"HEADS BOWED, EYES CLOSED":

ANALYZING THE DISCOURSE OF ONLINE EVANGELICAL ALTAR CALLS

by

Clint D. Bryan

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Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Mohammed Albakry, Chair

Dr. Elyce Helford

Dr. Patrick Richey

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife Sally, without whose undying support this dream

would never have been fulfilled.

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ABSTRACT

This discourse analysis study examines the final moments of selected online sermons delivered by America's leading evangelical pastors and speakers, paying particular attention to the language employed in the presentation of Christian gospel tenets, the public invitation for salvation, the altar call that identifies new followers, and the benedictory prayer meant to conclude each preacher's remarks to the faithful. Machin and Mayr (2012) provide the theoretical framework of multimodal critical discourse analysis, a social semiotics approach, for interpreting the lexical elements, the nonverbal communicative movements, and the optics of each video (if taped) to uncover the embedded power relations of the sermonic discourse and the myriad ways in which the preachers carefully construct personas for accomplishing certain rhetorical aims. By uploading these audio and video tracks to the Internet, ostensibly for the purpose of proselytization, these evangelical ministers have blurred the lines between insider and outsider language by foregrounding the types of in-group discourse normally reserved for religious services held within the confines of brick-and-mortar church buildings. Moreover, archived sermon videos become linguistic artifacts that last well beyond the time of the sermons' performance on Sunday mornings. Putting these sermons online and thereby obliterating the narrow boundaries of the traditional evangelical church audience, these preachers have opened a fairly ossified discursive form, the evangelical altar call, to linguistic scrutiny that provides valuable material for scholars interested in contemporary American religious discourse and practitioners (i.e., preachers interested in gearing their lexical choices to the understanding of potential parishioners unfamiliar with this

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language). Using Kenneth Burke's (1970) seminal definition of religious conversion as persuasion effected toward initiates' adopting a new language spoken by the faith community, this study asserts that this corporate indoctrination into new ways of speaking begins with the salvific prayer.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"The evangelist's soapbox is obsolete. Accepting Christ and committing sin against Him are both done sitting at a computer screen today."
　　　—L.D. Breen, "Newsmax's Top 100 Christian Leaders in America," 20 April 2015, *Newsmax*

Chapter Abstract

This introductory chapter situates this study in the middle of the contemporary

phenomenon of American evangelical megachurches' turning to new media for

proselytizing the masses. After locating the scholarly gap this study attempts to fill, the

chapter lists the guiding research questions, emphasizes the significance of this study to

scholars and practitioners, acknowledges the inherent limitations of the study, and posits

the central thesis of the dissertation.

In December 2015, the streaming entertainment service Netflix, purveyor of

movies and television programs (as well as original programming), sponsored new

content in a genre that it had never tried previously: American evangelical church

services. The video juggernaut that regularly categorizes film choices into subgroups

such as "Films with a Strong Female Lead" and "Gay and Lesbian Movies," announced a

new label: "Special Interest." Among those first programs include titles such as "Starting

Over" by Andy Stanley, a pastor from Atlanta; "Fifty Shades of They," a sermon series

by Dallas-area minister Ed Young of Fellowship Church that alludes to E.L. James's

trilogy of novels *Fifty Shades of Grey*; "Winning Life's Battles" with evangelist and best-

selling author Joyce Meyer; and "#Death to Selfie" by Steven Furtick of Elevation

Church in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The latter two of these preachers are among the subjects of this extensive study of American evangelical preaching and the ways in which these digital oracles negotiate the intricacies of an online temple in a world where the lines between the secular and the sacred are continually contested, blurred, erased, and redrawn regularly. Furtick's offering is illustrative of the new vistas of digital religious discourse. Still, the boilerplate Netflix terminology remains curious when applied to this discourse. Furtick's sermon series is called a "season," implying that future seasons will be available for "binge-watching," the term coined to describe watching one show after another until a title is exhausted. Each of Furtick's sermons is entitled an "episode." Filed under "Faith & Spirituality," the five-episode season "#Death to Selfie" is furthered tagged "Inspiring" and is "Starring: Steven Furtick," later identified as "Pastor Steven" in the descriptions of each episode. This honorific title "pastor" refers less to a physical parish where Furtick serves than to the type of discourse in which he participates. Unlike the format of regular television series (i.e., 23 minutes for a half-hour sitcom and 46 minutes for an hour-long drama), Furtick's sermons are not standardized in length. Furtick is shown preaching at his home church—a darkened auditorium with bold, graphic backgrounds and musicians alongside their electronic instruments. The parishioners at this megachurch are shown in the front rows and, at times, on the stage itself. The camera zooms in to the preacher's face and pans the crowd. At the end of each of his five impassioned sermons, Furtick encourages his congregation to respond wholeheartedly to the tenets of Christianity, while the screen fades to black.

