

TRANSMITTING THE WORD: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS
BROADCASTING

by

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(Under the Direction of Horace Newcomb)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes the use of televised religious broadcasting by the evangelical community. The analysis proceeds from a culturalist orientation that locates religious broadcasting in the historical context of American 20th century evangelicalism. Starting in the 1940's, religious broadcasting has been a critical and intentional component to the rise of this religious community. It has provided a platform for evangelicals to gain social, cultural, political and economic power.

Religious broadcasting is a site of social construction that provides evangelicals with significant symbolic inventories that allow them to negotiate their specifically *religious* identity. As this is performed in the midst of world they see as increasingly secular, religious broadcasting also becomes a site of resistance, which has galvanized the evangelical community into a prominent social movement. To this end, religious broadcasting produces crisis narratives that frame evangelicals as both socially marginalized and empowered.

This dissertation will specifically analyze three case studies that represent three different approaches to religious broadcasting. The first case study is Jerry Falwell's *Old Time Gospel Hour*. This approach, "camera on the pulpit," represents the traditional practice of placing a

camera in a church sanctuary in order to broadcast the weekly service. The second case study is Pat Robertson's *The 700 Club*, one of the longest running programs in television history. This approach, "camera on the couch," represents an accommodating strategy that sought to copy popular television forms. The third case study is Joel Osteen's *Joel*. This approach, "camera on the performance," represents the most contemporary form of religious broadcasting and represents a highly developed understanding of contemporary media branding.

Evangelical religious broadcasting has never been able to attract a significant audience of non-believers. Therefore, its manifest motivations of engaging the culture and bringing the gospel to the lost world, have never materialized. Instead latent motivations have developed that relate to the actual audience. Religious broadcasting allows the evangelical audience to "work out their salvation" in the biblical frames of being *in and not of* the "world." This ultimately provides evangelicals with feelings of legitimacy, relevance and empowerment in the contemporary cultural context.

INDEX WORDS: Televangelism, Religious Broadcasting, Pat Robertson, Joel Osteen, Jerry Falwell, Evangelicals

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Evangelicals: In Media We Trust

Martin Luther reportedly referred to the printing press as the “supremist act of grace by which the gospel can be driven forward.” Five hundred years later Ben Armstrong, executive director of the National Religious Broadcasters, suggested that the “awesome technology of broadcasting” is one of the “major miracles of modern times.” He further claimed that religious broadcasting would transform the 20th century church into a “revolutionary new form of the worshipping, witnessing church that existed twenty centuries ago.” (Armstrong, 1979, p. 8) These comments illustrate the high regard Protestant evangelicals have for media. This high regard is understandable. Protestant evangelical Christians are seeking to communicate the gospel to the entire world and nothing rivals media’s ability to produce mass audiences. It is a natural fit.

However, the evangelical fascination with media goes beyond simple utilitarian frames. For many evangelicals, media are a miraculous sign of God’s provision that can be used to not only elicit religious conversion but also enact a cosmic transformation. It is a popular notion amongst evangelicals that Christ will not return until the entire world has heard the gospel message. The final command Christ gave to his church was the Great Commission of Matthew 28 in which he tells his followers, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (NIV, MT 28:19) This is a formative text for evangelicals, who believe the global spread of the gospel is the most important task of

the church. Throughout church history, the challenge of this task undoubtedly at times seemed insurmountable. However, with the advent of electronic mass media many evangelicals began to envision an imminent completion of the task. Television was the “miracle” that placed the “impossible” within the grasp of the church.¹

This orientation influences many Christians to view technology in *eschatological* frames. Each great technological advancement is a benchmark that signifies one step closer to the return of Christ and the end of time. Media do more than disseminate information or tell a story. They can, through advancing the gospel, contribute to the revelation of the Kingdom of God and the creation of the new world. Therefore, technology is seen as a sacred blessing from God, given to his people so that they can complete the sacred and eschatological task of bringing God’s Kingdom to earth.

That is not to say technology has not often been the focus of criticism by the evangelical community. Just as television can be used as a tool of eschatological fulfillment, it also can be used to facilitate the spread of the enemy’s (Satan) deception and dominion. In other words, the gifts God bestows are often misused and produce obstacles to the eventual eschatological fulfillment. What is clear is that evangelicals believe media are extremely powerful tools, used for good and bad, in the cosmic battle for the souls of humanity.

Ben Armstrong illustrated this belief when he wrote that religious broadcasting was producing a new dynamic phenomenon within the Christian community, “the electric church.” (Armstrong, 1979) He believed this new articulation of Christian fellowship was a miraculous act of God that would reinvigorate the Christian faith. “The electric church has launched a revolution as dramatic as the revolution begun when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the cathedral door at Wittenberg” (Armstrong, 1979, p. 10). For Armstrong nothing had had a more

¹ A secondary, but significant, eschatological orientation of media is produced through a number of New Testament

revolutionary effect on the church's ability to fulfill its mission, since the 16th century Reformation, than television. For the first time in history the church had the ability to communicate with every person on the planet in an efficient and effective manner. In other words after 2000 years the church finally has the opportunity to fulfill its purpose.

The relationship between media and Christianity is highly complex. But what is clear is mediated forms of communication have always influenced the manner in which Christianity has been spread. Therefore, media have always influenced the way followers of Jesus Christ understand themselves, their mission and their behavior. A first century example is the church's use of the written form of *Koine* Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean region that allowed for the establishment of trade routes during the Hellenistic and Latin eras. Because the earliest Christian letters were written in this widely used vernacular, the Christian message spread throughout the known world, from Spain to India, in a matter of decades. The written word allowed the gospel to travel more quickly and widely than could the early missionaries. The Apostle Paul, for example, was often forced to remain in one location, but his epistles were constantly travelling and being copied throughout the Roman Empire.

This rapid spread of the gospel allowed early Christians to conceptualize global missions. This commitment became a key tenant of Christianity that persists in the evangelical community. The existence of a popular communication form, a written vernacular, proved to be formative in the church's understanding of their task. During the next two millennia this would be the case with media such as the printing press, radio and eventually television.

This dissertation will investigate the relationship between media use and the Christian commitment. It will proceed by identifying theological and technical commitments that work in concert and tension with one another to inform and/or shape the other. Even though Christians

generally conceptualize technological practices and theological commitments with varying degrees of significance, they operate together in the life and community of faith. In doing so the theological and technological commitments operate to help define one another.² The communication technology that Christians employ has a profound influence on their theological values. This dissertation will identify both theological and technological commitments that are articulated in the church's contemporary use of media. What happens when certain theological and technological commitments are mixed? What form of Christianity, worship, gospel expressions are produced and perpetuated? This dissertation will engage those questions and offer insight into the contemporary mix of technological and theological commitments.

This dissertation will look at those questions specifically from an investigation of the relationship between media and American evangelicals. This specificity is required because the broad scope of Christian theological tradition refuses any generalized conclusions relative to media production and consumption. Media use varies widely based upon specific Christian identities such as Orthodox, Catholic, Mainline or Evangelical. Of all these identities none has ever embraced media more enthusiastically or produced as much media content as contemporary American evangelicals. This dissertation will suggest that this fact is a direct representation of their theological commitments, most notably their central commitment to evangelism. It was that commitment that originally attracted evangelicals to media use, especially because of two related advantages it offered. First, and more obviously, mass media allowed for broad distribution of their message. But just as important was the fact that mass media provided early evangelicals with a cultural presence. In order to effectively transmit their message with any

² It is likely that this is particular true of communication technology because of its connection to the evangelistic practices of Christianity.

degree of legitimacy, evangelicals believed they needed to secure a position of cultural prominence. The world was not going to listen to messages from the margins.

Evangelicals: Faith as a Matter of Broadcast

Evangelicals are Christians who are committed to global evangelism through intentional cultural engagement. The evangelical community finds its roots in the Reformation of the 15th century. During this time there began a strong theological shift away from corporate ritual and toward individual piety and salvation. Reformers believed salvation extended beyond cultic identification. Faith, the foundation of salvation, was a matter of personal response to a divine call. This belief is at the core of evangelicalism.

Historian David Bebbington has identified conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism, and activism as the four foundational commitments of evangelicalism.³ "Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism." (Bebbington, 1989, p.5) Conversionism is the belief that every person is a sinner and is thus in need of a personal spiritual conversion that comes through the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Biblicism refers to high view of Scripture, represented by the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy⁴ and the belief that every believing individual can interpret and apply the sacred text to their lives. Crucicentrism is the central focus on the atoning work of Christ that allows for salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Activism is the belief that every follower of Christ is required to actively and intentionally proclaim the "good news" of Jesus Christ.

Taken together these four commitments produce a theological paradigm uniquely focused on communicating the gospel message. Many religious traditions, including Christian ones, have no particular emphasis on verbal transmission of their core beliefs. Evangelicals, on the

³ Collectively they are known as the "Bebbington quadrilateral."

⁴ Biblical inerrancy is the belief that on matters of faith the original form of Scripture is without error.

other hand, judge the quality of their faith based upon their ability to transmit their faith to as many people as possible. Proclamation of the word is the central act of constructing religious meaning in the evangelical tradition.⁵ Evangelicals believe that it is only through hearing the gospel can one experience salvation in Jesus Christ and thus the gospel must be proclaimed. Indeed the term *evangelical* derives from the Greek term *euongellion* that is translated as “good news.” Evangelicals are tellers of the good news. Thus the attraction to broadcasting is natural.

Evangelicals: A Marginalized Community

However, this “good news” is not necessarily *popular* news. The evangelical belief in the uniqueness of Christ inevitably elicits responses of animosity from some of the recipients of the message. This animosity has traditionally taken many forms, from individual prejudice to institutional persecution. But in any case, such a radical claim often leads to social marginalization. This sense of marginalization is heightened by the fact that Christ claimed his followers would face hatred, rejection and persecution from the world. Conservative Christians often view social marginalization as proof of Christ’s claims and evidence of their faithfulness. Thus central to the evangelical identity is a sense of persecution. Christian Smith claims this “embattled” sense is central to their corporate identity and has been the major factor in galvanizing this group. (Smith, 1998) It does not follow, however, that they accept the marginalization. In fact, evangelicals have often responded to these feelings of persecution by seeking to increase their cultural presence. Media are clearly an attractive and expedient way to accomplish this objective.

The American evangelical community was born in the social margins, during a period of church conflict in the early 20th century. This conflict pitted the theologically liberal Protestant

⁵ This is not the case for all Christian traditions. For many the central act is the reception of the Mass or corporate participation in the liturgy.

modernists against conservative Protestant fundamentalists. The conservatives had experienced a cultural hegemony during the antebellum period thanks to social movements such as the Second Great Awakening and abolition.⁶ However, with the growth of secularism in the late 19th century, many of the conservative commitments came to be seen as antiquated and out of step with modern developments such as urbanization and industrialization.

Conservative Christianity's emphasis of a personal salvation, which was fully experienced in future glory, simply didn't resonate with Americans who were caught in the grim situations of over-crowded cities and dreadful factory conditions. These people needed to experience a sense of salvation that provided immediate respite. Liberal Christians provided that salvation by articulating narratives that focused on a "social gospel." Progressive church leaders Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch emphasized the need for immediate social and institutional reform. Christian ethics, they reasoned, could not be isolated from the social despair that was rampant in this period. In 1896 this movement gained great momentum when Charles Sheldon published *In His Steps*. During the next two decades this book, which sold millions of copies, challenged Christians to seriously reflect on the question of "What would Jesus do?" in relation to the social ills of the day.⁷ (Marsden, 1991) Those Christians who held to theologically conservative views believed the "social gospel" was a compromise of biblical theology and sought to stem the growth of this unbiblical position. However, as the 20th century began, conservatives continued to lose ground and were forced further into the social margins. This was exacerbated by the fact that fundamentalists viewed many of the early 20th century developments, such as mass media, with a great deal of suspicion. They, therefore, withdrew

⁶ The tradition of "great awakenings" in American church history is, of course, founded on a commitment to evangelism.

⁷ It is ironic that nearly a century later evangelicals would garner significant cultural exposure with their WWJD, what would Jesus do, bracelets.

from mainstream American culture, fearing its corrupting influence, which further cleared the way for the liberal voices to gain a position of even greater strength. So great was the shift that James Davison Hunter has written that this period, from 1890 to 1920, witnessed the “disestablishment of American Protestantism.” (Hunter, 1983, p.27)

It was not, however, social developments alone that elevated the liberal Protestant voices. A number of academic movements in the second half of the 19th century played a critical role in eroding the credibility of conservative Protestantism. One key example was the rapid rise of Darwinism. Conservatives claimed the Bible was free of all errors and all of its claims were literal and true. The acceptance of Darwin’s theory called many of the biblical claims into question, and to call one biblical claim into question is to question all of the claims. Many Christians, who were to become the leaders of the modernist movement, found themselves in academic contexts facing a serious crisis of faith. They were being forced to choose between Christianity and academic acceptance. In an effort to mitigate that choice they began to construct a model of Christianity that was consistent with contemporary academic values.⁸

If they (Christian academics) were going to retain intellectual respectability, it seemed they were going to have to abandon Christianity or modify it to meet the standards of the day. For many the latter option seemed the only live choice.

(Marsden, 1991, p 33)

However, this modification of Christianity would have likely been impossible if not for the academic movement of biblical higher criticism. The rise of rationalism during the Enlightenment encouraged biblical scholars to view the Bible as a natural, and not supernatural, text. As such the Bible was no longer viewed as a mystical and universal transmission of God’s

⁸ Although Darwinism was the first and most significant academic movement that initiated this modification it was not the only one. Advancements in disciplines such as sociology, psychology and anthropology also contributed.

word, but a historical artifact written by fallible men. Therefore, it could be challenged, questioned and broken apart. Scripture was still valuable. It offered historical insight into human behavior and guidance on human ethics, but this new form of criticism rejected any sense of inerrancy.

This new posture of biblical criticism was articulated in a number of specific approaches, such as historical criticism. This approach focused on the perspective that the Bible was a historical artifact, primarily representing the *sitz im leben* of the era in which it was written. This is critical because it implies the Bible can't speak in any authoritative manner to the modern setting. The modern reader can draw indirect inferences from the text, but it has no authority to make direct claims about how a person in the 19th or 20th century should live.

Another significant form was source criticism. This approach came to challenge the unity and wholeness of Scripture, and to challenge the “wholeness” of Scripture is to eventually challenge its “holiness.” This approach suggested that much of Scripture was comprised by piecing together existing narratives and narrative fragments. For example, the similarities of the synoptic gospels was explained by suggesting there were two original sources, The Gospel of Mark and *Q*, a non-extant early manuscript of Jesus' sayings. The other gospel writers largely borrowed from these two sources to comprise their versions of the gospel story. When compared to the prevailing conservative view that Scripture was without error and dictated to each writer by the Spirit of God, this view clearly represented Scripture in much less authoritative frames.⁹

By the turn of the 20th century higher criticism was the standard practice at established seminaries and divinity schools such as Harvard, Andover-Newton, and Yale. Princeton, which

⁹ Another significant expression of this critical approach is the documentary hypothesis. It suggests the Torah was not written by Moses, the traditional and conservative view, but rather was a redaction of separate sources, the J, E, P, and D documents. (J is Yahwehist, E is Elohist, P is Priestly Source and D is Deuteronimist.) These sources, which were written between 1000 and 500 BCE, were redacted into the Torah during the Babylonian exile.

was a bastion of conservative biblical interpretation, became the last major American seminary to accept the modernist reform in 1929.¹⁰ Thus by the 1930's America's churches were being pastored by men who had been educated in this liberal context. Although many Christians at the time were not even aware of "higher criticism," it made an indelible impact on American Christianity. It was also a staggering blow to conservative Christianity that illustrated just how far conservative Christianity had fallen.¹¹

Conservative Christians had lost authority in cultural contexts, the academy and the church. This humbling reality entered the national stage in the 1920's as the liberal victories were being played out and through the burgeoning national electronic media. As the media began to cover much of the fundamentalist-modernist conflict, they generally characterized the conservative factions as backwards and superstitious, further pushing them into the cultural margins.

The Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925, one of the biggest news stories of the decade, is a prime example of the decidedly bias news coverage. The press framed defense attorney, and agnostic, Clarence Darrow as a forward thinking rationalist, while prosecuting attorney, the fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan was consistently ridiculed as an irrational dupe. Furthermore, there was evidence that media executives were conspiring to keep conservative voices off the airwaves. In 1943 the major networks of NBC, CBS and MBS all agreed to adopt the Federal Council of Churches (FCC) standards of religious programming. As the FCC was a liberal institution, many conservative programs, which had developed a strong radio presence,

¹⁰ It was at this point that some of the remaining conservative voices founded conservative seminaries like Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and Fuller Seminary in Pasadena. It also bears mention that starting in the middle of the 19th century some denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, began to open their own seminaries. Some of the denominational schools were less impacted by higher criticism.

¹¹ A related academic movement was the "quest for the historical Jesus." Starting in the late 18th century, this movement picked up significant steam by the end of the 19th. Its basic claims revolved around the perspective that the supernatural claims that surrounded Jesus were fictional and only served to undermine his value as an ethical teacher.

were removed from the airwaves because of their theological orientation.¹² And even after these restrictions were removed, major networks generally chose liberal programs to satisfy Federal Communication Commission public service requirements because they were less controversial and confrontational than the conservative offerings. This left conservative broadcasters with the only option of purchasing airtime. Media were not only reporting the decline of the conservative hegemony, they were contributing to their fall. Conservatives began to view media as a source of persecution and a symbol of their loss of cultural standing. As such, media became a key strategic location for conservatives to stanch the decades of decline.

By 1940 conservatives could point to nothing but a consistent and pervasive string of social losses. This convinced them that they were being persecuted by the mainstream culture. Key conservative leaders like Harold J. Ockenga and Carl F. Henry began to openly assert this position. It was clear they were losing and something had to change. Their strategy was to create an institutional presence that would allow conservatives to reassert themselves in the media and the general culture. (Marsden, 1991)

Many conservatives began to assert that the *true* church could not fulfill its purpose from the social margins. Thus, they began to fight to reclaim their cultural status. They believed they had to define a new posture of *engaged* orthodoxy, integrating into culture without sacrificing their theological commitments. This model of engagement would become the foundational framework for the development of American evangelicals in the 20th century. This dissertation will seek to describe the character and the consequences of this *engagement* model.

In pursuit of engagement, conservative Protestants dissatisfied with the fundamentalist isolationism founded the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in 1942. This

¹² For example, religious broadcasting made up 25 percent of Mutual Broadcastings System's revenue, and revivalist Charles Fuller's *The Old Fashion Revival Hour* was the most successful program on the MBS.

organization would provide American evangelicals with a public institutional identity to fight against the liberal FCC, and bring evangelicals into greater cultural prominence. From the beginning media played a critical strategic role, with leading evangelical voices, such as Henry, Billy Graham and Francis Schaeffer, all using media to spread their messages.¹³ From an institutional level the NAE clearly focused on media as a key means of establishing a uniquely *evangelical* cultural presence. One of the first acts of the NAE was to convince the networks to reverse their decision to enforce the FCC (Federal Council of Churches) broadcast standards, which led to a critical rise in evangelical productions. A year later the NAE established the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB), as the NAE's first service agency. The fact that the NRB was established prior to service agencies that focused on mission work, pastoral ministry, and Bible translation illustrates just how significant media was to early evangelical strategies.¹⁴

However, the story of the rise of evangelical broadcasting is about much more than changing FCC regulations. As the liberal broadcasts were receiving free airtime from the network affiliates, evangelicals had been investing capital to air their programs. This influenced the value these two groups assigned broadcasting. For liberals airtime was a free gift, given to them out of convenience and necessity. For evangelicals it was something to fight and pay for. When the Federal Communication Commission began to relax the requirements of networks providing public service airtime, evangelicals were prepared to dominate religious broadcasting. Ultimately, evangelical broadcasters had much more to gain through the use of television than their mainline counterparts. For mainline broadcasters broadcasting was a matter of public

¹³ Henry became the editor of the monthly magazine Christianity Today, Graham would televise many of his crusades and Schaeffer produced a film series to express his theological and cultural commitments.

¹⁴ Since its inception, the NRB has served as a consulting body for evangelical broadcasters. They have worked with broadcasters, providing them how-to-guides and production resources. They encouraged the strategy of purchasing local airtime, which came to have a profound effect on the landscape of religious broadcasting.

service. For evangelicals it was a matter of salvation for both individual souls and the evangelical community itself.¹⁵

It is critical to point out that evangelicals used media to establish not only a new cultural prominence but also a new theological position for conservative Christians. The greater cultural engagement would lead to more people than ever hearing the gospel message. The new theological position would articulate the distinction from fundamentalism. Evangelicalism was a more moderate paradigm, which did not reject the use of contemporary cultural apparatus. However, it was not as though millions of conservative Americans chose the evangelical posture of engagement overnight. Throughout the middle of the 20th century, many conservative Christians continued to largely reject media. However, as evangelical leaders began to produce “Christian” media this practice began to dissipate. Through this strategic use of media, evangelicals would draw millions to their ranks, from both the broader culture and extremely conservative positions.

It is noteworthy to highlight some of the characteristics of this strategy. The basic premise of this enterprise is to view cultural artifacts as “props” that can be easily removed from the “lost” culture. They are then filled with evangelical content and are thus co-opted for the cause of Christ. These “Christian” artifacts are then disseminated back into the culture. They also galvanize the evangelical position. By the 1970’s “Christian” media props littered the evangelical landscape as testament to a community engaged with the broader culture.

In the early decades of the 20th century media had contributed to pushing evangelicals into the social margins. The middle decades of the century witnessed media escorting conservative Christians back into social prominence. This ascension reached national attention

¹⁵ Horsfield makes a similar argument based upon the theological commitment of the two factions. He argues the evangelical message was more dramatic and appropriate for broadcast. (1984)

when Time magazine identified 1976 as “The Year of the *Evangelical*. ” Media, which had so often occupied a position of antagonism with evangelicals, was now one of evangelicalism’s great weapons, and would significantly influence the evangelical community. Evangelical broadcasting began as a strategy that expressed the commitment of reaching the world with the gospel. However, ritualistic symbols do not merely serve as representations of established identities; they actively serve as sites of negotiation in which the faithful work out and enact new identities. So it was with broadcasting. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, evangelicals negotiated their cultural and theological identities through the use of media.

The Gospel and Religious Broadcasting: Made in Media’s Image

As scholars such as Quentin Schultze (1990), Craig Detweiler (2003) and Shane Higgs (2006) have written, evangelicals have generally failed to recognize how critically media have influenced their communication and message. There is perhaps no greater example of the influence of technological concerns on theological commitments than the evangelical conception of the gospel and the practice of evangelism. Television was attractive to religious broadcasters because of its ability to get the message out. But in order to take advantage of this opportunity, evangelicals needed to produce a clear and concise message to transmit in the thirty-minute window of their broadcasts. This shaped evangelism as the transmission of an easily understood verbal message that focused on the salvation of individual souls.¹⁶ As such both the gospel and evangelism lost much of their previously robust conceptions and applications.¹⁷ The gospel of Christ has traditionally been understood as more than the path to personal salvation. According to Christian orthodoxy, it involves an enigmatic cosmic enterprise that restores all of creation to

¹⁶ It is noteworthy that during the peak of religious broadcasting evangelism came to be completed through such rituals as handing out propositional tracts and performing door-to-door visitation.

¹⁷ For example, 19th century conservative American Christians would have associated social justice issues such as the abolition of slavery with the spread of the gospel. Likewise, 17th and 18th century Christians understood travelling to the new world as an expansion of the gospel.

its proper place as a symbol of God's glory. However, this conception of the gospel is not easily communicated through broadcast forms. The gospel was not a list of comprehensible propositions to possess, but a mysterious redemptive force that influenced the believer to constantly pursue deeper understanding. As a propositional message, the gospel became a possession that the speaker needed to fully understand. Furthermore, the gospel was something that changed the other, the listener, not the self, the speaker. Thus, the broadcaster didn't need to pursue or work out meaning and truth. Religious broadcasting's strength is to transmit a simple message to as many people as is technically possible. It is not to encourage further investigation into the nuances of theological inquiry.

This characteristic, of seeking change only in the audience, both reflects and furthers the evangelical notion of communication as *engagement*. This engagement was a model of one-way communication. Evangelicalism was built on the belief that God had called them to *speak* to the world so that the world would change. There was always much less consideration of listening, a posture more open to new understandings and interpretations. When listening is privileged the core message can be more dynamic and complex. When speech is privileged the core message becomes one of static dogmatism.

This dogmatism eventually produces the need for more demanding and rigid articulation. By the time religious broadcasting reached its peak in popularity in the 1980's, it was dominated by about a dozen authoritarian personalities who were invariably forceful and dogmatic in their evangelical theological orientation. They were not seeking to start a dialogue as to what might be the proper biblical response to an issue. They were broadcasting their message because it was the most effective way to dictate to as many people as possible what was, unequivocally, the proper response. And although there were significant personality clashes amongst this small

community; there was very little theological or social diversity. American evangelicals came to be a unified community coalescing around the certain commitment that they possessed *the* truth. It was the truth they articulated and disseminated through their religious broadcasts.

Ministry and Media: Efficiency, Relevancy and Marketing

In an interview with *Ministry Today*, Phil Cooke (2013) repeatedly discussed the importance of having an *effective* media ministry.¹⁸ This commitment to effectiveness has become common amongst evangelicals, and is based upon an efficiency model of how many individuals can be reached relative to expenditure. In *The Last TV Evangelist*, Cooke (2009) claims the first strength of contemporary religious broadcasting is “distribution.” In *The Electric Church* Armstrong wrote, “Penny for penny, per capita studies indicate there is no better way to reach the largest numbers of people with the life-changing news of Jesus Christ than through radio and television.”(Armstrong, 1979) These comments represent an important functionalist paradigm that pervades the contemporary religious broadcasting landscape and influences contemporary evangelical theological identity and ministry practices.

In *The Last TV Evangelist* Cooke (2009) challenges the religious broadcasting community to change with the times in order to remain a viable presence. He characterizes Christian media as largely out-of-step with the larger culture. He points out some obvious issues present in some examples of contemporary religious broadcasting, including out-of-date formats, outlandish sets, and bizarre clothing and hairstyles. His frustration is that many religious broadcasters have so little understanding of the contemporary culture they fail to be relevant.

Evangelicals understand the gospel message as “the old, old story.” Therefore, evangelicals feel the need to embellish the narrative so as to make it more accessible to 21st

¹⁸ Phil Cooke is a well-known Christian television producer and consultant. He has written a number of resource books aimed at religious broadcasting and Christian use of media including *Successful Christian Television* and *Branding Faith*.

century audiences, by translating it into the language of contemporary media. Brad Herring, a professional media-worship consultant, claims, in his resource text *Sound, Lighting & Video: A Resource for Worship*, “Jesus didn’t use things like this (media). He didn’t have to, we however, are often *forced* to” (emphasis added). He goes on to suggest that although he cannot imagine Jesus using media technology, there is a need today to communicate to people in a “relevant media savvy method.”¹⁹ (Herring, 2009, p.7)

The two main objectives that emerge from the perspective of Cooke, Armstrong and Herring are numbers and relevancy. In fact, they have become so ingrained in the evangelical mindset they are effectively equated with the Christian mission. Therefore, religious broadcasters are perpetually identifying what forms and genres are successful and popular in the secular media. There has developed the battle cry of “if they can do it, we can do it better.” Jerry Falwell, for example, characterized his media strategy as “if they (secular media) got it we will try it.” (Carolton, 2003) Even when Falwell found the media expressions distasteful or lacking in aesthetic value he would pursue them. He claimed that some of the music his ministry used during worship services would likely “give you a headache.” (Carolton, 2003) The only reason he endorsed it was because he believed it reflected the successful practices of the secular media. Thus issues of art, aesthetic value, quality of expression, and even theological and spiritual consistency are minimized because of the driving motivations of large audiences through cultural relevance.

This quantitative concern creates a utilitarian mindset that equates “right” with what “works.” Thus the question for the religious broadcasters becomes what *can* we do in order to reach as many people as possible. This question, which is asked by broadcasters of all types,

¹⁹ Many have justified the desire to make the gospel relevant by quoting St. Paul’s desire “to become all things to all men.” However, it should be noted that St. Paul states *he* has become all things; he does not mention that he has made the gospel all things.

shifts the commitment away from theological concerns. The practical belief is the larger the audience the larger the number of converts. The following quote from Armstrong represents how technologically driven quantitative concerns have become intermeshed with theologically driven qualitative ones. “One of the unwritten laws of mass communication is that the more people you reach the further your dollar goes but the more it costs overall. Another unwritten law is that you can get your share of the audience only by offering them what they want...the larger the audience the greater the response in terms of lives changed.” (Armstrong, 1979, p. 23)

This dissertation argues that the biblical model of evangelism, as well as all Christian commitments, is founded on qualitative and not quantitative concerns. The gospel doesn’t need to be made relevant, because it inherently is so. Furthermore, the goal of making the gospel relevant eventually makes the church *less* relevant to the culture. By consistently seeking to produce “relevant” media, evangelicals are actually perpetuating a dualistic orientation that views themselves as cultural outsiders. From such a position religious broadcasting is understood as an attempt to penetrate the secular cultural realm. The problem with this approach is the broadcasters aren’t considering the possibility that “outsiders” simply can’t be relevant within the culture.

Religious broadcasting takes on the function of not simply delivering the message to the world, but also attempting to prove something to the world. There is an inherent “see, we can do it too” argument present in religious broadcasting. This only reveals prevailing senses of insecurity and inferiority that have been present in the community from the beginning. Religious broadcasting ends up being judged by how well it measures up to the secular originals they have copied, instead of by the prevailing biblical commitments. It is believed that if religious broadcasting can attract enough viewers to rival secular media and persist in the face of constant

cancellations and shifting television landscapes, it will prove its value. In this way religious broadcasting becomes a path to cultural capital.

This explains why there is a pervasive tendency for religious broadcasters to over-estimate their audience size. For example Falwell often claimed *OTGH* enjoyed a weekly viewership of 25 million, and a Falwell associate once claimed it was 50 million. Arbitron, however, rated the audience size at 1.5 million. (Smilie, 2008) From a “secular” media orientation, it is clear that a program with a larger audience has greater value. Religious media, like much of evangelicalism, judge success based upon return on investment. Notoriety, financial reward and human souls are all part of the return religious broadcasters are seeking to produce through their ministries.

Model of Communication

In his essay “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” James Carey (1988) identifies religion as one of the primary forces that gave rise to American communication practices. Values, religious and otherwise, shape the what, the why, the how, the when and the to whom of communication. However, communication does more than reinforce these existing values. It operates to constantly articulate new points of emphasis, which leads to the production of new values. An analysis of evangelical use of media bears this out as existing theological values became mixed with technological, social and political values. The communication styles of a religious group both reflect and shape its theological orientation and commitments. As will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, Carey’s work is foundational to this dissertation.

The Cultural Mandate as Paradigm of Creativity and Authority

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

GE 1:27

According to the Cultural Mandate, humanity was created in order to create. However, creativity has generally not been a point of theological emphasis amongst evangelicals. They tend to represent meaning as a static element. From this perspective, it is only the receivers of communication messages that are changed. Communication, therefore, becomes a limited action because it is not seen as having the potential to nurture mutual growth. Communication exists to represent established meaning, and invoke change in the audience and solidify power in the speaker.²⁰

The Cultural Mandate of Genesis expresses the biblical view of humanity. Genesis represents God creating, not a perfect world, but one imbued with potential. As the pinnacle of that creation, humanity is given potentiality. Humanity is represented in a pristine prelapsarian condition, but it is not perfected or fulfilled. In the Cultural Mandate God is calling humanity to perform two tasks, each one requiring a specific human characteristic. The first task "be fruitful and multiply" requires creativity. The second "subdue the world and rule over it" requires authority.

²⁰ With the evangelical model of communication, there is very little development or growth experienced by the evangelist or speaker. The only changed that is encouraged is the strengthening of the commitments already held. The only real change is to be experienced by the individual in need of salvation. Therefore, the evangelical model does not represent an equal distribution of need. The unbeliever needs the believer, but the believer does not need the unbeliever. Therefore, the notion of ritualistic communication is simply impractical and potentially wasteful. Communication is not a matter of "shared belief," that would only corrupt the message. It is a matter of dictation. It is a matter of extending power.

Both of these characteristics are present in the first specific task God gave to humanity. In the second chapter of Genesis, God calls Adam to name the animals.

Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

(NIV, GE 2:19,20)

In the fulfillment of this task Adam produces new meaning by the creation of new names and acts in authority by assigning the normative meaning.

Evangelical broadcasting also operates in close relationship to these two fundamental human characteristics. Religious broadcasters understand their work as an act of creativity through their production of new channels of gospel distribution. Religious broadcasting is also authoritative through its prevailing propensity for dictating privileged meaning for the Christian. This dissertation will employ this framework as a means of analyzing religious broadcasting, seeking to identify whether or not religious broadcasters can consistently express both creativity and authority.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One is a general introduction to the problem presented in religious broadcasting, especially in the evangelical community. This chapter examines the relationship between theological and communication based presuppositions, especially within the evangelical community.

Chapter Two is a literature review of the relevant literature, which investigates the field of religion and media. This chapter focuses on how the field has developed in the past thirty years. It looks at how the focus of study and the analytical approaches have changed.

Chapter Three explains the conceptual approach taken in the dissertation and its investigation of religious broadcasting.

Chapter Four will be an investigation of what is probably the oldest and perhaps most basic approach to religious broadcast, “camera on the pulpit,” as represented by *The Old Time Gospel Hour*. This approach simply broadcasts a Sunday morning worship service. It operates from the commitment that the addition of cameras and thousands of television viewers has not changed the church service in any critical way. This chapter will investigate the theological presuppositions, which influenced Falwell to place a camera in his church and broadcast his highly “traditional” services. First it will investigate the explicit and implicit objectives of Falwell’s media, and consider how his use of media played a key role in his entrance into the political arena the production of a “politicized” gospel. This gospel version has heavily influenced not only later religious broadcasters, such as Pat Robertson, but also the evangelical community in general.

Chapter Five will investigate the media ministry of M.G. “Pat” Robertson. Best known for his failed presidential bid in 1988 and *The 700 Club*, Robertson introduced a new approach to religious broadcasting, the “camera on the couch.” Unlike *OTGH* and other early religious broadcasts, *The 700 Club* is modeled on existing television forms, particularly talk show and variety formats. In creating this *Christian* variety show, Robertson initiated an immense shift in religious broadcasting. He was producing religious entertainment. Key to this new approach is its connection with the development of a Christian culture.

Chapter Six will investigate the relatively new media ministry of Joel Osteen. Osteen, who took over the pastorate of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas from his father in 1999, served as media director for the church for the previous seventeen years. Osteen represents a new approach to religious broadcasting, the “camera on the performance.” Osteen’s approach is a thoroughly media saturated and integrative approach. In addition to his use of television, Osteen employs print, Internet and other digital media to produce one of the most recognizable personas in contemporary American culture. This chapter will focus on the new characteristics of Osteen’s approach. Perhaps most notable is the dynamic of producing religious entertainment in the context of a Sunday morning church service. These two elements coalesce into Osteen’s “performance” as pastor, communicator and televangelist.

The final chapter will offer general observations drawn from my analysis of the three distinct forms. Even as there are many differences, the three share central commitments and objectives. Here I identify latent motivations underlying the use of media in the evangelical community.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Brief History of the Field

The body of literature that investigates the relationship between media and religion has undergone a significant evolution throughout the approximate half-century of its existence. The evolution is framed not only by the changes that have taken place in media and religion during that time, but also by a shift in the understanding of the relationship between religion and media. Starting roughly thirty years ago, the shift was initiated by the recognition of the inherent connections that exist between media and religion.

The field of religion and media became framed in the second half of the 20th century in America. Strict lines of demarcation, separating media and religion into separate spheres, characterized the early formations of the field. The prevailing methodology produced research questions that effectively asked how the one sphere affected the other. Although this paradigm continues, it is no longer the prevailing view. The rise of cultural studies in American scholarship has been the most critical force in the evolution of religion and media studies. This influence has slowly eroded the lines of demarcation between media and religion and has produced a paradigm that views religion and media as intrinsically connected elements, sharing space within the cultural web. In fact it is appropriate to suggest during the past decade the field has changed from “religion and media” to “religion, media and culture.”

The field gained significant credibility and notoriety during the 1980’s with the rise of televangelism. Although religious television had existed as long as television itself,

“televangelism” was a new phenomenon, born out of significant shifts in the American religious landscape and in American broadcast television. By the 1980’s evangelicalism had become a dominant voice in American Protestant Christianity. The decade also saw the explosion of cable television. These two developments coalesced to produce an explosion of televangelism. The influence of cultural studies first entered into the field during this boom in religion and media scholarship, although on an extremely limited basis. The clearly dominant orientation continued to be one of separate spheres that periodically collided.

This approach generally conceptualized media in instrumentalist frames. The general approach to inquiry was a “media effects” model. Research questions revolved around what effects the invasion of media had on the religious sphere. The 1990’s saw a drop off in scholarship investigating religious television, as televangelism quickly slipped from the public eye. Research, however, continued to investigate the more general relationship of media and religion. Publications investigating the relationship of film and religion, for example, increased during this period. One of the prevailing perspectives during this period was demonstrating the high degree of religious imagery present in media and popular culture. As if to challenge the secularization hypothesis, scholars highlighted religious, and often specifically Christian, symbols used in popular music, film and television.

This new orientation would contribute to the development of a culturalist orientation in the field. As long as the main focus of study was televangelism, the effects focus could remain. However, as the field shifted to consider the presence of religious symbols in popular media, there developed greater discourse centered on the use of symbols to produce meaning. According to David Morgan (2008), James Carey’s work serves as the foundation of this trend. “If a single moment in scholarship can be said to have birthed a new way of thinking about the

relationship between communication and religion, it may be an essay published in 1975 by James Carey, 'A Cultural Approach to Communication'." (2008, p. 2) Morgan astutely points out a dynamic that is often ignored by reviewers of Carey's work, namely its "religious" character. Carey suggests that both "transmissional" and "ritual" orientations of communication have their origins in religious practice. This was not merely a historical aside produced by Carey, but rather represents Carey's interest and understanding of the religious dynamic inherent in communication. This was a much-needed jolt to the culturalist orientation, which tended to marginalize the significance of religion. The field of religion and media is uniquely situated to serve as a corrective to that oversight. At the heart of the culturalist orientation is a commitment to view culture as a "web of signification." (Geertz, 1973) There is the clear pursuit of a holistic view of culture that rejects hierarchies and dualistic paradigms.

Likewise, there are clear developments in theological studies mirroring this culturalist shift. The shift has arrived much more recently compared to media studies, and is progressing much more slowly, which is to be expected due to the historic identity of theological studies. But, of course, theological inquiry, like all forms of inquiry, must recognize its need to remain connected to the contemporary cultural milieu if it hopes to remain relevant.

