosted by the Martins, Jacob and Bethany. In the Martin Group, participants tended to spend a lot more time fellowshiping, and it was during these times that I identified an emergent trend. I first noticed it when Jacob asked me directly during my first visit to their group: “Were you at the service this morning?” On that Sunday, I was unable to make it to the church service, and when I answered Jacob honestly, I sensed surprise in his reaction. In turn, I remember feeling somewhat ashamed. It wasn’t until the next time this group met, at a Mexican restaurant in town, that I felt a little better about my response to Jacob.

During our dinner at the restaurant, Bethany asked another one of the group members, Ricky, why he wasn’t at church that morning. Ricky had made a joke in the Mercy Group’s

group message about missing church this morning, so it wasn't surprising that she knew. Also, because Ricky broke the news with a joke, it seemed much more lighthearted when Bethany brought it up, which contrasts my own experience with Jacob the meeting before. What stood out about Bethany and Ricky's interaction was Bethany's dissatisfaction with Ricky's answer, yet her ability to continue interacting as if she's joking, by smiling and exaggerating her voice and movements.

Ricky told Bethany that missing church is something that tends to happen when he stays up "until three o'clock in the morning." "You can still get up for church!" Bethany loudly, but lightheartedly, said across the table, smiling with wide eyes, and pointing at Ricky. When comparing Bethany and Ricky's conversation to mine and Jacob's the meeting before, the importance of joking as a speech norm comes through again. In these groups, joking becomes a way for evangelicals to hold one another accountable for adhering to group bonds. Bethany was able to confront Ricky outright, notifying him about his inadequate Christian practice, without suggesting that he is a "bad" Christian, much less non-Christian. On the other hand, because Jacob's and my conversation was not prefaced with any jokes, his direct inquiry made me feel ashamed, regardless of whether I feel the same obligation to upholding the standard in question that evangelicals do.

Later in the conversation, this group bond--the expectation that one make it to church every Sunday morning--emerged again as Bethany turned her attention to another group member, Wilson. It sounded to me like she asked Wilson if he "played" that morning. I think Wilson plays in the worship band from time to time. Wilson answered that he was in church, but watched someone else. He then asked how come Bethany did not already know this. Was she not there that morning? She explained that she had to drive to Jackson and back that day. Wilson

jokes with Bethany about making excuses. Evidently, she does the same thing to him often for missing church to go “riding bikes.” Wilson told Bethany that it was too cold that morning to ride bikes, and that is why he was in church.

Bethany said that she never misses Sunday services, but Jacob calls her bluff shortly after. “Oh...” he stopped her, “don’t say that.” She then clarified that she rarely misses Sunday, and Jacob tried to remember the last time he missed a Sunday. Conversations like these are evidence of a trend in my observations at Mercy Groups, especially the younger participants in the Martin Group, that part of adequate group participation is verbally acknowledging one’s admiration and goal of attending church on a weekly basis. In this excerpt, both Jacob and Bethany distinguish themselves from Wilson and Ricky, individually, as good Christians. However, this example also reveals the implicit boundary process that occurs in tandem with the process of creating group bonds. By verbally acknowledging, and thereby creating, the expectation that, as members of this subcultural group, fellow Mercy churchgoers should do their best to attend church services weekly, Bethany and Jacob implicitly create a group boundary distinguishing good Christian practice from inadequate Christian practice.

One trend that stands out from the bulk of my ethnographic data is the tendency of Mercy Group members, especially in the Ross Mercy Group, to defer to Pastor Jerry as an authority on what it means to be a Christian and, more specifically, a good Christian. Jerry’s declarations about good Christianity preceded most, if not all, of the instances of explicit boundary-drawing I identified in my data. These concessions often took form during conversations about the goals of the church and goals that we should have as Christians. In other words, while group bonds are described as emergent in group style (Eliasoph and Litherman 2003), in many instances these group bonds, as well as group boundaries as I described in the previous section, were explicitly

passed on from Jerry to his congregants. It is the process of creating boundaries from these group bonds that occurs implicitly in Mercy Group interactions. While Jerry explicitly stated these group bonds, examining their content allows for the analysis of the implicit ways evangelicals differentiate themselves from other Christians, or distinguish between good and bad Christians.