As evidenced by the infiltration of evangelical Christianity into the Netflix queue, religion in the United States of America is in a state of flux. The sermons preached by Stanley, Young, Meyer, and Furtick are no longer temporal events preached on Sunday mornings in a brick-and-mortar edifice replete with stained-glass windows. These messages now exist in a virtual space where viewers may access them at any time, no matter their ideology or religion, allowing a variety of audiences to encounter this particular stripe of contemporary American Christianity with its respective theology and demonstrative worship style. While still decidedly Christian, recent statistics in the United States indicate a shift away from institutional church affiliation. Researchers note that the number of Americans who do not belong to a church or attend with any regularity ranges from 23 to 38 percent, a significant rise in the past two decades (Cooperman, Smith, & Ritchey 2015; Barna & Kinnaman 2014). These trends confirm earlier predictions that religion, while remaining important, would deviate from institutional forms toward innovative expressions (Knight, Woods & Jindra 2005, Berger 2001, Ebaugh 2002). One such innovation involves cyberspace religious platforms as sites for personal spiritual exploration. Hadden and Cowan (2000) sketch the historical contours of media in general and the Internet specifically, as well as the furtive relationship of technology and religion. They distinguish between "religion online" (e.g. the practice of gathering information about other faiths) and "on-line religion" where one participates "in the religious dimension of life via the Web [and] liturgy, prayer, ritual, meditation, and homiletics come together and function with the e-space acting as church, temple, synagogue, mosque, and grove" (8-9). Karaflogka (2006) synthesizes the more recent

scholarship of cyberspace as sacred and traces the history of religious discourse online. Groothuis (1997) questions the impersonal nature of religious interaction online compared to the face-to-face conversations in interpersonal relationships in the brick-and-mortar church. This tension between virtual modes of religion and their institutional counterparts informs the scholarship and practice of religious discourse in American evangelical Christianity.

Many American evangelical churches have entered this liminal space through websites, sermon content, podcasts, and other means of digital evangelism, with little assurance that these media are reaching their intended audience of spiritual seekers. Some researchers have argued that evangelicals' appropriation of online media content continues a longer tradition of churches' embracing new media forms (Babin & Rukowski 2002). One does not need to resort to viewing the streaming religious services of popular preachers such as Meyer and Furtick on Netflix. Today, anyone may view the preaching element of a typical evangelical church in America by visiting that church's respective website. If a video is not available, a majority of churches upload audio archives of the pastor's sermons, making the content available for free. Many potential visitors check out a church online by listening to these audio sermons or watching the pastor preach long before they initially head over to the brick-and-mortar buildings. Moreover, people who do not subscribe to the doctrines espoused in certain evangelical churches are granted access to view the sermon content and interact with the ideas presented without having to attend a worship service in person, thanks to the availability of downloadable sermon content online. Barna and Kinnaman's (2014) nationwide

research, however, demonstrates that these methods gain little "traction" with unchurched audiences, as merely six percent of unchurched young adults access online faith content weekly (19-20). The proliferation of church websites with audio/video content meets the hesitancy of contemporary religious skeptics, making digital sermons a suitable medium for analyzing the American evangelical church and its timeworn ways of persuading individuals to convert to Christianity.

A level(ing) platform?

More than broadcast or cable television (that ostensibly serves the commercial aims of its advertisers) or even subscription-based video streaming services such as Netflix or Hulu, the Internet affords users full access to content of any type without reference to its epistemological claims. American evangelical ministries have taken notice of this relatively inexpensive, egalitarian medium for the spreading of their version of the Christian gospel. The Internet is certainly a sacred cash cow, as computer programmers have developed algorithms that adjust advertising to users' browsing habits and charging advertisers' accounts per page view. Pop-up ads do precede certain YouTube videos, but not generally videos uploaded by churches because only videos with numerous page views (*viz.,* demonstrating the potential of viral content) are optimized for advertising. Sermon videos tend not to gain the viral views that piano-playing cats garner. Banner ads may frame the periphery of the computer or smartphone screen anytime one browses the Web in search of religious teaching or support, yet these ads are easily dismissed as

tangential to viewing the desired digital content. On the other hand, a television commercial that interrupts a program is unavoidable without services such as TiVo.