Religious and theological studies have traditionally been more concerned with propositional and doctrinal analysis and the absolute essence of a religious system than the cultural implications and influences that arise daily in the lives of the faithful. Media studies, particularly in America, have traditionally produced artificial taxonomies, which fail to recognize the holistic nature of culture. And cultural studies have generally contradicted their own convictions by marginalizing religion. Thus the field of religion, media and culture can serve as a critical illustration of how the broader fields of media studies, religious studies and

cultural studies can continue to improve by recognizing the complex relationships that exist within the “web of culture.”

A review of the literature investigating the relationship between religion and media articulates several ways to conceptualize the relationship. Scholars who investigate this interaction generally are writing from one of the two disciplines. There are theologians and religious scholars who write about media, and media scholars who write about religion. Perhaps the most basic taxonomy would be to divide the literature along the lines of discipline. However, this will prove unsatisfactory due to the small, yet significant, number of scholars who have training and experience in both fields. But more importantly it will prove unsatisfactory because no scholar is a “pure theologian” or a “pure media scholar.” Many of the media scholars who research in this field have a deep religious identity that clearly informs their work.

It remains clear that, even as the lines of demarcation are blurred, scholars are writing from different perspectives with different motivations. Some works look at religion in media; some, at media in religion. Some works celebrate the use of mass media in religious work, based upon its ability to reach the world. Other scholars lament it, based upon the belief that it erodes the essential character of spirituality. Thus, it would prove helpful to have a taxonomy in place, and to that end a few have been suggested.

Hoover's Taxonomy

Scholars who perform research in the field of religion and media approach the topic from a range of highly diverse orientations. One must simply consider the diverse perspectives scholars have on religion, ranging from a critical aspect of human salvation to an obstacle to human liberation. Media likewise elicits varied perspectives. Therefore, it is necessary to produce an organizing taxonomy, which serves to recognize and define the different approaches.

Stewart Hoover (1997), one of the preeminent scholars in the field, suggests the taxonomy of rallies, rituals and resistance.

The first category is “rallies.” Hoover chooses the term “rallies” to emphasize the optimism felt relative to religion and media. From this perspective, media are viewed as a divine gift, given to distribute His word. “Rallies” represent a utilitarian view of media and an embrace of religious content. Writers who work from this orientation have a generally “transmissional” view of communication and understand media as generally a conduit that carries the sacred message from point A to point B. This category is significant to this dissertation because it represents the general commitment of those being researched and offers a framework of their conception of the gospel. Their desire is to discover the most effective and efficient forms of distributing a verbal gospel message. The corresponding view of media is as a neutral system of tools that allows for mass distribution. The “rallies” category was the prevailing perspective for the first generation of religion and media research. Although there continue to be examples of this perspective, it has slowly diminished in prominence.

The second category of “ritual” borrows Carey’s use of the term. This view suggests media are more than transmitters of communication; they play a particularly significant role in the creation of culture, identity and meaning. This view considers how people relate to and use media. It also suggests media often operate in a particularly religious fashion, performing many of the tasks once reserved for religion. Communal and individual identity, social norms and cultural meanings are all seen as being heavily influenced by media. The major departure from the previous orientation is the rejection of the dualistic orientation.

This view properly understands religion is a form of mediation. It is “in the middle” between the transcendent and the immanent. Religion is how the transcendent

reality/being/essence is *communicated* to the faithful. This perspective endeavors to investigate how mediation can be played out in the relationship of religion and media. Over the past generation the “rituals” orientation has continually gained significance, and today represents the preeminent view in the field. It also generally represents the orientation of this dissertation.

The final of Hoover’s categories is resistance. Media provide audience(s) with material from which they choose particular symbols that they define in order to establish their identity. This analytical orientation is attractive in the field of religion and media because many communities employ religious media as a means to resist the “secularizing” elements of the general media and culture. The orientation, however, still represents a small percentage of the work in the field.

Although Hoover’s taxonomy offers definition to the field, it is ultimately not satisfactory because it does not allow for the subtle shifts that characterize the field. There are many texts, for example, that are generally representative of the first category, but begin to demonstrate sensibilities of the second. However, Hoover’s taxonomy does prove to be extremely helpful in offering a vocabulary to define the state and progress of the field in very broad strokes. Thus, from that broad perspective it is clear the field began with a “rally” orientation and has slowly progressed into a “ritual” orientation, with a representative “resistance” voice. However, it will prove more helpful to produce categories which represent the more specific orientation of the author, recognizing within such categories it is possible to have examples of all three of Hoover’s categories.

Texts Written from a Theological Orientation

This inquiry will first consider works that were written by individuals who primarily operate from a theological orientation. These works tend to have a focus of how contemporary broadcasting or media in general impact the religious identities of the contemporary audience. The studies began to appear in the middle of the 20th century. Up until that point media had been largely ignored by theological scholarship.

These early theological voices were generally critical of the impact of media on the moral and religious sensibilities of audiences. They were also generally from mainline churches and shared a generally liberal theological orientation. Whereas evangelicals have generally been highly enthusiastic about the advance of modern and contemporary communication technology, many voices in the mainline denominations have proven to be far more skeptical and cautious.

Kyle Haselden's *Morality and the Mass Media* (1968) predates the rush of media and religion scholarship by nearly twenty years. However, it remains significant due to its commitment to an inquiry of morality. The fundamental question, for Haselden, relative to media is whether or not media can increase the freedom in which humans act to produce whole persons and whole communities. His conclusions are consistent with some landmark mass media research, such as the generally pessimistic orientation of the Frankfurt School, and its mass society emphasis. However, they are also unique to the time, due to his use of Scripture. The main critique of Haselden is that his work does reflect a mid-20th century liberalism that tended to be highly pessimistic of technology in general. However, the great strength and contribution of his work is his insistence that *religious* research of media cannot be divorced from supernatural and *religious* concerns.

Haselden is part of a small but rich tradition of religious scholars who critique media not fundamentally because of the violence, language and sexual content but rather because the media themselves are not conducive to producing the humanity God intends. This is a rich and heuristic theological argument that will prove critical to future research in the area of religion and media. However, the perspective must be restrained so as to not deteriorate into a Luddite perspective.

Another author who wrote from a theological orientation was William F. Fore. Writing in the final two decades of the 20th century, his work represented thirty years of experience in the media, church and academy. He sought to examine broader cultural questions from a theological perspective. His two most significant texts are *Television and Religion: The Shaping of Faith, Values and Culture* (1988) and *Mythmakers: Gospel, Culture and the Media*. (1990)

In *Television and Religion*, Fore proposes the basic thesis that mass media, and television most notably, are replacing traditional religion as the institution the public looks to in order to find ultimate meaning and identity. This claim critically shifted the focus of religious media research. Fore's work suggests that the critical questions did not simply revolve around *how* was television used in the service of religion. Scholars had to consider the impact television itself would have on the religion.

The book also offers two other significant contributions, his criticism of religious broadcasting and his production of a "theology of communication." Fore suggests that religious broadcasting had failed to serve the audience it seeks to attract, largely due to two critical misconceptions. Religious broadcasters fail to appreciate the nature of television and the nature of the gospel. This is a critical break with the contemporary critiques of televangelism. Fore

then offers a corrective to religious communication through his production of a “theology of communication.”

In *Mythmakers* (1990), Fore further demonstrates how televangelists do not understand the nature of the Christian gospel. Another significant contribution of this work is its investigation of how the church uses television. Throughout this investigation, Fore represents a clear knowledge of contemporary media research, particularly highlighting a uses and gratifications orientation. However, he also represents a cultural orientation in his discussion of cultural mythmaking.

Perhaps the major critique of Fore is that he is highly critical of television in general, to the point of suggesting it has a “demonic nature.” (1988) This general disdain for television undermines his work. Fore’s greatest strength is highlighting the need to perform such inquiry from a position that is educated in both disciplines.

One of the most theologically informed critiques of religious broadcasting that was published after the televangelism boom of the 1980’s is Robert Jenson’s *Essays in Theology of Culture*. (1995) Jenson is clearly skeptical of the use of mass media in the work of the church. However, he states that the contemporary social context requires it. As such he works to create a prescriptive paradigm to define how it should be used.

In doing so he points out a number of characteristics of media that are at odds with the gospel of Jesus Christ. First, media are produced by *political* choices with related biases and goals. For Jenson the bias and goal of media are succinctly summed up in the term “mass.” Jenson views this quantitative focus as inconsistent with Christ’s work. Secondly, media connect individuals to a “common center” but not to each other. Media produce “masses” not communities. Thirdly, media tend to reduce communication to transmissible information.

The gospel, however, requires more than transmission across and through *space* because it requires touch, which occurs only through the absence of space. Touch is necessary to create availability and vulnerability, necessary elements of the gospel.

These authors are a representative sample of a small group of 20th century, mostly liberal theologians, who realized in order for theology to be relevant it had to answer questions about contemporary culture and society. This perspective would have a significant effect on both liberal and conservative theology and lead to an increase in the field. However, there was, particularly in the early works, a prevalent suspicion of technology and innovation in general.

Evangelical Practitioners

Another significant collection of media and religion texts is the body of literature that is produced by religious media practitioners. These texts generally serve as an apologetic, and often a justification, of the use of media to fulfill religious ends. As such they generally represent examples of Hoover's "rally" orientation. These texts generally serve as reference guides or "how to" texts, with aspiring religious broadcasters or media producers as the intended audience.

The foundational text in this body of literature is Ben Armstrong's *The Electric Church*. (1979) It serves as a defense not only of televangelism, but also of what Armstrong coined the "electric church," the community of believers and newly converted that form the audience of Christian broadcasting. Armstrong elevates this group through a positive comparison with the first century church. The argument that pervades the text is the belief that not only can religious broadcasting communicate the gospel to untold millions and even billions, but it also has the potential to revive Christianity. This argument is illustrative of the tendency for evangelicals to embrace contemporary technology while feeling a clear nostalgia for the "better days" of the

past. This book is perhaps the most optimistic text relative to the question of evangelical use of media.

Phil Cooke, a consultant and proponent of religious broadcasting, is one of the most prolific writers in this field. In *The Last TV Evangelist: Why the Next Generation Couldn't Care Less About Religious Media, and Why it Matters* (2009) Cooke offers an explanation of why religious broadcasting is dying and why it needs to be revived. Cooke paints a pessimistic picture of the new century and the coming decades as period of rapid decline in interest in religious broadcasting. According to Cooke, this will be of ultimate harm to the Christian community and faith. Consequentially, religious broadcasting has to shift and become "all things to all men." Furthermore, Cooke's work serves to highlight evangelicalism's desire to "contextualize" the gospel in such a way as to ensure its relevance to any cultural or social context. These commitments are core characteristics of the 20th and 21st centuries evangelicalism and are key to understanding evangelical use of media.

Cooke's jeremiad also serves to illustrate another fundamental orientation present in religious broadcasting and evangelicalism in general. There is a tendency to believe, based upon eschatological orientations that the world is getting worse. Thus relative to Christian concerns, we are experiencing an obvious cultural declension. This pessimism regarding the present and future is pervasive and continues to serve as a contradictory tension amidst the evangelical embrace of mass communication. Although mass communication can reach billions of people, it often contradicts the inherently conservative orientation of evangelicals that tends to mistrust change.

This tension is highlighted in Brad Herring's *Sound, Lighting & Video: A Resource for Worship*. (2009) In this text Herring lays out some practical steps that are required to initiate and

maintain a “media ministry.” But throughout the text there is an undercurrent of apology and regret. Herring’s basic sentiment is that media must be used by Christians to remain relevant in the contemporary culture. However, he seems to suggest that is an unfortunate fact.

Even with the tension present in Cooke and Herring, these texts represent an unfounded optimism about the place of media in the mission of the church. They avoid the broader questions about the impact the media might have on the religious formations. This optimism springs largely from their faith experience. These texts are written by “believers” who passionately assert that the media are gifts from God to extend the church’s mission and presence in the world. A comparison between the present evangelical writers and the liberal theologians from the previous section highlights the reality that evangelicals throughout the second half of the 20th century were far less critical of media use in the church than were their liberal counterparts.²¹

However, starting in the 1990’s the evangelical perspective became more diverse as voices of caution emerged. The rash of scandals that shook the televangelism community in the 1980’s no doubt influenced this development. One representative text, written by a practitioner, is *Wired for Ministry: How the Internet, Visual Media, and Other New Technologies Can Serve Your Church*. (2004) The author, John P. Jewell, is the director of instructional technology and distance education at Dubuque Theological Seminary. As both an academic and a practitioner, he offers a more tempered view of the potential of media within the contemporary church.

The book discusses how to implement modern communication technologies into ministry contexts. However, the tenor is one of caution. He highlights the pitfalls of technology, and encourages religious practitioners to realize unchecked media will become intrusive and take on an unmerited messianic role. The main focus of his inquiry is whether or not media can

²¹ This is particularly interesting because evangelicals at this time tended to be more critical of media in general.

effectively produce community. Unlike Armstrong's passionate "yes", Jewell offers a solemn "no."

1980's – 1990's Televangelism

It is likely that religious broadcast received more attention in the 1980's than in any other decade. The scandals that surrounded Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggert and Oral Roberts created a significant media focus. It also spawned a number of academic works that sought to investigate the phenomenon. These books were published from the late 1980's into the early 1990's. They generally share an explicitly critical view of televangelism.

Pray TV: Televangelism in America was written by an Irish scholar, Steve Bruce (1990). Bruce had published a handful of books investigating contemporary Christian trends in both Ireland and America. Although much of the mass media discourse represents Bruce's position as an outsider to the field, he seeks to explore the complexities and nuances of television that bring to bear significant impact on the effectiveness of televangelism. In doing so he effectively uses such mass communication theoretical orientations as third person effects, selective exposure and uses and gratifications without actually ever referencing the existence of such theories.

Ultimately, Bruce claims that televangelism is not effective at fulfilling its goals, and probably cannot be due to the very nature of television. Through long-term repetition, television validates and endorses previously held beliefs. Televangelism is not successful because its ostensible purpose is to produce converts to the Christian faith. This orientation, that televangelism is merely "preaching to choir," became the most prevalent critique of religious broadcasting during this time.

A similar work, *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (1986), by Razelle Frankl, frames the "preaching to choir" critique in a more nuanced manner. She focuses on the

effect of “revivalism” particularly within the American social context. She spends due time discussing the influence of notable American evangelists Charles Finney, Dwight Moody and Billy Sunday. Her discussion is significant in situating religious broadcasting in an historical context, something that is often missing in the literature. She focuses this inquiry through the lens of the social construct of “revivalism.” She explicitly differentiates between “religious revivals” and “revivalism.” Revivalism represents the anxiety that began to be felt by Christians in the 19th century relative to the perceived secularization of American culture. In response to this anxiety, professional “evangelists” emerged to offer hope and optimism. Perhaps the greatest significance of this development for a study on religion and media is the reality that these professionals employed techniques and schemes in order to effectively quiet the prevailing anxiety felt by the faithful. Frankl asserts televangelists must be viewed through this lens.

Quentin Schultze contributed to the discussion of televangelism with *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (1991). Schultze, a professor at Calvin College, is writing from a conservative evangelical perspective and laments the negative influence televangelism has brought and continues to introduce into the American church. Schultze suggests televangelism is not only a key contributor to production of the evangelical identity but is likely the most powerful one of second half of the 20th century. One of Schultze’s focuses, present in some of the above texts, is his investigation of how televangelism serves to transform Christianity from a religion of spiritual concern to a business of financial concerns. He also investigates how televangelism serves to transform Christianity from a historic faith into a realm of transient popular sentiments. Particularly, he points to the rise of an “expansionary-minded” commitment that emphasizes numeric success in terms of viewers/congregants and money.

Schultze ultimately suggests that television cannot be ignored by evangelicals but they must work to investigate how it might be “redeemed.” This represents a significant response to media from evangelical scholarship (as opposed to evangelical practitioners). There is a general sense that media have watered down the Christian experience. However, media are a key part of culture, and culture must be engaged in order to bring redemption.

Schultze is an important figure in this field due to his status as one of the leading evangelical scholars. He certainly overstates the direct influence televangelism has had on the church, thus representing an outdated dualistic paradigm, but he also brings in cultural concerns and orientation that are not found in much of the above work. It is further noteworthy to highlight that Schultze has continued to gravitate toward a more cultural orientation in his subsequent work.

As the three previous authors focused on the economic implications of the televangelism phenomenon, Jeffrey Hadden and Anson Shupe focus on the political implications in their text *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God's Side* (1988). Hadden and Shupe offer a detailed depiction of the power struggle that occurred within the televangelism community during the controversy-filled later years of the 1980's. Shupe and Hadden depict televangelists as power hungry competitors, fighting for market share, as well as savvy politicians.

Televangelists are trained in a political arena and can slip into the formal and national political arena with relative ease. But beyond the representation of the televangelists themselves as political animals, the authors identify the politicizing process that gave rise to the “religious right.” Not only were the televangelists moving towards a more politically centered identity so also was their audience. Encouraged by the conservative rhetoric of the Reagan administration and energized by the Christian political rhetoric of televangelists, the term “evangelical” took on

an acutely political connotation by the turn of the century. The authors highlight this trend in the 1980's even while many media outlets were largely dismissive of the political credibility of the evangelical community. Another key contribution of this text is the author's clear distinction between fundamentalism and evangelicalism.

In *Religious Television: The American Experience* (1984) Peter Horsfield points out that religious broadcasting, once dominated by mainline denominations, had by the 1970's become dominated by evangelical and fundamentalist denominations. This is perhaps the most significant historical development of religious broadcasting and serves as the frame of his research. Evangelicals had not only taken control of religious broadcasting, they also had taken control of the religious landscape in general. Another key development was Horsfield's observation that religious broadcasting had contributed to religion's loss of cultural hegemony. Although many would suggest the opposite is true, Horsfield suggests whereas religion once offered answers to the significant questions of life, television has usurped that position. And although religious broadcasting is a part of television, he concludes that the answers religious broadcasting offers are more influenced by the ethos of television than that of religion and they do not represent traditional orthodox Christianity.

Finally, he suggests that television is more consistent with the theological position of evangelical Christianity than mainline orientations. Early mainline broadcasts were characterized by a general moral position, which, because network broadcasters used them to meet public service requirements, had to be free of the flair and controversy associated with later evangelical broadcasts. This approach proved to be fatal to mainline broadcasts. Christianity, Horsfield asserts, is a religion of specific revelation, not general morality.

Horsfield also provides important historical context to his study by considering the shift in American Protestantism that provided evangelicals with greater power. He frames this shift as an expression of the cultural ethos of the 1960's, which favored diversity and challenged traditional values. Mainline churches were the established Christian voice in American society, and they did very little to conform to social changes of this period. Evangelical churches, on the other hand, due largely to the desire to be "culturally relevant," were constantly being influenced by the cultural shifts. Evangelical worshippers wore stylish clothing and sang contemporary Christian music.

However, there was another key aspect to these cultural shifts which worked to propel evangelicalism into the fore of the American religious landscape. The turmoil of the 1960's produced a great deal of anxiety amongst the American public. Horsfield points out that it was the evangelical church that offered the clear and definitive answers that much of America desired. The evangelical message of "salvation" resonated with Americans more than the nebulous moral message propagated by the mainline denominations. Thus by the mid-1970's evangelicalism, which had always been a part of American Christianity, had moved from the margins of the American religious experience into the center. Religious broadcast, he argues, played a key role in that move. Horsfield methodology represents a unique blend of the social scientific approach, which was dominant in America at the time, and a theological and pastoral sensitivity. His work helps frame this dissertation due to its emphasis on the social and cultural condition of evangelicalism in America. A robust analysis of religious broadcasting is simply impossible without this emphasis.

Religion in Media

There was a marked shift of focus in religion and media studies starting in the early 1990's. Televangelism had experienced a significant blow to its credibility due to the multiple public scandals of the 1980's and yet there was clear momentum in the field of religion and media born out of the televangelism boom. Much of that momentum was placed into researching the presence of religious iconography and ideology in popular media artifacts. One motivation behind many of these studies was a response to claims of secularization that had been common in the academy for a generation. As if to answer the social marginalization, scholars of faith sought to identify the noteworthy presence of religious symbols present in the media. Another key, and generally more explicit, motivation was to give people of faith a framework in which they could "engage culture." This is important because there tends to be a general suspicion of media amongst conservative communities, like American evangelicals. These texts, often written by evangelicals, encouraged a model of engagement and discretion.

Although the texts are generally successful in their objectives, it ultimately proved to be a somewhat shallow pursuit and was relatively short lived. The scholarship initially operated from the artificial paradigm of the dualistic relationship between religion and media. Religion was clearly conceptualized as a sacred concern while media were viewed as a secular reality, the focus of the study being the influence of the sacred on the secular. However, as more and more texts were published the paradigm began to slowly fall apart. How many religious influences need to be present before it becomes clear there is no line of distinction? By the end of the 1990's the contradiction was becoming apparent and scholars began to shift away from the dualistic paradigm, but still there remained a residual effect.

Three texts that began to demonstrate the subtle shift away from the dualistic frames are William Romanowski's *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* (2005) Craig Detweiller's *Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (2003) and David Dark's *Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, the Simpsons and other Pop Culture Icons* (2002). These works argued against the prevailing sentiment, which viewed media and popular culture as largely secular enterprises, isolated from the religious sphere. Romanowski, Detweiller and Dark highlighted numerous examples demonstrating how western media are highly influenced by religious, specifically Christian, imagery, themes and ideology. Furthermore, they all offered prescriptive measures for people of faith seeking to engage culture. This was a critical step in the development of the field of media and religion, particularly from the religious view, because it began to blur the line of demarcation between religion and media.

These works represent a key development towards a more cultural understanding of the relationship between media and religion. Indeed, it can be argued that even as media scholars were beginning to take a more obviously culturalist approach in the field of religion and media so also religious writers, motivated by their desire to engage culture, were having much the same impact. Thus, by the turn of the century a clear shift had taken place. Literature which articulated a clear ontological distinction between religion and media had become the minority voice.

The Field Shifts: Culturalist Orientations

The following three texts serve as foundational examples of the culturalist orientation being applied to the study of religion and media. These three books do not essentialize either religion or media. As such they are able to avoid "media effects" conclusions. Media and

religion are contemporary cultural elements that serve as sites of negotiation, operating to allow people a greater sense of meaning and identity.

At the height of the televangelism boom Stewart Hoover wrote *Mass Media and Religion* (1988). The study is similar to the majority of religion and media texts published at this time due to its focus of study, televangelism. However, it distinguishes itself from the other texts through its orientation. Hoover eschewed the dominant paradigm that essentialized religious experience and conceptualized media as an external phenomenon that forced itself into the religious sphere. Instead Hoover focused on “religious consciousness” a construct that sought to highlight the socially constructed elements of religious experience. For Hoover religion was not primarily a set of theological propositions but rather a site for the ongoing construction of meaning. Borrowing from contemporary anthropological and sociological literature, Hoover characterized the contemporary American religious landscape as a marketplace of religion filled with self-styled symbols and ever changing practices. Thus, televangelism was not a media driven interloper corrupting authentic religious expression but rather a recent religious expression that simply served to continue the ever-evolving identity of American religion. Furthermore, this book was one of the earliest publications to emphasize the need to study religious media from a “ritualistic” orientation. It is difficult to identify just how much of an influence this work has had on the field, but it has been significant. As David Morgan writes about this text, “the implications for the study of religion and media have been enormous.” (2008 p.6) Likewise, the influence of Hoover’s work on the framing of this dissertation is significant.

In *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: from the Media to Mediations* (1993) Jesus Martin-Barbero introduced the concept of “mediation” into the religion and media field. In doing so Barbero also challenged the prevailing scholarship by redefining the role media play.

For Barbero media are not merely conduits that carry religious content, or religious symbols, but rather media are sites of religious experience where people of faith work to produce religious meaning.

Not only does Martin-Barbero further the field of religion and media research, he also makes contribution to the broader field of cultural studies. He challenged prevailing ideas of the role of media in the construction of consciousness and identity by introducing a potentially liberating outcome. Relying heavily upon Latin American liberation theology, Martin-Barbero argues that media can serve as sites of construction of communal consciousness that can ultimately serve to liberate the community. He further argues that this potential inherent in media can bring about a “resacralization” to the postmodern society that was secularized during modernity. By using liberation theology, a theological movement heavily influenced by Marxist thought, Martin-Barbero serves to unite cultural studies and theological inquiry in a way that was not visible prior to his work. In doing so, he implied the field of religion and media need not be dualistically constructed, but rather there are powerful lines of intersection and overlap between theological and cultural inquiry that can serve to unify the field and bring about more fruitful research.

Gods of Televangelism (1993) by Janice Peck differs from the previous two texts by focusing on televangelism. However, in doing so the work serves as a model for the field in that it demonstrate scholars can ask the broader cultural questions while investigating specific aspects of religious broadcasting. In other words as cultural approaches decentered the concept of religion away from traditional religious authority, they tended to investigate nontraditional representations of religion. Peck’s text demonstrates it is possible to represent the decentered and broader view of religion while continuing to investigate traditional manifestations.

She accomplishes this by employing Geertz's concept of religion as a location of meaning construction through the pervasive use of sacred symbols. For Peck, televangelism becomes a sacred symbol system that allows for audiences to produce a meaningful everyday experience. She offers a review of the televangelism literature of the 1980's and rightly criticizes scholarship, which dismisses religious broadcasting as either overrated in cultural importance or manifestly manipulative. She, on the other hand, refuses to easily dismiss or marginalize religious broadcasting, instead demonstrating its cultural importance by analyzing two specific forms and personalities. She analyzes the "country preacher" approach of Jimmy Swaggert and the "religious broadcaster" approach of Pat Robertson.

Another key aspect to Peck's work is her commitment to locating televangelism within then burgeoning community of American evangelicalism. She references a number of religious scholars who highlight the necessity of crisis in the development of a religious movement and goes on to highlight the twentieth century crises, which produced the evangelical community. Televangelism for Peck is a primary source of the evangelical response during the later decades of the twentieth century. Televangelism, through the rhetoric of personalities like Swaggert and Robertson, articulated the felt threats ostensibly facing traditional American mores and offered the responses that galvanized the evangelical community.

Representation and Meaning

Another significant focus of research done in the field of religion and media can be called "representational" research. These texts provide an important perspective on the relationship of media and religion that suggests media are not merely "conduits" by which religious content is distributed. Rather, media artifacts serve as critical symbolic inventories that are used by individuals and communities to produce and negotiate meaning. This body of work can be

thought of as an update of the “religion in media” literature described above. It recognizes religious themes in mainline media, but furthers the discussion by suggesting not only do religious themes and symbols appear in mainstream media, the mainstream media can in fact be thought of in *religious* frames. In other words this literature shifts the focus away from identifying the religious *content* in media to identifying the religious *nature* of media. This is a significant shift because it produces a more conceptually broad definition of religion. Furthermore, the current body of work corrects a prevailing notion present in much research which views media and material artifacts as eroding the authentic religious experience. This correction rejects the easy dualism, which separates spiritual and physical meanings while generally elevating the spiritual to a superior position, thus marginalizing the experience of the physical, material and mediated. The current body of literature recognizes the spiritual / religious realm is accessed, apprehended, and often produced through material and mediated artifacts. This is not only a significant development in the field of religion and media research, it is also a critical step in how we understand cultural activity.

One of the earliest examples of this approach to the field is *Channels of Belief: Religion and American Commercial Television* edited by John P. Ferre. (1990) Although the text was written during the height of televangelism, and indeed some of the contributors wrote specifically about televangelism, the text does not focus on religious broadcast but commercial broadcast. This is a significant shift because it opens the conceptual frames of the field of religion and media. It is an important sign of the field “growing up.”

The first two chapters can serve to highlight some of the key contributions of this text. The first chapter, written by Quentin Schultze, is entitled “Television as Sacred Text.” In this chapter Schultze argues television narratives serve the same function for the broad society that

religious narratives serve in religious communities: they provide the myths through which society interprets reality. This orientation rejects easy distinctions between sacred and secular articulations of media. Perhaps *MASH* is every bit as *religious* as the *700 Club*.

Schultze suggests three myths, all theologically infused, that are perpetuated through the narrative of popular commercial broadcast, which work to produce sacred meaning for the viewers. The first is that good always triumphs over evil. The second myth is evil exists only in the hearts of a few evil people. And finally, godliness exists in the good and effective actions of good people. There is a sacred, but also secular, and more to the point, mundane aspect to each of these myths. That is the dynamic of religion and media. Media cannot allow religion to remain in the rarefied air of the sacred for too long. Thus, religion comes to be defined heavily by the immanent expressions of religious thought.

This dynamic, of immanence and the corresponding transcendence, is picked up by Horace Newcomb in the second chapter, "Religion on Television." Newcomb contributes to the manner in which religion is defined within the context of media studies when he suggests the whole "sweep" of television must be investigated. Religion, he argues, is not something that can be easily dropped in and then simply removed from the television landscape.

He does not only identify religious elements of immensely popular shows, but he furthers the investigation by seeking to analyze those elements. In other words, Newcomb is not satisfied with the realization of religion on television; he also asks *how* religion is represented on television. The answer resides in what he characterizes as a "push and pull" dynamic of transcendence and immanence. He offers an episode of "Magnum P.I.," in which the titular character undergoes an afterlife experience, as illustration. Newcomb points out the obvious religious themes of such a narrative and then highlights the fact that Magnum does not leave his

ordinary context of friends, enemies and Hawaiian beaches throughout this experience. When television offers a religious narrative it does so within the familiar context. In other words, television highlights the immanent aspects of religion. Television, driven largely by its desire for large audiences, creates a religious experience which does not force the audience to move far from the familiar. Although Newcomb was investigating commercial television, his conclusions can have significant impact on the analysis of religious television as well.

In Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture (2004)

Heather Hendershot focuses on media produced and consumed within the evangelical community. She goes to some lengths to argue for a working understanding of the term “evangelical.” Although her definition falls short of other far more nuanced and helpful descriptions, it does produce a picture that does not marginalize or stereotype the group. She presents evangelicals as an adaptive community, shifting with the ever-changing modern marketplace. This perspective suggests religious commitments do not fade away in the face of the growth of secularization; they adapt and change. She articulates a model that represents the secular and sacred as being in constant dialectical relationship with one another, serving to inform and produce meaning for both.

Within this model Hendershot challenges the notion that evangelical media have become more secular. Instead she argues they have become more “ambiguous.” No longer do evangelical media necessarily espouse clear messages bent on proselytizing. Rather, citing examples such as *VeggieTales*, some of the media evangelicals are currently producing promote a more “ecumenical belief in God.” She concludes that it is best to recognize the great diversity, in terms of the explicit representation of a “saving message”, present in the media produced by

evangelicals. This approach will prove useful in a contemporary examination of religious broadcasting.

The rise of “ambiguous” evangelical media is for Hendershot evidence of how evangelicals have been changed by the quickly changing media landscape. However, she rejects the notion this is a negative evaluation. Instead she simply highlights that in their drive to engage culture, evangelicals have been changed by the culture.

One challenge to Hendershot’s work is the manner in which she deals with the “sacred” and “secular.” Even as she takes pains to represent them in dialectical relationship, she repeatedly makes mention of how the “secular” sphere has influenced the evangelical community. In making her main point, that evangelicals are influenced by culture, Hendershot overestimates the distinction between sacred and secular spheres. This is an inconsistency in her work. Evangelicals are not outside the “secular” sphere; they play the same role as everyone else in its production and consumption.

Understanding Evangelical Media: The Changing Face of Christian Communication (2008) is another text that considers evangelical use of media and how the use serves as representation of their faith. Edited by Quentin Schultze and Robert Woods, the text differs from *Shaking the World for Jesus* in that most of the authors are themselves evangelicals. This provides a unique opportunity to view how 21st century evangelical scholars understand the manner in which their *tribe* represents their faith through mediated forms.

One of the driving themes of the text is the production of *tribes* and associated *tribal* media. Evangelicals, it is argued, operate tribally to produce and negotiate meaning. This constructivist sentiment represents a clear shift in evangelical orientation, as does much of the

text. There is a clear sentiment of self-critique throughout the text, which presents many evangelical scholars are suspicious and skeptical of evangelical use of media.

Schultze identifies a key drive for evangelical use of media when he writes, “evangelicals occasionally emphasize persuasion as *the* purpose of Christian media.” (2008, p. 27) He follows that quote by asserting the significance of the Great Commission to the understanding of media use. “Evangelicals bias toward persuasive communication might partly come from Jesus’ Great Commission.” (2008, *ibid.*) Although these quotes actually understate the influence, they do point to what is the most significant characteristic of evangelical communication.

One of the most telling articles is written by Kathy Bruner and looks at evangelical use of television. Bruner suggests the reasons behind this use include: fulfillment of the Great Commission; teaching and discipline; calming believers in turbulent times; and providing family friendly fare. She also believes evangelicals need to change their business model in order to attract younger viewers if they are to be successful in the future. This is a common critique of evangelical television, which has been used for the past thirty years. However, her final comment reflects the development of another perspective. “The goal remains the same as ever, to develop creative, meaningful and entertaining programming that embodies the truth and beauty of the gospel.” (2008, p. 57) This represents a subtle but significant shift. It does not move away from proselytizing and persuasive driven media production, but it does expand the potential of producing media that are perhaps not primarily driven by such a narrow transmissional view of the gospel.

This representational approach can also be seen in literature focusing on a particular medium, an example of this is *Small Screen Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*, edited by Diane Winston (2009). She suggests the combination of such 21st century cultural events as

the rise of the Religious Right, the presidency of George W. Bush and the deployment of “political Islam” produced a high degree of anxiety in both religious and irreligious individuals and groups. These anxieties had an acutely “religious” feel to them and as such were played out on national mainstream television.

Shows like *24*, *Lost*, *House* and *West Wing* engaged fundamentally religious questions in various ways. Questions such as can torture be ethically employed in pursuit of the better good, is there life after death and if so how do we access it, and what role does God play in science and politics were all played out in overt ways in these shows and obviously have very clear religious roots. Thus television, which is presented as the most pervasive of American media, takes on a religious function, offering a symbolic inventory with which people (whether they consider themselves religious or not) will work out religious concerns and meaning.

Winston thus claims shows like these and others are in fact “religious texts.” Although she recognizes the incredulity of many responses to this claim, she defends it by suggesting “watching television is a link in the chain of sacred storytelling, a latter-day version of Western traditions, such as hearing scriptures, “reading” stained glass windows, or absorbing a Passion Play.” Winston contends “social concerns, cultural conundrums, and metaphysical questions” are at the same time the building blocks of religious speculation as well as the key components of contemporary television. Thus television turns “the big picture into small stories that allow audiences to see growth over time.”

Perhaps the most significant claim Winston makes in the introduction is furthering John Hartley’s claim that television serves as the “secularization of the medieval Catholic Church” because it is the key contemporary provider of identity, community and instruction. The obvious error in Hartley’s statement was the emphasis of the “secularization.” This is simply too

simplistic of a response. Television for Winston is the contemporary site of the negotiation of these key cultural constructs but it is not a particularly *secular* site. These are inherently religious issues, whether they are played out fundamentally in formally ecclesiastical settings or in more informal contemporary media. In response to Hartley's claim Winston's introduction seems to be suggesting the 21st century has brought about a "sacralization of 20th century television."

Winston and the contributors also are fundamentally operating from a perspective which views religious experience in the frames of "lived religion." In other words, religion is not an isolated "Sunday experience," but rather it is an overall orientation, which serves to offer motivation and meaning to symbols. This is clearly a move toward a "cultural" response to religion. Religion is not for most people something that is turned off when the television is turned on. Thus, it erroneous to assume television is not religious. Millions of extremely religious individuals watch hours of televisions every day. When Hall's notion of the autonomy of decoding is considered, the religious nature of television becomes clear.

Although a number of articles are due careful consideration I will reserve my comments to the initial chapter, written by S. Elizabeth Bird. "True Believers and Atheists Need Not Apply" discussed the short-lived television drama *Revelation*, based on the final book of the Bible. Although it seems clear producers anticipated a sizeable audience comprised largely of the evangelical community, the show quickly failed. The reason seems to be related to the evangelicals' and fundamentalists' response. Although the show was clearly and overtly "religious," it was not clearly or overtly consistent with fundamentalist and evangelical interpretation of the book of Revelation. This chapter points out that while television is clearly religious, it is a religious vision that is seen by many as counter to their dogmatic beliefs.

Mainstream media, like broadcast television, tends to marginalize the extreme ends of the religious continuum. Television is religious; thus it offends the atheists. But it is not dogmatic; thus it offends the conservative believer. It seems that as long as media are religious, they will offend someone.

The Cultural Orientation Becomes More Fully Realized

By the late 1990's it became clear to many researchers that the questions of media and religion were fundamentally *cultural* ones. The field was changing from the study of the relationship between media and religion to the study of the contemporary culture and its use and construction of the institutions of media and religion. One text that serves as a portent of what was to come was the *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (1997) edited by Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby. The volume includes contributions from a number of authors who would become seminal in this new direction. Lynn Scholfield Clark, Clifford Christians, Jesus Martin-Barbero, Gregor Goethals, Peter Horsfield, Chris Arthur are all contributors to this volume who would later contribute further to this shift. They are also contributors who come from a relatively wide spectrum of disciplines. It is not only the fields of religion and media that are represented in this group, but experts in sociology, culture and ritual are present as well. The opening sentences of the book provide a succinct overview of the shift.

This book intends to link theories of media, theories of religion, and theories of culture into a more coherent whole. By such a triangulation of theories, we want to readdress the simpler, two-sided relationships between *religion and media*, *media and culture*, and *culture and religion* that up to now have characterized both theory and research. The thought here is that media, religion and culture should be thought of as an interrelated web within society. This volume

represents a first step in the direction of this more complex understanding of these phenomena. (Hoover, 1997, p. 1)

Clearly, the editors of this volume suggest that this shift was motivated and intentional. This text serves as a watershed moment in the development of religion and media research. For many in the field it was no longer enough to talk about how media influenced religion or how religion influences media. It was a significant cultural concern, and within that context media and religion could not be conceptualized as independent constructs. The text begins by justifying the new direction through highlighting the shortcomings of a number of related fields.

The editors argue that media scholars have generally failed to see the significance of cultural questions and, when they began to recognize those issues, they continued to be blind to the significance of religion in the relationship. Likewise, sociology scholars had missed opportunities to seriously report on the significance of religion. When they began to correct that oversight, they still missed the significance of media. This is a highly significant and clearly broad criticism that is being articulated. One glaring oversight of the text itself, however, is the omission of theological scholarship. Media scholarship clearly has a history of ignoring religious and cultural dynamics. Sociology clearly has a history of ignoring religious and media dynamics. But so also does theology have a history of ignoring sociological, cultural and media dynamics.

The editors of the text praise Carey for his contribution to the project. However, they argue his notion of “ritual” is primarily metaphoric, and they seek to transcend his position and use of the term.