From October through the end of my study in February, the Rosses' Mercy Group covered the book of Acts. During one meeting in early December, we covered a passage which cited a specific case of Peter miraculously healing a "beggar" who was born without the ability to walk. After reading the passage, a discussion ensued in which participants closely and critically examined the biblical account of the miracle. In particular, Debbie and Zack, who are both healthcare professionals, scrutinized how the beggar's movement and the process of the miracle are described in a section of the passage which reads "Then Peter said, 'Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.' Taking him [the beggar] by the right hand, he helped him up and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk." Debbie pointed out to the rest of us that the beggar did not gain the ability to walk until Peter had begun to lift him up. The beggar reaching out for Peter's hand, Debbie noted, was a sign of the beggar's faith that Peter would in fact heal him in the name of Jesus Christ. Jerry agreed with Debbie, and explained to the rest of the group that this story is a great example of faith, because all one needs to do is "wish in Jesus' direction." Debbie and Zack began discussing how "this really is a miraculous case of healing," as Zack once put it. They described the severity of the beggar's atrophied limbs, and even, somewhat jokingly, point out that "walking is hard." Here, Zack and Debbie's joking functioned as a reminder of their medical expertise, because it is reminiscent of their professional knowledge of just how hard walking can be. Jerry went on even further to note that

Hippocrates, who the Hippocratic Oath is named after, even determined that being born unable to walk is one of the incurable ailments. Despite the fact that Hippocrates was not a Christian, and therefore would not have thought of this miracle as a realistic depiction of history, Debbie assures us that his determination is still true today by citing cases such as cerebral palsy.

Interactions like Debbie, Zack, and Jerry's above exemplify how discussions from which group bonds emerge also help evangelicals prove to one another that they are good Christians, and distinct from bad Christians. Debbie and Zack both are, or were, healthcare professionals who reflected their care for and interest in the medical field on many occasions. Debbie states her perception that one of the points of this passage of scripture from Acts is the faith that the beggar placed in Peter to heal him, a truly "miraculous" case. Despite their close interpretation and their understanding of the faith of the beggar as conditional for the miraculousness of this case of healing, though, Debbie and Zack represent the expectation that despite scientific denial of the possibility of this miracle, as Christians, we should nevertheless have faith that this miracle did happen. It is this faith, reflected in the commonly-used phrase "wishing in Jesus' direction," that evangelicals in the Ross Group believe yields positive results in one's life. It is also this faith in the face of scientific evidence that marks Debbie and Zack, in this instance, as good, faithful Christians. In this example, a process emerges wherein Debbie acknowledges a group bond, that Christians have to be faithful regardless of contradictory scientific knowledge or the like. This unfaltering faith becomes a symbolic marker for group identification as she, as well as Zack and Jerry, then proceed to assert their belonging in this group by expressing their belief in the truth of this account despite the scientific evidence that suggests its impossibility. It is not that they deny this evidence, as Debbie reflects in her acknowledgement of cerebral palsy as an affliction that can disable someone incurably from walking. Group members' faith in

biblical accounts of miracles actually becomes stronger, and they become more adequate Christians, on account of acknowledging contradicting scientific evidence, because it reflects an unfaltering faith in God and the truth of scripture.