To maximize the viewing experience, as well as to maintain viewer continuity, most religious broadcasting on the radio or television is paid for by private donors who subscribe to the dogma being presented. Their aim in financially supporting this media content's distribution may be both personal edification as well as the promulgation of Christian doctrine in the public sphere. Many Christian televangelists buy blocks of airtime, therefore, so the only commercials that punctuate their broadcasts tout their books or request financial donations to their ministries rather than breaking continuity for ads about fast-food restaurants or laundry detergents. Even so, these ministries are limited to scheduled broadcasts, whereas the Web allows religious content to be accessible at any time, thus pushing religious discourse into interesting vistas outside the walls of brick-and-mortar churches and beyond the faith-based religious channels on TV and radio.

The Internet, by comparison, provides wide access to many types of content without much by way of a filter, unless the user selects to install software that steers clear of pornographic or racist sites. With a few simple mouse clicks, then, the most varied content (from neutral to negative, secular to sacred) is delivered to one's screen and is even scaled for optimal viewing on the respective device. The user, then, becomes the final arbiter of distinguishing the personal value of the content to consume. She alone evaluates what to view—what deserves her attention—in an ultimately democratizing medium that appears to bring the content creator and the consumer to the same level. What the user may not be conscious of, however, are the number of factors influencing

the decisions she makes while reading lines, viewing photographs, writing comments, or watching videos. The typical computer user may be influenced by a trending hash tag; a viral video; the obscure, niche community represented in a chat room or fan site; or a friend's recommendation shared through a "pin," a thumbs-up, a "like," a tweet, or an Instagram graphic. It would initially appear, therefore, that the Internet levels all content, situating the user as the final determiner of what to see and how to estimate its ultimate value. When it comes to religious content, however, especially in the form of digitized audio and video content originating from American evangelical churches, very strong forces that situate political and authoritative power in the hands of the preacher continue to shape and to influence (and be influenced by) the way Christianity is delivered via the ones and zeroes of the Internet.

Background of the discourse

For all the variety of preaching venues evident online, the Internet is helping to homogenize American evangelical preaching. Before the advent of the Internet, it was difficult for ministers to know how their contemporaries were preaching. The only times pastors heard a variety of preaching styles were while enrolled in seminary and while attending ministry conferences. With the advent of the Internet, suddenly, access is given to thousands of pulpits on any given Sunday. One may hear sermons in the High-Church tradition, homilies from Catholic priests, or sermons from imams and rabbis, all from the comfort of one's desktop computer in the pastoral study or a mobile device. By and large, however, evangelical ministers are listening to and learning from other evangelical

preachers. Comparisons may be performed more easily when a large number is available to listen and to evaluate for free in the form of podcasts and video files. Moreover, emulation of others' homiletic style becomes easier when one has access to thousands of sermons online. So-called "celebrity pastors" (Wax 2014), those whose churches soar into the thousands in attendance and not just those who have ventured onto national television markets with televangelist broadcasts, are easier to access to watch frequently, listen to via weekly podcast, and to mimic in form and style. The effect, then, is an adoption of certain formulaic trends in handling altar calls, closing prayers, and responses to the invitation(s) given. These trends provide rich material for in-depth study for their larger societal implications today.

Purpose of the study

A tension animates the practice of evangelical preaching in today's American church culture. Always intent on growth based upon proselytizing unbelievers, the evangelical church finds itself at the precipice of societal change fueled by technological innovation. In recent years, people are gravitating away from church buildings and organized expressions of religion, especially for American Catholics and mainline Protestant denominations (Cooperman, Smith, & Ritchey 2015). During this time frame, however, Internet usage has skyrocketed. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, almost half of Americans own smartphones (Smith 2012), prompting many churches to use technology for "relational" rather than "informational" purposes to connect with those expressing spiritual interest (Bourgeois 2013: 23). Those still