We would argue for a move beyond Carey toward a new metaphor that has another implication: Media consumption is rooted in human ontological

imagination and practice, and media may therefore play a quasi-religious role in everyday life. The categories of ritual must acknowledge this broader scope.

(Hoover, 1997, p.7)

This frames the key contribution of the text. The field of religion and media should not be limited to investigation of how often religion is discussed in media or how media is used in religion. It needs to focus on the space in which meaning is constructed through ritual. This of course includes *religious* meaning. However, the editors are quick to point out that they reject an “essentialism” that would suggest media “constitute” religion. This allows for religion to be studied as an authentic social experience that is not merely a contingent phenomenon.

The text further justifies the shift it seeks to initiate by highlighting some of shortcomings of the work that had been completed in the area of religion and the media. The editors state that these studies can generally be categorized either as administrative studies, which have “assumed an instrumentalist media theory” and concerned themselves with formal religious institutions or studies that “contemplate relations between media and religion in terms of an antagonistic dualism.” These conclusions are critical to the current study because they represent the foundational critiques of instrumentalist framing of media and the dualistic orientation.

Seeing Through the Media: A Religious View of Communications and Cultural Analysis (1992) shares a culturalist orientation with *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture*. However, a fundamental point of distinction is that the author, Michael Warren, is a theologian rather than a media or culture studies scholar. This is significant because theological scholarship is more closed and narrowly defined relative to culture or media studies. Media are, it is believed, at best a peripheral concern. Culturalist scholars, of course, reject such easily established categories. Although theological reflections on the subject are clearly present and immensely insightful, the

majority of research into the relationship of media and religion is performed from the media side of the aisle.

The greatest contribution of this text is the attempt by Warren to infuse Williams' cultural theory into theological endeavors. Although the results of his project are mixed in terms of effectiveness, it is the project itself that offers a distinct heuristic for theological enterprises. Ultimately, Warren finds a potentially ironic resonance between Christian theology and the apparent wholly secular work of Raymond Williams. It is particularly in the call of Christ to his church to resist the marginalizing structures of a society. And in order to do that it must resist the urge to analyze culture through criticism and rather choose the path of culture production and resistance. Warren closes his text with a short discussion of Williams' description, relying heavily on Gramsci, of hegemony. How has the church employed the subtle dominant force of cultural hegemony to capitulate to the dominant cultural paradigm and effectively marginalize large sections of the population? This, for Warren, is a question that must be asked and addressed if true Christianity is to be redeemed. He suggests that it is a culturalist orientation that offers the most fruitful and legitimate response.

These texts represent a considerable rise of literature produced in the field of media and religion written from a culturalist perspective. Another key characteristic of contemporary religion and media research is its pluralistic sensibility. The majority of religion and media research in the 20th century focused exclusively on Christianity. However, the 21st century literature is far more representative of the global experience of religion in terms of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and even civil religion. It is to that 21st century body of work this review now turns.

Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media (2002), edited by Hoover and Lynn Scholfied Clark, frames religion as not only a location of negotiation but also as the process of that negotiation. Religion is not something religious people have; it is something religious people do. Hoover begins the introduction of the text by highlighting how religion and media have generally been viewed as autonomous and competing entities in the research of this field. Although this theoretical position has become clear through the repetition of the sentiment in culturalist texts at the time of publication, it was still quite new. The text is divided into sections representing key trends in the contemporary landscape.

Part One, “Mediation in Popular Religious Practice” highlights the reality that religion, counter to the popular imagination, is a highly *popular* pursuit. It is generally not a top down dictation but far more often a mediation involving the populace. Religion is not only performed in gothic cathedrals or in contemporary mega-churches, it is also performed as chapter 3 suggests on pilgrimages to Graceland.

Part Two, “The Mediation of Religion in the Public Sphere” highlights that religion is becoming more and more a public experience, just as media always have been. This section offers a particular contribution to the field due to its largely historic orientation. Two of the three chapters offer historical overviews of mediated public religious experiences in America in the early and mid 20th century.

Part Three, “Religion Made Public Through Media” furthers this discussion of religion as public enterprise. However, this part is nuanced to focus on the role of media in this transformation. Specifically the two chapters focus on the role of the press in its relationship to Catholics, Evangelicals and Southern Baptists.

Keywords in Religion, Media and Culture (2008) is a volume edited by David Morgan. In the introduction Morgan highlights the secularist sensibilities of early culturalist work. He then offers a few glimpses of how religion began to be seriously considered in some culturalist pockets. However, for Morgan the watershed moment came with Carey's "A Cultural Approach to Communication" (1975).

Morgan highlights that early religious media was produced with a view toward a passive audience. Much of the work was done on whether or not televangelists influence their audience with their message and, if they do, how is it done. For Morgan a key paradigm shift from the transmissional to ritual model is the recognition of humans as moral beings, exhibiting choice, reason, feelings and imagination. And thus, in the midst of oppressive and often coercive institutions people represent a resistance and seek to carve out a space to articulate their own power. Much of this resistance is experienced in and through the mediation of contemporary culture and much of the mediation is experienced within religious space.

Morgan identified fifteen key words and assembled a collection of fifteen scholars (including himself) to address these terms. The list included aesthetics, audiences, community, culture, media, narrative, public, religion, soundscape and text. It is clear that many of these terms were not central or critical to earlier scholarly inquiries. Morgan identifies Hoover's text *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the "Electronic Church"* (1988) as a key text in turning the cultural corner. However, it is not until the end of the century that the turn had gained a fuller sense of awareness and trajectory. Morgan's edited volume serves to offer great definition to that trajectory.

Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader (2012), edited by Gordon Lynch and Jolyon Mitchell with Anna Strhan begins by stating "over the past twenty years there has been an

exponential growth in the academic literature on religion, media and culture.” (2012, p. 1) This text obviously positions itself in the midst of that literature. As the text points out, the literature is certainly in debt to the academic trend, started in the middle of the twentieth century, to consider the “everyday” as a legitimate object of inquiry. This trend influenced the position that religion, no less than other expressions and sources of social identity, is an “everyday” experience that cannot be separated from all the other everyday experiences. Religion is indeed part of the everyday mesh that serves to produce and maintain individual and communal identities.

In some ways this text serves as a benchmark for the current state of study in the field of religion, culture and media. The four parts of the text each represent a key development in the field and conspicuously challenge previous normative practices and perspectives in the field. The text also follows the contemporary trend of considering a wide range of religious experiences.

Part One, “Religion, Spirituality and Consumer Culture,” focuses on the relationship between finances and faith. Although, this relationship has always been present it is, of course, generally perceived with great skepticism if not cynicism and often accompanied by scandals, such as the scandals surrounding late 20th century televangelism. This volume, however, seeks to discuss the financial implications present in the steady rise of public mediated religion. The section starts from the assumption that it is clear mediated religion is in general significantly more expensive than traditional on-site religious services, thus as these new religious experiences are bought and sold religion itself becomes more and more commodified.

Part Two, “Media and the Transformation of Religion,” focuses on the impact of the ever-increasing complex mediated environment on the manner in which religion is experienced

and acted upon. The authors seek to be analytical and tempered in their investigation, in response to the abundance of exaggerated comments others have made. They identify some key potential areas of impact such as the potential for reversing secularization trends, reshaping religious authority, and redefining how religious expressions obtain legitimacy in the public imagination.

Part Three, “The Sacred Sense,” investigates the embodied experiences of contemporary religious experience. The editors rightly assert that although the study of religion has traditionally centered on the foundational sacred texts it now recognizes the significance of everyday objects and expressions in the lives of the religious adherents. This section triggers a critical challenge to the traditional and still commonly held belief that religious devotion and expression is a primarily, if not exclusively, cognitive and interior expression that is divorced from the daily habits and practices of the body and everyday material. Rather the text puts forth the perspective that religion is always a mediated experience, meditated through contemporary electronic media but also always mediated through the physical and material realm.

Part Four, “Religion and the Ethics of Media and Culture,” wrestles with the issue of normative critique of cultural practices and products. This section serves as a response to research that seeks to expressly avoid any normative critiques so as to not only produce more “objective” research but also to “secularize” the field. However, the editors of the current text recognize, in keeping with the culturalist tradition, even though normative critiques are certainly fraught with potential dangers, they are ultimately critical to the scholarly pursuit. The section points to such issues as maintenance of a healthy democracy and society and the production of peace and social justice as key aspects to the media, religion and culture discipline. What is needed are not the hasty and often unbalanced conclusions of the previous normative critiques,

that generally limited both expression and research, but a “critical reflexivity towards assumptions about media sources, the content of media texts, and particular forms of everyday culture that create new possibilities for interpreting and acting in the world around us.” (2008, p. 5)

It is clear the field of religion, media and culture has undergone a shift in focus. It has developed from a more social scientific orientation toward a more holistic cultural approach. This development serves to produce a more fruitful framework for inquiry. It also produces the potential for the field to serve as an example for other fields of study. The current trends in the field of religion, media and culture have the potential to positively impact the individual fields of religious, media and cultural studies by serving to demonstrate the value of embracing a legitimately holistic model.

The Watershed Moment

The final work to be discussed in this literature review is James Carey’s “A Cultural Approach to Communication.” (1975) Significant scholars in the field of religion and media, such as Hoover and Morgan, explicitly point to this essay as the key moment in the production, not only of a new direction for communication and media studies, but also of the field of religion and media. Although some authors, like Hoover, seek to move beyond Carey’s typology, this in no way lessens the recognition of the significance of this work.

Carey begins by acknowledging the influence of John Dewey’s assessment of communication. “Society exists not only by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication.” This quote from Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* (1916) serves as a catalyst for Carey to introduce the two alternative conceptions of communication, which have been present according to Carey since the term “communication”

has entered the vernacular in the 19th century. And thus, Carey begins his discussion of transmissional and ritual communication.

This is a formative essay in the field of religion and media due to Carey's insight that the religious impulse produces a paradigm of experience and meaning. This concept of communication was given life during the age of discovery, an age, which Carey argues, was driven by religious motivations every bit as much, and probably more so, than political or economic forces. The spread of Europeans across Africa, Asia and North and South America produced a mindset viewing this migration, the first great democratic migration, as an effectively religious one. Christians were being transported in order to produce the kingdom of God on earth. This mindset would eventually apply to the movement of the Christian message. Carey was arguing for an approach that rejected the dualistic categories of "religion" and "culture," but rather recognized the inherent religious character of communication.

Communication, whether it is in the form of spoken word, telegraph or computer, is a foundationally *religious* enterprise seeking to *morally* improve the recipients of the transmitted message. Growth, improvement, evolution all occur through the enlightening transmission of morally superior information, which once apprehended will serve as a catalyst for the audience to experience these liberates dynamics. However, before the "word" became sacred, before the need to transmit the "sacred word" over space arose, there was the need for identity, and it was found not in the word but in the relationship. Ritual communication, thus, is linked to the idea of "the possession of a common faith."

The views are both foundationally religious but they derive from markedly distinct religious traditions. The transmissional view derives from a tradition, which emphasizes the sermon and instruction because it understands the highest form of communication is the one that

effectively transmits the sacred word. The ritual view derives from a tradition of emphasizing prayer, chants and ceremony because it understands the highest form of communication is the one that is found in the production of an orderly meaning.

Carey concludes the first part of his essay by applying his taxonomy (Carey asserts it is actually Dewey's taxonomy) to newspapers and the news. It is at this point that Carey's debt to Innis and McLuhan becomes clear. In this conclusion, he compares reading a newspaper to attending a mass or a play. From a ritual view, reading a newspaper is not about gaining information, although that occurs, but about entering a drama, a conflict, and taking a side. News is, according to Carey, not information but "a historic reality," a constructed reality, which transforms the culture from one of tradition and epics to one of newness and originality.

It is in this discussion Carey asserts that the two views of communication do not necessarily deny what the other affirms. In other words, the ritual view does not deny information is being transmitted. It does, however, assert one cannot properly understand the process of information transmission except as cast in the ritualistic orientation. But what is of greatest significance in this dynamic is Carey's assertion, "origins determine endings, and the exact point at which one attempts to unhinge the problem of communication largely determines the path analysis can follow." (1975, p. 22)

Carey starts the second section of this essay by defining communication as "a symbolic process by which reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed." (1975, p. 15) Carey argues, borrowing from the Gospel of John, "in the beginning was the word." "Words are not the names for things, but to steal a line from Kenneth Burke, things are the signs of words." (1975, p. 25) In other words reality does not exist apart from language, with language serving as "a pale refraction." Reality is brought into existence by communication. Reality does not exist

in any “significant detail.” The world is not that ordered. It has certain boundaries and constraints inherent in nature but it falls to people to produce reality. “We first produce the world by symbolic work and then take up the residence in the world we have produced.” (1975, p. 30)

He continues by suggesting symbols have the ability to be representations “of” and “for” reality. Symbols do serve as blueprints of the building as the popular imagination conceives of symbols. But the blueprint also serves as a representation for the house in that it serves as guide and control of the construction of the house. So it is with religious rituals. They not only represent elements of the nature of human life but ritual also “induces the dispositions it pretends merely to portray.”

Thus the communication field, although generally performed in a radically reductionist manner, is not focused on the production of effective speech but rather on the social process and the corresponding production of reality. And the objective of the field should not be of a political or economic nature. Carey laments the fall of communication into a realm of utility and pragmatism, buying and selling, consumption and elections. For Carey the object of communication is not based on efficiency models or effectiveness charts but “to give us a way in which to rebuild a model of and for communication of some restorative value in reshaping our common culture.”

In summary, some reflective comments on Carey’s work will prove helpful to describe how this work influences this dissertation. Communication is a foundationally *religious* enterprise. As Carey writes communication operates within the constraints of nature to produce order, meaning, and reality. This is the purpose of religion as well. Religion operates within the constraints of the divine will, as articulated by the constraints of nature, to produce order,

meaning and reality. The religious origins of the two views of communication represent the intrinsically religious nature of communication. As this literature review demonstrates, religious media have been analyzed from a communication perspective as well as from a religious/theological perspective. Carey's essay demonstrates the reality, these two perspectives are actually and fundamentally one.

As the following chapter will discuss Carey's work will serve as the foundational approach of this study. It is clear, as many have suggested, Carey's work lacks definitive method. But there have been countless studies that have proceeded from his approach. One such study that will serve as a model of my approach is John Durham Peters *Speaking Into the Air* (1999).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The works represented in the previous chapter provide a number of useful strategies for analyzing the landscape of religion and media. They build on one another to produce approaches better suited to represent the key dynamics of the relationship. This dissertation will continue this process by borrowing from a number of these strategies and injecting them with a unique orientation to produce a robust paradigm for critical analysis of the field. Generally, I will seek to combine the theological depth of writers like Fore and Jenson with the culturalist orientation of writers such as Morgan, Lynch and Peck. This “theologically informed culturalist approach”, clearly informed and founded in Carey’s taxonomy, will serve to produce the hermeneutical paradigm of the inquiry. Thus demonstrating the strong potential of a theologically informed cultural approach in the field of media and religion.

This theologically informed cultural approach will reflect the nature and commitment of cultural studies. Cultural studies are a set of approaches, which seek to produce a dialogical response to certain cultural questions. Unlike social scientific approaches, cultural studies do not recognize a particular methodology nor seek specific conclusions. In the words of Clifford Geertz, cultural analysis is an “interpretative science” dealing with “sorting out the structures of signification and determining their ground and import.” (Geertz, 1973, 9) My approach will proceed from the key question of how key assumptions about media and theology held by American evangelicals, and acting as “structures of signification,” serve to reinforce each other

and produce and perpetuate the evangelical religious experience. The relationship of media and theology does not represent a determinist or causal dynamic. Theological assumptions do not directly cause specific media usage just as assumptions about media do not determine specific theological practices or beliefs. Rather the relationship is one of dialectical tension. The assumptions of theology and media, and communication in general, held by certain communities and individuals are constantly acting upon one another as these individuals and communities perpetually seek to produce a meaningful and comprehensive religious experience.

It is too simplistic to ask how media use determines religious behavior or religious thought for the evangelical community. The evangelical community clearly holds theological commitments, which predate electronic media by thousands of years. However, it is equally clear media use has become so pervasive within the community it would be impossible for this use to not have a signifying influence on the production of meaning, specifically religious meaning, for this community. I will seek to identify these key assumptions and demonstrate how they operate to produce the “texts” which are then used by the community as a critical symbolic inventory in the production of meaning and identity. I will produce a theologically informed philosophical argument, which will seek to highlight this dynamic as it has played out in the evangelical community for the past seventy years.

The evangelical experience, like other religious expressions, is a collection of ideas that produce an orderly everyday life for the faithful community. As Geertz claimed, religion is about the production of meaning in the human experience. Religious experience is an expression of the reality that humanity has always searched for more than isolated individual identity. Much of humanity desires to have their identity connected to some transcendent meaning or truth. This

relationship then challenges the individual and society to understand themselves always in relationship to the transcendent.

Religions employ sacred symbols, which are imbued with meaning, to allow for sense to be made out of this quest. The nebulous character of religious (and ethical) commitments like faith, mercy, and righteousness require material frames to give sense to them. Altars, vestments, architecture and liturgy are but a short representative list of the vast array of sacred symbols employed. It is my argument that contemporary media serve as repositories of sacred meaning, and as such serve in the same role as these more traditional sacred symbols. These symbols are used by the faithful to store, engage and perpetually produce meaning.

But media are obviously relatively new symbols, which points to the reality that the evangelical community, like other communities of faith, is always in the process of updating their symbolic inventories. Many Christians seek to touch or view holy relics, which serve as material representation of the presence of God's glory and power on earth. These material relics and icons become *holy* in the experience of the believer due to their unique ability to contain and transmit the glory of God. Such is the case with the technological practices of many evangelicals. Technological material, like television, has been sanctified due to its unique ability to communicate the message of God. Theology and media are not adversaries, battling for the souls of the "faithful." They are inextricably linked partners, working together in communities of faith, often in tension, to produce a meaningful everyday life. Both elements of this relationship will clearly have a formative effect on the faith that is practiced.

Speaking into the Air: Model Text

A significant example that generally informs my approach is *Speaking into the Air* by John Durham Peters (Peters, 1999). Building on Carey's work, the book is an investigation into

the nature of communication. Peters is not writing within the field of religion and media *per se*, but his study of spiritualism, including speaking with the dead, certainly has strong similarities. Furthermore, his philosophical approach makes explicit claims that both media and religion are influential components to the contemporary “idea of communication.” He argues that the western conception of communication, centered on the desire for an idealized “authentic connection,” reflects and perpetuates certain socially held values. For example, the associated objective of overcoming distance and difference invariably privileges conformity and centralized power structures. He challenges the prevailing “idea of communication” in an attempt to reveal the potentially liberating character that resides in more robust conceptions.

According to Peters, communication is concerned with establishing transcendent, not simply imminent, connections. As such communication is essentially religious in nature. “The power of ‘communication’ lies in its ability to expand human interaction across the expanse of space and time; its pathos lies in its transcendence of mortal form.” (Peters, 1999, p. 228) Since the objective of pervasive conceptions of communication is the imminent control of the other, all relationships problems are understood in the reductionist frame of “noise reduction.” “Noise” is anything that causes accessibility to the other to be diminished. Therefore, it also reduces the likelihood of conformity, and must be overcome. This is accomplished through the prevailing pursuit of more efficient and effective communication models, which are generally constructed out of an uncritical commitment to dialogue. Effectively, Peters is arguing that through the idealized form of dialogue, people pursue “authentic connection,” but ultimately unequal power structures are often the product.

This contemporary idea of communication has developed out of the spectacular rise of mass communication and the associated societal power structures. However, Peters rejects a

technologically determinist orientation. “To blame media for distorting dialogue is to misplace pathos.” (Peters, 1999, p. 34) He supports this view by pointing out the “broadcast” application of radio (one way distribution of signal to an audience who can not broadcast a response) was actually not determined by the medium but “was a complex social accomplishment.” (ibid.) Thus Peters suggests the concept of communication is constructed by media usage working in concert with key philosophical assumptions. I will employ a similar paradigm, but expand it to include *theological* assumptions.

Peters challenges the contemporary idealism associated with dialogue by suggesting dissemination, an approach largely dismissed in contemporary contexts as oppressive, can actually serve to be far more liberating than most forms of contemporary dialogue. “Dialogue can be tyrannical and dissemination can be just.” (Peters, 1999, p. 34) He chooses Jesus as the greatest example of liberating dissemination. Jesus, as represented in the Gospels, has a different understanding of love and communication than does Socrates, as portrayed in *Phaedrus*. Peters highlights Jesus’ parable of the sower as the “archparable of dissemination.” In this parable the sower of the seed broadcasts the seed indiscriminately over multiple soils, some allow growth others do not. The parable acts as a “metaphor” describing the manner in which Jesus disseminates his message of the Kingdom of God. He shares the message with a highly diverse audience and thus indiscriminately empowers all hearers to choose. He does not require response from the audience but allows them to space to choose to hear or not. The Platonic dialogues, such as *Phaedrus*, are not given to a diverse group but are “aristocratically selective” in their presentation. Thus Jesus’ use of dissemination offers a more liberating model than the discriminate dialogical model presented in *Phaedrus*. “The parable of the sower celebrates broadcasting as an equitable mode of communication that leaves the harvest of meaning to the

will and capacity of the recipient. The hearer must complete the trajectory of the first casting.”
(Peters, 1999, p. 54)

Peters is not only describing the current state of communication; he is also offering prescriptive measures that will serve as a corrective. He accomplishes this not by merely dismissing the current model, but rather by offering an alternative view that challenges current conventional wisdom. Communication need not be conceived of as an economic utility of exchange, based upon reciprocity. Every message does not require a response. However, this is not the prevailing view of evangelicals. Due largely to their interpretation of the Great Commission, evangelicals generally seek clear audience responses to their messages. In fact, they often explicitly dictate what that response should be. Religious broadcasting is generally an example of dissemination. However, it is also clear that religious broadcasters have often sought to include more dialogical discourse in their broadcasts. As such, there are a number of religious broadcasts that are heavily influenced by dialogical models.¹ However, in either case it tends not to be a liberating form of communication. Thus they break with the model of Christ and operate from a communication model of power.

My approach will be similar to that of Peters. By looking at key historical moments and personalities in the arena of religious broadcasting I will build a philosophically and theologically informed argument that highlights the concept of communication prevalent within religious broadcasting. By examining key historical religious broadcasting “texts” (program styles, political and social activity, uses of new media) I will be able to identify key assumptions that worked to produce the texts. Furthermore, I will identify the key theological presuppositions that feed into this model and thus fortify it. In other words religious broadcasters are compelled by the convergence of their presuppositions of biblical theology and human communication.

¹ One example would be *The 700 Club Interactive*, a companion broadcast of *The 700 Club*.

These two elements produce a web of meaning that sets the agenda for the religious broadcaster even as they reinforce one another.

The Shared Commitment: Biblical Theology and the Culturalist Approach

Although culturalist approaches are the most prevalent approaches currently in the field of religion and media, there is a disconnect between theological and cultural study. Many religious or theological elements are studied from a culturalist hermeneutic, and many cultural elements are studied from a theological one. However, there is a dearth of work that combines these two hermeneutics. This is a significant oversight on the part of these two fields that limits their ability to investigate contemporary culture. My methodology draws from both the theological discipline and cultural studies. I will demonstrate how theology and cultural orientations share a number of foundational convictions, which should serve to overcome the traditional separation. My theologically informed cultural approach will have clear heuristic value and potentially serve as a catalyst for similar works in the future.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 2:36-28

In this text the Apostle Paul is articulating the equality that exists through the work of Christ by highlighting three areas of distinction that cause significant inequality in the society of his day. The Apostle is instructing the Church in Galatia to reject any behavior that leads to the marginalization of Gentiles, slaves and women because this behavior is counter to the work of Christ. It is interesting to note that the three areas the Apostle Paul chooses to stress are race, class and gender. Nearly two thousand years before Marx, Adorno, Gramsci or Hall, the most

significant voice in the formation of Christianity recognized the significance of these three social spheres and the need to overcome the rampant injustice that pervades them.

Culturalist approaches to media studies are consistent with the Apostle Paul's position that society is generally stratified along these lines. Furthermore, due largely to the influence of critical approaches, cultural studies recognizes the value of overcoming such stratification.

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field that draws on the fields of communication, anthropology, political science and economics. Although theology has traditionally not been a part of the list, it is consistent to speak of a *theologically* informed cultural approach.

A framework of analysis that is influenced by theology and cultural studies can be a robust analytical approach to the analysis of any cultural element. However, it will prove to be of particular value in the study of cultural elements that operate in an explicitly religious sphere. Furthermore, including theological discursive elements in a culturalist analysis will be mutually beneficial. A culturalist orientation can serve to offer theology a touchstone for cultural and social application, the lack of which is often lamented in the field. Theology can provide culturalist approaches with a vocabulary and context that frames the production of meaning, especially religious meaning, by communities of faith. As such, it produces grounding for the cultural inquiry.

It is critical to mention at this point that both cultural and theological studies are varied fields, which represent a number of differing interpretative paradigms. This is particularly the case for theology, which a millennium old discipline. As such an established discipline, theology represents a remarkable amount of diverse orientations. It is therefore significant to state that the comments made in this section represent a particular position of theology, and are

by no means universally accepted. However, they are consistent with an established theological hermeneutical paradigm.

The first connection to investigate is the ontological understanding of meaning. In *Myth, Symbol and Culture* (Geertz, 1974), Clifford Geertz contends that the production of meaning is what allows for the human condition. In other words producing meaning is what it means to be *human*. Scripture also represents this as a primary condition. The creation account in Genesis clearly depicts the Creator instilling humanity with the ability to produce meaning and requiring them to use it.

Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

Genesis 2:19,20

Genesis is a second millennium BCE document, which emphasizes Geertz's "primary condition of human experience." Scripture represents humanity as uniquely purposed to produce meaning through made choices. Thus, both culturalist approaches and this theological hermeneutic represent meaning in constructivist frames.

A second general similarity is the prevailing mutual conviction to reject artificial dualistic categories, many of which pervade modern thought. Cultural studies rejects the practice of emphasizing distinctions between "high" and "popular" and "folk" cultures, as well as the evaluative hierarchy that invariably ensue. In the same spirit theology rejects the artificial distinction between sacred and secular cultures and the evaluative hierarchy that follows.

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this life of vanity that God has given you under the sun. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 9:7-9

In this text, Solomon is suggesting that mundane, everyday acts, which are often located within the secular sphere, are central to a religious identity. Eating food and drinking wine are not marginal activities to be dismissed as “secular.” They are profoundly significant activities that influence the production of identity and faith.

Another example is the rejection of distinction between the production and consumption of culture. Relying heavily upon the foundational work of Antonio Gramsci and furthered by the work of Stuart Hall, cultural studies recognize the process of negotiation, carried out by varying elements of culture, working to produce meaning. Ultimately, cultural studies articulate an ontological outlook that is well represented by Clifford Geertz’s “web of signification.” The focus of study is not on one artificially isolated element, but on the relationships that exist between the elements. Relationships are not merely expressions of established meaning; they are sites of meaning production. Biblical theology, likewise, privileges the relationship. The primary example is the Trinitarian model of God. God is one, in three distinct persons. Although the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are separate persons, their identity is eternally constructed through their inextricable relationships. Before there was anything else, there existed the relationships between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Scripture represents that everything else, all meaning, proceeds out of those foundational relationships.

A critical result of this conviction, to focus on the relationship, is the ability to avoid marginalizing any elements of culture. There is a clear tradition present in academic scholarship, the popular imagination and in Christian history of dividing material and non-material or ideal elements of human experience. This process inevitably marginalizes certain material elements of culture and represents them as less significant than many non-material or ideal elements. Cultural studies and biblical theology, however, are committed to articulating the value of material elements of culture. In fact, biblical theology understands any marginalization of the material as heresy.²

A third key commitment shared by a culturalist approach and biblical theology is the representation of humanity as a moral agent produced through the necessary process of choice. Although both culturalist approaches and biblical theology recognize that there are forces able to curtail and restrict human agency, both champion a humanity free of those oppressive forces and seek to produce space in which the liberated humanity will flourish. In other words people have agency and any ontological model that is fundamentally determinist must be rejected.

This simple overview highlights some key points of connection between biblical theology and cultural studies. Biblical theology, from this perspective, and culturalist approaches hold to an ontological model which values the intrinsic “web” of connections between not only people but also elements of the individual such as thought and action. Both understand that meaning and knowledge are produced by the articulation of human agency expressed in “everyday” practices.

With these common commitments in mind, it is clear that it is possible to shape an analytical culturalist methodology that is consistent with this biblical hermeneutic. However,

² This is historical represented in the church’s response to the gnostic heresies, which sought to undervalue the human (material) identity of Christ.

there are very few works that operate from this orientation. This is largely due to the fact that as Morgan claims, “the cultural approach to the study of religious significance of media and mediated practices proceeds without prescriptive assumptions about what religion properly is or how people ought to use or interpret media” (Morgan, 2008, p.3). This statement expresses the limitation of cultural studies in dealing with religious matters, particularly for scholars who self-identify as religious. To commit to a religious orientation is to necessarily produce standard descriptions and prescriptions of religion through ritualistic expressions and explicated dogma. Religion is not an objective experience, but one that is value-laden and seeks a social improvement and liberation. If practices are being performed in the name of religion that marginalize, discriminate or disempower factions of society, judgments should be made to bring these practices to light. Ultimately, both cultural studies and theology seek to articulate an image of the world that energizes, and doesn’t restrict, the human capacity for choice.³

Defining the Categories of Analysis

My analysis of religious broadcasting will look at three different approaches, as represented by three key evangelical personalities and their practices. Although it is clear other broadcasters generally employ the approaches, these three cases are the most notable example of each. These cases do not represent an exhaustive list of approaches to religious broadcasting, but are significantly representative of the religious broadcasting landscape. The three approaches are “camera on the pulpit,” “camera on the couch,” and “camera on the performance.” The three corresponding personalities are Jerry Falwell, M.G. “Pat” Robertson and Joel Osteen.

In addition to the various approaches represented by each of the three cases there are three other related reasons I chose these examples. First, all three can relatively be characterized

³ Biblical theology’s embrace of value-laden pronouncements shares a commitment with Critical hermeneutics, which are, of course, a significant historical and contemporary influence on Cultural Studies.

as being within the evangelical mainstream. This cannot be said of many religious broadcasters. Religious broadcasting is an extremely wide and varied landscape that represents any number of theological backgrounds. Secondly, each personality has received a high degree of notoriety and has established a significant following and sizeable audience. This fact is not significant only because of the influence it potentially produces for each personality, but also because of the influence the audience has on the personality. In other words in having such a large audience Falwell, Robertson and Osteen have all responded to the expectations, interests, and desires of the audience that is largely comprised of evangelical members. Finally, although they all have had their detractors, from within and without the evangelical community, and have experienced minor controversies, none of them has experienced significant scandals similar to those, for example, experienced by the Bakkers or Jimmy Swaggert. Therefore, they have been able to retain a certain degree of credibility within the evangelical community that other religious broadcasters have clearly lost.

“Camera on the pulpit” will focus on investigating Falwell’s broadcast of *The Old Time Gospel Hour (OTGH)*. Falwell began the program in 1956, the same year he founded Thomas Road Baptist Church (TRBC), and only four years after his conversion to Christianity. The show was originally shot in a studio. The only furnishings on the set were a cross and a pulpit. Within a decade, the setting of the program shifted to the sanctuary of TRBC. At this point the *OTGH* effectively became the broadcast of the TRBC Sunday morning service. This would remain the form of *OTGH* for the next half a century, until Falwell’s death in 2007. The designation of “camera on the pulpit” arises from the fact that the centerpiece of the show has always been Falwell preaching from his pulpit.

Outside of TRBC and Liberty University archives, extant copies of *OTGH* broadcasts are rare. Therefore, I was limited in my ability to choose episodes. Currently *OTGH* is broadcast only in the Lynchburg area and features Falwell's son, Jonathan.⁴ However, The Liberty Channel, Liberty University's online streaming network, streams a selection of past broadcasts every morning at 9:00.⁵ The broadcasts are a representative sample of shows from the history of *OTGH* and will represent the preponderance of *OTGH* episodes analyzed.⁶

"Camera on the couch" will focus on Robertson's broadcast *The 700 Club*, one of the longest running television programs in history. It began production in 1966 and continues today. The show is produced every weekday and is broadcast twice a day on the Freeform Network.⁷ There are also a number of older episodes available online. I will analyze both current and older episodes. The show combines news and talk show formats. The designation arises from the couches used on the varying sets over the years.

"Camera on the performance" will focus on Osteen's broadcast of *Joel*. The program is a weekly production broadcast on a number of different networks in the U.S. and internationally. The program is an edited broadcast of Osteen's weekly service at Lakewood Church, the largest church in America. I will analyze current episodes as well as older ones available online. The designation arises from the religious broadcasting development of presenting a much more immersive performance based program.

⁴ Upon Falwell's death his son became pastor of TRBC.

⁵ As of fall 2015 the Liberty Channel is no longer available.

⁶ I also found a couple of used VHS copies of *OTGH* broadcasts from the 1980's online.

⁷ Freeform was previously ABC Family. As part of the sale of the Family Channel, originally Christian Broadcasting Network, there is a stipulation that *The 700 Club* will be broadcast on the network daily for perpetuity.

Analytical Approach

As relationships are critical to the production of meaning, my analytical framework will provide contextual framing that will highlight the interplay of key influences. This will include a brief history of the programs as well as some comments about audience size and reception. These discussions will emphasize how historical and institutional forces profoundly impact the process of meaning production. Once a contextual foundation is in place, I will proceed to perform a close textual analysis of each of the three programs.

Most of the scholarship that has focused on religious broadcasting, or televangelism, as it is often called, has been based in a rhetorical analysis of the content of the broadcasts, which is essentially the spoken message of the broadcasters. I will expand the framework to include analysis of other symbolic inventories used in the making of religious meaning. The first set of symbols I will analyze are the televisual elements such as camera placement and movement, lighting, shot framing, editing, title sequences and set design. The use of these symbols locates religious broadcasting in the cultural sphere of mainstream media, and produces their credibility as *broadcasters*. The second set of symbols I will analyze are “sacred” symbols, which include crosses, pulpits, the religious vernacular and church sanctuaries. The use of these symbols locates religious broadcasters in the rarified sacred realm, and establishes their religious and spiritual credibility. I will analyze how religious broadcasters co-opt and possibly reformulate these symbols. The analysis will identify what established meanings are perpetuated and what new meanings are constructed within the unique religious broadcasting context.

Another point of inquiry is the relationships religious broadcasting has to the mainstream culture and to ecclesiastical communities. Religious broadcasting has produced a unique cultural expression that employs rules and conventions from distinct social spheres. As such it serves as

a point of intersection. A careful analysis of the manner in which these codes are used will offer insight into the quality and character of the relationships religious broadcasting has with the mainstream cultural and ecclesiastical community.

CHAPTER 4

CAMERA ON THE PULPIT

John 1:5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Jerry Falwell is often cited as the premier figure in religious broadcasting in the mid- to-late twentieth century. More than Jim and Tammy Baker, Jimmy Swaggart, or a host of other “televangelists,” Falwell intensified not only evangelical religion, but evangelical politics and cultural engagement as well. He spearheaded the production of a media driven evangelical community, which started with radio and television but has spread to almost every conceivable form of mediated communication. In fact, he is credited with coining the term “electric church” in a 1968 *Wall Street Journal* article. (Wall Street Journal, 1968)

His use of media provided him with a significant position of influence in the mid- to-late twentieth century American evangelical community. “He (Falwell) was the major cobbler and distributor of the hybrid religious and political rhetorics that enabled hitherto unallied and inactive white conservative Protestants to see themselves as a singular political and moral force.” (Harding, 2000, p.24) Unlike his religious broadcasting contemporaries, many of whom were becoming no more than religious caricatures through their sexual and financial excess, Falwell was fueling a social movement, which unified millions of Americans under a common banner. In doing so he became not only a formidable presence in American evangelicalism but in the American cultural landscape as well. As a head of this controversial movement, he became a public figure who elicited extreme responses from the American public. “Jerry Falwell was the most visible American evangelical of the twentieth century, and perhaps the most hated.” (Smillie, 2008, p.10)

Overview of Chapter

This chapter focuses on his “media theology,” his sense of what electronic media could, even must, do to save nations as well as souls. His approach to “media theology,” which I will call “camera on the pulpit,” focused on the unparalleled power of television to reach the world. In a 2003 interview with the Archives of American Television Jerry Falwell stated, “TV has been from its inception the most powerful medium for getting a message out. And I think it forever shall be.” (Carolton, 2003) Television was a gift from God.

The first section of this chapter examines in greater detail his attraction to, and use of, television. I will investigate the relationship between some of the foundational characteristics of mid-to-late twentieth century television and his religious and cultural strategies through the lens of key communication theories. The second section will consider the connection between his media approach and the Old Testament prophetic tradition. This tradition, in which stark dualities – of religion, personal morality, politics and more – are central, clearly played a formative role in Falwell’s ministry.

The third section is a detailed investigation of “camera on the pulpit.” This section will include a descriptive analysis of the television production of the *Old Time Gospel Hour* (OTGH), Falwell’s flagship program, and an examination of some of the rhetorical strategies represented on OTGH. In this section, I focus on a few key texts, but also draw together the theological implications of his various practices, including more commentary on the implications of the television programs, the expanding media programming, and his political roles. This section will also include an analysis of how his rhetoric served as a severely divisive weapon that served to produce and perpetuate a “cultural war.” The section concludes with a discussion of Falwell’s

attempts to respond to the secular culture he so abhorred. The final section of the chapter is a response to these media strategies.

Falwell: The Making of a Prophet for America's Holy War

There is no doubt that Jerry Falwell despised much of television. In his estimation, it shouldered a significant amount of the blame for America's moral decline. Falwell considered television personalities as predominantly immoral reprobates, singling out particularly immoral culprits such as Phil Donahue and Ellen "Degenerate." (*OTGH*, 1992) But if television could be used for ill, it could also be used for good. It could be used to reestablish the moral foundation of the American church and society.

Of the many benefits of using television, two seemed to stand out for Falwell. Television, in his estimation, was the perfect platform for the unequivocal pronouncement of God's word and for the waging of a subversive cultural war against the enemies of God. "Camera on the pulpit" was constructed to accomplish both of those objectives. Have a message, point the camera, speak into the lens and thousands of people will hear and believe. It was this simple and authoritative strategy that fueled *The Old Time Gospel Hour* and Falwell's rhetoric in general. It was the transmission of straight-forward propositions that were designed, not to encourage reflection, but articulate division and elicit action.

This style of communication was a benchmark of twentieth century evangelicals and had a profound impact on their conception of the gospel. As Harding writes, the gospel for evangelicals is framed as a speech act. The more explicit and clear the speech is the more effective it will be. (Harding, 2003) Thus preaching, with its expository and explicit character, is the centerpiece of evangelical worship.¹ And *television* preaching became an ideal. It ostensibly

¹ While liturgy, with its more experiential and less defined character, is largely absent.

provided the communicator of the gospel a stage to transmit this explicit and clear message without the potential confusion introduced in face-to-face communication. As long as the audience can talk back, the effectiveness of the gospel is diminished.