In many instances, Mercy's pastor would preach to the congregation, or advise Mercy Group members, about the 'dos and don'ts' of good Christianity. Often, these teachings revolved around a principle or value that one should hold and defend as a Christian. One evening in mid-October, we read a story which describes a scene wherein the Holy Spirit descends upon members of the early Galilean church, and miraculously they began speaking in all languages represented in the area they're in. In the discussion that followed, Jerry described a professor at Yale who was born Muslim and later converted to Christianity. The professor, according to Jerry, describes the difference between Islam and Christianity as being rooted in the fact that, in Islam, Arabic is considered "the language of God." The discussion moved on to cover a few other points from the passage before Alyssa, a third-year law school student, asks Jerry: "So, what's the big takeaway?" Before Jerry could answer, Missy, his wife, whispered under her breath: "That's the hard part of Acts." Jerry doesn't hear her the first time, and she repeats herself, louder. Jerry agrees, this is a difficult passage to interpret anything applicable from. However, he tells the group that he thinks that the main point is that "the gospel is for everybody."

Jerry's arrival at the "big takeaway" here exemplifies another, though less common, speech norm adhered to most often by Pastor Jerry. It also provides an example of the interrelatedness of all dimensions of "group style" (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003:739). By declaring that it is hard to glean applicable interpretations from Acts, Jerry creates a speech norm of ambiguity in interpretation. This ambiguity then opens the door for Jerry to create a group

bond, something applicable, from an abstract interpretation of the story: the gospel is for everybody. The story that Jerry shares about the Yale professor acts to reiterate the boundary between Christians and Muslims, generally, by identifying a marker of difference between the two: each religions' beliefs about language's relationship to divinity. Jerry uses the passage from scripture and the anecdote about the professor to suggest to group members that, here, the bible is teaching a message that "the Gospel is for everybody." As Debbie and Zack exemplify in the previous example, good Christianity is linked to a dedication to perfect faith in scripture. Jerry's ambiguous interpretation results in an implicit boundary between 'good' Christians who should believe that "the Gospel is for everybody" because the bible says so. Only 'bad' Christians would disagree, and to do so would make one more like a Muslim. The speech norm of strategic ambiguity in the interpretation of scripture allows, in this instance, for Jerry to create a group bond of a universal gospel. This group bond, or the shared expectation that evangelicals live in accordance to this belief, reveals how group bonds and group boundaries work together to constitute each other and inform additional group bonds, such as evangelism. As I discussed in the previous section, how evangelicals imagine their engagement with the boundary between themselves and non-Christians is influenced, in part, by evangelism as a group bond. Group style, then, affects perceptions of how intergroup interactions should be, because the belief that the gospel is for everybody informs the value placed on evangelism that influences how group members imagine their interactions with certain groups of non-Christian Others.

In this chapter, I have provided an examination of how Mercy Christians create boundaries between themselves and other Christians as well as bonds they share with their fellow churchgoers. These boundaries were almost always moral boundaries, between 'good' and 'bad' Christians and Christianity. The symbolic markers that provide the basis for drawing these

boundaries ranged from marks of religiosity such as church attendance, to adherence to and proper applications of biblical scriptural interpretations. While in this chapter I have provided specific examples from my participant observations of these boundary processes, I also briefly described how these boundaries between good and bad Christianity and the group bonds that accompany them can inform and influence how evangelicals think about interactions with non-Christian Others. In the discussion which follows, I will further elaborate this relationship between evangelicals' assumptions about adequate Christian practice, how they distinguish themselves from and frame their interactions with non-Christian Others, and how they form their identity as good evangelical Christians for themselves.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Amidst increasing political polarization and a sharp increase in religious “nones,” evangelicalism remains alive and well in the United States today (Baker and Smith 2015; Bartkowski 1996; Coreno 2002; Fitzgerald 2017; Gallagher 2004; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Pew Research Center 2019; Pew Research Center 2014; Smith 1998). In the past, scholars have repeatedly found that evangelical Protestants create sharp distinctions between themselves and the rest of the world, and they have attributed evangelical Christianity’s strength and vitality to the oppositional relationships they feel they have with other groups (Bean and Martinez 2014; Smith 1998; Tranby and Zulkowski 2012). Some scholars have conducted qualitative studies that go beyond noting these sharp boundaries and account for how Christians construct their evangelical identities through contrast by defining who and what they are not (Burke 2016; McDowell 2018; Ward 2018). This thesis continues along this line of research. I not only outline how evangelicals create a shared identity through contrast. I also examine how evangelical identity is constructed, in part, as a result of shared bonds that dictate how evangelicals should engage with various, distinct out-groups of religious and non-religious Others.