interested in traditional worship formats consult prospective church websites prior to their initial visits. Consequently, many American churches upload sermon content in the form of digital audio files and videos of what pastors preached within church buildings. These sermons, available free of charge in an easily accessible medium, are rich sources for interesting linguistic analysis. To date, sermons have only been systematically studied in the form of televangelists' broadcasts and small, albeit meaningful ethnographic studies of individual churches (Heriot 1994). A more recent ethnographic study of five online churches over a four-year time span (Hutchings 2011) concerned itself with the interaction between virtual parishioners. Few scholars have examined Fundamentalist discourse (Kettemann & Marko 2005) or evangelical sermons via CDA (Hamlet 1994, Allder 2006, Hukam Singh & Thuraisingam 2011), not to mention the thousands of digital sermon files available online.

One aspect of digital sermon content introduces thought-provoking questions about speakers' perlocutionary[1] intentions, implied performative[2] speech acts, and particular rhetorical moves within a specific discourse community: the public invitation for salvation and the benedictory prayer that concludes most online evangelical sermon files. By isolating a representative sample of transcripts of final prayers from the largest American evangelical churches on a given Sunday in late summer 2014, I have collected a relatively large corpus in order to perform critical discourse analysis of the language

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[1] The "effect a speaker has on the hearer — e.g. persuading, frightening" (Kempson 2003: n426).
[2] Performative "[u]tterances can be found… such that:
    A. They do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true or false,' and
    B. The uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as 'just,' saying something" (Austin 1975:5).

employed for indications of the changing discursive and rhetorical patterns of contemporary preachers practicing religious communication in a society acquainted with flux in terms of technology and tradition.

While the potential way(s) to organize and analyze the results obtained by critical discourse analysis of digital sermon/prayer extracts (audio and video) emerged from the data themselves, I examined the varieties of invitational prayers as practiced by the selected group of preachers, the linguistic formulae of confessional prayers as outlined by certain preachers, the verbal versus nonverbal rhetorical appeals used, and the myriad ways power and authority are enacted in the act of public prayer in an American evangelical church context. Moreover, I set out to examine how a digital platform both reinforces and subverts that assertion of power on behalf of the minister conducting the invitational prayer. This dissertation stands to contribute to the practice of preaching at the nexus of traditional Christian dogma and technological innovation. Contemporary American preachers, as well as those seminary professors devoted to training them, compose a primary audience for the results this study garnered. Further, linguists who appreciate discourse analyses performed by practitioners of that discourse may value the insights I derived as an ordained Protestant minister for over 20 years.

Research questions

The following questions are informed by the study's purpose:

- What are preachers doing with words when they pray for others in public? How does leading individuals to pray aloud a confessional prayer imply that this prayer

constitutes a speech act (if at all) in the Austinian[3] sense? If standard evangelical

tradition dictates that one becomes a Christian by saying words aloud, does

conversion as enacted by an online altar call truly occur when no one can monitor

the speech act? Is the production of verbalized lexical terms essential to the

conversion? Can the conversion be termed a speech act if the "sinner's prayer"

goes unspoken or unmonitored?

- Given the archived nature of online sermons online, how do speakers address

  those listening outside the brick-and-mortar church, if at all? How are audiences

  asked to respond during a prayer? After the "amen" is said?

- What lexical/rhetorical choices do preachers make to foster a sense of connection

  with their audiences?

- How do online evangelical preachers assert their power and purport their

  ideologies (i.e., personal and doctrinal) through their use of language, nonverbal

  communication, and other available semiotic resources?

- How much do these preacher-led discourses (e.g. public invitation/salvation

  appeal, altar call, Sinner's Prayer, and pastoral benediction) valorize conformity

  and complicity (if not outright compliance) on the part of the parishioner?

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[3] Speech act—J.L. Austin's (1975) groundbreaking work *How to Do Things with Words* defines a speech act as a performative sentence established when "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—…not normally thought of as just saying something" (6-7), as long as certain linguistic conditions are met.

Significance of the study

Historically, evangelical churches have marked one statistic quite carefully: the number of people who respond affirmatively to a call to convert to Christianity—typically at the conclusion of the pastor's Sunday morning service. Along with baptism in water by immersion, the repetition of a confessional prayer of repentance, led by the preacher from the pulpit, marks the beginning of the initiate's Christian journey. Since evangelicals generally count converts as a measure of ecclesiastical success, how does one track converts in the digital age when people are listening worldwide via the Web? Since online preaching has become a fairly ubiquitous phenomenon, it surprised me that few linguists have concentrated their attention on ecclesiastical discourse in general and on digital forms in particular.