This view of television perceives none of the negotiation that is present in ritual conceptions of communication.² Television is a global megaphone that would do nothing more than amplify the pronouncement of a propositional truth and make clear the distinction between good and bad. Capitalists and communists, whites and blacks, men and women, Republicans and Democrats, heterosexual and homosexual, Christians and non-Christians were all key distinctions that drove Falwell's messages.³ But perhaps the most critical line of distinction was the one between sender and receiver. If this line were blurred chaos would ensue.

Ultimately, it was Falwell's objective epistemology that made these distinctions necessary and television attractive. Truth is a matter of knowledge. It is something that is learned, understood and transmitted from sender to receiver. It is not constructed in relationships or formed through experience.⁴ Dialogue and community are not critical; proclamation is. Therefore, the one who possess the truth must transmit it, so others might know it. The title of one of Falwell's books succinctly expresses his communication model: *Listen America!* (Falwell, 1980)⁵

² For many evangelicals, these communication elements are to be avoided because they create the possibility of misrepresenting the "truth."

³ Falwell's soteriology demonstrates how critical these lines were. In a 1974 broadcast, he made clear he understood salvation as a punctual experience. Salvation, "is not a gradual process it is instantaneous..." (*OTGH*, 1974) In other words the issue of whether or not a person was a believer (an "in" member) or an unbeliever (an "out" member) was never in question, not even for a moment.

⁴ This ensures that heresy does not flourish.

⁵ Falwell's televised sermons were formed on this model as they were usually comprised of 5-10 related propositions that would appear on screen as he introduced them verbally. In a 1993 broadcast Falwell spoke about how to persevere in your ministry, in your work, in your marriage, in your church, in your faith, in your relationships, and in your home. (*OTGH*, 1993) Thus television allowed him the specificity to dictate his narrow vision of his audience in terms of how they believe, act, and live.

Falwell's model of cultural engagement was a subversive cultural war fought from within the social institutions he sought to overcome. He waged a war against contemporary media and celebrities on television as a television personality. Television made his confrontation with the culture more dramatic and effective. It also provided him cultural capital and social access. It brought him into every home in America, but it did not require him to leave the sanctity of his Lynchburg headquarters or Thomas Road Baptist Church. Television allowed him to engage culture while still retaining a sense of separation, to be "in the culture but not of it."⁶ Television was the perfect solution to the evangelical conundrum of reaching the sinful world without being corrupted by its sinfulness.

In April of 1977, as a celebration of Founder's Day, Thomas Road Baptist (TRBC), published a booklet entitled "Jerry Falwell, a Man in the People Business." This booklet traced the biblical history of great leaders. It started with Adam and discussed how "man was needed to propagate and subdue" the world. It then discussed Moses and John the Baptist and their roles as prophets of the Lord. It then took a significant thematic turn and discussed the contributions Abraham Lincoln and George Washington made in ensuring and perpetuating the specifically Christian character of America. However, in more recent years, America had left the true faith.

Through the years as our nation turned from the "Faith of our Fathers," God sent faithful men to bring her to her knees in repentance... Today, when our nation, has reached the height of modern civilization and the depth of depravity, dangerously balancing on the brink of moral and spiritual destruction, God has again provided a man to meet the need and challenge the hour. That man is Jerry Falwell. To God be the glory for sending him to us.

⁶ To be "in and not of" the world is one of the most critical standards for American evangelicals.

Falwell believed himself to be an heir to the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, as exemplified in the rhetoric of Isaiah, Nehemiah and perhaps most significantly Jeremiah. The prophets were called and sent by God to proclaim, his word so that his people might hear it, and in hearing they might believe. To be a prophet of God was to speak and act with his authority and divine approval. In a 1996 interview with *Christianity Today* Falwell stated, “God has called me to be a voice crying in the wilderness.”⁷ (Kennedy, 1996)

The biblical narrative represents prophets as social outcasts who lived outside the prevailing social and cultural conventions. They were unpopular voices because their message was predominantly one of judgment and condemnation against Israel. Marginalized, separated from others and maligned, they stood in the gap between God and his people. The more powerfully and unambiguously they spoke God’s word the more they were persecuted and the more God blessed them.

Of all the Old Testament prophets Jeremiah perhaps best serves as a model for Falwell’s mission. Jeremiah, known as the weeping prophet, was called by God to warn Jerusalem of its coming demise. The Babylonian conquest and subsequent captivity of Judah are framed in the Old Testament as signs of God’s sovereignty and power, and Jeremiah was given the unenviable task of announcing this imminent event to the people of Judah. “And when the people ask, ‘Why has the Lord our God done all this to us?’ you will tell them, ‘As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your own land, so now you will serve foreigners in a land not your own.’” (Jeremiah 5:19) The Lord, knowing the prophet would be abused for his words, gave Jeremiah a powerful promise. “They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 1:19) If Jeremiah could stand

⁷ This is a biblical phrase used to describe the prophetic mission of John the Baptist.

strong in the midst of persecution and criticism it would be *proof* of God's presences and blessing with him.

Two week after Bill Clinton's inauguration, Falwell produced an *OTGH* special called *America Declares War on God*. (*OTGH*, 1993) During the production he stated, "we (America) are heading toward a secular state and we are going to be under the wrath of God very soon." (*OTGH*, 1993) Evidence of America's war against God, he claimed, had been pervasive for decades, and had culminated in the election of Bill Clinton.⁸ Now God was judging America. According to this jeremiad, AIDS was God's instrument of judgment. (*OTGH*, 1993) These types of pronouncements would certainly elicit criticism, but Falwell relished the criticism he received because it was proof that he was being faithful. He was a self-proclaimed outsider who was called by God to speak truth in a world filled with lies.

Falwell increased his rhetorical strength, within the evangelical community, by using television to frame himself as a prophet. The mass audience television served to legitimize his prophetic claims. Furthermore, the notoriety, and subsequent criticism, that he received from television allowed him to seamlessly slide into the historical prophetic narrative. During a 1982 broadcast while recounting how critical the mainstream media were of him, a common refrain of his messages, he read a text from Jeremiah even though it had nothing to do with the sermon topic. He then claimed that, "If Jeremiah were around today he would be branded as a member of the radical religious right and the national media would have a field day with him." (*OTGH*, 1982.) In 1981 he stated, "Every morning I wake up there is some new story about me. They

⁸ Falwell was well known for repeating stump sermons during his "America Back to God," "I Love America," and "Clean Up America" crusades, which spanned the first half of the 1980's. Just as God had judged Israel for their idolatry and immorality he was now judging America. At the peak of his popularity he preached the same message 10-20 times a week.

(media) are like crocodiles, gnats, piranhas.”(*OTGH*, 1981)⁹ In another sermon he began by “boasting about his accomplishments and his family and then reading from the Book of Nehemiah.” (Harding, 2000, p. 157) Nehemiah was chosen because he was the prophet God called to lead Israel out of exile and return to Jerusalem. Falwell, an exile in this sinful land, was called to work to return America to its former glory. “God has called me to mobilize, inform and inspire the evangelical church in America.” (Kennedy, 1996)¹⁰

We have a monumental task ahead of us....but this country is on the upswing...we could see the greatest harvest of souls in church history. Before the trumpet sounds and the church is called away before the great tribulation I will have lived to see hundreds of millions of people swept into the Kingdom of God...There is no other reason for our existence. None other. (Harding, 2000, p. 160)

In prophetic tradition Falwell believed he had to explicitly underscore who was to blame for the fall of. “It is time to speak harsh language...And you should not be afraid to make people mad. You don’t change things if you don’t make people mad.” (Harding, 2000). Within the Old Testament prophetic narrative, the Israelites were the children of light and everyone else were

⁹ Although he was most assuredly attacked by many, some of his musings on his supposed persecution bordered on the ridiculous and smacked of paranoia. In 1985, while being interviewed by a *Newsweek* correspondent, he complained about the choice of photographs *Life* had chosen to run in a recent story about him. The photograph they had published showed Falwell on a riding mower running down a security guard at his home. Although this was an ostensibly playful act Falwell felt as though it cast him in a very negative light and that *Life* was attacking him through this choice. What makes the episode almost absurd is that moments later Falwell and Wally McNamee, the correspondent, drove into the parking lot of TRBC and to McNamee’s astonishment Falwell “playfully” drove down a defenseless security guard who was watching the parking lot. (Young, 1982)

¹⁰ The sermon centered on a scattered list of social ills that ostensibly illustrated America’s rebellion. During this refrain he claimed homosexuals have no right to enjoy minority status and that he believed AIDS is “God’s judgment against America for endorsing immorality (speaking of homosexuality) and even embracing it.” (Harding, 2000)

servants of darkness. The notion of “in-group” and “out-groups” was a critical element to the prophetic speech model and Falwell’s rhetoric.

As Carey suggests, transmissional communication is the transmission of messages through space for the purpose of gaining power. It is hard to imagine a communicative model that better expresses this ethos than does the prophetic speech model. Prophets were media-conduits that simply carried and transported the word from point A-God-to point B-the people. The message was not to change, and the meaning was not to be negotiated. By performing this strict transmission of messages the prophets sought to enact God’s authority over Israel and by extension their own. Falwell leveraged his prophetic role into significant rhetorical authority that allowed him considerable influence over the evangelical corporate identity.

Religions can survive and thrive in pluralistic, modern society by situating themselves in subcultures that offer morally orienting collective identities which provide the adherents meaning and belonging...Epistemological and moral relativism leave everyone in the same condition – deprived of absolute foundations-and tend to highlight commonality. But the belief in having come to understand the ultimate Truth necessarily creates distinction between those who know and believe and those who do not...Its (the evangelical identity) strength results from the combination of its socially constructed cultural distinction vis-à-vis a vigorous sociocultural engagement with pluralistic modernity. (Smith, 1998, p. 127)

But the success of the plan was dependent upon his audience expressing and enacting the distinctions he articulated. He had to ensure they followed his lead. In an interview given shortly before his death he suggested that although people generally thought of him as a “preacher” he

considered himself a “teacher.” (Carolton, 2003.) He made the distinction presumably based on the notion that “teachers” do more than merely proclaim the word. They *instruct* the audience. In a 1981 broadcast of *Old Time Gospel Hour* Falwell stated that followers of Christ had to be “*indoctrinated* in biblical truth.” (*OTGH*, 1981) (Emphasis added.) During the thousands of sermons he delivered, Falwell would indoctrinate his audience in the proper way to go about doing everyday tasks such as speaking, dressing or being a husband/father or wife/mother.¹¹

Camera on the Pulpit

The image of the pulpit is chosen to illustrate this model because it is the *traditional* site of disseminating the word. Throughout church history, the pulpit has been one of the most symbolically rich fixtures of the Christian church. It is a literal and figurative barrier that separates the one proclaiming and teaching the word from those hearing and being taught, the greater the size and elevation of the pulpit the greater the authority of the one who stands behind it. By featuring such a traditional symbol in his progressive/televised approach, he was able to mitigate the potentially corrupting force of progress while entrenching his rhetoric in a clearly traditional site.

Weekly broadcasts of *Old Time Gospel Hour* highlighted Falwell behind his immense, elevated and traditional pulpit. From this position he would enact his prophetic authoritative persona, fighting for a return to traditional values, not only in the limited context of the *TRBC* community, but also in the ostensibly unlimited audience of *OTGH*. The barrier allowed him to make his explicit pronouncements unencumbered by interruptions and dialogue. The pulpit at *TRBC* was a centrally located transmitter, which would broadcast his message in ever-expanding concentric circles until the world was reached with his messages.

¹¹ At the height of his ministry he claimed he preached more than ten times a week.

The use of the pulpit allowed Falwell to increase his strength by perpetuating his traditionalist persona. This is particularly noteworthy because he was able to do this using the *progressive* medium of television. One way he accomplished this was through his awkward television presence. He lacked the flare that many of his televangelist contemporaries employed. He would fidget with his suit coat and repeatedly look at the clock in the back of the sanctuary. Some even questioned how could a speaker whose “oratory offered nothing to excite or inspire his audience” produce such a loyal following? (Young, 1982, p. 212) However, it was exactly this lack of flamboyance that reinforced Falwell’s credibility. His rough edges, as caught on television, served to highlight that he was not a “star” or a celebrity but just a “down-home,” simple Baptist minister proclaiming the explicit message of God.

Old Time Gospel Hour: A General Overview

The use of media had always been a significant component to Falwell’s plan. “It was always, from the moment I was converted through a radio broadcast, an intent of mine to use the media.” (Carolton, 2003) *Old Time Gospel Hour* saw that intent become reality. The broadcast was a relatively simple enterprise but that was part of its message. The name of the broadcast, *Old Time Gospel Hour*, served to represent and produce the prevailing ethos of the broadcast.¹² Falwell was proclaiming an “old-fashioned” and unchanging message. In the AAT interview Falwell discussed how he was always looking for new ways to proclaim the “old” message. “The ways we distribute the message changes; but the message never does.” (Carolton, 2003)

OTGH had a remarkable fifty-year broadcast life that spanned the second half of the twentieth century.¹³ At the peak of its popularity, it attracted 1.5 million weekly viewers.¹⁴ The

¹² The name was an homage to Charles Fuller’s *Old Fashioned Revival Hour*, a radio broadcast that had a significant influence on Falwell’s spiritual birth.

¹³ Under Falwell’s regime the program ran from 1956 until his death in 2007.

development of *OTGH* consisted of Falwell employing the most basic television techniques of the day. This was likely a combination of financial limitations and intended ethos. A cutting edge production would have proven inconsistent to the theme and narrative of the program. But a complete lack of innovation would be unfaithful to Christ's call to "go." In other words, to not use television was to reject the gift of God and be faithless to his call. To be *too* innovative was to succumb to the temptations of the world. It was in this tension that *OTGH* was produced.

For the majority of its history, *OTGH* was recorded during Falwell's Sunday morning services at *TRBC*. It is hard to exaggerate the significance of this move. Falwell, the defender of traditional Christianity, who was highly suspicious of progress and media, brought television cameras into the most sacred space of Christianity, the church sanctuary. This demonstrated his strong belief that media were the most powerful tools for communicating the gospel to people. The broadcasts contained music and prayer, but the centerpiece, approximately 25 minutes of the half hour broadcast, was Falwell's sermon. The early broadcasts employed a simple camera located in the center of the back of the church. The camera would frame the pulpit, and the message was broadcast with very little camera movement. Through the years the production of *OTGH* became more complex. Cameras were placed in the balcony and the aisles. A crane was even placed in the sanctuary aisle and a production suite was built in the rafters of the church building. The broadcast came to include live switching, zooms, and more advanced titles.

The set of *OTGH* was the traditional Baptist interior of *TRBC*. Backed by the choir, in choral robes, with assistant ministers seated on either side, Falwell delivered his message from his large, centrally located and elevated pulpit. The pulpit was clearly the most pronounced

¹⁴ The 1.5 million viewers is according to Arbitron. The size of the audience was often challenged and significantly inflated by Falwell and his staff. He would often claim that there were upwards of 20 million viewers. An aide once claimed 50 million. Obviously, these numbers were never substantiated. (Smilie, 2008, p. 103)

piece of the set and served to establish Falwell as the central authority of the church and the broadcast.

The broadcast began with the *OTGH* title sequence.¹⁵ The titles appeared in a script that clearly was meant to evoke a Victorian idealism and bygone moral epoch. The sequence was constituted by a series of old black and white photographs representing the rise of Falwell's ministry. The pictures depicted a steady growth from older, smaller and temporary buildings to the contemporary glory of Liberty University and TRBC. Intercut with these titles and images were sermon clips of Falwell stating how there are "no limits with God."

From the opening shots of the program, the title sequence served to establish Falwell's authority. First, it illustrated with great clarity that God had blessed every enterprise he had ever initiated because it was part of God's will. What Falwell had achieved was "miraculous" and only God could have orchestrated it all. Second, the title sequence placed the broadcast in a traditional setting. Even though it was obviously a contemporary broadcast using modern technology, the titles established a critical traditional ethos. In the midst of the sinful modern world *OTGH* provided an opportunity to look back to a time when things were as they were supposed to be; an age when people feared God and lived upright moral lives. This nostalgic message of an idealized past would surface in almost every sermon he preached and was central to this theological commitment.

The broadcast would generally open with special music. A 1981 broadcast began with the Thomas Road Choir, always dressed in traditional choir robes, singing "I Surrender," a

¹⁵ There were a number of different title sequences through the programs' run. By the late twentieth century the it had settled into a common form.

traditional Baptist hymn.¹⁶ Following the choral number a music group from Liberty University, Voice of Liberty, performed another traditional piece.¹⁷

Whether the first segment was singing, or praying, or some political/social pre-produced segment, all of these elements served to set up the centrality of the transmitted word and the sermon. The sermon would begin with an establishing shot of the front of the sanctuary framing Falwell's position in the pulpit. Once he had assumed this position of rhetorical power the broadcast would settle into a pattern of switches between shots that is typical for a three to six camera shoot. The most prevalent shot during the sermon was always a medium shot of Falwell, taken from the centrally located camera. This shot would allow his audience to get as close to him as the broadcast allowed. There were never close-ups of Falwell. These would have likely undermined his authority by drawing the audience into an equal position. The audience always looked *up* to him. These shot selections clearly established Falwell as the center of the broadcast while representing the power of the "pulpit."

As the sermon developed other camera shots would be employed as cutaways serving to create a more dynamic broadcast. These shots generally included a long shot of the front of the sanctuary, from both the left and right sides, shot from cameras in the balcony. These shots included the pulpit and Falwell at the front of the frame, assistant ministers seated on either side of the pulpit (below and behind Falwell) and the choir. These shots served to perpetuate the "church identity" of the broadcast. This was not just a television show; this was a church service. It wasn't rehearsed. It was authentic and real. The shots also perpetuated the

¹⁶ The use of hymns was a significant symbol during the later decades of the twentieth century. During this period the conservative Protestant church was undergoing an identity crisis in terms of the music used in worship services. Churches and ministries could identify themselves as "contemporary" or "traditional" by simply choosing to use praise choruses or hymns, respectively. *TRBC* always used hymns

¹⁷ The use of Liberty students is significant because not only does it serve as an advertisement for Liberty University it also serves as another advertisement for Jerry Falwell as the approved servant of God.

authoritative position of Falwell. No one else was standing in the position of power and the long shots highlighted Falwell's centrality and elevated position relative to the pastoral staff and congregation.

The other most prevalent use of cutaways involved shots of the congregation. These shots served to highlight the *pastoral* position of Falwell. Every couple of minutes members of the congregation were shown during these quick cutaways intently listening and watching him. These cutaways were usually two-shots, often showing couples or families sitting together. Some of the shots showed members of the congregation following along and taking notes or underlining passages in their Bibles. The majority of these shots represented a high degree of intentionality and commitment on the part of the congregation.

The development of these series of cutaways served to define Falwell's audience while connecting Falwell with both his congregation and the Word of God. The fact that the majority of the cutaways either represented individuals looking at Falwell or the Bible created a representational bridge between these two subjects. He was being cast as a representative of the Bible. He was speaking the word of God as clearly as when it was read from the pages of the Bible.

These cutaways also served to define not only Falwell's congregation but also his rhetorical audience. The cutaways of the congregation were almost exclusively of middle class white heterosexual Americans.¹⁸ *TRBC*, like most evangelical churches in America, is a highly homogenous community in terms of race and class. Although the cutaways clearly were employed to show the diversity of age and gender present at *TRBC*, they just as clearly revealed the lack of diversity in these other categories. He was speaking his message of truth to a particularly narrow audience. He was talking to white Middle America. This rhetorical

¹⁸ Many of the cutaways framed a man and woman sitting together, ostensibly a husband and wife.

connection between live and television audiences also served to encourage the television audience to mimic the actions of the TRBC congregation. Just as they were intently listening and following Falwell's words, so also should the thousands watching at home.

The conclusion of the sermon was effectively the end of the broadcast. He would formally close the broadcast with a short prayer. In keeping with baptistic practices the prayer often included a petition that God would move in the "hearts of unbelievers" so that they could see the truth of Jesus Christ and believe in him. Although such proselytizing language was rarely the focus of Falwell's sermon, it was often present at the close of the broadcast. This is another representation that, even as Falwell clearly stated and believed the "only purpose" for which he and Christians existed was to "sweep people into the kingdom," he did not invest much airtime in this purpose. But as the show ended it was important to offer unbelievers the option to "come into the kingdom."

Falwell's Media Strategy

OTGH: Rhetorical Narratives

The following section presents a rhetorical analysis of *OTGH* through the decades. In this section I seek to identify key narratives, authored and perpetuated by Falwell, that served to fuel his mission of empowering the American evangelical church. Fundamental amongst these narratives was Falwell's constant emphasis of a world at war.

War

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

2 Timothy 4:7

In 1980 the *OTGH* sent out an official looking document that had the appearance of a government proclamation, complete with the official seal of *OTGH*. The title of the document read, “Declaration of War.” It continued...

“Be it known to all that the Old-Time Gospel hour has hereby declared war against all the evils threatening America in the 1980’s. Furthermore, this shall be a holy war, not fought with guns and bullets, but with the Bible, prayer and Christian involvement. The Old-Time Gospel Hour hereby dedicates itself to spearhead the battle and lead an army of Christian soldiers into the war against evil.” (Young, 1982)

The signature line read, “With a firm mandate from God I fully commit to the Old-Time Gospel Hour ministry in support of this Declaration of War.” It was signed by Jerry Falwell, President. It was this combative characteristic that fueled Falwell’s meteoric rise and served to define the evangelical identity for a generation.

Christianity for Falwell had always been a war, and wars are conceptually simple. Wars are products of distinctions and they perpetuate those distinctions. War makes clear who is good and who is bad and does not tolerate neutrality. It also distinguishes “generals” from “foot soldiers.” Transmissional communication thrives amidst these distinctions. It produces and perpetuates hierarchical paradigms that distinguish speaker from listener, teacher from student, knowledgeable from ignorant. These were battle lines. Once the lines of distinction are foundationally set any number of social markers can be brought to bear to populate the categories. He created hierarchies along the lines of male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, urban and rural, and American and foreigner. As Rob Boston wrote shortly after Falwell’s death, his activism was “all too often based on dividing the public, and demonizing classes of people because of their political beliefs, sexual orientation, or religious or philosophical views.” (Boston, 2007)

One of the last *OTGH* broadcasts that featured Falwell was the last convocation message that he presented at Liberty University shortly before his death. He encouraged the students of Liberty to realize they were being prepared to fight on “the battle field, especially with unpopular ideas, like the exclusivity of Christ.” (*OTGH*, 2004) This quote demonstrates that he not only conceptualized the world in a state of war but also that the war was defined by the church’s position as “unpopular” and counter to the world. In 1992 he once made the connection between the fighting power of the American Army in Kuwait and Iraq and his own broadcasts. (*OTGH*, 1992) The experience of war, both materially and spiritually, was seen as a galvanizing experience that could demonstrate resolve, commitment and strength. Just as George H. Bush used American military force to expel Saddam Hussein’s occupational force in order to liberate the victimized country of Kuwait, so also Falwell and his followers would forcibly remove secularists from the victimized American culture and thus free America.

Although he connected the enemies of the gospel generally with Satan, most of his rhetoric identified personified representatives who were at war with God. He spoke far more about the earthly, institutional enemies of the church than he did about any supernatural force or power. Thus the enemy of his gospel was a collective of all the political and social forces who undermined his vision of a strong Christian America. In an interview with Pat Robertson on the *700 Club* on September 13, 2001, he infamously blamed the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the “pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians...ACLU, People for the American Way” and on anyone else who has tried to “secularize America.” He went so far as to suggest, “It is probably what we deserve.” (*700 Club*, 2001) This comment received great media attention due to its timing, but it was a common refrain of his rhetoric.

During a 1981 broadcast, in which he was encouraging his audience to send their children to Christian schools, Falwell highlighted the battle that was present on the educational landscape between creationists and evolutionists. During this same broadcast he also discussed the social values that were found in “New York, Hollywood and Washington” and how they were corrupting the true values of Middle America. (*OTGH*, 1981) The enemy could be media, politicians, educators, activists, and even urban areas. As the list grew so also did the strength of the lines of distinction.

But perhaps his favorite enemies to attack were Hollywood and liberal politicians. He often spoke of the battle that “Hollywood” waged against the church. Whether it was highlighting the immorality of certain celebrities or stating too many people miss church in order to watch their “programs,” he perpetually constructed a rhetorical space in which the goals of “Hollywood” were at war with those of the church. The church had been put in a position in which they were being forced to fight back.

The church would put Hollywood on its ear. No one would be watching television. We would force Donahue into retirement, where he deserves to be (stop for congregation applause). Soap operas would return to the back rooms of pool halls where they used to be. (*OTGH*, 1992.)¹⁹

Hollywood and liberals were two faces of the same beast. In a January 1993 message Falwell stated that the election of Bill Clinton was a clear sign that America was now fully at odds with God and had in fact openly “declared war on God.” Speaking of the inauguration he stated that, “Hollywood danced in ecstasy at the unleashing of immorality.” (*OTGH*, 1993)

¹⁹ The irony that these words were delivered on television should not escape notice and highlight the inherent tension in much of Falwell’s approach.

The war imagery provided a context of fear in which he attempted to motivate his audience to action through specific threats. In a 1995 broadcast, he was discussing the loss of prayer and pervasive persecution of Christians in the public schools. He then stated, “Christian schools will soon have to hire gay professors. You mark it down.” (*OTGH*, 1995) Once fear allowed an individual to see his or her place within the narrative the next step was to mobilize and motivate that audience to action. This action was dictated to the audience and could take the form of anything from patterns of media consumption, to clothing choices, to educational choices, to how often they are to read the Bible, to who they should vote for in the next presidential election.²⁰

Falwell’s rhetorical vision was one of simple dualistic antagonism. Everything can be easily assigned to one of two categories that constantly war against one another. All creation is divided into the “world” or the “church.” People are either saved (Christians) or lost (non-believers). Politicians are either right (Republicans) or wrong (“*Demoncrats*”). Humans are either meant to lead (men and America) or serve (women and other nationalities). Media either explicitly express the gospel or propagate an anti-Christian, anti-God rhetoric.

Because this cosmic dualism required such strict definition he went to great lengths to explicitly describe key communities. Both sides of the battle were defined in explicit and essentialized terms. Gender and sexual orientation were two key social markers that required essentialized meaning. *OTGH* was a replete with explicit, and clearly marginalizing,

²⁰ But perhaps the most common action required revolved around donating money to one of Falwell’s many ministries. Falwell’s ministries would often seek donations with form letters that highlighted the dire situation at Liberty University or TRBC or *OTGH*. A 1981 letter sent out by *OTGH* encouraged “friends” to donate \$25 “right now” to save the program from going off the air. “It now appears that, after 25 years on broadcasting and televising the Gospel, the Old-Time Gospel Hour may go off the air...It breaks my heart to tell you this. But it is the truth.” (Young, 1982.)

characterization of homosexuals and women as Falwell sought to position them in the lower social margins.

Homosexuals and Women

One of the most prominent threats of this war narrative was the one that ostensibly arose from the homosexual community. One of Falwell's favorite refrains that he used in both speech and print was, "Remember homosexuals don't reproduce. They recruit." (*OTGH*, 1992) This was often associated with his additional warning that "they are after your children and my children." (Young, 1982, p. 52)

The 1992 *OTGH* special production opened with a series of white, heterosexual, conservative Protestant, American male "experts" sharing their dire predictions of the devastating impact AIDS would have on America in the coming decade. Not surprisingly these predictions, and the associated explanations, did not focus on the toll of life felt in the homosexual community but rather the "real threat" that AIDS posed for the heterosexual audience. Through the execution of his war rhetoric, he was able to demonize the homosexual community as the source of this threat. The AIDS epidemic was not an opportunity to offer mercy and compassion to the homosexual community. It was an opportunity to demonstrate the destructive force and threat that they had become to the fabric and wellbeing of American society.

A number of the "experts," including Falwell himself, stated that AIDS is a manifestation of God's judgment on the homosexual community. God is warring against homosexuals and the weapon he is employing is AIDS. True followers of Christ need to take up the battle. But as Falwell had conflated his Christian and national commitments, the message was clear; the

homosexual community was not only an enemy of God they were an enemy of America as well.²¹

Homosexuals were not the only group he used to populate the “outside” margins. Although women served a number of critical roles in the church, God had ordained men alone for leadership. Any attempts to empower women were met not only with criticism but also the scathing sarcasm that he reserved for the most offensive enemies of the gospel. In both *OTGH* broadcasts and print publications, Falwell proclaimed that “feminists hate men,” “what they need is a man in the house,” and “they are the real sexists.” (*OTGH*, 1992) While discussing “persevering in your work” he stated that “the ladies” should not allow the “feminists and abortionists” to persuade them to believe that their place and calling was not in the home. (*OTGH*, 1993.).

Every broadcast of *OTGH* would perpetuate the clear hierarchical lines between men and women. The elevated stage area of *TRBC*, which represented the leadership of the church, was the clear domain of men. The most elevated and central position was the pulpit, which was reserved solely for Falwell. The next concentric circle, several large chairs on either side of the pulpit, was reserved for male assistant pastors. It was not until the cameras broadcast the third and fourth concentric circles, choir and congregation, that the viewing audience was able to see a female presence. The design of *TRBC* and broadcasts of *OTGH* made clear that women were not to occupy positions of power.²²

²² In the 1992 broadcast, he stated that what America needed to see was the return of “strong male leadership.” In the middle of this diatribe he stopped and stated, “that’s right, *male* (emphasis original) leadership, we don’t support the ordination of women. We don’t ordain women.” (*OTGH*, 1992)

America

Falwell believed America enjoyed a special place in God's plan. America was the world leader of justice and freedom. In some ways America was the new "chosen people." Being a true American was another key line of distinction. As the husband lead the family and the clergy lead the church, so America was to lead the globe. "As you know whatever happens in America it pretty soon jumps the Atlantic and the Pacific...And I am convinced that what is happening in America is going to impact the world....and there is no bamboo or iron curtain that can keep God out." (*OTGH*, 1992)

He stated that God had "raised America up" in order to fulfill three specific objectives: "evangelism, global conscience leader and the protection of Israel." (*OTGH*, 1993) In discussing the significance of America's global role he used the seventh chapter of II Chronicles, which recounts the dedication of the Temple of Solomon. In this chapter the chronicler writes that God meets Solomon, king of Israel, and tells him Israel must repent of their sins so that they might commune with him.

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. II Chronicles 7:14

By tying this text into a discussion of the sins of America, Falwell was implicitly tying America's destiny with a status of divine approval. (*OTGH*, 1992) By the early 90's it appeared he believed that true American Christians were failing in their responsibility to delineate themselves from others and America was thus failing in its divine call.²³ As God's first chosen

²³ In *God's Bullies* Perry Young quotes some of the findings of Betty Flint's unpublished thesis, which focused on TRBC. Flint attended over thirty services at TRBC and conducted a number of informal interviews with TRBC members. What she discovered was that the members had a very clear and cohesive narrative of America as a "sin-sick society" that has lost much of its "prestige due to its rebellion against God." (Young, 1982)

people Israel had been tested in the desert; now God's new chosen people were to be tested amidst secularism.

Falwell constructed an idealized "America" that served as the location for his righteous warriors. This America, led by a community of heterosexual Christian men, was a mythic construction of conservative politics and nostalgic longing. It was an amalgamation of cold war anxiety, Christian doctrine and Reagan era conservative politics. It was one that easily conflated the teachings and work of Jesus Christ, which he learned from his mother, with right-wing politics and a strong commitment to the entrepreneurial capitalism, which he learned from his father.

True America could be found in the spaces of "Christian" culture, and were represented by places like Christian schools, churches and universities. That is why it was so important for the audience to be at TRBC every time the doors opened, Sunday morning and evening and Wednesday night, (*OTGH*, 1974), send their children to Christian schools (*OTGH*, 1981) and Liberty University (*OTGH*, 2004), and always avoid social activities such as smoking and alcohol consumption that might tie them to the secular enemy (*OTGH*, 1981).²⁴

In the January 1993 broadcast, Falwell used a *Time* article as support for his war worldview. The article was a forecast of America in the 21st century. The article predicted that America would generally evolve into a more secularized state. This cultural shift would include the erosion of the traditional understanding of family and marriage and precipitate a steady decline in spirituality. Not surprisingly, Falwell was critical of all the predictions. Significant cultural change represented the erosion of traditional values and as such a "line must be drawn in the sand." (*OTGH*, 1993) Although he constantly criticized the cultural status quo in America

²⁴ In a 1981 broadcast Falwell stated "if your pastor tells kids they should avoid drugs but has booze in his fridge he is a hypocrite...Booze is the number one drug." He went on to simply state "Christians should have nothing to do with alcohol." (*OTGH*, 1981)

and called for change, his posture and rhetorical vision was one of entrenchment and defense. Even as he borrowed heavily from the rhetorical vision of redemption and revival, a rhetoric that finds its focus in the *new* life offered in Christ, he also spoke of protecting what America had and working to bring back what it lost. In other words his vision of redemption was the vision of an idealized American past. America had to return to its “original beliefs” (*OTGH*, 1992)²⁵

“Our enemies are wrong if this is where they think America is going...Every home in America can watch this show and we will receive thirty to forty-thousand phone calls today and 90% of them will be positive.” (*OTGH*, 1993) This statement made clear that *OTGH* was a force that was eliciting the proper response from soldiers of the cross.²⁶

Falwell and the Construction of the Shadow Culture

Falwell lived out his battle for America by constructing Christian institutions that could serve as the center of his idealized America. By the 1980’s Falwell had turned the mountain town of Lynchburg, Virginia into a center of Christian industry. In addition to *OTGH*, *TRBC* had grown to 20,000 members, he had founded a K-12 academy and a university, created a number of publications including *The Fundamentalist Journal*, co-founded and led the Moral Majority, and for a time managed PTL (Praise the Lord), the religious broadcasting network that Jim Bakker founded and subsequently lost due to his legal and moral scandals.

Evangelical Christians had been called to bring America back to God by serving as an occupying force in her cultural institutions. For Falwell this did not mean occupying the old

²⁵ An illustration of this false nostalgia was Falwell’s propensity of discussing the Christianity of the founding fathers creating a *Christian* America even though many of the founding fathers were deists who would held theology that was detestable to Falwell.

²⁶ The inconsistency in Falwell’s rhetoric is again noteworthy. When it was convenient to do so he would point out the great amount of criticism his broadcasts and ministry received, but when it was convenient to emphasize support he would likewise do that. It also must be pointed out that while Falwell obviously commented that every home “can” watch his program, relatively few actually watched.

broken secular institutions; it meant creating new Christian organizations that would grow in power and eventually eclipse their secular counterparts. Thus Falwell spent the entirety of his professional life working to produce “Christian” alternatives that would rival the secular institutions that had given the enemies of God cultural hegemony.

The evangelical strategy of cultural engagement was initiated during the middle of the 20th century and sought to move conservative Christians out of the social margins. Evangelicals wanted to start having meaningful influences in all corners of cultural life and in the established social institutions. This strategy did not proceed as intended. The evangelical dualism that was fortified during decades of cultural exclusion was so ingrained in their corporate identity they couldn’t execute the idealized agenda. There existed too much suspicion of the mainstream culture; it was beyond redemption. Therefore, the strategy of “engagement” was reformulated and became the production of the Christian alternative, which returned the conservative community to a philosophical orientation of cultural withdrawal. By the time Falwell had created his Lynchburg empire, the result of the strategy was the production of a “shadow culture.”

Falwell was a preeminent voice that reformulated the “engagement” strategy, into militaristic frames. He was going to *fight* Hollywood with the production of *Christian* television. Although *OTGH* was the most the recognizable example of his media strategy, it was not alone. If the secular media produced a successful children’s television show, Falwell wanted to produce a successful *Christian* children’s television show. “We have a *Christian Sesame Street*...whatever works.” (Carolton, 2003) Falwell also credited Ted Turner, whom despite obvious differences of opinion he considered a friend, with the production of the Liberty Broadcasting Network. Once Turner began to use satellite television to reach the majority of homes in America with his superstation, WTBS, Falwell quickly followed the example, with the

launch of LBN (Liberty Broadcasting Network).²⁷ “We did it to keep up with what’s going on out there.” (Carolton, 2003)²⁸

This strategy had a number of key objectives. It would allow Christians the opportunity to experience safe and family-friendly media content. Not only would this prove beneficial to the viewer watching the broadcast, it would eventually prove beneficial to the American society because every viewer watching Christian media was one less watching secular content. In other words, “the Christian *Sesame Street*” was produced as a weapon in the cultural battle used to battle the secular *Sesame Street*. By gaining viewership, Christian media would also create a great deal of cultural hegemony for conservative Protestants. It is clear that Falwell had great faith in the power of media. Evangelicals were engineering a dramatic cultural comeback and *Christian* media were leading the charge. If people watched secular shows and were thus indoctrinated by the liberal secular agenda, people would watch the *Christian* alternative and be indoctrinated by God’s agenda.

²⁷ It is noteworthy that Falwell didn’t credit Robertson, who had pioneered religious satellite delivery. This is indicative of, not only Falwell’s desire to compare himself to the secular establishment, but also the rivalry and petty animosity that often surfaced within the religious broadcasting community.

²⁸ Today audiences around the world can tune in to the Liberty Channel, not only through satellite television but also through the 24-hour a day Liberty Channel online stream. His legacy of alternative production is clearly represented on the daily LC programming schedule. The morning broadcasts *Faithful Workouts*, a half-hour exercise show that “helps you get your body and your faith in great shape.” After this is a series of animated programs produced for children ages 2-10. These shows include *Flying House*, which “is an animated presentation of the historical events recorded from 4 A.D. to approximately 70 A.D.” (www.liberty.edu/libertychannel/) Later in the morning there is a series of talk shows that largely target women including *Precepts for Life* hosted by Kay Arthur, a well-known Christian author who deals largely with the issues pertinent to Christian women in the 21st century. There is health related reality show in the afternoon called *Your Health*. There is programming for older children in the mid-afternoon and a simulcast of CBN’s (Christian Broadcasting Network) *Newswatch* in the evening. In addition there is late night fare that targets young adults including reality shows like *The Drive*, a reality TV series that documents the journey of a group of young men as they embark on an extended road trip across the United States. Throughout their travels, the young men find opportunities to teach young people about God’s grace. (www.liberty.edu/libertychannel/) There is also the music based show *Revolution*, which features “killer music, razor sharp truth, the back-stories of radical Christian musicians and pro-athletes on a mission beyond their stage,” and the sports show *Planet X*, which features “action sports lifestyle TV show: surf, snow, skate, bike, motorsports and music.” (www.liberty.edu/libertychannel/)

A Critique: A Faulty Cultural Paradigm

This strategy has seen varied success over the past fifty years. Even as it is clear that evangelicals have gained cultural capital through this approach, it is equally clear that the strategy never produced the type of spiritual renewal evangelicals originally desired. Most obviously, television was ultimately not able to produce a global audience for Falwell or the church. The message of religious broadcasting, like all television, must resonate with the audience. As Falwell was fond of saying a television producer has to give the audience what they want. (Carolton, 2003) And non-religious people don't want *religious* broadcasting. As is well documented, unbelievers do not tune in to religious programming with any degree of consistency. (Smilie, 2008) Falwell didn't reach the world. Instead he produced a parochial and galvanized community and social movement.