Using data from participant observations I collected at bible study group meetings organized by Mercy Church, an evangelical church in North Mississippi, I have shown that evangelicals do, indeed, draw boundaries between themselves and the rest of the world.

However, contrary to prior research, I have shown that the nature of these boundaries, and how participants imagine and engage with them, varies depending on the specific group in question. In short, the boundary between evangelicals and the unsaveable is qualitatively different from that between evangelicals and the unsaved. “Unrighteous” liberal college students and professors, for example, are imagined as what I call “unsaveable,” a threat to evangelical Christianity that is to be derided and avoided. Victims of government persecution of Christianity in other nations or groups around the world who lack access to Christian churches or teachings, on the other hand, compose the group I call the “unsaved.” Mercy evangelicals imagine the unsaved as in need of the gospel message, and they view themselves as the ideal deliverers of that message.

In addition to the distinctions that evangelicals make between themselves and non-Christian Others, I also identified those they distinguish themselves from other Christians, including other evangelical Christians at other churches and in other denominations. In some cases, these were explicit distinctions made between the “good” or “adequate” Christians forms of Christianity, and the “bad” or “inadequate” ones. Sometimes these boundaries emerged as a result of authoritative declarations of what one can do, be, and believe if they want to be a good Christian or, as was more often the case, what it is that one does or believes that makes them a bad Christian. At other times, these distinctions were implicit, emerging as a by-product of the creation of “group bonds” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), or the obligations and responsibilities expected of other members of the group which characterize group membership. That is to say, as group bonds are created in interactions between Mercy Group members, the prescription of adequate behavior for group membership necessitates a characterization of

inadequate behavior, thereby creating distinction between those who adhere to the group's shared expectations and those who fail to do so.

By identifying and examining the processes that create these distinctions, I have shown that evangelicals continue to draw sharp boundaries between themselves and Others. However, this sharpness is not uniform. Instead, part of the development of evangelical identity is the creation of shared group bonds, and the nature of these bonds has a direct influence on how group members imagine their relationship to other groups. My findings extend prior research on evangelical Christian identity, strength, and vitality by analyzing at the group level *how* evangelical Christians create difference from Others, how the creation of difference is closely interrelated with the creation of shared bonds between group members, and how these bonds in turn influence the nature of the difference being created between groups. In other words, prior research has concluded that the reason evangelicals thrive in the U.S. is through their distinction from other groups, and this thesis extends that research by identifying processes of how this difference is made. In doing so, I have developed a more nuanced understanding of how evangelicals imagine their position in relation to other groups in the world. Rather than imagining themselves at odds with a single, monolithic Other, this study shows that evangelical identity is formed and crystallized through small battles with a multitude of Others that reinforce the idea that evangelicals are one-of-a-kind. I conclude that this research at the group level suggests that evangelicalism in the United States maintains its dominant position in the political and religious landscape because their collective identity as evangelical requires a degree of permeability and fluidity. That said, this fluidity does not compromise the integrity of evangelicals' strong sense of belonging because an important dimension of how they stake their claim to evangelical Christianity is possessing a good understanding of the differences between

the “unsaved” and the “unsaveable,” between “good” and “bad” Christianity, and between how these groups should be treated or engaged.