However, this dynamic was ultimately beneficial for his pursuit of authority.

I came to understand that the capacity of Falwell's rhetoric to expel outsiders such as me, to viscerally define and exclude us, was one aspect of its power.

Unlike witnessing rhetoric, which both constitutes "lost" outsiders and invites them in-indeed, steadily paves the way and prepares a house for them-Falwell's rhetoric brooked no liminal listeners. (Harding, 2000, p. 156)

This binary grouping was extended beyond people to effectively include everything from movies to television to schools. In this regard the binary oppositions of us/them were refocused as sacred/secular. Regardless of the earliest motivations of reaching the lost, Falwell reached national prominence through his mission, not to bring the "them" in, but to fortify the "us."

This reality serves as a response to the "preaching to the choir" critiques of television ministries, which assert religious broadcasting fails because it can't attract unbelievers. It seems

that Falwell, at some level, came to this realization even before the critics because his programs had very little content that targeted the “lost.”²⁹

Old Time Gospel Hour turned out to be a fascinating mix of broadcast ambition and narrowcast sensibilities. Christ commanded the church to “go into all the world.” Falwell, like other religious broadcasters, saw in television the fulfillment of this mission. But it was an overly optimistic evaluation that exaggerated the appeal of religious broadcasting.

Although Falwell never stopped encouraging his congregation to engage the broader culture in order to save people from it, his production of a shadow culture implicitly discouraged such engagement. One wonders just where a believer, who was sending her children to Christian schools, working out to Christian media, watching Christian talk shows, receiving Christian oriented world news, reading Christian literature and attending Christian services at least three times a week, might find an opportunity to engage the broader culture.

Falwell had set out to wage a subversive war within the cultural institutions of the mainstream culture. But his drive for power and division made this subversive approach impossible. Instead of engaging the current culture in a subversive war that would culminate in an America returned to God, he was trying to build a new America founded on an idealized vision of America’s past.³⁰

Although he continued to use the rhetoric of war until his death, the grand war never materialized, culture simply didn’t permit it. The American culture of the second half of the 20th century was too pluralistic to serve as an arena for such a conflict. (This is even more obvious in

²⁹ The critique also potentially misses the fact that contemporary television is characterized by narrowcasting or “preaching to the choir.” Oxygen and Lifetime aren’t criticized for “preaching to the choir” because their audience is predominantly women. ESPN, likewise, isn’t criticized because their audience is comprised of sports fans.

³⁰ Despite his vocal opposition to all things postmodern Falwell was participating in the production of simulacrum, a key component of the postmodern narrative.

the 21st century.) Even though he received significant criticism from elements of the culture, the culture itself lacked the necessary rigidity for a war. The culture didn't war against his productions; it simply subsumed them as a new option. Christian alternatives were produced to be weapons against secular media. But instead the prevailing cultural trends simply turned them into a new genre. What Falwell failed to appreciate was the media landscape of the 21st century does not require a child to stop watching *Sesame Street* if he starts watching *Flying House*.

But religious media did not simply experience the consequences of the contemporary media landscape; they were significant players in its production. By 1980 America's media-saturated society had already begun to show numerous examples of cultural fragmentation. This "fragmentation" is an unsatisfactory label that misrepresents the nature of culture and is more accurately understood as cultural pluralism. Religious media were significant examples of media pluralism during the final decades of the 20th century. In fact, religious broadcasting proved to be an early example of narrowcasting during television's broadcast period. Religious broadcasting helped alter the media landscape, just not in the way Falwell had planned.

Conclusion

As stated, this dissertation seeks to offer a robust critique of religious broadcasting that is informed by theological and cultural orientations. "Camera on the pulpit" represents a shallow understanding of contemporary culture. In addition it fails to fulfill the biblical mandate. Scripture requires that people work to restore broken relationships in order to bring unity and order to a fragmented and chaotic world. Falwell's perpetual reliance upon transmissional communication, indoctrination and the production of a shadow culture only served to further the fragmentation of relationships and remove any hope of restoration. Due to his divisive strategies, Falwell became a purveyor of chaos, seeking to pit one cultural element against

another. Scripture requires people of faith to communicate in such a way as to represent the broadening and unifying mission of Jesus Christ. This mission requires communication that is not characterized by a tyrannical dictation that emphasizes and furthers differences, but by a liberating form that produces space for the listener and promotes unity through the embrace of diversity. Biblical communication requires a model that can be heard by all people and encourages the production of conceptual space to allow the audience to work out how they should be agents of restoration in their own individual context.

CHAPTER 5

CAMERA ON THE COUCH

Jerry Falwell spoke of himself as a prophet and used television to amplify his word. M.G. “Pat” Robertson speaks of himself as a “broadcaster” and has used television to try to make his word more relevant.¹ As a prophet, Falwell projected a commitment that he wouldn’t change for anything or anyone.² As a broadcaster, Robertson operates according to a different set of commitments. He is a television executive constantly analyzing the culture so as to shape his message accordingly. To put it in biblical language Robertson has tried to become “all things to all men.”³

The roles of prophet and broadcaster identify the television strategies and distinct theological orientations held by the individual. Although both orientations hold to the fallen state of the world, the “broadcaster” position perceives the existence of a greater potential for redemption. The “prophet” makes definitive pronouncements from outside the lost world in hopes that some might flee from the world and be saved. The “religious broadcaster” seeks to enter the world in order to redeem, and potentially control it.

Falwell’s “camera on the pulpit” was an example of “televised religion.” In this model television is perceived to be a tool that simply captures and disseminates the religious ritual, ostensibly altering it as little as possible. Robertson’s “camera on the couch,” on the other hand,

¹ Robertson has over the years repeatedly and explicitly stated he is not a “television minister” or “televangelist” but a “religious broadcaster.” (Harrel, 2010)

² As seen in the previous chapter this commitment was not a straightforward proposition. Even though his flagship program *OTGH* remained an example of the prophetic model he certainly experimented with the broadcast model through some of the peripheral programming.

³ This quote originates from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and was quoted by Senior Producer Terry Heaton in relation to the original vision of *The 700 Club*. (Harrel, 2010, p.47)

is an example of what Peck calls “religionized television.”⁴ (Peck, 1998, 116) This approach seeks to modify the religious ritual to fit the prevailing norms of the television industry.

According to Robertson, the biggest mistake religious broadcasters make is they “superimpose their ‘thing’ on the media. They should discover what the media are doing and adapt to the media format.” (Kyle, 2006, p. 254) Robertson believes that “camera on the pulpit” failed to exploit television’s potential because it forced the program to fit into the religious experience.

Proclaiming the gospel from a couch produces a different communication experience than the one produced from a pulpit. Both context and content are altered because the symbolic inventories that are appropriate for “couch discourse” are different from those of “pulpit discourse.” As the symbols and words are altered a new meanings will emerge.

Robertson views television as a gift from God, and this “miraculous” character is defined by its potential to reach mass audiences. In this view a two hundred-member audience isn’t a miracle; a two million-member audience is. During a 1976 fundraising broadcast hosted by Robertson a CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network) staff member gave a “message in tongues,” which Robertson interpreted on air.⁵ “Yea, the miracles that you thought great will be commonplace in your sight...For I will show the world that I am the Lord God Almighty. I have called you to the show the world. I will give you the tools and the skills that you need.” (Harrel, 2010, p. 57) Given the context it is clear that these “tools” were television and “skills” were television production. Robertson has come to believe that this “miraculous” potential of television will only be realized through the use of the most popular television forms. In his estimation he had created “a microphone...that will go around the world.” (Harrel, 2010, p.37)

⁴ “Camera on the couch” derives from the number of couches that have been part of *The 700 Club* sets.

⁵ “Speaking in tongues” is a common ritual amongst charismatic Christians. It often involves one person delivering a message in a “heavenly language” and another interpreting for the congregation.

Several years ago we tried the “all-religious” program schedule, and found that we were reaching a very limited audience. Since we changed the format to include family entertainment with a major religious emphasis the audience increased dramatically. Instead of a few million, we are now reaching 17 million households. I feel it would be better to have a 60-second religious spot in the Super Bowl than to have 10 hours of UHF station that nobody watches. It’s a strategy, but it seems to be working. (Harrel, 2010, p. 44)

It is obvious that both “camera on the pulpit” and “camera on the couch” alter both the television and religious landscapes. But Robertson has been more willing to allow the norms of television to dictate those changes. He fits religion into the contours of television. Unlike the traditional service of *Old Time Gospel Hour*, “Robertson’s relaxed, chatty, weekday show is constructed within a format that has been wholly determined by the television medium with religious content inserted. *The 700 Club* constitutes religion adapted to TV.” (Peck, 1998, p. 5)

This more accommodating strategy has deep theological and social implications. Like Falwell, Robertson’s rhetoric is centered on a representation of an ongoing culture war with the associated critique of the mainstream culture. This creates an obvious tension in Robertson’s overall strategy. He is highly critical of the mainstream culture, even as he embraces many of the forms of that culture. This tension creates a point of inquiry. Can a critic accommodate to the requirements of the object of his criticism and retain a legitimate critique? This chapter will investigate this question from the perspective that the pursuit of broader appeal and larger audiences will necessarily affect the theological commitments of the religious broadcaster.

Overview of Chapter

The first section of this chapter offers an overview of the rise of Robertson's media empire. This main property of this empire was CBN. At its zenith in the 1980's it became the fourth most watched cable network in America. (Peck, 1998) This success was largely based on the popularity of its flagship program, *The 700 Club*. Through its half century run, the show has undergone a number of changes, but the one constant throughout the five decades has been Robertson.⁶ His persona dominates the broadcast and serves to establish the character and authority of the program, even as the program serves to establish his authority within the community.

The next section is an analysis of Robertson's overall media strategy and includes a close reading of *The 700 Club*. Like Falwell, Robertson understands his work as a battle against the secularized culture. But Robertson's war is fought along more nuanced lines of division. He is driven by a strategy of accommodating the message of Christ into the contemporary vernacular. As he executes his strategy, he blurs the lines that divide the foundational dualities of sacred and secular. He accomplishes this by redefining the constructs of sacred and secular by removing and/or reformulating some of the key symbols that have traditionally established the sacred. However, he must also retain significant rhetorical power, which he accomplishes through his relationships on the broadcast.

The final section is a response to Robertson's strategy. It will specifically seek to identify how this strategy has impacted Christianity. By the middle of the 1980's there was a Christian alternative to most every media form, and Robertson was a key producer. This section

⁶ Even during his short visible absence from the show during his presidential run in 1988 he retained executive control.

will identify how such designations are constructed and disseminated and how they serve to produce a sense of Christianity, specifically within the framework of its relationship to culture.

Robertson's accommodating strategy includes reformulating many of the symbolic inventories associated with conservative Christianity, which inevitably leads to the restructuring of theological meaning.⁷ A key point of inquiry in this chapter is whether or not the articulation of a more accommodating media strategy serves to produce a more engaged theological commitment. Has the creation of a Christian television network allowed evangelicals access to the prevailing culture that can be leveraged to produce meaningful discourse or has the result simply been the production of cultural alternatives, which allows them the opportunity to remove themselves from the mainstream culture?

Robertson: The Making of a Religious Media Empire

Through the second half of the 20th century, Robertson substantially influenced the shape of the evangelical community. He achieved this influential authority through the production of the first Christian media empire, which began in 1959. Shortly after graduating from Yale Law School, and reportedly at God's behest, Robertson surrendered his plans for a legal profession and earned a Master's of Divinity at New York Theological Seminary.⁸ One year later, Robertson bought a failing UHF station, WTOV in Portsmouth, Virginia for \$37,000. (Harrel, 2010, p.29) He rebranded the station WYAH, and launched the first religious UHF channel in television history.⁹ After two years of broadcasting as much religious content as he could find,

⁷ In her seminal work *Gods of Televangelism* (1993), Janice Peck argues that Pat Robertson practices an accommodating *theology*. His accommodating practices cannot simply be limited to the broadcast realm.

⁸ It has also been suggested that Robertson had little choice in terms of his legal profession because he was unable to pass the New York state bar exam. (Peck, 1993)

⁹ The new call letters, which are based upon the Tetragrammaton YHWH - the Hebrew name for God - are indicative of Robertson's strategy.

WYAH was attracting small audiences and operating at a \$7000/month deficit.¹⁰ As a last ditch effort to remain viable, Robertson produced and broadcasted a live fundraising telethon. His strategy for meeting production costs was to recruit 700 viewers, a group he referred to as “The 700 Club,” who would agree to donate at least \$10 per month. (Harrel, 2010, p.29)¹¹

Four years later, in 1966, *The 700 Club* began production and was effectively a nightly version of the variety format of the annual telethon with a number of charismatic Christian elements, including “miracles and healings.” (Straub, 1986) This format served as the dominant production format for the show for its first two decades. During that time Robertson followed the examples of other conservative religious media personalities by purchasing time on some of the new cable channels in key markets such as WPIX in New York and KTLA in Los Angeles. By 1974 *The 700 Club* had reached national syndication. By 1976 the show was being broadcast in 100 markets. (Peck, 1993, p. 127)

In 1977, reportedly dissatisfied with reaching only 100 markets, Robertson introduced a basic cable channel, the Christian Broadcasting Network Satellite Service (CBNSS). (Harrel, 2010, p. 42) Not only was it the first 24-hour religious television cable network, it was the first basic cable channel of any kind to be delivered by satellite at its launch.¹² But Robertson’s innovation came at a price. In 1977 there were too few homes, particularly Christian homes, equipped to receive cable television and Robertson was again losing money. Therefore, Robertson created a number of campaigns, including going door-to-door, encouraging Christian families to purchase cable boxes so they could view the new channel.¹³ These campaigns quickly

¹⁰ There was a very limited amount of evangelical television available at this time.

¹¹ This telethon proved successful and has been held every year since.

¹² HBO had pioneered satellite delivery but was, of course, a premium cable channel. To put CBNSS in historical context it preceded MTV by four years and CNN by three.

¹³ This practice of going door-to-door is illustrative of Falwell’s and Robertson’s shared commitment and understanding of their faith. “Visitation” was a common practice amongst conservative churches during the middle

proved fruitful. Within a year Robertson was able to obey God's "command" to buy a 200-acre plot in Virginia Beach and build the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). (Harrel, 2010, p. 40) By the mid 1980's CBN was the fourth largest cable network in the world and operated on an annual budget of nearly a quarter of a billion dollars, 75% of which was raised through annual donations. (Peck, 1998)

It boasted state of the art equipment and facilities. As Gerard Straub, who had spent the previous sixteen years at CBS and subsequently worked for NBC and ABC, wrote, "Beyond a doubt the television studios (at CBN) are the best in the world. Two of the studios are bigger than anything I worked in at all three networks." (Straub, 1986, p.62) Robertson was creating a television network that could compete with anything the secular world offered.

A 24-hour *Christian* network introduced a number of unique challenges. Since there did not exist sufficient "Christian" programming to fill the broadcast schedule, Robertson was faced with a choice of either producing enough Christian programs or purchasing the broadcast rights to existing secular shows. As the former option was cost prohibitive, Robertson sought a middle ground. He produced a number of programs and aired a number of established shows like *Father Knows Best* and *Bonanza* (Harrel, 2010)

Although it seems obvious that finances played a significant role in this decision, Robertson has always claimed it was a philosophically and theologically motivated decision. "We feel that to be a significant factor in the market place it is necessary to draw people to watch and we have also found that wholesome programs, family situation comedies and some of the better programs of past years on television are extremely suitable for family audiences, yet at the same time, the draw tens of thousands viewers to the stations." (Harrel, 2010, p. 39) Robertson

of the 20th century. It involved canvassing a particular neighborhood with tracts and invitations to church. It is highly representative of the transmissional view of communication. Get the word out at all costs.

was forming a *Christian* network that intentionally broadcast a significant amount of secular shows.¹⁴ This was all motivated by the commitment that “You can’t shoot any ducks until they are in range of your guns.” (Harrel, 2010, p. 39) But in gathering his “ducks,” Robertson was redefining what could be considered “religious” or “Christian” broadcasting by blurring preexisting classifications.

This blurring possibly reached a high water mark when he began to feature secular celebrities on *The 700 Club* and advertise the show in *The National Enquirer*. “To reach those people we have to put entertainers on the air whom they identify with...then we can bring them to the Lord.” (Harrel, 2010, p. 44) His “theological commitments” were leading him to make many of the same decisions secular broadcasters were making.

This trend was also obvious in some of the original programming. One of the most notable examples was the 1990 production of the first “Christian sitcom” *Big Brother Jake*. The show’s titular character was an ex-Hollywood stuntman who returned to his hometown to help out in the foster home in which he was raised.¹⁵ *Big Brother Jake* did not communicate explicit biblical truths or Christian theology, but was a “family friendly” alternative to network sitcoms. What was unclear was whether *Big Brother Jake* was intended to be one of the shows that put the “ducks within the range of the guns” or drove home the message. In blurring the lines between sacred and secular Robertson was making it increasingly difficult to determine what exactly constituted *Christian* broadcasting. *Big Brother Jake* was produced to be indistinguishable from other family-based sitcoms, such as *My Three Sons* or *Lucy Show*.

¹⁴ The most significant move came in 1992 when CBN purchased the entire MTM Productions library for 43 million dollars. (Harrel,)

¹⁵ The backstory of *Big Brother Jake* serves as a representation of how the evangelical community views Hollywood. The show clearly juxtapositioned Hollywood and hometown ethos.

During this period Robertson, “singlehandedly changed the face of religious television” by producing *religionized* television. (Straub, 1986, p. 53) No longer was it necessary to have a minister, a sermon or even a Bible present. There were also no longer any requirements of explicit exposition of specifically Christian commitments. The new standards of “Christian” programming were a combination of family values and popularity. If a large enough audience could be secured by an innocuous sitcom, a critical mass of the audience would remain to hear the gospel at some point.¹⁶ Ultimately, what defined Christian programming was the fact that it was broadcast on the *Christian* Broadcasting Network.

As Robertson moved away from explicit expressions of the biblical message in the majority of the CBN programming, the notion of what constituted certain Christian commitments, such as the gospel, became far more nebulous. Did *Big Brother Jake*, for example, present the “gospel” or did it simply present a narrative that was not inconsistent with the gospel? These questions effectively opened new conceptual space for evangelicals to impose new codes on their experience of these Christian commitments.

The 700 Club: A General Overview

In 2016 *The 700 Club* will celebrate its “golden anniversary,” making it one of the longest running shows in television history.¹⁷ It airs twice a day on Freeform (formerly ABC Family). It also airs on religious networks such as TBN (Trinity Broadcasting Network). The format of the show is a hybrid of talk show and news magazine formats that plays out in three segments and two main sets. The opening is a news segment that reports on world events from a Christian perspective. The second segment is a human-interest segment that usually consists of pre-recorded packages. The third segment is an interactive segment with Robertson answering

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that for the first time in the history of religious broadcasting television flow and program schedules became a fundamental concern.

¹⁷ It also boasts the longest continuous run of any cable program in television history.

viewer's emails. This segment utilizes the "living room" set, replete with couches and comfortable accessories that would look at home on a morning talk show.

The First Segment: All that is Newsworthy

The opening news segment of *The 700 Club* is effectively a twelve-minute news report, focusing on political events. The segment is the major remaining outlet for CBN News, which was founded in 1982 to be "a refreshing alternative to today's mainstream news sources." (Harrel, 2010, p.199) Its goal is to report, not only the news of the day, but also what "God is doing" in the world. It represents an approach to journalism that Robertson refers to as "advocacy journalism," which is meant to provide the opportunity for both objective reporting and subjective instructive commentary, which is often presented in biblical frames. (Harrel, 2010, p.48)

According to bureau chief Rob Allman, Robertson's standing directive is to have the news division aspire to be "unbiased." "He (Robertson) encourages the news division to be an independent division to do stories in an objective manner." (Harrel, 2010, p.201) The "advocacy" comes in when Robertson is called upon to give on-air commentary. "When we pass it back to Pat it becomes commentary." A CBN publication characterized this commentary as "the enlightened news commentary of Pat Robertson...(he) uses his lifetime experience in ministry, business and politics to help viewers understand the significance of events as they unfold." (Harrel, 2010, p. 193)

The segment is also characterized by what Allman refers to as "selectivity." There are some issues and stories that receive considerably more coverage than provided by the major news outlets. In fact, CBN has acknowledged an exaggerated coverage of Middle East stories, particularly related to Israel. (Harrel, 2010, p. 200) However, in justifying these decisions, CBN

has generally suggested that this selectivity is a response to their audience's interests. Although this is undoubtedly true, it does not alter the fact that this "selectivity" plays a role in shaping those interests. CBN's selectivity implies that these are uniquely "Christian" concerns and stories.¹⁸ And since the mainstream media are not covering them, the inference is that the mainstream media are marginalizing Christians. As Allman has stated people watch CBN News on *The 700 Club* because they believe, "you (CBN News) are telling us what others will not." (Harrel, 2010, p. 200)

The segment is set at a news desk that mirrors contemporary sets found on Fox News or CNN. The set is a significant symbol that represents the professional commitment and aspirations of CBN News and Robertson's prevailing strategy. The fact that Robertson isn't presenting his commentary from behind a pulpit, but a contemporary news desk, is meant to increase the legitimacy of his claims. Robertson is expressing his belief that the "world" views ministers, who inhabit pulpits, as biased. But news reporters are objective and focused on the truth. By borrowing symbols from the mainstream, Robertson believes he is elevating his credibility.¹⁹

The segment generally begins with Robertson offering "commentary" on current events, even before the events have been reported.²⁰ When he is finished a female co-host and news correspondents report on the world events.²¹ This reporting is often performed split screen with the news anchor or correspondent sharing the screen with Robertson and asking him to offer his thoughts on the headlines. Although this is a common practice in contemporary news reporting,

¹⁸ The most notable example of this is the inflated coverage Israel receives. This is due to Robertson's eschatological belief that Israel, as God's chosen people, will play a key role in the end of the world.

¹⁹ How this strategy actually might negatively impact how the faithful view ministers in the pulpit might be an area for future study.

²⁰ Due to Robertson's age he no longer appears on the show everyday.

²¹ There are a few co-hosts who rotate appearances. This is noteworthy because a permanent co-host could come to rival Robertson's status.

it generally involves an “expert” on screen with the anchor. Using Robertson on the split screen establishes him as the resident expert on all things political and economic. The final words of the segment belong to Robertson who offers his “commentary” as a way of framing the proper Christian response.

Robertson’s “commentary” is so pervasive, that it certainly calls into question the “unbiased” model that CBN claims for itself. There are very few “objective” elements in this segment. In fact, it becomes difficult to view the co-host and correspondents as professional journalists. Instead they come across as Robertson’s disciples or children. As Butch Maltby, former vice president of institutional advancement at Regent University, has stated, the function of “*The 700 Club* co-hosts is setting up the ball so Pat can spike it.”²² (Peck, 1998, p. 131) Their response serves as model for the audience. The segment is a stage for Robertson to dictate to Christians what news stories they should care about and how they should respond. In doing this Robertson is shaping both a normative political and theological posture for Christians, which are woven into the unique social narrative Robertson disseminates.

This is a thoroughly detailed narrative that provides very clear identities for all the major characters. Christians are represented as victims who are lacking the necessary faculties to make responsible informed decisions. Because the enemies of Christianity are so strong, the audience must be helped “to understand the significance of events as they unfold.” Mainstream news outlets are obviously not going to help because they are the enemy who persecute the faithful. Unlike *The 700 Club*, they do not cover stories like imprisoned pastors in Iran and persecuted Christians on the poor streets of underdeveloped countries because they don’t want Christians to

²² Regent University was founded by Robertson as CBN University. Robertson continues as Chancellor of the university.

have a voice.²³ But the news media are by no means the only persecutors of the church. As the segment reveals, the Obama administration, the Democratic Senate, Muslims, and Planned Parenthood are all representatives of the “enemy.”²⁴ (*The 700 Club*, 2013) Christians are the victims, liberal forces are the persecutors and Robertson is the savior.

Another key component of this narrative is the setting. This segment, which begins each episode of *The 700 Club*, is decidedly political in orientation. Robertson is privileging the political realm and setting the Christian battle in that arena. This is a critical theological claim that creates a standard of conservative political engagement for true Christians and dictates a particular understanding of separation of church and state.

A story of persecuted Christians in the Philippines that was broadcast in September 2013 illustrates these points about Robertson’s narrative. As the pre-produced story finished, the news anchor said, “Pat, during my devotions this morning I was reading Matthew five when Jesus is talking about how his followers will be persecuted and it made me think of all the work Christians and CBN are doing in the Philippines.”(*The 700 Club*, 2013) Robertson responded by offering his assent to these sentiments and then offered the “authoritative” commentary on the plight of Filipino Christians. In a very short commentary the news anchor articulated a number of key CBN News objectives that relate to Robertson’s narrative. He referenced the Bible, implying that it is relevant in every area of life. He highlighted the plight of Christians and the belief that the persecution is a sign of faithfulness. He commented on what God is doing in the world, but made specific claims that God is working through CBN, and by implication Robertson. But perhaps most importantly he gave Robertson the stage to offer commentary on

²³ There are further examples of some of the stories that receive “selective” coverage.

²⁴ All of these “enemies” were from one broadcast.

all of this. This is not just an expert who can provide political commentary; this is an expert whose reach goes far beyond those limitations.

This story also illustrates the flaw of “advocacy journalism.” As explicitly stated by Allman, it is the job of the *The 700 Club* news anchor to objectively report the news. Yet in this report he is offering biblical and spiritual reflection on the events. The claim that objectivity can survive in the midst of this highly charged subjective environment is highly suspect. But perhaps even more significant is the fact that the reporting is consistently presented from a sense of prevailing threat. As the narrative frames the audience as victims, there is a prevailing implication that the news and commentary are intended to be a warning. There will be real consequences if the audience does not heed Robertson’s guidance. Thus the focus of the segment is ultimately on the condition of evangelicals. This is noteworthy based upon the prevailing evangelical commitment of engagement with the world. Robertson claims he founded his network, and *The 700 Club*, as a “microphone to the world,” as a way of saving the world. In this segment, however, he only criticizes the “world,” as he speaks to an audience who is explicitly “not the world.”²⁵

During a period in October 2013, when the main news story of the week was the President’s health care initiative, Robertson opened one broadcast by stating that, “Obamacare should be renamed Democrat-care” based upon the party’s support of the law. (*The 700 Club*, 2013) A few days later during the government shutdown, Robertson stated, “It is amazing we have a president who is so disengaged, he’s on a trip abroad; he just doesn’t seem to care.” (*The 700 Club*, 2013) This type of inflammatory and unsubstantiated rhetoric, which is certainly

²⁵ As a sign of how news “commentary” can shape the theological commitments of the audience, it is interesting to note that Jesus actually does not guarantee his followers will be persecuted in Matthew chapter five (although he suggests this elsewhere in the Gospels). Rather he commands his followers to pray for anyone who persecutes them. But there was no “fact checking” that accompanied this “theo/political” report.

commonplace in contemporary talk radio and other news outlets, challenges the notion that the “news” can be objectively reported. Robertson is not merely offering “commentary;” he is dictating meaning. The news effectively becomes little less than the context in which Robertson’s narrative is delivered.

Second Segment: Dramatizing Christian Stories of Triumphs

The middle segment of the show consists of one or two pre-produced pieces that each last about eight minutes and dramatize this narrative. These pieces serve as an updated version of Christian “testimonies,” and often take the form of docu-dramas. In these stories Christians are shown persevering in the face of a wide variety of persecution and trials. The segment promotes the belief that faith in Christ can overcome anything from drug addiction, to sex trafficking to financial ruin.

The segment illustrates the rhetorical strength “camera on the couch” shares with television talk shows, like *Oprah* and *Ellen*. All of these talk shows have the ability to personalize and dramatize human struggle. This segment does this specifically with Christian faith, moving it out of the theoretical realm into the lives of actual Christians. Christianity is represented, not as a personal meditative experience, but an intense struggle with dangers in every possible position in life. Professional athletes, middle class mothers, adolescents, Americans and foreigners will all face trials such as financial schemes, legislated discrimination, drugs, worldly success, media corruption, existential angst, Muslim extremists and careless drivers. But no matter the enemy or trial, salvation is readily available.

The pieces largely consist of interviews and staged cut-away shots of the main characters going about their everyday lives. To increase the dramatic appeal, these stories often focus on individual Christians who have achieved a certain degree of celebrity. During the fall of 2013,

for example, NFL kicker David Akers and Cy Young Award winning pitcher Clayton Kershaw were featured overcoming personal and professional “trials.” Akers discussed how Christ helped him navigate his financial and professional problems. He had been cut from multiple teams and had lost a sizable amount of his retirement in a Ponzi scheme. Through this period of “trials,” he had begun to doubt the power and provision of God, but his wife served as a great encourager and challenged him to hold strong to his faith. This perseverance paid off, as he was picked up by the Detroit Lions and reasserted himself as a dependable father and husband. The last shot of the docu-drama showed him playing with his children. The docu-drama on Kershaw also focused on the power of faith in a celebrity athlete’s life. Kershaw discussed how in the midst of his great professional success he felt as though there had to be “something more.”²⁶ Kershaw found that “more” in Christ and the orphanage he and his wife started in Zambia.²⁷ (*The 700 Club*, 2013)

Often when the focus of the story is not a celebrity believer, the pieces highlight the plight of Christians around the world. These productions include interviews and recreated dramatizations of key events. One such docu-drama focused on an evangelical German family. The piece made the claim that, due to their efforts to homeschool their children, the German government had taken their children into protective custody. The family was being persecuted because of their commitment to educate their children in “fear of the Lord.” The docu-drama ended with the family seeking asylum in the United States. (*The 700 Club*, 2013) Another docu-

²⁶ He is a multiple Cy Young Award winner and in 2013 signed the largest contract in MLB history.

²⁷ There are also segments of less famous athletes. One such segment featured an ultra-triathlon athlete. It told the story of how as a boy his father raised him to be a successful athlete. (*The 700 Club*, 2014) But during the docu-drama revealed that as a twelve year old he was hit by a car and suffered twenty-one broken bones and ultimately lost his right arm. He recounts how during the months of hospital stays his father was always by his bedside. The segment paints a picture of a father-son relationship that was largely healed through the devastating accident and the grace of God. He has now become a successful ultra-tri-athlete. (*The 700 Club*, 2014)

drama highlighted the plight of Filipino Christians. This community was represented rescuing thousands of street children from enslavement and sex trafficking, even while they faced significant persecution, including murder, at the hands of Muslim extremists. (*The 700 Club*, 2013)

A number of key elements are always present in these pieces. The narratives always begin with the main character facing some kind of “worldly” challenge. This leads the character to realize that there is more to this world than previously assumed. The character searches for that something and eventually finds it in Christ. This moment of realization, which takes the form of a conversion or a rededication experience, leads to the victory of peace and contentment. The enemy in these pieces can have many specific faces, but ultimately is represented as a lack of faith. It doesn’t matter what persecution Christians experience. As long as they persevere in faith they will grow stronger through the battle. Thus, believers are empowered to recognize that periods of persecution are opportunities to experience the victory of Christ.

The main characters are also generally members of a traditional family represented by the traditional familial roles of authoritative father, supportive mother and obedient children. When the character is not located in a traditional family context it is represented as another obstacle or attack to be overcome. The family is represented as a unique expression of God’s grace that expresses his order. For example, the piece on Clayton Kershaw made implicit claims that an individual could not have achieved what the Kershaw *family* did. However, the family is under attack, once again elevating the dramatic impact of the story. In the Akers piece the family was threatened by the financial troubles brought on by deceit.²⁸ In the German piece the family was under attack by contemporary liberal politics.

²⁸ It is also noteworthy that the husband was represented as the authoritative head of the family who made the financial decisions, while the wife was represented as the encouraging and nurturing supporter.

By the end of the second segment, the Christian identity has been well defined and dramatized. Christians live in a world that deceptively claims satisfaction can be found in “worldly success.” But these offerings only amount to snares that offer no true benefit. Christians must find true success in things not of this world. When they look to Christ, as represented on *The 700 Club*, they will always win.

The first segment frames the Christians experience as one of persecution. The second segment of the show offers heroic narratives of those who stand and fight the institutionalized marginalization as a rhetorical defense. The first segment is a warning of prevailing threat; the second segment is an encouragement to overcome. The final segment is the climax of this narrative. It offers Robertson the opportunity to speak directly to individuals who are experiencing the pain of the persecution.

The Third Segment: Institutionalized Indoctrination

The final major segment of the show is called “Bring it Online.” The set up of this segment is reminiscent of co-host driven talk shows like *Regis and Kelly*. It presents Robertson answering emailed audience questions on a set that is evocative of an upper class American living room.²⁹

The segment begins with the female co-host, usually Terry Meeuwsen, chatting with Robertson. She often directs some flattering comments to Robertson and then reads the first question. After Robertson answers the question, the process is repeated four or five times. Questions cover a wide range of concerns such as dating, marriage, drug addiction, church governance, possibility of miracles, and general theological concerns. As the opening segment

²⁹ By setting the segment in an upper class home, power, which has already been grounded in conservative politics and masculine privilege, is further defined as residing in the middle-upper class. Thus the authoritative claims the white, upper class Robertson makes are legitimized.

serves to frame the appropriate political and social issues for a Christian and the prescribed response, this segment does it on a more personal, cultural and spiritual level. This allows Robertson an arena in which he can prescribe much more specific instructions to his audience. Here is the fatherly figure letting his children know what is best for them, telling them who and when to date and which specific theological views to adopt.³⁰

On a September 2012 broadcast, a viewer emailed a question about adoption. The viewer explained that she had three internationally adopted children and was currently having difficulty in her dating relationships with men. When the men found out she had international children, she reported they lost interest in the relationship with her. Once the co-host finished reading the letter to Robertson she interjected that the men in question were “dogs.”³¹ Robertson immediately and forcibly countered that they weren’t dogs, “just because they don’t want to take on the United Nations.” (*The 700 Club*, 2012) Robertson went on to offer a rather convoluted explanation of his position on international adoptions and family systems but a clear exposition of his disdain for the U.N., even though this had nothing to do with the woman’s question and concern.³² What began as a single mother’s personal concern over dating problems became a highly politicized diatribe against the U.N.

On a September 2014 broadcast an anonymous viewer asked if, in light of the Ebola epidemic, he should go on a planned mission trip to West Africa. Robertson was very brief and vague in his comments related to the danger of Ebola or the current crisis in West Africa. Instead he began to expound upon a present danger in Kenya. According to Robertson, travellers to Kenya have to be extremely careful because “you might get AIDS in Kenya, people have

³⁰ As such this segment perpetuates a key evangelical epistemological commitment, which affirms that even the most difficult and complex issues in life can be easily answered if you go to the right authoritative source.

³¹ The co-host was a temporary replacement for Terry Meeuwsen, and apparently overstepped her bounds.

³² This practice of failing to demonstrate empathy even with the handpicked questions is typical of Robertson’s response.

AIDS in Kenya and...the towels could have AIDS.”³³ He then went on to state that he was in Africa during an Ebola outbreak and “there wasn’t all this panic.” (*The 700 Club*, 2014)³⁴

However, this clip is not unique in terms of the extremity of Robertson’s comments. During a 2013 broadcast Robertson responded to the concerns of a viewer whose church was part of a ministry that provided transportation for AIDS patients. After a few comments related to the question Robertson responded, “ I think people in the gay community, they want to get people. They will have a ring, and you shake hands, and the ring has a little thing where you cut your finger.” (*The 700 Club*, 2013)³⁵ According to Robertson, this is the process by which homosexuals who “have the stuff” (referring to AIDS) are able to infect others with the virus.

The fact that such extreme and inflammatory commentary goes largely unchallenged on the broadcast represents and further expands Robertson’s rhetorical power. This final segment implicitly claims Robertson is an expert in *everything*. It also closes out the crisis-based narrative arc of the show. The first segment is a warning. The middle segment is an encouragement. The last segment is an application and proof of the success that comes to the faithful. Robertson is not simply answering questions and giving advice. He is, in his unchallenged position, modeling the victory over the world that comes through faith.

Robertson’s Media Strategy

Power: Gendered Relationships

One of the main channels that extends Robertson’s authority is his interaction with the female co-hosts. Throughout the program they offer their undivided support for Robertson’s

³³ The AP reported that residents of Nairobi, including Christian residents who are regular viewers of the show, were demanding an on-air apology from Robertson. This apology was not given.

³⁴ Obviously, this statement was suggesting that the viewer’s concerns were unmerited and largely a result of the unnecessary media-induced panic surrounding the Ebola outbreak.

³⁵ *The Atlantic* reported that the comments were cut from reruns of the episode.

positions.³⁶ The resulting elitist association and unrivaled authority, which is produced within the context of the show, becomes a model for how Robertson ultimately relates to the audience as well.

The news segment's use of rotating co-hosts makes it much less likely that anyone will be able to rival the status of Robertson. This is furthered by the fact that the female co-hosts are not the same during the news segments and "Bring it Online." Unlike Robertson, who is represented as equally qualified to appear as a political expert and personal counselor, the female co-hosts must be content with narrowly defined duties that are consistent with traditional female tropes of nurturing supporter.

The most established and significant female presence on the show is Meeuwsen, who has been a permanent co-host since 1993. She was hired to bring a "a woman's perspective...a softer, more sensitive view" to the show. (Harrell, 2010, p. 194) *The 700 Club* bios list her as co-host, even though she currently appears only during the "Bring it Online" segment. This fact, coupled with her conspicuous absence during news segment, places the most well known female character in a clearly traditional nurturing role. Furthermore, as she is visible only on the living room set, there are implicit claims that the place of the idealized women is in the home. She fills the role of the questioning and uncertain female, looking for male affirmation, and offering empathy in response to Robertson's authoritative answers.

The biographies of the current co-host found on cbn.com also highlight these gendered roles. Meeuwsen's bio reads "Terry's background as a singer, broadcaster, Miss America, and working mother makes her equally adept at either interviewing a Hollywood celebrity or

³⁶ In the past female co-hosts have been removed because Robertson felt as though they were not supportive of his positions. Two examples of this were Sheila Walsh and Danuta Soderman who were both co-hosts during the peak popularity years of the 1980's and early 1990's. Robertson referred to Walsh as a "naughty daughter" based upon her perceived lack of support. And Soderman was removed from her position because she didn't support Robertson's political agenda. (Harrell, 2010)

working with kids on The Christian Broadcasting Network. Terry is not only a co-host on *The 700 Club*, but also a co-host on *Living the Life*.” (cbn.com) Robertson’s bio on the same page reads “M. G. "Pat" Robertson is the founder and chairman of The Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) Inc., and founder of International Family Entertainment Inc., Regent University, Operation Blessing International Relief and Development Corporation, American Center for Law and Justice, The Flying Hospital, Inc., and several other organizations and broadcast entities.”(cbn.com) “Robertson” is portrayed in an idealized masculine trope, a world-shaking philanthropist and innovative leader. “Terry” is represented in the traditional feminine roles of caregiver for children or object of care for men. Robertson’s bio makes no reference to his talents or ability to entertain or propagate. These narrowly defined and clearly marginalizing gender roles are not isolated occurrences. Instead, they are illustrative of the manner in which *The 700 Club* is able to establish narrowly defined identities for the Christian in general. While propagating Robertson’s authority to personally define the identities.

Blurring the Lines of Distinction

Robertson is motivated by social legitimacy, larger audiences, and the belief that more Americans will watch a talk show than will watch a sermon. If more people watch and listen to him, America can experience a revival and God will be glorified. Of course, it becomes very difficult to distinguish between the exaltation that is received by God, by America and by Robertson. But this conflation is key to Robertson’s strategy.

In the fall of 1986 Marion “Pat” Gordon Robertson announced that God had called him to seek the Republican presidential nomination. For years Robertson had insisted he had no interest in a political career because God had called him into ministry. But that had apparently changed. In order to clarify his intentions he removed his name from the ordination list of the Southern

Baptist Convention. (Martin, 1996) He was now a politician and not a “reverend.” The manner in which Robertson announced his presidential run is illustrative of his overall cultural strategy. In particular it illustrates two key characteristics of the “camera on the couch.”

The first is the transmissional character to the approach. God speaks to Robertson and he listens. Then he translates that message into forms that are ostensibly comprehensible in the contemporary context and broadcasts them and the audience listens. Robertson considers his audience in the translation phase because he must learn the relevant vernacular. But once that phase is complete, there is very little expectation for the audience to responsibly and intellectually engage the message.

Within this model, knowledge and truth are objects that are given and possessed, and those with the knowledge are empowered.³⁷ For Robertson, knowledge and truth are not constructs that are developed through relationships and dialogue; they are absolutes that are received from God. This epistemological paradigm does not only shape his relationships, it also heavily informs his theology and broadcast strategies.

Robertson has shaped *The 700 Club* to be a vehicle of disseminating objective truth. An advertisement for the show claimed, “When the show reports the news it doesn’t just give a news report. It presents the news in order to *get to the truth*.” (*The 700 Club*, 1986) This notion of “truth” transcends historical events and categories of true or false. It is a theological and ethical concern of right and wrong. *The 700 Club* is in Robertson’s estimation a socially relevant

³⁷ Robertson has a well-established style of autocratic management. As Straub writes of his time at CBN “nothing happened (at CBN) without (Robertson’s) approval.”³⁷ (Straub, 1986, p. 42) His wife, Dede, has stated that Robertson, “does not take suggestions well from me, but if I say I have a word from the Lord he listens.” (Harrel, 2010, p.60)

microphone that is used to proclaim the immutable truth of God. That is ostensibly the motivation of ensuring the show stays on air.³⁸

This epistemological orientation serves to also justify Robertson's unrivaled and unquestioned authority. Robertson has the answers because God gave them to him. Throughout the history of *The 700 Club*, Robertson has often reported hearing the voice of God and then repeating the message on-air. (Straub, 1986, p. 163) All of Robertson's reformulating of symbolic inventories, all of his ventures into the secular realm, are justified because he carries a seal of divine approval. The amount of confidence one must have in order to make grand prognostications on air requires this particular epistemological orientation. If a person doesn't believe in an absolute and objective truth, it is unlikely that person will make authoritative claims about future events or about individuals all over the world.

During the height of the popularity of *The 700 Club* it was not unusual for Robertson to report that a certain audience member was suffering from a particular disease or ailment.³⁹ Often it was one that the generally unnamed audience member was unaware of. On one broadcast Robertson claimed, "there is a woman who is suffering from cancer of the womb and she doesn't know it." (*The 700 Club*, 1988) Robertson proceeded to claim that the woman would be healed from this unknown malady.

On a 1980 episode he stated, "I guarantee you by the end of 1982 there is going to be judgment on the world." On the same episode he also claimed, "I believe the Arabs are going to begin to live in peace with Israel." (*The 700 Club*, 1980) During a 2007 broadcast, Robertson

³⁸ At a press conference announcing his return to the show after his failed presidential bid Robertson stated that, "something like *The 700 Club* will be on forever." (*Richmond Times Dispatch*, May 17, 1995) The details of the sale of The Family Channel to Fox ensure that this will be the case, if not technically "forever," at least in perpetuity.

³⁹ Robertson would hear words from God about studio and television audience members but the divine guidance apparently lasted only through the hour format. Straub writes it was an "astonishing fact that God seemed to time miracles to conform with standard television format," and "God would stop speaking to Pat and stop healing exactly in time with the theme music." (Straub, 1986)

claimed that there were going to be significant terrorist attacks on the U.S. near the end of that year. "The Lord didn't say nuclear. But I do believe it will be something like that." (*The 700 Club*, 2007) He also claimed in 2012 that Mitt Romney would win the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections. He knew this because God told him. He later claimed he missed the message. (*The 700 Club*, 2012)⁴⁰

At the press conference to announce his return to the broadcast Robertson stated, "the challenge remains the same to make it (the show) more appealing so more people will watch." (Harrell, 2010, p. 193) This illustrates the second characteristic of "camera on the couch," the strategy of accommodating to contemporary cultural forms. Like many religious broadcasters Robertson views the "world" with contempt, fear and at times paranoia.⁴¹ (Straub, 1986) And yet Robertson has been more willing to submit to the norms of that world. In 1987 he stated he removed his ordination status because he believed blurring the lines of distinction between politics and church ministry was wrong. (Dart, 1987) However, this statement represents a general shortsightedness. In running for president and removing his ordination status Robertson was doing exactly what he claimed he was avoiding. Through his political and media careers he has blurred the lines of distinction between religion, politics, entertainment, media and faith. In doing this, he has also confused the traditional symbolic inventories that are associated with these different institutions.

Thus, Robertson's decision to allow television to dictate his agenda had far reaching effects. As Robertson blurred the lines of distinction it became less clear as to what exactly

⁴⁰ On a June 3, 2013 broadcast Robertson responded to a question from a viewer about individuals who prophesy in church. "They (the ones who prophesy) want to dominate other people, so they do it like (sic), "I've got a word from God for you...Predictive prophecies about disasters are almost always from the psychic world, it is not something from God...By your fruit you should know them. What's their track record that's how you can tell." (*The 700 Club*, 2013) Even though he apparently recognizes the use of alleged prophetic proclamations are generally a sign of an individual's desire to master others he continues to do it. It appears as though he simply fails to recognize the characteristic in himself.

⁴¹ Numerous textual examples from *The 700 Club* will make this point abundantly clear.

constituted the sacred and secular, not to mention Christianity itself. During the 1980's CBN was often flooded with complaints when a "secular" celebrity would appear on *The 700 Club*. Robertson's response, of course, was the basic need of building an audience and reaching the lost. "To reach those people we have to put entertainers on the air whom they identify with...then we can bring them to the Lord...Non-Christian celebrities are promotable to a secular audience." (Harrel, 2010, p.44) But, of course, putting a secular celebrity on a religious program begins to redefine what secular and religious mean. From a purely practical orientation these attempts to reach the "lost" have been a failure, but they have not been innocuous. There has been an effect of this strategy. It was the reformulating of conservative Christianity.

Religious Identities and the Use of Sacred Symbolic Inventories

Religious rituals are ever changing with perpetual social and cultural shifts. However, Robertson was intentionally reformulating Christian rituals so that they would be more attractive to more people. This reformulating of the sacred practices required that he jettison a number of traditional Christian symbols and replace them with more attractive updated "secular" versions. Thus, he removed his title of "Reverend" and consistently repeated that he was a "broadcaster." He spoke from a couch and not a pulpit. There are no crosses visible on the set. Baptism and the Eucharist are absent from the broadcasts. The Bible is referenced only sporadically and not expounded upon. There are no formal liturgies, prayers, hymns or praise songs. It is no mean task to remove symbolic inventories that had for centuries established meaning for communities of faith. It required a great deal of rhetorical authority.

Through the implementation of the strategy, however, there developed a separation between the evangelical community and historical Christianity. The symbols of evangelical Christianity constituted a formative inventory that connected the community to the traditional

biblical doctrines of Christianity.⁴² In jettisoning many of these material symbols he effectively weakened the connection between the practices and the doctrinal foundation. Moving from a pulpit to couch will produce effects other than market share. The loss of material symbols will fundamentally alter what is believed and communicated.

Transmissional communication models, like the ones Robertson employs, fail to recognize the strength of symbolic inventories because the models represent meaning as fixed. Meaning is an absolute, and ultimate meaning is truth. Meaning transcends the existence of symbols. Therefore, symbols aren't imbued with power in and of themselves because they don't operate to produce meaning, they simply reflect, communicate and transmit the established meaning. Symbols can be interchanged without impacting the meaning.

Without the presence of traditional symbols, current events and issues, like the war in Iraq, midterm elections, abortion and gay marriage, become the contemporary symbols that are used to negotiate and articulate the religious meaning. Thus, political and social positions become central to the production of the religious identity. Furthermore, this meaning is formed less through an evolving negotiation of traditional doctrines produced through communal discourse and more by the dictates of authoritative figures. This results in a narrowing corporate identity characterized by specific political agendas. In addition there develops significant pressure to conform to the identity or face the ignominy of being labeled an outsider.

A key challenge that is produced through this strategy of accommodation is the ability to sustain the foundational distinctions of "in" and "out" that are necessary to the evangelical identity. Amidst all of the blurring of lines, this is one line that, within the community, must remain clear. He mitigates this challenge by propagating a clearly divisive rhetoric. Through

⁴² The prevalence of the cross, for example, in Christian worship is a material way of accessing and negotiating the meaning of atonement and sacrifice.

this rhetoric he is able to sustain legitimacy, with some members of the evangelical community, by perpetually speaking out against the evils of the culture he has cloned. Thus perpetuating the hard line distinction between “in” and “out.”⁴³

A Critique: Narrowcasting Christianity

Robertson’s strategy ultimately narrows the definition of “in.” Providing evangelicals with their own 24-hour cable network has significant social implications that elevate the social status of evangelicals. But amidst the celebration of elevated cultural status many evangelicals missed a critical character of this development. When a *Christian* news magazine program reports from an expressly conservative political orientation it will inevitably equate that political view with the biblical or Christian view. The production of a “religionized” television news-talk show conflated Christianity and political rhetoric. The result is that “Christianity” becomes represented in narrow frames that easily marginalize those who don’t neatly fit within those frames.⁴⁴

An example of this dynamic can be seen in 1988 when CBN was rebranded as The CBN Family Channel. Ostensibly this was done as an expression of Robertson’s strategy to produce a more attractive option for non-Christians and greater cultural relevancy and a larger audience. But it was likely not intended to trade traditional theological distinctiveness for the socially constructed set of “family values.”⁴⁵ The Christian alternative programs were “Christian” not because of the presence of theological or biblical commitments but because of the absence of

⁴⁴ An illustration of this dynamic occurred in the middle of the 1980’s at CBN. CBN executives had decided to pursue the production of a daytime drama. A well-known and highly successful producer of daytime dramas, who was a devout Roman Catholic, had contacted the producer and offered to consult pro-bono. He invited the CBN production team to his home in Connecticut. Straub relates how the producer was an exceedingly gracious host, even providing home cooked meals throughout the weekend. As they all were exchanging “good-bye’s” at the end of the weekend Straub’s colleague left a tract on the coffee table in the living room. The tract described in great detail the one way a person could become a Christian and went onto denounce Catholicism as a “false religion.” Straub relates how this was a common perspective at CBN. (Straub, 1986)

⁴⁵ The effects of this are still visible today. Many Christian media outlets refer to themselves as “family friendly.”

sex, violence, graphic language and taboo social practices like abortion and homosexuality. Christianity was being defined not by what it historically was (biblical doctrine) but what it was currently *not*.

In 1990 the name of the network was again changed to simply The Family Channel. This move was precipitated by a federal investigation into the tax-exempt status of CBN. The federal government demonstrated that they too were unsure as to what constituted a “Christian” media ministry. Thus, under the threat of an IRS investigation, the Family Channel had to break away from CBN. The network was placed under the newly created corporation International Family Entertainment Inc., with Robertson’s son, Tim as CEO. Even though it was no longer tax-exempt and had no explicit Christian reference in its name the network still broadcast much of the same programming, including *The 700 Club*. Was The Family Channel a “Christian” network? And if so what made it Christian? According to the federal government the answer was “no.” But for millions of evangelicals the answer remained “yes.”

In 1997 The Family Channel was sold to Fox and four years later to Disney. Today it exists as Freeform. The fact that *The 700 Club* is broadcast on a Disney property is ironic and revealing, especially given some of its current programming. Robertson worked to produce a “Christian” television network that would neatly fit in with any cable or satellite line up. While he was doing this he was criticizing secularizing forces, including Disney, calling them “anti-religion bigots” amongst other things.⁴⁶ Now the “Christian” network is owned by these “bigots” and a viewer can watch a Harry Potter marathon, a series that received criticism from

⁴⁶ Disney’s recognition of same sex civil partners has been a source of significant evangelical criticism and boycotts. During a 1997 broadcast of *The 700 Club* Robertson referred to Disney as becoming “the family organization of homosexuals and anti-religious bigots.” (*The 700 Club*, 1997) A year later he warned the city of Orlando and Walt Disney World against flying rainbow flags during their “GayDay” celebrations because Orlando “is right in the path of some serious hurricanes. I wouldn’t wave those flags in God’s face if I were you.” (NY Times, 2001)

Robertson due to its perceived connection to the occult, and *The 700 Club* on the same channel, back-to-back. Robertson's strategy to leverage cultural relevance into cultural legitimacy and dominion has not come to fruition. Instead it has produced the situation in which the "Christian" program has become a largely unwelcomed interruption to thousands of viewers.

"Religionized" television has had a profound influence on the experience of Christianity within, and to a lesser degree without, the evangelical community. Two key dynamics can be noted to illustrate this fact. In reformulating the symbolic inventory of evangelical Christianity, *The 700 Club* replaced the "preacher" with the "host." This shift would inevitably have a formative influence on how pastoral ministry was conceptualized and practiced. The variety and talk shows have always been *personality*-driven. The practice of naming talk shows after the host (e.g., *Donahue*, *Ellen*, *Oprah*) illustrates this fact. Although *The 700 Club* was never rebranded as *Pat*, there still exists within the ethos of the broadcast an obvious focus on the personality of the host that serves to reduce the focus the audience places on God and increase the focus on "Pat."⁴⁷

This shift was easier than might be expected because the preacher/pastor and talk show host share a number of key functions with their respected communities. Talk show hosts, like ministers, are not expected to act as impartial journalists; they are expected to offer guidance to the audience. The success of a talk show or a church, in fact, is dependent upon the host's/pastor's ability to connect with the audience by framing contemporary issues in such a way as they make sense within their daily lives. The main personality was expected to be primarily shaped by the exposition of the word of God. By creating the televised role of the "religious variety show host" Robertson removed much of this limitation.

⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that the next evolution in religious broadcasting, to be examined in the following chapter, does bear the name of the "host."

Second, *The 700 Club* replaced the “congregation” with the “live studio audience.”

Religious broadcasting traditionally has had live audiences because it was generally recorded during church services. These congregations were not media audiences watching the spectacle of entertainment; they were members of a congregation who were present to, at some level, actively pursue and participate in a worship experience. This is not the case with *The 700 Club* audience.

The “congregational audience” of traditional religious broadcasting is generally well lit and is often the subject of cutaways showing members actively taking notes or following the preacher in the biblical text. The congregation is conceptualized as an active participant in the worship experience. However, *The 700 Club* audience is never shown on screen. The television audience of “camera on the pulpit” is an extension of the congregation and as such is expected and encouraged to mimic the activities of the congregational cutaways. The televised audience of *The 700 Club* is encouraged to simply observe.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The impulse to produce a product of universal appeal cannot succeed or effectively exist within a prevailing social dualism. Robertson had used CBN and *The 700 Club* to perpetuate that formative social dualism, repeatedly criticizing the secularizing forces that he detested and yet copied. But what happens when the network can no longer fit into the “in” group it has

⁴⁸ Two decades ago I was a member of the studio audience at a taping of *The 700 Club*. The audience sat off-camera behind the studio lights on darkened studio risers. The sense and expectations experienced were quite distinct from entering into a church service. What was most notable was the excitement surrounding the possibility of seeing “Pat.” The audience was there to *watch* not *participate*. This is not to argue that all television regulations are rigid or strictly enforced. I had actually been a member of the television audience of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* two years prior. A key similarity was the excitement and anticipation as the hosts entered the studio. A key difference was the level of interaction with the audience. On the *Oprah Winfrey Show* the audience was part of the program. Members of the audience spoke to the issue and were well lit through taping. *The 700 Club* audience, on the other hand, were passive observers.

worked to perpetuate. The network had contributed to the construction of a social landscape that ultimately demanded the demise of its core characteristic. In a certain iteration Robertson's network still exists. However, it cannot be legitimately recognized as a "Christian" network.

Robertson has for years believed television and its associated technologies are miracles sent from God. This notion, held by many evangelical broadcasters, that television is a "modern miracle" because it allows the word to be distributed to a universal audience is clearly misplaced. Rather, it should be understood as a formative cultural institution that provides contemporary society with symbolic inventories used for discourse and the construction of meaning.

Robertson set out to critique culture but he has largely affirmed his target. The decision to create "religionized" television, as opposed to televised religion, was an affirmation, possibly unknowingly, of the power of television to set the social agenda and cultural definitions. "By appropriating the conventions of commercial television, CBN implicitly endorses the medium's central role in representing society's values and beliefs and in defining its social discourse."

(Peck, 1993, p. 139) *The 700 Club* and CBN in general were affirming television's authoritative cultural position by applying its communicative practices to the sacred spaces of Christianity.

The sender, receiver and message of the gospel were all being redefined in order to fit the established conventions of the 20th century television. When the traditional television norms cease to be the center of the cultural experience, the whole religious experience constructed around it becomes irrelevant to the contemporary setting.

CHAPTER 6

CAMERA ON THE PERFORMANCE

Joel Osteen celebrated his fiftieth birthday in 2013 as the senior pastor of the largest church in America and the most watched televangelist in the world. Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas is home to over 40,000 members and *Joel* is viewed by a global weekly audience of seven million. Osteen is a television minister who has transcended the religious community to become a significant personality in American popular culture. He has a considerable presence not only in broadcasting but also in print, online and live media.¹ He is the face of 21st century religious broadcasting. In fact, he has been called the 21st century face of Christianity. (*Washington Post*, 2005) This chapter will investigate the strategies that allowed this college drop out to become the most visible religious broadcaster in history.²

For the past decade Osteen has been widely regarded as “The Smiling Pastor.” One reason his approach is noteworthy is because it runs counter to the established and expected mode of communication on religious, particularly Christian, broadcasting. Osteen isn’t yelling or criticizing. He is laughing and encouraging. But this innovation is only part of Osteen’s larger strategy. Over the past fifteen years he has intentionally produced and marketed a very sophisticated and well-defined brand, which is founded on the production and marketing of his personality and performance. I will refer to Osteen’s approach as “camera on the performance.” Its use of media is characterized less by strict utilitarian frames and much more by critically

¹ He has multiple *New York Times* bestsellers. In 2009 he embarked on a stadium speaking tour that culminated in selling out Yankee Stadium.

² Osteen dropped out of Oral Roberts University to help care for his mother who was suffering from cancer and to become the producer of Lakewood’s media ministry.

integrated elements. Television is not used simply so that he will be louder or more relevant. He is producing an immersive mediated religious experience that serves to articulate and market a global \$100 million brand. His performance is not about telling people what propositions to believe, and making sure he is relevant enough to have people listen. His performance is about *inspiring* people. In “camera on the performance,” television is more than a loudspeaker; it is a site of production.

Overview of the Chapter

The first section of this chapter will investigate the production of this unique religious global brand. It will consider the rise of Joel Osteen from a television producer to the pastor of the largest church in America. Like Robertson before him, Osteen is perpetually reformulating established symbolic inventories. But unlike Robertson, he is not carrying out a culture war against the secularizing forces of society. He is not the prophetic image of a “lone voice crying out in the wilderness.” He is a celebrity speaking, writing, broadcasting, blogging and podcasting in the heart of that culture.

The second section will focus on the production of his “message.” Osteen’s narrative is about infusing his audience with a spirit of success that will encourage them to experience the “destiny” God has prepared for them. Because he isn’t starting with dogmatic propositions his use of television is less utilitarian.

The final section of the chapter will offer a close analysis of Osteen’s weekly broadcast and his “camera on the performance” approach. *Joel* represents a production value that is a far cry from the bare bone approach of *Old Time Gospel Hour*. Osteen employs a much more integrated media strategy to construct his immersive brand. Unlike Falwell, whose role of

broadcaster was always ancillary to his position as minister, Osteen's vision of ministry was given shape and continues to be framed by the mediated form.

Osteen is both an agent and sign of substantive change within the evangelical community. His performance is much more consistent with contemporary media forms than that of his predecessors. Osteen is as much at home on OWN's *Lifeclass*, for example, as he is behind a pulpit. But he has not instituted a revolution that has changed everything about evangelicalism. He represents the next stage of the development of religious broadcasting, and he continues to surround himself with traditional symbols and uses their established meanings to propagate his media persona. However, he is also adept in reformulating these symbols, which leads to the introduction of new meanings. He has been able to leverage the introduction of new meaning into a great deal of ministerial, media and personal success.

Osteen: The Making of a Brand

Osteen is redefining the role of religious broadcaster by creating a world wide personal brand. Robertson and Falwell constructed their audience by producing a culture war narrative that resonated with the core of the evangelical community. This narrative mitigated much of the criticism that potentially might have been expressed by the evangelicals who had traditionally been suspicious of media. In fact, it is likely that the narrative eased some of the dissonance the broadcasters themselves might have otherwise felt. By embracing such divisive rhetoric, Falwell and Robertson, forced people to either love them or hate them. Furthermore, they often appeared angry, bitter and even vindictive. All of this made the production of a personal brand that could cross cultural barriers impossible.

However, by the end of the 20th century, media had become commonplace in the evangelical experience. There is no longer any need to justify its use with hardline rhetoric.

Therefore, 21st century religious broadcasters, like Osteen, have become more innovative in their media use, exploring ways to realize its potential. The most significant innovation of the new century is use of web-based platforms. Osteen has pioneered this development. His sophisticated and broad use of multiple media platforms has turned the “televangelist” into what Sinitiere calls a “tel-e-vangelist.” (Sinitiere, 2015, p. 108)

Osteen has a substantial online presence on Lakewood.com and his own website, joelosteen.com. On joelosteen.com browsers can download a free app, which automatically downloads daily devotional thoughts, called *e-votionals*, and weekly sermons to be to their mobile device. (joelosteen.com) Osteen is also a prodigious author, with many of his over twenty different publications topping the *New York Times* Bestsellers List.³ He also makes regular appearances on CNN and OWN. All of these media components strategically work together to produce a unified front. His books are repackaging of his sermons, his sermon tours are marketing for his books, and his broadcasts are advertisements for his church.

However, this new media strategy alone would not fuel the explosion of a global brand. Osteen’s brand is ultimately built upon his performance as, “the smiling pastor.” (Sinitiere, 2015) In his sermons, Osteen intentionally avoids any discussions or references to things that might divide or offend. Politics and sin, two favorite topics of more traditional religious broadcasters, are always avoided. His brand is streamlined, and his audience expanded, by being constructed on positivity.⁴

This brand has allowed him to transcend some of the cultural limitations that were key for previous religious broadcasters. For example, Osteen’s sermon, “The Power of ‘I Am,’” can

³ The success of his first book earned him a \$12 million advance, the fourth largest in publishing history, on his second. (Streeter, 2007)

⁴ Osteen’s ability to attract a broad audience is illustrated by the fact that at the dedication service for Lakewood’s new campus both Rick Perry and Nancy Pelosi were guests of honor.

be viewed at oprah.com. In fact, the website advertises the message as “the sermon that changed the way Oprah sees her life.” (oprah.com) In 2006 *The Church Report* ranked Osteen as the most influential Christian in the world. In the same year Barbara Walters named him one of the ten most interesting people of the year. (*The Church Report*, 2006; ABC News, 2006) Others on her list included Sasha Baron Cohen, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and Jay Z. Osteen’s use of media has allowed him to access an extremely rare role, a minister who has ascended to the highest echelons of pop cultural celebrity.

Osteen’s father, John Osteen, was the founder and lead pastor of Lakewood. As a young man, John had been an employee in the theatre industry and a “frequent night club patron” when as an adult he “surrendered all to the Lord Jesus Christ, and passed from death into life.” (Thomas, 2012, p. 90) Following his conversion John became an itinerant evangelist. His participation in many camp style revivals allowed him to draw on his theatre background. Revivals were a well-established American religious ritual, which were generally characterized by charismatic and theatrical performances.

John Osteen eventually founded Lakewood as an independent non-denominational church, which freed him to exhibit more of the charismatic revival character in his weekly church services. John became known for his passionate and theatrical preaching. As it was believed this style was well suited for television, Lakewood began a local television ministry. John’s dramatic television preaching would have a formative effect on the younger Osteen.

At the age of 19, Joel Osteen became a producer of Lakewood’s television ministry, even though he had no formal training. For seventeen years Osteen edited his father’s sermons and services and prepared them for television broadcast, learning the craft of television production. But television production was not the only thing Osteen learned on the job. He also lacked

formal theological training. Therefore, he received both his theological and television education while producing and editing his father's sermons. This would have a profound influence on Osteen's ministry and was a major distinction from previous religious broadcasters. Falwell and Robertson used television to broadcast their beliefs; Osteen developed his beliefs through broadcasting. Osteen never had to strategize to translate his ministry to the screen. His Christian experience was grounded and formed in the screen.

Osteen is a religious broadcasting pioneer because he was likely the first broadcaster to study televangelism for such an extended period of time. For nearly two decades as a producer, he coached his father on how to be a better *television* minister. This motivated him to study other religious broadcasts and identify what elements of contemporary televangelism were effective and which should be abandoned. This practice developed when Osteen began to watch each of his father's sermons one time through with no volume. According to Osteen, "the key to learning how to communicate in television is to turn the sound down and observe the speaker's facial expression...I know that people who watch tv are more likely to tune in to a smiling face than any other." (Sinitiere, 2015, p.115) By turning down the volume, Osteen was attenuating the propositional doctrinal and theological content, and amplifying the performance. This experience would shape a ministry that would become possibly the most popular media ministry in history.

In 2001 John became ill and asked Joel to preach. Although he was reluctant, he agreed and delivered his first sermon. The following week his father died and Osteen was asked to be pastor of Lakewood. The dramatic character of Osteen's ministerial performance is illustrated by the fact that during his first sermon as pastor Osteen wore a pair of his father's shoes so he could symbolically dramatize "stepping into my father's shoes." (Sinitiere, 2015, p. 73)

Since Osteen assumed the position of pastor, Lakewood has become the largest church in America growing from 8,000 to over 40,000 members. The church has moved into what was previously the Compaq Center, past home to the NBA's Houston Rockets, which has a seating capacity of nearly seventeen thousand. The remodeling project of this facility cost nearly 100 million dollars and was paid for without assuming any debt. Four times each Sunday the facility is filled with an average total attendance of just over 43,000. (Sinitiere, 2015, p. 5)

As pastor Osteen has significantly expanded the media ministry. In fact, he claims that his father's death was used by God to allow him (Joel) to implement the media ministry God wanted. (Thomas, 2010) He has taken a regional broadcast and turned it into a global brand. His broadcast, *Joel*, operates on an annual budget of \$30 million and can be seen in every major market in America and 150 countries worldwide, with a weekly audience of seven million viewers. (*Church Growth Today*) It is broadcast by religious networks, like TBN (Trinity Broadcasting Network) local stations and secular networks like Discovery, USA, Lifetime, Fox and Freeform.

This type of success certainly does not occur without significant levels of intentionality. Lakewood has employed marketing experts, such as Duncan Dodds and Phil Cooke, to further the brands of Lakewood and Osteen. (Sinitiere, 2015, p. 121) As Cooke worked with Osteen on the media front, Dodds was working to establish "Joel" as a revolutionary religious brand. He created and distributed a handout entitled "Marketing and Creating a Brand." (Sinitiere, 2015, p 259) The goal of this brand was for people to think "Joel" when they wanted religion, in the same way people think "Starbucks" when they want coffee. (Sinitiere, 2015, p 120)

What truly set Dodd's approach apart was the fact that, "Dodds articulated the need for a focused branding strategy with biblical concepts relating to the evangelical distinctive of

missionary work.” (Thomas, 2010, p. 95) In other words Dodds was able to articulate a marketing strategy that intentionally included theological commitments and biblical language. Primary amongst these theological concerns was the Great Commission. Dodd sought to use Christ’s call to his followers to bear witness to him “in Jerusalem, Judea and to the ends of the earth” as a model for marketing the brand. In the strategy Dodds’ strategy Houston churches were “Jerusalem,” other Texas cities were “Judea,” and the “ends of the earth” was the global audience. (Thomas, 2010, p. 95) Falwell and Robertson focused on using biblical language to articulate a social and political narrative that would resonate with their evangelical audience. Osteen has used biblical language to produce a promotional narrative that markets his brand.

Because he isn’t working to keep the traditional narratives, symbols, meanings or message securely in place he has significant freedom in the narratives he does produce. Falwell and Robertson were both committed to the “old time story.” Osteen believes his strength relies in telling his own stories. And these stories work to produce a narrative that articulates meanings that are distinctive within the religious broadcasting landscape.

All of these elements coalesce into the Osteen performance. An illustration of the scope of this performance is the 2014 “America’s Night of Hope” tour. This was a stadium tour that went to major cities in America. Although it is not unprecedented to fill major metropolitan sporting venues with religious meetings, it is certainly uncommon in the contemporary culture. This is especially true if only one personality is the draw.⁵ But what is also noteworthy are the venues Osteen chose. In Los Angeles he appeared at Dodger Stadium. In New York he appeared at Yankee Stadium. Osteen chose venues with historical and cultural significance, illustrating the sense of the dramatic that is pervasive throughout his performance and message.

⁵ For example, the 1990’s saw the rise of the PromiseKeepers movement filling stadiums by using a cast of Christian personalities.

Osteen's Gospel: Persona, Performance and a Message of "Self-help"

In order to attract a larger audience, Robertson moved the conservative Christian message from the sacred spaces of a church to the more personal, popular and secular space of a talk show setting. Osteen's greatest innovation is bringing the secular "message" of contemporary talk shows (and other entertainment based programming) into the traditional sacred setting of a church.⁶ Simply put, Robertson brought the sacred into the secular; Osteen brings the secular into the sacred. Robertson's accommodation of updating the setting is revealed as being relatively superficial when compared to Osteen's more comprehensive strategy of updating the message. When Osteen's popularity is considered it seems clear that although setting and form undoubtedly influences people's decision to tune in, the message and its tone seem to exhibit a greater influence on these decisions in the context of religious broadcasting. It is also likely that Osteen's approach has the greater potential to bring about significant changes to the "sacred" community.

The key distinctive of "camera on the performance" is Osteen's commitment to produce a new persona and performance. As a student of religious broadcasting, Osteen developed a clear idea of what to exclude from this persona. Furthermore, as he performed this "study" during the flood of controversies in the late 1980's, he readily concedes that many of the suspicions people have of clergy, and televangelists in particular, are legitimate and justified. (Morgan, 2011) His response was the production of a religious broadcasting persona characterized by humor, boyish charm, stylish looks, and sincerity. In other words, he disarms many of these suspicions by producing a performance that is obviously counter to the image of the religious broadcaster as angry, manipulative, arrogant and out of touch. This persona is then located in a performance,

⁶ As an edited broadcast of Lakewood's weekly Sunday service, *Joel* infuses the production techniques of "camera on the pulpit," the most traditional form of religious broadcasting, with the tenor of contemporary talk show.

which is affable, accessible, entertaining, encouraging, and non-confrontational. Unlike Falwell and Robertson, who participated in producing the form of religious broadcasting, Osteen operates in a context that has forced him to reframe it.⁷

Central to this new framing is the performance that expresses the Osteen persona. Robertson embraced many of the external forms of contemporary talk shows while attempting to preserve the message and much of the tone of traditional church-based religious broadcasting. Osteen is committed to incorporating more of the inner forms, or themes, of contemporary television genres into his broadcast. In doing so he creates a broadcast that is more consumer oriented. He isn't broadcasting dire warnings of impending eschatological doom. He is effectively chatting with his audience about their day and encouraging them to make it better, all within a traditionally defined religious space.⁸ But this development also creates a broadcast that is driven more by the persona, and not the message, of the broadcaster.

But what exactly constitutes the "message" of contemporary talk shows? Many contemporary talk shows can be characterized as "self-help therapeutic entertainment" and as such are quasi-religious in orientation. Shows like *Ellen*, *Dr. Phil Show* and *The Rachel Ray Show* exude an optimism that serves to construct an audience and encourage that audience to reach their potential to become better people. How exactly "better" is defined is fundamentally articulated through the performance of the host, and as such it differs from show to show. This social articulation of "better," and by extension "good," has traditionally been accomplished most significantly within the religious sphere and articulated by prophets. For millions of television viewers today the performances of hosts like Ellen DeGeneres and Oprah Winfrey

⁷ It is also illustrative that he never asks for money during the broadcasts because he knows how many people feel about religious broadcasters. (OWN, 2013)

⁸ It is interesting that in the early 1990's Peck suggested Robertson's style was "chatty." (Peck, 1993) In the contemporary landscape, relative to Osteen's preaching, Robertson's "chatty" commentary feels dictatorial.

perform much of this prophetic role. However, Osteen has the advantage of being able to draw on the religious authority of the traditional model by conflating the roles of contemporary talk show and pastor.⁹

The success of contemporary talk shows is dependent upon whether or not the host's performance can articulate a coherent expression of the "morality" that provides the context to experience "better." Thus the performance and persona of the host must be clearly defined. Whether it is DeGeneres' warm humor or McGraw's no-nonsense advice or Ray's positive energy or Winfrey's legendary acts of generosity, all of the hosts have key elements that produce and characterize their "performance" and help define the ethical category of "good." The manner in which Osteen performs this task on *Joel* is a key point of analysis for this chapter. Furthermore, the quasi-religious characteristics of contemporary talk shows highlight how easily and fluidly religious and televisual forms influence and modify one another. Osteen's ability to exploit this dynamic is clearly on display during *Joel*.¹⁰

Joel isn't characterized by the indoctrination of theological and dogmatic propositions that is present on *Old Time Gospel Hour* and *The 700 Club*. Rather *Joel* is an expression of a more nebulous therapeutic character that employs more entertainment elements, like humor, to articulate its signification. All of this stems from Osteen's belief that the traditional model of Christian preaching is intrinsically aggressive and often victimizes the audience, thus turning them away from the truth. During a segment on *60 Minutes*, Osteen made the point that he doesn't want to preach the same "old message that just beats people up." (*60 Minutes*, 2007)

⁹ Although Robertson clearly conflated these roles as well, his articulation was not as immersed in the ethos of "host" as is Osteen's.

¹⁰ The connection between Osteen and contemporary talk shows is illustrated by the fact that like some contemporary talk shows such as *Ellen* and *Oprah*, Osteen's broadcast simply bears his first name. Although on television listings it often appears as Joel Osteen.

Osteen is characterizing the traditional preaching ritual as an inherently *violent* expression. In Osteen's estimation most audiences will not submit themselves to this practice.

But as Falwell and Robertson proved, "messages" are not isolated objects that can be shifted from one context to another without affecting change in both the environment and message. Thus Osteen cannot import a new message, heavily informed by contemporary entertainment, into the traditional church setting without creating a critical impact on the traditional character and purpose of church and ministry.

This impact is made visible through Osteen's ability to reformulate the meaning of some of the traditional symbols to establish a new narrative that is not rigid or dogmatic. The "old" message of religious broadcasting is based on a series of propositions such as "abortion is sinful," "homosexuality is evil," "Clinton is destroying America," and "God is punishing America." Osteen's message is much less specific and dogmatic. He characterizes the core of his message as, "our God is a good God who desires to bless those who are obedient and faithful to Him through Jesus Christ." (Payne, 2012, p.7) In a sense Falwell and Robertson had to compete with their definitive propositional messages for top billing on their broadcasts. Based on its persona-centered performance and much more imprecise message, *Joel* produces no such rivalry.

Joel: A General Overview

The Opening Sequence:

The opening sequence of "*Joel*" consists of three segments, which taken together form a preview of the Osteen brand and ministry. The first segment of the opening sequence is a personal word of encouragement from Joel or Joel and his wife Victoria. So before the viewing audience is brought inside the vast space of Lakewood church, it is brought into the Osteen's

upper class American home. A November 2013 broadcast begins with Joel and Victoria encouraging people to have more joy in their lives and experience the blessings God offers. Victoria begins by stating, “Life is too short to let things bother you. Everyday is a gift from God.” (Joel, 2013) This segment, which runs for a couple of minutes, is followed by a high production value commercial marketing a product of Osteen’s ministry.

The November 2013 broadcast, for example, showed a commercial marketing Osteen’s sermon series *Blessed not Stressed*. The production value of the commercial evokes the feelings of a family sitcom. The commercial is a scene of a mother cooking with her toddler son in an upscale and contemporary kitchen. As the mother is working, the son begins to break eggs on the counter and pour flour everywhere. The mother is about to lose her temper but instead decides to laugh at the situation and even allows her son to rub wet flour on her nose. Throughout the commercial a female voiceover explains that frustration with everyday trials will only limit one’s ability to experience the blessings God has destined for him. Joel and Victoria then appear and encourage the viewer to go to joelosteen.com and request a copy of the series. (Joel, 2013) The production value of the commercial also comments on Osteen’s success. Religious broadcasters are notorious for their unprofessional productions, which highlights just how out of touch they are. (Cooke, 2009) Here is a commercial a viewer could see on any program and represents a real life situation, not corny preaching.

As soon as the commercial concludes the title sequence for *Joel* begins. It is light and lively with upbeat music encouraging the viewer to “discover the champion in you,” the slogan of Lakewood Church. This is accompanied by quick cutting images of Osteen’s family playing football and playing with the family dog. The only text that appears during the title sequence is the word “Joel” in a stylized scripted logo.