Future research should consider a limitation of this thesis being the inability to make empirically-rooted claims about how evangelicals’ understanding of their group membership influences their intergroup interactions in reality, as opposed to how these interactions are imagined or idealized in the minds of evangelical Christians. Sociologists of religion could glean valuable information from observing and assessing Christians’ evangelism practices such as mission work, revivals, public conferences and debates, or ministries to analyze how and why the actual interactions between evangelicals and the unsaveable are similar to or different from those between evangelicals and the unsaved.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION TEMPLATE

Name of Place or Group: _____

Day and Date: _____

Time of Arrival and Departure: _____

Demographic Profile of Participants: _____

Physical Setting:

- Did the setting (place, time, etc.) for the meeting change since the previous meeting? Why?
- How is the seating arranged for the bible study?

Leadership:

- Who is the formalized church leader of the group?
- Who is speaking the most in discussion? Do these participants seem to take on an informal leadership role?
- How do members perform their deference to who is “in charge,” if so at all?
 - Who is able to speak without being interrupted?
 - Whose questions are taken more seriously? (Do participants laugh at some questions, but not others? Do everyone’s questions get answered?)
 - Who is performing this deference? How?
- Do the leaders (formal or informal) ask the group questions?
 - Are these questions posed to the group as a whole, or individuals? If individuals, who?
 - What are these questions about?
 - Are these questions rhetorical or open-ended? Is this clear?
- Are the leaders in the group (formal or informal) ever challenged or questioned? If so, how? By whom?
 - How do leaders (formal or informal) respond to being challenged or questioned, if at all?

Social Interactions

- How do participants arrange themselves in the space?

- During fellowship, are there multiple groups discussing different things, or is everyone having one conversation?
- During bible study, who sits by whom?
- How do group members talk about their faith?
- How do group members talk about practicing their faith?
 - What practices seem to be most significant?
 - Do members focus their discussions on the practice of evangelizing, or ‘spreading the Gospel’?
- When did participants talk the most? What issues or topics got participants talking?
- When did participants talk the least? Was there an issue or topic that participants did not have much to say about?
 - At what times do I expect the conversation to go one way, but it doesn’t? Explain.

Evangelism--practice, conversion, success stories:

- Are there any discussions about practicing evangelism?
 - What is the nature of the practice of evangelism being discussed? (i.e., mission trips, day-to-day evangelism, outreach, etc.)
 - Describe the language used when discussing evangelism in the group.
- Who are group members talking about when they talk about evangelizing?
 - Are participants referring to specific groups?
 - Are participants *naming* these specific groups? In other words, from an outside perspective, would know for certain what types of people are being discussed, or would they have to interpret the discussion for themselves?
- Are there any groups or individuals that group members *do not* evangelize to?
 - Is this something they explicitly state? If so, is there a rationale for why these groups are avoided? Or, are there groups that they simply fail to mention?
- Do members share stories of past experiences of attempts at evangelizing?
 - If so, were these stories ‘success’ stories? Does the member telling the story describe ‘winning someone over?’
 - How do members seem to measure this success?
 - If they are not ‘success’ stories, what seems to be the point, or ‘moral,’ of the story, if there is one? Is this a warning about who *not* to try to evangelize to, or merely an anecdote about a failed attempt at proselytizing?

Closing Notes:

- What was most surprising/puzzling about what I observed? Explain.
- Who do I think I would like to conduct follow-up interviews with, based on my observations of this event? Why? What would I ask them, and why?

VITA

Pace Ward was born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1996. Raised nearby to the south, in Northern Mississippi, he graduated high school in 2014. The following August, he enrolled as a student at the University of Mississippi to pursue his Bachelor of the Arts in English, with an emphasis in creative writing and the Honors distinction. He completed his degree in four years, and earned a minor in Sociology along the way. He successfully defended his undergraduate Honors thesis, “‘Everybody But Us’: Constructing Evangelical Identities by Defining the Skeptic,” in May of 2018. He will receive his Master of the Arts in Sociology at the University of Mississippi in May of 2020. His research interests include religion, culture, identity, gender, and sexuality.