Images of family and home dominate the opening sequence. This serves to establish the central themes of the broadcast and ministry. Osteen is represented as a family man who embraces the evangelical notion of “family values.” The great points of conflict in Osteen’s narrative don’t take place on the global stage but in the home or office in the midst of the everyday.¹¹ Family is another example of a significant traditional evangelical symbol that infuses with new meaning. His position as father and husband is clear, but he is repeatedly shown in ways that do not emphasize the elevated status that evangelicals associate with those positions. Family is a key component of the Osteen narrative, but only in its progressive definition.

The opening sequence of the broadcast also demonstrates the new values associated with “camera on the performance.” Both “camera on the pulpit” and “camera on the performance” broadcast from within the church. But “camera on the pulpit” used every possible moment to capture and disseminate the worship experience. Broadcasts would begin with the first words of the service and end with the last. And because “camera on the pulpit” was motivated by the utilitarian function of television to “get the word out” any other setting or message would have been understood as a waste of time. When Falwell was on screen he was always preaching.

“Camera on the performance,” on the other hand, shows Osteen, during this opening sequence, in a number of contexts. During the fall of 2013, he was shown in his house, playing outside with his family and pets, visiting the set of *The Bible* mini-series, and talking with people from the community. (*Joel*, 2013) He is also shown in commercials that are marketing his own products.¹²

¹¹ It is perhaps ironic that while Osteen is more sophisticated both technologically and in terms of marketing strategy he has a message that is more “down home” than the ubiquitous battle narrative of previous evangelical generations.

¹² This presence of commercials is noteworthy because “*Joel*” is broadcast on purchased airtime. Therefore, there is no financial necessity to have commercials. But Osteen isn’t motivated by simply transmitting the message; he is

The experience is enhanced if the viewer follows Osteen's encouragement and enters joelosteen.com to request a copy of a sermon series.¹³ As the viewer enters the website she is exposed to an assortment of advertisements for Osteen's products on the home page. It becomes clear that joelosteen.com serves as a type of hub of Osteen's varied media platforms. The home page informs browsers how to order copies of his books, listen to his sermons on the Joel Osteen Sirius XM channel, and donate "with a gift of ANY SIZE" to the ministry to obtain a DVD copy of the sermon series. "Joel and Victoria's Blog" is also prominently displayed on the page. In addition the site offers the familiar icons of youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Google+, which offer one click access to Osteen's pages on these social media. (joelosteen.com) Above all of this is the banner of the web page, which displays the logo of Joel Osteen ministries.

Rhetorically, the entire opening sequence is a commercial for Osteen's brand, which is being developed and marketed. The first segment, set in the home, establishes the desirability of the brand by placing Osteen in a clearly wealthy and pristine home. By presenting Osteen and his wife as materially successful and ordered in their home life the segment touches on two significant desires of Osteen's middle class audience. The second segment, the commercial, heightens the desirability of the brand. Television audiences are socialized to understand that any product that has a television commercial associated with it is desired by someone. The

marketing his brand/performance. The commercials, thus, aren't interruptions; they are part of the performance. They further the brand. He is constructing an immersive media experience.

¹³ The web site is a far more immersive experience than the 1-800 numbers used by previous religious broadcasting models, without the potential pressure of dealing with an actual operator. (Osteen does have a 888 number advertised as well.) Upon visiting joelosteen.com the viewer (who has by this point also become a "browser") is redirected to a page that informs the viewer that the series is available "with a gift of ANY SIZE." (joelosteen.com) This commercial is thus indicative of Osteen's approach of using established religious broadcasting techniques and infusing them with innovative contemporary approaches. Exchanging branded trinkets for financial donations is a long-standing religious broadcasting tradition. But no one has ever spent this type of production capital or received this type of financial reward. Osteen is simply operating in a different category. The days of the "700" club have been replaced by the "7 million" club.

commercial produces the conception that his sermon series is *marketable* commodity. Then the title sequence makes clear that “Joel’s” performance is the focus of the show.

Introducing the Service

Once this pre-produced opening segment concludes the broadcast of the service begins with a sweeping establishing crane shot of the vast interior of the Lakewood church. Not only does this shot establish the setting it communicates the breadth of the success that is formative to the narrative. The congregants are all standing and applauding as the camera moves towards the front of the church, eventually ending on a long shot of the stage.¹⁴

The stage is in the middle of two large choral areas that rise steeply from the stage and hold a 450-person choir. The choral areas are separated in the center of the stage by a large rotating metal globe, which is always clearly visible directly behind Osteen. Flanking the choral areas are two large sections decorated with rocks. Plants descend to the stage.¹⁵ At the front center of the stage is a relatively modest “podium” adorned only with Lakewood’s logo, a contemporary representation of an oil lamp with flame, an allusion to Psalm 119.¹⁶ Above the stage are three enormous LED screens, providing over 1100 square feet of image, that project Osteen during the service.¹⁷

The opening moments of the broadcast service establish the breadth of the *Joel* brand. From huge interior boulders, to the 450-person choir, to the size of the LED screens, it is clear that this is an immense, and in now way ordinary, experience. This sense of transcending the ordinary in a place of worship is certainly not new to Christian history. Construction of Gothic

¹⁴ *Joel* doesn’t broadcast the first half of the Lakewood service. By the time the broadcast begins the congregation has already been moved by experiencing a sensory immersive performance of praise music, testimonies and dramatic elements.

¹⁵ Ostensibly these set pieces are to call to mind the landscape of Israel.

¹⁶ This icon is another example of how Osteen co-opts traditional biblical imagery into his innovative narrative and brand.

¹⁷ The center screen is 33 x 19 feet; the two peripheral ones are 20 x 11.

cathedrals during the Middle Ages was based largely on the initial and sustained sense of awe the faithful felt when they stepped into the building. But unlike the solemn and largely solitary feelings experienced by worshippers in the Middle Ages, this is an experience of energy, excitement and community. And as the enormity of LED screen suggests, not a single part of the experience is to be missed. The size of the cathedrals was meant to influence the faithful to look inward and meditate on their spiritual condition, which largely produced feelings of guilt. The size of Lakewood is meant to influence the faithful to look outward and experience excitement as they prepare for the performance. One similarity between Lakewood and Gothic cathedrals is that the size of the structures is meant to communicate the legitimacy of the authoritative claims made by the clergy. In Lakewood's case this is, of course, Osteen.

Another key element of *Joel*, which is captured by the opening shot, is the racial and gender integration in Osteen's audience. The choir and congregation are made up of men and women from a spectrum of ethnic backgrounds. As such *Joel* becomes an expression of 21st century multi-ethnic culture and challenges the prevailing segregated standards of American churches, of which only 5% are racially integrated.¹⁸ (cnn.com, Aug. 8, 2008) He is the pastor for everyone.¹⁹

Osteen is introduced in a long shot showing him enter the center of this enormous set. Osteen is always wearing a neatly and fashionable tailored suit. The lack of ceremonial vestments presents a "man of the people," rather than one with the "vested" authority of

¹⁸ In fact, Oprah Winfrey made a couple of references celebrating the multi-ethnic character of the choir and the congregation during the broadcast of her interview with Osteen. (OWN, 2013)

¹⁹ This racial diversity is not only illustrative of Osteen's postmodern status; it is also representative of the New Testament's position on race and gender. In Galatians 3:28 St. Paul writes, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (NIV) Osteen is seen as progressive by many because of the racial integration of his congregation. But this progressive element is one that ties him into a theological position that is as old as Christianity itself. This ability to pursue innovative elements while being able to tie them back into traditional Christian standards is a hallmark of Osteen and critical to his success

denominational or sectarian status. However, the quality and style of his suit certainly makes claims of authority based upon another standard. His credibility is not built through some denominational statement but through his personal success.

The Osteen Liturgy

Religious narratives require rituals to enact and articulate their significance. Within Christian contexts these rituals often take the form of traditional liturgies that orient the worshipper toward God and the associated traditions. Osteen performs a type of liturgy that represents very little in the way of tradition because he created it. He always begins the broadcast with this “liturgy,” which is comprised of a three-part ritual. It opens with Osteen welcoming his audience. He then states that he likes to “start off with something funny” and tells a joke. Finally he tells the congregation to “hold up your Bible and say it like you mean it” and they all recite the “Bible creed.”²⁰

Osteen welcomes both the live and television audiences. He also invites anyone watching to visit Lakewood, “home to the greatest people in the world,” if they are ever in Houston. He follows up the welcome with his weekly joke, which serves as a mini-monologue. The joke has generally nothing to do with the topic of his sermon. It is not intended to set the theme of the message, but rather the *tone* of the performance. The joke also furthers the “everyone” ethos and disarms the suspicions and reservations outsiders might have about Osteen or clergy in general.

During an April 2013 broadcast Osteen told a joke about a “Southern Baptist man” and a “priest.” The Baptist man secretly visited the racetrack to bet on horse races and was on a losing streak. One day he noticed the priest blessing a horse and the horse won. In fact, every horse the priest blessed won. So the man took out all his money and watched as the priest performed a

²⁰ Osteen does not use this term. It is meant to simply serve in a descriptive manner.

rather elaborate blessing on a horse before a race. The man put all his money on this horse and was amazed when it fell over dead during the race. Crestfallen he asked the priest what happened. The priest responded by saying, “that’s the problem with you Protestants, you can’t tell the difference between a blessing and last rites.”²¹

Amidst the church-wide laughter and without explanation or introduction Osteen then says, “Hold up your Bible and say it like you mean it” and he recites in unison with the audience the following “creed.”²²

“This is my Bible. I am what it says I am. I have what it says I have. I can do what it says I can do. Today, I will be taught the Word of God. I boldly confess my mind is alert; my heart is receptive. I will never be the same. In Jesus’ name.”

This “creed” is critical to the articulation of Osteen’s message. He uses two traditional symbols, confessional creeds and the Bible, but reconfigures their respective meaning.

Creeds give congregations the opportunity to construct and declare what they believe and what they are committed to. Christian worship has always involved elements of communal declaration. They serve both pedagogical and formative utilities. They teach doctrine and build unity. A classic example is the Apostle’s Creed. For centuries many church traditions have recited a version of the Apostle’s Creed in unison. Affirming their commonly held beliefs and their unity.

²¹ This joke serves particularly well to highlight Osteen’s inclusive outlook. Religious broadcasters such as Falwell, Swaggert and Robertson are often highly critical of the Catholic Church. They challenge Catholic theology and criticize papal authority. In this joke it is the uninformed Southern Baptist who is the butt of the joke. In this simple joke Osteen is able to highlight his commitment to a more inclusive and ecumenical brand of Christianity

²² In its original form, the “creed” was written by John Osteen. Over the years Joel has introduced a couple of subtle changes.

Osteen's "creed" accomplishes this as well. But as is his practice Osteen articulates new meanings through the contemporary practice of the ritual. The Apostle's Creed employs the first person pronoun only three times though it is a twelve-part confession. The focus is ultimately not on the believer but on *what is believed*. It is an exposition of orthodox Christianity. Every sentence of Osteen's creed employs a first person singular pronoun and it is used a dozen times in this relatively short, seven-part, creed. Consistent with the 21st century, Osteen has created the *i-creed*, which focuses on the believer, their condition and possessions.

The second traditional symbol he employs is the Bible. The creed represents a high view of Scripture. However, Osteen never reads Scripture during the broadcast and it is used sparingly throughout.²³ Osteen references biblical stories, but he seldom provides textual or historical context. Instead he simply recognizes the significance of the Bible as a material symbol. During an interview with Oprah Winfrey for her *Lifeclass* program, he recounted how early in his ministry he tried to work more biblical texts into his sermons, but realized that "wasn't me." "I hit my groove when I just started talking and telling stories." (Winfrey, 2013)²⁴ The Bible is not valuable for the manifest doctrine and theological content. Instead it has symbolic value. It serves as a traditional icon of Christian identity that can be used to negotiate contemporary meaning.

If Scripture's significance is based upon the explicit content, there is a limited, although still significant, amount of interpretative space. By distancing the "Bible" from its historically recognizable content it becomes a symbol that, while still calling to mind Christian identity, references nothing specifically. Therefore, Osteen is provided with a symbol that situates him in

²³ The sermons always present at least one verse, or part of a verse, that Osteen quotes and the text is projected on the screens. Reading would likely break the flow of Osteen's performance.

²⁴ This is another illustration of Osteen reformulating the established "performance" of preaching.

the Christian identity, providing him with authority, while providing him expansive rhetorical space to establish meaning. That is how Osteen effectively establishes his “Christian” narrative.

Prayer is conspicuously absent from the opening ritual. Prayer is, of course, one of the most significant disciplines and practices of traditional Christianity. It is the act of communicating with the Almighty; as such it has a great deal of mystery and gravitas associated with it. Osteen avoids this at the beginning of the show. He prays only at the end of the broadcast. Bringing in such spiritual gravitas early on in the program would disrupt the flow of the performance, climaxes at the end of the sermon and then has its spiritual dénouement in the prayer.

The Sermon

Once Osteen has completed this introductory segment he enters into the sermon segment. To heighten the performance of the sermon Osteen writes his sermons in manuscript form and presents them word-for-word from memory. (Streeter, 2007)²⁵ In keeping with his strategy, Osteen’s sermons are a collection of stories of noteworthy people and events that will serve to illustrate the point of his sermon, which is some variation of his message of finding “God’s destiny for you.”

During the sermon Osteen relies upon both verbal and nonverbal stock codes. His use of nonverbal codes is critical, which is not surprising considering how many hours he committed to studying the nonverbal communication of religious broadcasters. The nonverbal codes make his performance far more charismatic and *tele-visual*, and creates a greater sense of trust with the audience. Thus nonverbal communication plays a critical role as Osteen attempts to overcome the public’s suspicions and mistrust of religious broadcasters.

²⁵ Memorizing sermons is an uncommon practice. Most sermons in the evangelical community are presented extemporaneously.

Osteen clearly uses nonverbal codes to produce his well-crafted and marketable persona. His slender and fit frame is always clothed in an obviously tailored and expensive suit.²⁶ His ties are always highlighted by a pressed white dress shirt and are always tied with a perfectly symmetrical full windsor knot. His hair is meticulously styled. His teeth are gleaming white. Before Osteen speaks a word the televised images make clear he is an obviously successful professional. Although much has been written about Osteen's smile, this is only a part of the overall Osteen persona that is given life through the televised image.

Once he does begin to speak it becomes clear he is a master of kinesics. His use of facial and hand gestures and bodily movement all work in concert with his verbal message. His hands are constantly in motion. Between pointing at the camera or toward heaven and folding his hands together in a gesture of unity or making fists to communicate strength and commitment, it is clear Osteen has a stock inventory of hand gestures that he perpetually draws on to help illustrate his message. He is able to skillfully use his hand to perpetually offer affirmation and encouragement to his audience and thus draw them into his performance.

Osteen is always very clearly in control of his bodily movements. He does not sway or pace in the chaotic fashion of some religious broadcasters nor does he stand motionless behind his pulpit as others do. Osteen has an intentional pattern of movement that plays out through each broadcast. He always begins stage left just to the right of his "podium" and then as he is introducing a new or comparative point he walks stage right to the left of it. All of his movements communicate order and control and draw both the live and televised audience into his performance.

²⁶ To demonstrate the intentionality that goes into the production of his persona, the suit coat is always a three-button front with the top two buttons buttoned during his preaching.

But it is his facial expressions more than any other nonverbal code that has brought attention to Osteen's performance. "The Smiling Pastor" is certainly an appropriate epithet. He never speaks for any extended time without smiling. As discussed Osteen believes people won't tune in if he isn't smiling. Therefore, he must be speaking words that are consistent with smiling. It is thus clear that in the finely tuned Osteen performance the relationship between verbal and nonverbal communication has been carefully orchestrated and television gives that relationship significance.

Eye contact is also important in the production of the Osteen performance. Osteen always begins his broadcast by looking at the camera, thus gaining "eye contact" with the television audience. In a broadcast of "America's Night of Hope" at Yankee Stadium in June of 2014, Osteen spent the first half of the sermon looking directly at the camera. It wasn't until after an edit nearly ten minutes into the broadcast that Osteen began to gain eye contact with his live audience. Most "camera on the pulpit" broadcasts produce a general sense that the televised audience is watching the broadcaster speak to their live audience. Thus the television audience becomes a secondary concern. Osteen avoids this by spending most of the first half of his message looking directly into the camera. Osteen also often tightly closes his eyes. In addition to times of prayer Osteen closes his eyes to communicate great commitment. It also tends to communicate a connection between Osteen and God, thus adding a significantly dramatic element to the performance and credibility to the persona.

Osteen's sermons are analogous to the interview segment of talk shows, when celebrities are brought on to the show to serve as encouragement or entertainment for the audience. The producers of talk shows are, of course, hoping to leverage the celebrity of the guests in order to produce a product the audience will consume. Osteen operates along the same strategy, even

though he generally doesn't have guests actually appear on the broadcast.²⁷ Instead Osteen introduces the celebrities through telling stories.

Less than a minute into the message during the February 2013 broadcast Osteen recited a litany of celebrity success stories. According to Osteen all these celebrities had to "remove the negative labels" placed on them by others. He begins by telling a story of Walt Disney as a teenager. Osteen claims that an art instructor told Disney that he was not creative and had no imagination. Disney, according to Osteen, had to "remove that negative label" and he "went on to do pretty good." He then recounts that Lucille Ball was told she didn't have any acting skills and should find another profession. She "removed the negative label" and "starred in *I Love Lucy* for years." He then tells his audience that Winston Churchill failed the sixth grade and was told he wasn't "smart enough" before becoming "one of the greatest prime ministers in history." Osteen sums up these stories by suggesting the common denominator is that they all chose to remove the negative labels. (Joel, 2013) Osteen then suggests King David had to do the same thing. Although Scripture does not claim that King David ever removed negative labels, Osteen is able to conflate the biblical text with his contemporary stories of popular cultural characters.

In the context of the narrative of the performance, King David is an ancient equivalent to Walt Disney and Winston Churchill. No one believed this small shepherd boy could kill Goliath or become king of Israel, but because he removed negative labels and believed in himself he was able to accomplish great things. Whether the stories are from the worlds of entertainment, politics or from the pages of history or Scripture, Osteen does not concern himself with the accuracy of details. Within the performance it is unimportant who exactly told Churchill he wasn't smart enough or even if anyone actually ever spoke these words. And it is obviously

²⁷ Occasionally Osteen does bring celebrities to his church. The presence of Tyler Perry and Oprah Winfrey during one week's message is a noteworthy example.

unlikely that Osteen could ever know if Churchill, Disney, Ball or David ever made the decision to “take off the negative label.” The point of the sermon is greatness is built by overcoming obstacles that have been placed in your way. Whether it is a historical story, contemporary celebrity or biblical pericope, Osteen will make the story fit his performance.

Perhaps it is most telling that the fourth celebrity Osteen employed during this segment was himself. He tells the story of how early on in his role of pastor he overheard two ladies speaking about how they didn’t think Osteen was as good as his father and would eventually lead to the church’s demise. Osteen recounts how as a young insecure minister this event added a “negative label” of “not good enough.” He had to take off that label and since he has “has done pretty good.” (*Joel*, 2013) He places himself in the same company of hugely successful and popular individuals in order to secure the credibility of the persona and performance he is enacting.

Fame and celebrity are key for Osteen because they provide him pictures of “success.” That is why Osteen embraces his own celebrity. When he appeared on Winfrey’s OWN he claimed that if he were not given the success and notoriety that he has he would not be able to help as many people as he does. (Winfrey, 2013) Celebrity is understood as a sign of God’s favor. This is a clear reversal of the traditional evangelical orientation that views celebrity as sign of moral decay. Celebrities for Falwell were cautionary tales, illustrations of what *not* to do. But Osteen is not segmenting the culture into “good” and “evil.” His message is not focusing on morality per se; it is focusing on success. The world for Osteen is only divided along the lines of “success” and “potential success.” Everyone has potential. Fame and celebrity are often proof that someone has fulfilled that potential. According to the Osteen narrative that fulfillment might well be the greatest good.

Throughout this process he employs biblical and theological language to ensure the connection between this message and Scripture. At one point near the end of a sermon Osteen encouraged his audience to take off the negative labels and wear the labels of “restored,” “redeemed,” and “forgiven.” (*Joel*, 2013) He offers no exposition or explanation of these terms. These words become, like his use of Scripture, symbols with communal significance but without explicit definition. It is clear these symbols are valued by the congregation as they are met with rousing congregational applause. It is unclear, however, as to whether the congregation, or Osteen for himself, can articulate a theologically informed definition of any of the terms.

Osteen’s use of the Bible and pulpit illustrates the tension between traditional symbols and progressive meaning and identity. He challenges the elements of tradition that have necessarily enacted exclusionary practices even while relying upon the traditional symbols, both material and linguistic, to produce a sense of the sacred authority in which he operates.²⁸

Osteen’s humor is also a key element to the sermon segment. Even as he begins every broadcast with a joke he liberally sprinkles humor throughout the performance. Falwell’s humor, what little was broadcast, was focused on criticism and served to clearly define who was and who was not his audience. Atheists, social liberals and democrats all found themselves the butt of his jokes. Osteen again removes limitations to the potential of his audience size by employing humor that is not sarcastic or critical.

Osteen received emphatic applause after telling a story about meeting with a drug dealer. He recounted how this young man told him he was the biggest drug dealer in the neighborhood

²⁸ Osteen in this regard represents a degree of consistency with the post evangelical movement. Even as the postmodern has sought to reduce and decentralize authority so also has the post evangelical movement. Osteen, however, is not a post evangelical because lacks the theological direction and commitment that drives the movement. He is an evangelical in the postmodern world who simply does not deal with the burden of theological positions or presuppositions. As he decentralizes authority he frees symbols from their traditional moorings.

and knew it wasn't right but couldn't stop. Osteen said he shared the following with the young man.

If you can sell drugs you can sell pharmaceuticals or stocks and bonds. Think about it. If you sell drugs you have to get the word out, that is advertising. You have to manage your inventory, that's administration. You have take care of your customers, that's customer service. Don't sell yourself short. Remove any negative labels. (*Joel*, 2013)

As Osteen was telling the story his tone and volume dramatically rose to the climax. As this was happening the broadcast switched to cutaways of the audience laughing and clapping in response. The climax of the story was shot with a sweeping crane shot moving over the applauding audience to the stage.²⁹ The narrow limits that are imposed by Falwell's and Robertson's traditional narrative would never allow them to find humor in an exchange with a drug dealer. Within that narrative drug dealers are solemn reminders and warnings against the depravity that secularization has produced. But this humorous story is clearly at home in Osteen's performance.

Ending the Service

Osteen ends his broadcast with two prayers that serve as his benediction. However, it is not merely a "closing prayer." It is an offering of blessing to the congregation. A traditional benediction for Judaism and Christianity is the Aaronic priestly blessing from Numbers 6:24-26.

²⁹ Osteen's use of humor is another element of his performance that critics point to as they label him "Christianity-lite." (Washington Post, 2005.) But what is interesting is his humor is likely more consistent with biblical precepts than either Falwell's or Robertson's, even though they received far less criticism from within the evangelical community. Their humor, filled with sarcasm and biting criticism of individuals and groups, certainly did not seem to represent the notions of community, encouragement and love as represented in the New Testament. However, there was never a large outcry because their humor resonated with the social and cultural identities of the fundamentalist and evangelical community of that period. Osteen is working to produce a "kinder and gentler" conservative Christianity and his humor represents that cultural and religious trend.

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.³⁰

Osteen's updated benediction is another example of his systematic reformulation of traditional Christian symbols. He does not explicitly invite the congregation into a state of prayer when he pronounces his benediction. Generally in Christian services a minister will say, "let us pray" or the liturgy will direct everyone into prayer. Osteen seamlessly slips into prayer. He also doesn't even invoke the name of God at the beginning of the prayer, which makes it unclear if he is in fact speaking to God.

In a February 2013 broadcast Osteen's prayer began with the following words.

The bondage of the past is no longer going to have any influence on you. You are going to rise up and be the son of strength and the daughter of influence, the child of victory. (*Joel*, 2013)

These words are obviously not directed to God but rather to the congregation. However, Osteen is speaking these words with his eyes closed. After a few more encouraging catch phrases Osteen closes by saying, "In Jesus' name, if you receive it can you say Amen." And he opens his eyes. This is the climax of the *Joel* broadcast.

A few elements of this benediction are noteworthy. Osteen is clearly "claiming" the blessings that he believes God has destined for everyone watching. Thus it represents the traditional motivation of the benediction while eschewing the traditional form. As seen in the Aaronic blessing above the benediction traditionally seeks God's action, although implicitly. "May the Lord bless you and keep you." Osteen is seeking to elicit the people's actions. "You are going to rise up and be sons of strength." Osteen is highlighting his commitment to motivate the actions of the people, not the actions of God. God has already acted in creating people's

³⁰ A benediction, meaning to "speak well" in Latin, is traditionally offered at the end of a service.

destiny. Now the responsibility is on the person to “receive it.” Osteen produces a benediction that is combination of an Oprah “pep-talk” than a traditional Christian benediction.

The broadcast ends with Osteen giving the television audience an opportunity to accept Jesus. This segment contains the second of the two prayers, and serves as the dénouement of the broadcast. Although Osteen is wearing the same suit from the rest of the broadcast it is clear this segment was recorded at a different time and apparently not in front of the live congregation. Thus *Joel* opens and closes with segments that are recorded specifically for the television audience. From his position beside his pulpit Osteen tells his television viewers that, “we never want to close our broadcast without giving you an opportunity to make Jesus the Lord of your life.” (*Joel*, 2014)

Osteen’s version of the “sinner’s prayer” is “Jesus Christ, I repent of my sins. Come into my heart, wash me clean. I make you my Lord and Savior.” (*Joel*, 2014) Notions of being washed clean of sin and Jesus entering another’s heart are foundational constructs in the evangelical notion of salvation. What is interesting is throughout his broadcasts Osteen intentionally avoids the issue of sin. However, here in the last segment he is encouraging individuals to recognize their sin and ask Jesus to forgive them and wash them clean.

Osteen’s message involves the need for repentance and the turning away from sin. It doesn’t, however, involve a description of just what one is repenting from. Osteen never intimates that an individual is in need of forgiveness. That, after all, is not the battle or struggle he is outlining. The battle he focuses is on is the individualized battle of becoming the “best you.” This is a battle that is won by positive attitudes and faith in one’s destiny. It is not won by recognizing one’s brokenness or sinfulness.

The closing segment ultimately serves as another way in which Osteen establishes the context of his performance. The “altar call” is another traditional symbol that he employs to establish a sense of the sacred identity but he offers no real context of what it entails. In effectively displacing much of the traditional meaning he creates free-floating symbols that are still able to tie him to the traditional evangelical community even as they allow him the interpretative space to negotiate and associate new meanings.

Traditional Symbolic Inventories and New Narratives

As an ordained minister, Osteen has cobbled together his personal and performance by combining established symbols, infused with traditional religious significance, with contemporary popular constructs and narratives. Specifically they are an amalgamation of elements of his father’s Pentecostal faith, earlier religious broadcasting, and contemporary popular culture, such as self-help therapy and new age upbeat optimism. And to this mix he always sprinkles a fair helping of Scripture, which produces what he refers to as the “biblical basis” of his messages.³¹ “God is on our side and wants each person to live the better life God has planned for them.” (Streeter, 2007) This message is clearly articulated by using symbols such as “God,” “God’s will” and “blessing” from traditional religious inventories, but reformulates them with new meaning. “God” is no longer the transcendent wrathful entity who presides tyrannically over Falwell’s narrative. He is now an imminent, kind and encouraging friend who has prepared a positive destiny for everyone.

In the *60 Minutes* interview Osteen made a point to reference his “podium.” The correspondent then asked him explicitly whether it was a “pulpit” or not. Osteen casually responded that he “just prefers the term podium.” (Streeter, 2007) The manner of his response

³¹ Osteen has responded to his critics, who claim he doesn’t preach the Bible, by claiming all of his messages are “biblically based.” (Streeter, 2007)

illustrates the strategic dynamic behind this rhetorical maneuver. The tone with which he responded and the terms he employed and rejected are all part of building the performance. He makes clear that he has replaced the autocratic indoctrination of Falwell and Robertson with an ostensibly egalitarian and informal discourse by using the term “podium.” A preacher tells people they are sinners from a “pulpit.” A storyteller tells people encouraging stories from a “podium.” He is reformulating symbols, but he is doing it in a non-confrontational and non-violent manner, so as to not marginalize any potential audience member. Many contemporary evangelical and postevangelical ministers have chosen to preach without a pulpit in order to overcome the largely negative connotations. By simply renaming the pulpit, Osteen is able to continue to draw upon some of the traditional inventoried meanings in order to legitimize the new narrative that will invariably arise out of this practice.

Osteen does this with the linguistic symbols as well. In the sermon, “The Power of ‘I Am’” he reformulates the meaning of the traditional symbols of “I am.” This phrase is a recognizable name of God that represents his universality and omnipotence.³² Osteen uses this established meaning as the basis of his shift towards his more self-help therapeutic message. In the sermon he repeatedly encourages the audience to use “I am” in the context of “I am valuable as opposed to I am average, I am beautiful as opposed to I am old.” (oprah.com) Traditional Christian theology claims that the “I am” has great power. Osteen co-opts this claim through his performance that produces a new site of power, thus a new meaning.

Ritualistic symbols do not merely serve as representations of established identities; they actively serve as sites of negotiation in which the faithful can work out and enact religious identity. Therefore, by reformulating some of the sacred symbols of Christianity and Christian ritual, Osteen produces new Christian narratives that allows for a significant redefining of

³² When Moses asked God who he was in the third chapter of Exodus God responded with “I Am.”

Christian identity and ministry. Osteen significantly widens negotiation and interpretative space through his untraditional use, or in some cases lack of use, of Christian symbols. Of course, Robertson and Falwell produced new narratives as well, but the difference is that they were more adamant that their narratives were from the Bible. Osteen does not make such radical claims. He freely admits that he doesn't preach the Bible because he believes that there are others who are better educated and suited to do so.³³ (Streeter, 2007) Osteen has explicitly liberated his narrative from the traditional symbolic biblical foundation.³⁴

The reformulating of traditional symbols and the broadening of the interpretative space has clearly extended his popularity. But the extent to which Osteen reformulates is illustrated by the substantial criticism he receives from the members of the conservative Christian community. His critics claim he does not teach the Word of God and that his messages have very little to do with biblical Christianity. (Lee, 2009) He has been referred to as "Christianity Lite" and accused of watering down Christianity by avoiding sin and judgment in his sermons. John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, CA and a leading evangelical voice, called Osteen a "pagan religionist" and a "quasi-pantheist" during a 2011 sermon. (MacArthur, 2011) Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has stated that Osteen is an example of how ministries often focus on "building crowds and not churches." (Mohler, 2011) In a sense these criticisms are accurate. He doesn't set out to accomplish what MacArthur and Mohler do. But the controversy arises when he "tells his stories" in the sacred spaces using the

³³ One would be hard pressed to imagine Falwell ever making such a claim.

³⁴ Although, Robertson and Falwell might take exception to this practice, it was their practice of developing contemporary Christian narratives through religious broadcasting that allowed Osteen to do so. By creating narratives that were so heavily infused with contemporary political and social commentary, they clearly contributed to a drift away from strict interpretation of the biblical record. After all, very little of what they said on their broadcasts could be considered biblical exposition.

sacred symbols. In that context he has become, not just a storyteller with encouraging optimistic stories, but a “false prophet” teaching false doctrine. (Henderson, 2013)

Conclusion

Joel Osteen is the most marketable commodity in the contemporary world of religious broadcasting and likely in its history. Osteen has no rival in his ability to use media to produce an immersive religious brand. He is, as Lee and Sinitiere suggest, a “holy maverick” who has furthered the entrepreneurial spirit of religious broadcasting. (Lee and Sinitiere, 2009). The Osteen brand has distinguished itself by its ability to bridge the conservative “sacred” world of religious broadcasting and the “secular” consumer driven world of the contemporary self-help industry. This is his most revolutionary contribution. He is a televangelist who is actually hard to hate.

Even though he has significantly reshaped the religious broadcasting experience, he is clearly a product of early religious broadcasting models. Osteen is the latest step in the evolutionary development. Falwell respected the power of television enough to employ it. Robertson respected the power of television enough to copy it. Osteen respected the power of television enough to *study* it. Before Osteen, no major religious broadcaster had ever invested the amount of time and money into the *art* and *performance* of religious broadcasting. Within the paradigm of “camera on the performance,” religious broadcasting becomes a craft. Osteen is a master craftsman.

But what are the consequences of this new approach? Falwell and Robertson galvanized a community and critically contributed to a social movement through their use of divisive rhetoric. Osteen’s broadcasts are more popular than either of theirs, but yet there is no obvious large-scale social or cultural impact. This is partly due to the fact that Osteen is the religious

broadcaster for an evangelical community that has begun to show signs of fragmentation in recent years. And although Osteen certainly is not to be blamed (or credited) for this development, his propensity for drastically reformulating traditional meaning-making symbols certainly contributes to the trend. Osteen will likely never change the way the evangelical community understands their faith, but he is constantly impacting the way individual Christians do.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

According to the Pew Research Center, roughly 70% of Americans considered themselves Christians in 2015. This represents an 8% drop from the previous Pew study conducted in 2007. Likewise, evangelicals saw their numbers decline from 25% of the population to 24%. Although this might not be seen as a significant decline, it is a *decline* nonetheless. In addition, the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion has grown from 16% in 2007 to nearly 23% in 2015. This means that the population of non-religious Americans is greater than that of Catholic Americans (20%). The U.S. religious landscape is changing, and it can be argued that evangelicalism and Christianity are not “winning.” (Pew Research, 2015)

Evangelicals will undoubtedly lament these findings, but not many will be surprised. Since the inception of the National Association of Evangelicals in the middle of the 20th Century, a central rallying cry amongst evangelicals has been a call to battle against the rise of secularism. American evangelicals were formed as a group of Christians who sought new models of cultural engagement. The manifest objective of this engagement was to bring the gospel to the lost world. By extension, battling against anything that might be conceptualized as an obstacle to the gospel, such as secularism, is seen as part of this objective. Therefore, evangelicals need more than the Word of God; they need to produce a socially relevant and powerful institution that serves as a legitimate alternative to secularism in order for the gospel to flourish. For many, the evangelical church satisfies this need for an alternative institution.

The landmark Annenberg study on religious broadcasting in the early 1980's found that the great majority of religious broadcasting viewers already held strong religious beliefs. Religious broadcasts, it claimed, "*failed* to reach large numbers of viewers who are not actively religious, nor do they seem likely to make many new converts." (Gerbner, et. al., 1984) This claim not only highlights the makeup of the viewing audience, it also implicitly comments on the objectives of religious broadcasting. Religious broadcasting, the study asserts, seeks to attract a wider audience but *fails* in this pursuit. There is little to suggest that in the past few decades there have been any significant changes that would challenge the Annenberg findings.

Why then does religious broadcasting persist? Furthermore, why do broadcasters continue to express their belief in media's saving potential?¹ Regardless of what the manifest motivations and objectives of religious broadcasters might be, it simply cannot promote salvation to the lost because the lost are not watching. The test for religious broadcasting is its ability to provide a sense of "salvation" to its actual audience. This "salvation" takes the form of an empowering narrative that claims Christianity is a relevant and legitimate reality in a contemporary world characterized by pluralism and secularism. This "salvation" is extremely valuable for a community who persistently feels marginalized and persecuted in the contemporary world. As Bobby Alexander articulates in *Televangelism Reconsidered*, religious broadcasting's primary utility is not reaching and saving the "lost" but the justification and legitimizing of the "saved." (Alexander, 1984) Evangelical television shows, television networks, and television celebrities all act as cultural capital for the self-proclaimed embattled community. Being such a significant part of the media landscape can potentially produce great rewards.

¹ The latter question becomes particularly germane when it is clear that very little of the actual airtime of religious broadcasting is focused on this ostensible objective.

This reality appreciably mitigates the critique that religious broadcasting simply “preaches to the choir.” Neither religious broadcasters nor their audiences fit the reductionist frames of popular stereotypes. As scholars such as Alexander and Hadden and Shupe have suggested, the general perceptions that religious broadcasting audiences are gullible and ignorant simpletons accepting everything the manipulative and dishonest broadcaster says is simply unfounded. (Alexander, 1994; Hadden and Shupe, 1988)² Religious broadcasters know that the great majority of their audience comprises believers, and they target that audience. Religious broadcasting then becomes a contemporary site of negotiation in which the broadcasters and audience work to define Christianity.

In this dissertation I argue that religious broadcasting has been crucial to the contemporary definition of evangelical Christianity. This is the case regardless of the form of a particular religious broadcast. In analyzing “camera on the pulpit,” “camera on the couch,” and “camera on the performance” elements emerged that highlighted the distinctive character of these approaches. However, clear and common patterns develop that offer insight into the practices of religious broadcasting as a whole for the evangelical community. Ultimately, these practices do not reflect the manifest motivation of converting the “lost,” but rather providing evangelicals with feelings of empowerment, legitimacy and relevancy. Taken in concert these elements serve as a bulwark for the community against the encroachment of secularization and the associated social marginalization. Identifying and analyzing these distinctive practices is the key finding of this dissertation. The strategies used to create these feelings and shape this definition of evangelical Christianity are articulated through and expounded upon in four topics: broadcast strategy, lived religion, process of cultural accommodation, and the central feature of

² Furthermore, it represents an antiquated model of media scholarship, harking back to hypodermic needle and mass society paradigms.

empowerment through religious broadcasting. This chapter will further assess the value of religious broadcasting by exploring these four topics.

The Production of the Lead Character

It is no small task for an individual to be able to provide a broad audience with feelings of legitimacy, relevancy and empowerment. The audience must trust the individual a great deal. The production of this trust is a key characteristic of religious broadcasting. The focus of religious broadcasting is invariably the theology and/or ideology of the host. In doing this, religious broadcasting simplifies and personalizes the production of trust by providing a particular name, face and ideology. This trust is furthered based upon the implicit authority that comes from being televised, and is increased based upon audience size. Surely, seven million *Joel* viewers can't be wrong. This sentiment is strengthened for the Christian viewer because the vast majority of those seven million are also Christians.

To ensure the production of this trust, differing views or value systems are never represented as legitimate alternatives. Rather they are placed in heterodox frames. This extremely centralized model of authority is generally not questioned because it is consistent with the *religious* context in which God is the singular source of all authority. As long as the religious broadcaster is able to produce a compelling narrative that demonstrates God has in some way “called” the broadcaster to speak his word, his authority will be viewed as legitimate.

It is clear that the fundamental manifest motivation behind the use of broadcast to propagate and transmit the sacred message(s) is the production of larger audiences in order to “reach” larger groups with the gospel. However, the means of obtaining those audiences have changed through the development of religious broadcasting. The “characters” portrayed by Falwell, Robertson and Osteen provide an overview of this development. Within the strategic

context of “camera on the pulpit,” Falwell’s character can be identified as a prophet.³ With “camera on the couch,” Robertson’s character is best identified as a broadcaster.⁴ And Osteen’s character portrayed on “camera on the performance” is best understood as a celebrity performer.⁵ Each of these roles represents a different set of responsibilities and expectations. But each is able to provide the key components of, relevancy and empowerment to the audience.

In “camera on the pulpit,” Falwell’s placement of a camera in his church is an expression of bringing the secular sphere into the realm of the sacred. In doing so, he privileged the sacred as the immutable component. Within this context, the audience is expected to understand the message on and through its own terms. As a religious broadcaster, he was forced to exhibit a degree of accommodation in his communication practices. But he would limit that accommodation. He would claim that he would never change the message, even as he was willing to use any form or medium to communicate it. (AAT, 2003)

Through these practices and his rhetoric Falwell perpetuated a strong dualistic orientation between sacred and secular spheres. The “camera on the pulpit” narrative required his audience to choose between these two spheres. In other words “camera on the pulpit,” conceptualized the relationships of sacred (Christianity) and secular (culture) in oppositional frames. The secular is framed as a constant threat to the sacred, and as such its influence must be limited. Ultimately, this approach is unsatisfactory because it seeks to effectively alleviate the biblical tension by minimizing the secular.

Robertson has persistently insisted he is a “broadcaster” and not a minister. A prophet remains a prophet as long as he speaks the message. Audience size is immaterial. This is not the

³ As demonstrated in chapter four, it is clear that Falwell thought of himself within this biblical identity.

⁴ As reported in chapter five, Robertson consistently refers to himself using this term.

⁵ It is unlikely that Osteen would choose this label for himself. However, when the breadth of his media involvement is considered, it is clear that Osteen is in fact a celebrity.

case for a “broadcaster.” His commitment and willingness to accommodate to the audience is far greater than Falwell’s. Robertson, like Falwell, believes he will not change the content of the message. But, unlike Falwell, he is willing to change the *telling* of the message.

Robertson’s key innovation was the decision to bring the sacred religious experience into the secular sphere of the studio. In doing so he began to privilege the secular sphere in a way not previously experienced. The secular became the setting of the sacred expressions of truth. This was an extreme step in the development of religious broadcasting that began to increasingly blur the lines of distinction between the two spheres. It thereby created a context in which new distinctions needed to be dictated. This is where Robertson’s *religionized* neo-conservative narrative came into effect.

The privileging of the secular was an articulation of the pursuit of cultural relevance in a society becoming increasingly secular and deaf to traditional religion. In “camera on the couch” the people of God must be more accepting of the cultural institutions and practices that populate the world. Thus, Robertson lessens the oppositional relationship between Christ and culture that was favored by Falwell, but does so without alleviating the antagonism. “Camera on the couch” negotiates the *in and not of* tension through frames of an antagonistic engagement with culture. Robertson is more amenable to playing the world’s game by their rules. But he does it so that he can, in his words, “beat them at their own game.” (Rob bio) Ultimately, the manner in which he blurs the lines of distinction does not produce a satisfactory response to the dialectic. The biblical requirement is the perpetuation of both spheres in tension. Robertson seeks to overcome the secular with the sacred.

In “camera on the performance,” Osteen returns to bringing the secular sphere into the sacred sphere by bringing cameras into his church. However, this process, as it represents a

further evolution of religious broadcasting, has become highly distinctive compared to Falwell's articulation. Thanks in part to "camera on the couch" blurring the lines of distinction, Osteen does not simply bring a camera into the church; he brings the cultural/secular ethos into the church. When one watches a broadcast of *OTGH*, it is clear that it is set in a church. Such is not the case with broadcasts of *Joel*. Falwell borrowed from the secular sphere in order to expand the reach of the sacred. Osteen borrows from the sacred to enrich and *spiritualize* the experience of the secular. This is illustrated by the fact that he is equally at home on Oprah Winfrey productions as he is on his own broadcasts.⁶

Even though Osteen's broadcasts are set in the sacred space of a church he does not privilege the sacred because he has been more willing to alter it. His "sacred" narrative articulates an image of the gospel that is less about the declaration of a propositional message and more about an opportunity to express the personal success experienced in the marketplace of a consumer driven society. He doesn't have to perpetuate the strong sacred/secular divide because, in his narrative, society is conceptualized less as a site of antagonism denying Christians opportunities to succeed, and more as a site in which Christians can achieve success of all kinds.

The "performer's" job is not to simply proclaim the truth, but to entertain his audience as well.⁷ Therefore, Osteen's accommodation has progressed beyond Robertson. Accommodation is required in order to be relevant, but far greater accommodation is required in order to be entertaining. Whereas Robertson accommodated by inserting the sacred into the secular realm, Osteen's accommodation is characterized by allowing the secular to have an immersive influence on the sacred. In doing so he reduces the significance of the biblical tension. His answer is an

⁶ It is difficult to believe Falwell would have every agreed to have Winfrey on *OTGH* or appear on her show.

⁷ Falwell, of course, had to entertain his audience as well. But with Osteen the entertainment factor has become more central to the religious broadcasting experience.

easily accessible position that emphasizes the secular but justifies that choice with a sprinkling of the sacred.

Lived Religion: Gaining Legitimacy through “Everyday” Rituals

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for and the certainty of things unseen.” (Hebrews 11:1) There is clearly a persistent tension in the experience and expression of faith. The spiritual life of a Christian is a process of negotiating the apparent contradictions of being *certain* of that which is *hoped* for and *unseen*. This process can undoubtedly influence the faithful to wrestle with the legitimacy of their faith. This challenge is most certainly exacerbated in the contemporary American cultural context of rising secularism and pluralism. There are a myriad of voices explicitly and implicitly challenging the legitimacy of believing in something unseen and unverifiable.

This need for feelings of legitimacy is heightened when the community of faith is one that feels persecuted by the mainstream culture, which is understood to be intentionally challenging the legitimacy of the faith. The community of faith constantly feels compelled to justify their legitimacy. This process is played out everyday in the evangelical community, not primarily in the pulpits or theology classes, but in the everyday rituals of evangelicals.

Of course, the everyday “secular” rituals are far more numerous than the sacred ones and as such have a high degree of significance in determining the character of an individual believer’s faith. However, in order for these secular rituals to accomplish such a critical role, the community must impose the established sacred standards onto the secular experiences. For example, television, mainstream or religious, can become a key marker, demonstrating the quality of a believer’s faith based upon the viewing choices the believer makes. This is

especially true if there are television options that are explicitly recognized as the “sacred alternative.”

All mainstream media ultimately serve in this role for the evangelical community. The films of the 1930’s and 1940’s, the rock n’ roll of the 1950’s and 1960’s, the television programs of the 1970’s and 1980’s all gave Christians the opportunity to negotiate a sense of their engaged faith in clear frames. By determining which artifacts were appropriate for consumption, evangelicals produced standards of faith.⁸ This process eventually encouraged the development of particularly “Christian” media, which serves to articulate and normalize many of the proper “Christian” responses.

With the introduction of “Christian” broadcasts on both radio and television, conservative Christians were provided with a *dictated* space in which they could negotiate and articulate the standards of their faith. The faithful still demonstrated degrees of agency but the space in which they performed these tasks became more restrictive. Furthermore, the *reach* of these broadcasts was unparalleled. By creating national and international broadcasts, evangelical Christians were able to transcend regional boundaries. In doing so, the prescribed standards were becoming normative on a much larger scale, which furthered their claims to legitimacy.

It is important to note that with the rise of “Christian” media, evangelicals did not abandon mainstream media. Many of the network offerings of the final decades of the 20th century became key elements in the evangelical identity. In the 1980’s evangelicals were highly critical of the perceived loose sexual morality of shows like *Three’s Company*, *Dynasty*, *Fantasy*

⁸ This is by no means suggesting that film, music or television served in this capacity only during the two decades mentioned. All three media continue to serve in this capacity into the 21st century. Although it is interesting to note that the significance applied to any given medium invariably wanes as the medium loses cultural centrality. Thus, with the advent of music, television and internet, for example, the evangelical community has become considerably less concerned with which movies the faithful view.

Island and *The Love Boat*. The standard decision to *not* watch these shows was likely a more powerful galvanizing force than the viewing of appropriate programs.

A key function of these prescribed responses produced out of lived religion is their ability to alleviate some of the dissonance associated with the dialectal through much of the Christian experience. One such tension that has a pervasive presence in church history is the belief that Christians are to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. It is difficult to overstate the significance of this tension in the spiritual life of the church.

However, contemporary evangelicals face a unique challenge because they have sought to have a high degree of cultural engagement (*in*) without sacrificing any of the rigidity of their theological commitment (*not of*). But what is of particular significance for this dissertation is the fact that the ability to negotiate this tension in a satisfactory manner allows Christians a critical sense of legitimacy.

For the past fifty years television, particularly religious broadcasting, has provided an idealized way to negotiate and even resolve this key tension and produce feelings of legitimacy for the evangelical community. It does this in two significant ways. First, as scholars like Alexander and Hendershot suggest, it provides the community with a share of the popular landscape. (Alexander, 1994; Hendershot, 2004) This process diminishes the threat of secularism as a challenge to the legitimacy of faith. This motivates evangelicals to gain greater and greater shares of the landscape because evangelical growth necessitates secular decline. Secondly, it provides a sense of an easily accessible resolution to the tension that can influence questions of legitimacy.

During the middle and late 20th century, there were few cultural elements that were more *in* the world than television. It was sensible, therefore, to use this pervasive medium for

evangelical purposes and satisfy the *in* requirement. The *religious* character of the broadcast would continue to satisfy the *not of* component. Religious broadcasters can point to their choice of producing particularly *Christian* programming as evidence of their commitment to remain *not of* even while they point to the size of their viewing audience as evidence of their presence *in* the world. Likewise, audience members can justify the consumption of these *Christian (in)* yet popular (*not of*) cultural artifacts as evidence of their commitment to *in and not of*.

However, as the evangelical broadcaster delves further into the world there exists the pervasive pressure to exhibit a matching commitment to being *not of* the world. This pressure is answered through the production of contemporary social narratives that include identifiable elements of biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism and activism (the Bebbington quadrilateral). Thus, the religious broadcaster is able to satisfy the *in and not of* requirements by employing a secular form to communicate a sacred message that resonates with the evangelical community.

However, it would be impossible to produce and communicate a coherent and intelligible narrative that was purely *not of*. These “sacred” narratives are necessarily constructed through the use of everyday secular symbols. This produces the process by which religious broadcasters effectively co-opt existing contemporary narratives and reframe them as uniquely Christian narratives by inserting established sacred symbols. These new “Christian” narratives mitigate any substantive contradictions that might exist between the “sacred” symbols and the “secular” narratives by establishing new conventions that effectively interpret the narratives as part of an idealized established Christian experience.

Falwell and Robertson, for example, were heavily influenced by the rise of late 20th century neo-conservatism and the associated narrative of a contemporary culture war. In their respective narratives neo-conservatism’s high regard for free market capitalism became framed

as God's chosen economic system. The Soviet Union, which was famously labeled as "the evil empire" by Ronald Reagan became a specifically Satanic agent.⁹ Likewise, defending Israel, which enjoyed a highly favored status amongst neo-conservatives, became a rallying cry for Falwell and even more so for Robertson. This is all seamlessly conflated with Christian theology so it becomes the privileged Christian interpretation.

Osteen's rhetoric focuses on the plight of the individual, co-opting contemporary self-help narratives. Self-help's commitment to positive self-speak serves as a fundamental tenant to Osteen's message, but he frames it in theological terms. The title of Osteen's most recent book, *The Power of I Am*, is an exposition of how positive and affirming comments, such as, "*I am smart*," will have a transformative effect on the individual. However, to gain a fuller insight into Osteen's enterprise it is necessary to recognize that "I Am" is the title God uses to describe himself in the Book of Exodus. Therefore, Osteen is able to insert a well-established Judeo-Christian sacred symbol into his contemporary narrative, reframing the symbol and the Christian experience.

Through these developments, television came to be seen as an idealized ritual in which to alleviate the tension. By reaching millions of people, it allowed a level of cultural engagement that was unparalleled throughout church history. But it did so in such a way as to protect the religious broadcaster within the confines of the sacred space of either the church or "Christian" studio. No longer was it necessary to actually or physically enter the "world" and run the risk of spiritual and theological corruption. They could be *in* the world and reach more people than ever before, even as they significantly mitigated the associated dangers and so protected their *not of*

⁹ This quote is also evidence that Reagan himself conflated neo-conservative values with biblical theology. He was convinced that the Soviet Union would play a significant role in the events prophesied in the book of Revelation. (If you are going to assert this, you need to provide a source to back it up.)

status.¹⁰ As Christians view these broadcasts they are able to gain a sense of successfully solving the tension and thus receive the critical feeling of legitimacy.

Accommodation: Relevance and the Rise of Christian Cultural Industries

Religious broadcasting is necessarily an act of accommodation. It fits the sacred message into the shape and contours of television, a secular popular communication form. As evangelicals employed television in their battle for cultural relevancy, the techniques and strategies they developed consistently increased the level of that accommodation.

However, no matter how many popular symbolic inventories religious broadcasting employs, it cannot escape the fact that it is itself a *religious* enterprise. A religious enterprise defined by such a narrow theological commitment will never be fully synthesized into a contemporary western cultural milieu. Therefore, evangelicals continue to pursue cultural relevancy through the co-opting of the *vernacular*. In the late 20th century context this meant co-opting popular cultural forms. The end of the century witnessed an explosion of religious themed products that were produced, marketed and sold within the evangelical community. As previously discussed there are very few areas of the contemporary culture that have not been co-opted into the Christian experience. The contemporary evangelical experience includes, for example, Christian television, Christian music, Christian literature, Christian fashions, Christian dating services, Christian online retail services, Christian news agencies, Christian travel opportunities and the list goes on. And all of these commodities, programs and institutions are strong responses to the demand for social relevance felt within the evangelical community.¹¹

¹⁰ The televangelism scandals of the 1980's clearly expressed the erroneous character of this strategy. The fall of televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert, due to sexual impropriety, highlights the reality that television is not simply a utility that can be used to enter (and then exit) the "world" at one's discretion. It is a pervasive cultural institution that rejects such dualistic frames.

¹¹ One such example is the Upward sports leagues headquartered in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Founded in 1995 it currently boasts operation in 47 states and four countries. Current participation in the Upward programs exceeds half a million children. (upward.org)

All of these *Christian* cultural expressions, such as television, radio, film, are representations of the growth of what can be called “Christian cultural industries.”¹² For the past fifty years or so these industries have worked together to produce a greater sense of legitimacy and relevancy for each other. These enterprises ultimately empower the evangelical experience by producing a context in which it is culturally normative.

Most of the elements of the Christian cultural industries are rebranded iterations of co-opted mainstream cultural products. Just as the CCM (Christian Contemporary Music) is rebranded pop music and Christian t-shirts are parodies of popular t-shirts, the narratives associated with the Christian cultural industries are rebranded secular social narratives. But regardless of the specifics of the products, all of these industries are ultimately selling the same product, a transmissional and commodified gospel. This “gospel” is primarily being packaged, marketed and sold not to the world but to the Christian community as a sign of cultural legitimacy and relevance. They are selling their product and message to the faithful and in doing so are reshaping the communal identity of that audience by providing material products that allow evangelicals to negotiate the *in and not of* tension.

In the midst of this development evangelical Christianity in America had become, as Hoover suggests, a “public and commodified” version of religion. (Hoover, 2002) No longer were evangelicals a marginalized minority voice. They had become the largest religious group in the U.S. They had achieved the necessary relevance to effectively battle against secularization. Religious broadcasting was a driving force behind the production of a cultural industrial complex that was ultimately producing and marketing the “Christian” identity.

¹² In *Material Christianity* McDannell discusses the rise of “Christian retail.” In this discussion she highlights how this contributed to faith becoming a more material and visible reality and how this trend peaked during the final two decades of the 20th century.

Evangelicals consume the material objects produced by these enterprises, and in turn use them to negotiate their identities.

This powerful social force was produced through a galvanized and unified set of social values. By the 1980's the "Christian cultural industries" were significantly shaping the ever-narrowing evangelical identity. This identity, that continued to be negotiated through the consumption of the cultural industries products and disseminated through religious broadcasting, had a particularly political/social character. Robertson might have suggested he was not interested in blurring the lines between religion and politics, but it is clear religious broadcasting was doing just that. By the end of 1980's the social political character of the evangelical community was as significant as the theological character. In fact by the 1990's it is likely theological diversity was more accepted within the evangelical community than was political dissent.¹³

The theological character of the manifest motivation associated with the commitment to being *in* the world had been conflated with the latent motivation of cultural vindication. In doing so the Christian cultural industries produced a culture that allowed evangelicals to remove themselves from the margins of the mainstream culture and become the central and authoritative voice in the newly developed evangelical shadow culture. One way to ensure relevancy is to be central in a discreet cultural experience. Even as evangelicals were finding more ways to engage the broader culture, they were producing new ways to remain separate.

Empowerment and Crisis Narratives

Programs such as *OTGH*, *The 700 Club* and *Joel* demonstrate that religious broadcasting increases rhetorical power for both the community of faith broadly and the religious broadcaster

¹³ It is also likely that by the end of the 20th century the evangelical establishment was more invested in educating evangelicals about the proper political positions than about commitments.

specifically. The evangelical community is clearly empowered by increased relevancy and legitimacy. Furthermore, the production of the Christian cultural industrial complex greatly increases the social power of the evangelical community. Empowerment is more than a fringe benefit related to the rise of religious broadcasting. It is one of the fundamental goals, easily surpassing the explicit motivation of “reaching the world.”

Even though it is framed differently, power plays a key role in all three of the narratives of the broadcast models analyzed. In each narrative the broadcaster has been able to articulate a clear sense of vindication that the faithful viewer can potentially experience. The broadcasters are viewed as authoritative voices, modern day Moses, because they are able to provide the community with a path out of the cultural margins.

A key component of this process is the production of specific crisis narratives, which are critical elements to the overall contemporary narratives. In these crisis narratives audience members are victimized, because of their faithfulness, by attacks from the broader culture, which seeks the end of true Christianity. Even though the specific character of these attacks varies, the audience is always compelled to seek guidance and assistance. The broadcasters present themselves as the most obvious and immediate source of that guidance.

The dramatic appeal of religious broadcasting, which is critical to its success, is fundamentally produced through these contemporary crisis narratives, not through biblical theology. Therefore, broadcasters must be able to articulate a specific ongoing battle that rages between the believing audience and the forces of the enemy. These satanic forces can take almost any form, from political figures to social movements to personal depression. The broadcaster has to be able to articulate, in a manner that resonates with the audience, how these contemporary cultural elements attack believers. In this way watching religious broadcasting

becomes more than passive observation. The audience is not simply watching a battle; they understand themselves to be actively involved in it. Furthermore, by watching the broadcast the audience member is able to level a blow against the enemy, and making financial contributions to the ministry is an even more damaging blow. In this way the viewer is empowered.¹⁴ But all of this is predicated on the audience members experiencing feelings of persecution and marginalization. Only then can the broadcaster can lead them out.

The crisis narrative Falwell constructed was set most significantly in the political and social arenas, and was specifically tailored for American Christians. To fight against the attack of liberal forces, faithful Americans were called to specific social and political positions. By conflating biblical values and conservative patriotism, he produced an evangelical response that recognized no distinction between the enemies of America and the enemies of Christ. America became God's new chosen people, thus furthering the empowerment offered by his rhetoric. Viewers experience vindication because they are a Christian and American.¹⁵ The climax of this narrative is the empowerment American evangelicals experience as they "take back America."¹⁶

Robertson is able to expand the crisis narrative thanks largely to the talk show/variety genre of *The 700 Club*. With its obvious focus on current political events, the news segment of *The 700 Club* frames the crisis in the political arena. In this way the narrative plays out much like Falwell's with America experiencing the privileged position of God's favor.¹⁷ The second segment of the show, with its pre-produced docu-dramas, describes how the satantic forces target social institutions such as the family and education as well. In the final segment of the show

¹⁴ A donation of \$100, for example, is often seen as a small price to pay for such empowerment.

¹⁵ It is significant to note that Falwell was espousing this narrative during the period America was dealing with what the democrat Jimmy Carter famously called a national malaise and crisis of confidence.

¹⁶ This is reflected in the number of Falwell's speaking tours that explicitly focused on America.

¹⁷ One distinction between Robertson's and Falwell's theocratic model is Israel plays an even greater role in Robertson's narrative.

Robertson situates the crisis in personal frames as he responds to individual emails. These emails are from viewers and represent the spectrum of contemporary personal issues. This serves to frame the fact that these evil forces have corrupted all of culture.

On *Joel* the battle is limited to a personal conflict. But as he co-opts much of the ethos of the contemporary culture, he is able to cast that personal battle in a public sphere.¹⁸ His crisis is represented by everything that stands in the way of personal success. He intentionally avoids being specific about the nature of this success, but it clearly represents areas such as health, finances, family life, and professional pursuits.¹⁹ Personal constructs like self-doubt, poor self-esteem and fatalistic mindsets are the weapons wielded by the enemy. However, if the viewer has faith these obstacles will be overcome and the viewer will experience the full range of God's personal blessings.

But in any case the crisis narratives produced through the televised broadcasts perpetuate and further the evangelical notion that religion, particularly Christianity, is an external solution to all human problems. This further empowers the evangelical community because they alone possess *the* power that is *the* solution.²⁰

Narrowcasting: Evangelicals and Politics - 1976-2014

This empowerment experienced by evangelical for the past forty years is a result of forming a more unified and clearly defined cultural experience. This distinct cultural experience, produced largely by the Christian cultural industries, provides evangelicals with feelings of legitimacy and relevancy as well. However, conformity is the price of these benefits. Inclusion

¹⁸ In this regard Oprah Winfrey serves as an example of Osteen's approach. Both Winfrey and Osteen are seeking to elicit personal healing but the battles are fought in the public sphere.

¹⁹ In locating the battle in such a personal space Osteen is able to challenge the greatest obstacle to the success of religious broadcasting, the limited audience. Everyone has personal issues, but not everyone cares about politics.

²⁰ Again, there should be no surprise that prosperity theologies are prevalent in contemporary religious broadcasting. If Christianity is the answer to everything, a true believer should have no problems.

in the evangelical culture expands far beyond theological commitment. This reality can be seen in a number of places, but is perhaps best represented within the political arena, where at times theological commitments seem to become secondary concerns for the community. A prime example is Jerry Falwell Jr.'s endorsement of Donald Trump's presidential candidacy. Falwell Jr. chose Trump over a pack of candidates with strong evangelical credentials, such as Ted Cruz, Ben Carson, Marco Rubio, and Mike Huckabee, despite the fact that Trump has no established evangelical credentials. Starting in the middle of the century evangelicals began to emerge from their fundamentalist political isolation and began to assert their voices in the political arena. Ultimately, this would lead to the development of Falwell's Moral Majority in 1979 and Robertson's Christian Coalition in 1988. Both organizations sought to mobilize evangelical voters to support conservative political policies and vote for Republican candidates. These two organizations were instrumental in the development of what came to be called the religious right.

Amidst the development of this movement the first self-proclaimed "born-again" evangelical U.S. president was the Democrat Jimmy Carter. Carter was able to secure support from many evangelicals, including Robertson. However, since 1976 no Democratic presidential candidate has received any degree of support from the evangelical community. As Carter's policies failed, Ronald Reagan was able to successfully court the evangelical vote in 1980 and 1984. During this period a number of scholars and journalists were asking questions about the future of the relationship between politics and evangelicals.

One of the most important of these texts is the Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Cromartie edited *Piety and Politics: Evangelicals and Fundamentalists Confront the World*. (1987) This collection includes a section that consists of chapters penned by evangelical leaders, including Falwell, that promote their particularly political vision for America. All of them are

decidedly conservative in orientation. Evangelicals were gaining power by asserting themselves as strong voices in the burgeoning conservative movement.

Another important work was a *Wall Street Journal* article written by Stuart Rothenberg in 1986 outlining the political diversity of evangelical community. (Rothenberg, 1986) As he states the purpose of his article was a reaction against journalists who were describing Robertson as the “evangelical candidate.” In his estimation there could not be an “evangelical candidate” because evangelicals didn’t even agree on party affiliation. He suggested that the evangelical support of Reagan in no way represented a lasting trend and cites Robertson’s support of Carter as evidence of this assertion. “Politically, evangelicals cut across the spectrum,” he wrote. (Rothenberg, 1986)

Thirty years after publication, it is clear that Rothenberg could not see how galvanized the evangelical community would become. Much of this galvanizing force was predicated by the strength of the Christian cultural industrial complex. In the last four presidential elections eight out of ten evangelicals have cast their vote for the Republican candidate. George W. Bush was elected twice thanks largely to the over 80% support he enjoyed from evangelical voters. (Pew Research: Religion and Life Project) In fact, evangelicals have been the most unified voting block of any major religious communities over that period.²¹ Perhaps the most remarkable single statistic is that in 2012 a slightly higher percentage of evangelicals supported Mitt Romney than did his fellow Mormons.²² However, it is not only during presidential elections that evangelicals demonstrate their political leanings. In the mid-term election of 2014, in which Republicans regained control of Congress, 82% of evangelicals who attend church at least once a week

²¹ Over the past four presidential elections Jewish voters, the next most unified religious community, have cast their vote for the Democrat candidate on average 73% of the time. Evangelicals have supported the Republican candidate 79% of the time.

²² Pew reported that 79% of evangelicals supported Romney, while he received 78% of the Mormon vote.

supported Republican candidates. (Christian Post, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/evangelical-vote-played-key-role-in-republican-victories-data-shows-129197>)

The extraordinary development of such a significant shift cannot be reduced to any one factor. But what is clear is that the strategy of evangelical leaders like Falwell and Robertson to politically mobilize evangelicals by conflating Christianity with a growing social movement had proven successful. And it was the proliferation of Christian cultural industries that had produced a fertile ground for this strategy to take root. The crisis narratives that have been propagated by Falwell, Robertson and later Osteen were never articulated in a cultural vacuum. They were always part of a larger cultural enterprise. Not only do they serve to bring in financial resources they act as critical components to the development of the cultural web of American evangelicalism.

Conclusion

Religious broadcasting is a critical element to the ongoing negotiation the evangelical community experiences with the broader culture. It provides them with a well-defined sense of being both *in* and *not of* the corrupt world. Thus it is a material vindication of their divinely mandated mission. These feelings of vindication have allowed evangelicals to be a galvanized social force for forty years. The feelings of legitimacy, relevance and empowerment all serve to support the well-defined corporate order present within the evangelical community. This order is founded on the fact that evangelicalism, like other conservative faith expressions, operates based on claims of uniqueness. Within the community, evangelical Christianity is not *a* way; it is *the* way. As the exclusive character of this claim flies in the face of the prevailing contemporary pluralism, evangelicals feel the need to defend and justify their commitments. Thus regardless of

the size of the evangelical community, there is the prevailing identity of a marginalized minority.²³

As with many conservative religious communities, the evangelical corporate order provides very specific definitions for a wide spectrum of social and cultural elements and contexts. Political and social commitments, sexual behavior, consumption of entertainment media, alcohol and tobacco usage, fashion, and the family are all defined by the order.²⁴ Due to the narrow and dogmatic character of the order, the evangelical community is implicitly discouraged from producing individual interpretations of the world around them. Rather, the prevailing expectation in the community is to conform to the established order and its established definitions.

The goals of religious broadcasting must provide evangelicals with a sense of being part of the culture while encouraging them to feel a critical distance from it. This is accomplished through the production of religious broadcasting narratives. The fact of their *broadcast* character places them in the culture; while the content of the narrative ensures they are separate.²⁵

These narratives articulate a perpetual cycle in which evangelicals simultaneously experience persecution at the hands of prevailing cultural forces and dominion over those forces. Evangelicals are both perpetually marginalized and perpetually being led out of the margins by authoritative figures whom God has chosen. Religious broadcasting allows evangelicals to experience a presence in the culture, a sense of ongoing conflict with the culture and victory over the culture. The community experiences a sense of justification when it hears and sees their exclusive claims being transmitted on the very media they conceptualize as generally

²³According to the Pew Foundation, roughly one quarter of the American population have identified as evangelical over the last two decades.

²⁴ This is by no means an exhaustive list.

²⁵ The content also makes explicit claims of the evangelical presence.

propagating the “enemies lies.” In order to experience this justification, evangelicals conform to the social and political ideology of the broadcasters transmitting the claims, which ensures their cultural separation. This is the “salvation” disseminated by religious broadcasts. Unlike the biblical model that locates salvation in humility and repentance, this model locates it in power and justification. Although the narrative does promote a certain degree of power within the mainstream culture, to ensure a sense of justification, it is more fully experienced in the evangelical shadow culture where the power is unrivalled.

In all of this the “Christian cultural industries” have persistently sought greater relevance in order to further the evangelical mission. However, these efforts have perpetuated a dualistic orientation that actually threatens the evangelical mission and its commitment to “engage” the culture. The enthusiasm felt for religious broadcasting is misplaced because ultimately religious broadcasting has contributed to drawing evangelicals out of the mainstream culture through the creation of the shadow culture. As John Fiske has written relevance is not something that can be dictated; it must be produced through negotiation.

For Fiske it is a matter of highlighting the distinction between “reading”, and “deciphering”. Reading is a process of participatory negotiation that occurs between viewer and text. Deciphering welcomes no such participation, but is a process in which truth is dictated by the text. “Unresolved contradictions, unstable, unfinished knowledge, skepticism, parody and excess all invite reading: truth and objectivity invite decipherment.” (Fiske, 1989, 59) Within light of this quote, it is clear that religious broadcasting produces narratives that privilege discernment. “Reading involves the production of relevance; decipherment, the perception and acceptance of distance.” (ibid.) In the pursuit of cultural relevance, religious broadcasting has produced a perception of greater distance between evangelical community and the “world.”

The “Christian cultural industries,” which continue to provide legitimacy, relevance and empowerment for older generations, have produced an isolated evangelical experience that does not resonate with the cultural sentiments of the millennial generation. It can be speculated that religious broadcasting will ultimately contribute to increased feelings of illegitimacy, irrelevance and disempowerment within the evangelical community and as such contribute to its fragmentation.

Religious broadcasting has failed to articulate creativity and authority, the fundamental precepts of the Cultural Mandate. Instead it perpetuates authority at the expense of creativity. The biblical model requires humanity to express creative authority, in order to represent or image God. Religious broadcasting, with all its diverse genres and forms, lacks creativity because it is effectively an expression of cultural cloning. As such, it images the culture more than God. The millennial generation has begun to significantly challenge the model of creativity that simply co-opts existing elements and reframes them as the Christian or religious alternatives.

It is likely that Phil Cooke is correct in his assessment that religious broadcasting will lose much of its cultural prominence in the 21st century. But his reasoning is in error. Religious broadcasting will likely decline unless it can discover a way to capture the ethos of Christ’s communication, and such foundationally redefine itself. Attempts at reframing are underway. Perhaps the most notable example of this attempt is the *Rob Bell Show*. Originally a project by Rob Bell and television producer, Carlton Cuse, one of the creators of *Lost*, the show is described as a “spiritual talk show” and was aired on OWN. The show features Bell, former megachurch pastor, and guests fielding spiritual questions from the audience. The responses are not the definitive and authoritative fiat of Robertson, but rather probing responses meant to encourage audience reflection. Bell is obviously trying to produce dialogue more than provide

answers. It remains to be seen if there will develop a significant market for this approach to religious broadcasting. If there does not, the future of religious broadcasting as a significant cultural influence is greatly in doubt.

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APPENDICIES

APPENDIX A

STANDPOINT

In this dissertation I investigate religious broadcasting and its place and purpose in the evangelical community. Although religious broadcasting has received attention over the past thirty years, the preponderance of the scholarship does not draw specific attention to the historical and theological contexts of the evangelical community, and there is very little that proceeds from a stated theological position. My intention is to add to the scholarly discourse by addressing these under-represented areas of analysis. I will at times make judgments regarding the theological positions of the individuals and groups I analyze. The motivation of this practice is not to assert that my theological orientation is superior or correct. Rather, it is simply expressing my belief that a robust theological analysis requires a theological position. In the following brief exposition of the “standpoint” for my judgments I will describe the position from which I create my analysis.

I desire to have my faith inform every aspect of my life. It frames my commitments to my family, my work, and my scholarship. Furthermore, each one of these commitments informs and furthers my faith. I “work out my salvation” as I teach my students, guide my children and perform research. I do not understand any part of my life as a secular enterprise, fully distinct from my faith.

I believe my faith is constantly evolving. Although there are a number of theological and biblical propositional truths that have always been a part of my faith, my understanding and

commitment to these truths are always in a state of development. As such I believe my primary job as a person of faith is listening, not speaking.

The Apostle's Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

A fundamental issue that faces the church is the nature of truth. The majority view throughout the church's history can be characterized as the substantive view associated with correspondence theory paradigms. Truth according to this view is a matter of fidelity to some external reality or generally propositional claim. The commitment to this view of truth is illustrated by the fact that Christianity is traditionally a creedal faith. The Apostle's Creed, for example, is comprised of propositional claims. If a person accepts these truths then the person has faith. This view clearly prioritizes the "external" or "objective" reality and conceptualizes it as the standard by which truth claims are judged. This view of truth is consistent with an objective epistemology and its corresponding emphasis of a "knowledge that" model. Knowledge is a matter of being intellectually aware of accurate propositions.

John chapter fourteen describes Jesus encouraging his disciples to not lose heart or faith in the days that were to follow because a day would come when they would be with him. In the sixth verse of this chapter Jesus responds to Thomas statement that the disciples didn't know the way to where Jesus was going. Jesus responds not by describing the place or the way but rather by remarkably claiming that he is the way, the truth and the life. This statement calls into serious question the prevailing notion of truth held within the church. Jesus does not claim that what he says is the truth or that he is truthful. Rather Jesus claims he is the truth. A person who makes such a claim must have a view of truth that transcends a propositional orientation.

Perhaps the most significant effect of this statement on the church's understanding of truth is a realization that truth is not something that can be related to primarily through intellectual assent. Truth is not something that can be *known* as a fact is known, but rather *known* as a person is known. Truth is not something that can be fully possessed as a fact, but rather it is something that must be perpetually sought after as we seek to know the other in a relationship. Truth is not a disembodied objective reality transcendent of relational bounds; it is a person who is only known in relationship. This issue is critical to an interpretation of John 8:32. "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." What does it mean to "know the truth" in such a way as to experience the liberation Christ is referencing?

The definition of truth followers of Christ choose to adopt will have a profound influence on their understanding and the experience of their faith. The propositional view of truth fosters a perspective that the faithful can or should possess the truth in full. The focus of study for this dissertation is evangelical broadcasting, which has flourished because it supports and perpetuates this view. Religious broadcasters make definitive claims about all manner of issues because they understand themselves as repositories of truth. Whether they are discussing theological beliefs,

political positions, personal habits or social commitments, they invariably provide a dogmatic response that leaves very little room for interpretation.

Many of the comments and claims made about contemporary evangelicalism in this study are in part formed from my forty-years of experiences as part of the evangelical community. I graduated from an evangelical high school. I completed my undergraduate studies at Wheaton College, generally viewed as the leading evangelical college in America. I received an M.A. from Regent University, a university founded by Pat Robertson. I have two theological graduate degrees from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, one of the preeminent non-denominational evangelical American seminaries.²⁶ I pastored an evangelical church for six years. And for the past fifteen years, I have taught at two evangelical colleges.²⁷

I continue to value many of the commitments related to the person and work of Jesus Christ evangelicals espouse, but I generally find their prevailing ontological and epistemological positions suspect. Although I certainly recognize the significance of cultural influences, this skepticism is fundamentally founded on theological commitments. I believe truth is fundamentally personal and only secondarily propositional. Truth is not possessed; it is pursued. Therefore, it cannot be transmitted from one person to another. Furthermore, truth is necessarily relational in that it can't be apprehended, accessed or comprehended apart from an interpersonal encounter with the Spirit of God.

Furthermore, I believe Scripture articulates a constructivist epistemology.²⁸ God created humanity with the fundamental purpose of creating meaning. According to the Genesis account of creation, God did not create a perfect world because it would have not allowed for the creative

²⁶ I have a M.Div. and a Th.M.

²⁷ I taught at Gordon College, in Wenham, MA, from 2002 to 2006 and Toccoa Falls College, in Toccoa, Ga, from 2006 to the present.

²⁸ This is a position many evangelicals would find potentially heretical.

and volitional work of humanity. He created a *flawless* world, filled with potential, which allows human agency to be operationalized. In the production of raw materials imbued with potential, God gave humanity the ability to carry on the work of creating, which requires the articulation of choice. Humanity was tasked with intentionally producing a cultural existence that is in harmony with the person, character, word and kingdom of God.

This is illustrated by the first act performed by a human in Scripture. In the Genesis God brings the animals to Adam so that he will name them.

Genesis 2: 19 Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. 20 So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

This represents the purpose of humanity, the intentional production of meaning through the articulation of language and the manifestation of choice. The image of human communication in Genesis is not one of merely transmitting meaning; it is fundamentally creative. God did not only bestow upon humanity the authority to care for the creation in a static form; he created humanity to produce new meaning and expand the creation. On the seventh day of the creation week, the Creator entered his Sabbath rest. He does this not due to weariness or even completion of task, but rather as a sign that responsibility to further create is being handed over to his image representatives.

Because I hold to these theological commitments, I believe the fundamental purpose of communication is the corporate production of meaning and signification through ritualistic interaction. Furthermore, because I believe this is the purpose of communication in general, my

theological commitment is reinforced. This illustrates how theological commitments and views on communication are inextricably bound to one another. Religious broadcasting, with its objective commitments, represents communication as an act of indoctrination through the transmission of propositions. I believe this view limits the purpose and abilities of humanity and is inconsistent with the scriptural record. As such I understand that my scriptural hermeneutic is significantly distinct from the prevailing evangelical approaches, as are my interpretations.

A view of communication will inform one's interpretation of the text. The prevailing evangelical view communication, as a matter of transmission and dictation, privileges a punctual view of evangelism and salvation that is defined by simply stating the facts and saying the appropriate words. From the ritualistic orientation communication is a process of creativity that establishes contexts and meaning. From this orientation salvation becomes a process that is not bound by time constraints, but is worked out in the context of relationship and through the production of meaning.

To assert a ritualistic view of communication is to assert particular theological conclusions (and vice-versa). The evaluations I make in this dissertation are made from a particular standpoint. They are not, however, made from a position of intellectual certainty, but intellectual curiosity. They are made from a theoretical position that seeks not to answer all the questions, but pursue greater theological and cultural understanding and discourse.²⁹ In other words, they are made from a position of faith.

²⁹ Even this objective is inconsistent with prevailing evangelical objective ontological and epistemological orientations.