At the outset of this CDA study, I hypothesized that the majority of evangelical church preachers do not lead the congregation in repeated prayers at any given worship service, preferring to pray a blanket prayer on behalf of potential converts (if at all). This practice would contradict a long-standing practice of extending an "invitation" to join the ranks of the converted in the evangelical church setting—what in essence qualifies a congregation as "evangelical" (*viz.,* a congregation that disseminates the gospel and issues direct invitations to respond; see definition in Appendix A). Moreover, I hypothesized that very few of these preachers would include their online audiences within the purview of their altar calls, despite their awareness that audio/video recordings of these sermons will be uploaded to the Internet within the week of the sermon's performance. This fundamental misunderstanding of the potential size of their listening

audience with their attendant religious backgrounds (or lack thereof) signals a missed homiletic opportunity. I came to discover that, for the most part, my initial hypotheses were accurate, although at least two of the preachers I analyzed directly address their podcast audiences in their sermons.

Delimitations and limitations

Given the close reading nature of critical discourse analysis techniques, the sample size of prayer excerpts had to remain small enough to permit comparison between extracts. Therefore, the study concentrated on qualitative (rather than quantitative) measures in selecting usable data. By no means should these results—while perhaps representative of contemporary evangelical church culture in the United States—be viewed as exhaustive. Because Outreach Inc. requests self-submissions of data for inclusion in their *100 Fastest-Growing Churches* annual special report, these data cannot be relied upon as statistically accurate. Furthermore, I chose this periodical's yearly list to aid in my selection process of sermon videos because the publisher represents the largest body attempting a systematic record of evangelical church attendance and growth today in the U.S.A. One delimiting factor of the study is the size of the congregations being surveyed. While smaller congregations may upload sermons to their respective websites, the *Outreach 100* churches, each of them designated "megachurches," allocate bandwidth and staff resources to make this content viable (Long 2014). The "live streaming" component, wherein users can view church services as they occur in real time, are

generally the domain of larger churches via computer screens that can afford to support the digital content.

Central thesis

Despite evidence questioning the effectiveness of media evangelism (Ammerman 1987: 26, n. 24) as outreach tools for the unchurched, American evangelical preachers continue to upload millions of gigabytes of digitized audio/video sermons complete with local church-specific altar calls embedded. These "public" invitations actually exclude their virtual audiences who cannot meet the inherent communicative conditions of the discursive event, rendering their participation as online observers outside the realm of the performative speech act ostensibly being performed. The streamed/archived recitation of the Sinner's Prayer in its various digital iterations becomes little more than contemporary, evangelical branding and an enactment of the preacher's digital persona as conversational and empathetic yet authoritative and powerful. As such, these messages serve primarily to advertise the type of live service the church operates to draw the curious to visit, and secondarily as a regular reenactment for the already religiously convinced of their own initiatory faith ritual, emphasizing conformity to communal norms and values of those congregations.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW / METHODOLOGY

"One big upside to digital connectedness is access to people, ideas, and information from all over the world…. The church stretches from one corner of the earth to the other, and for the first time, believers can worship together and fellowship with one another despite the miles that separate them."
—George Barna and David Kinnaman, *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Reach Them* (2014: 19)

Chapter Abstract

This chapter opens by reviewing the scholarship focused on language used by evangelical

ministers while preaching toward Christian conversion. Next, it details the

methodological parameters of the corpus-assisted qualitative research study conducted of

the micro-discourse of public invitations and the prayers that follow them issued by

American evangelical megachurch and influential preachers (men and women, Caucasian

and minority ethnicities) as accessible through Internet archives of sermon videos and

podcasts culled on or near 24 August 2014. The chapter ends by outlining the various

conceptual frameworks guiding the analyses, chiefly Multimodal Critical Discourse

Analysis (Machin & Mayr 2012).

Discourses, even micro-discourses such as the one selected for this study, promise

rich veins of inquiry to mine for larger implications regarding societal institutions, the

social actors who lead them, and the forms of communication practiced by and about

them. Michel Foucault (1972: 49) helps to foreground what discourses accomplish

through "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (49).

Preaching is essential to evangelical religious practice; each week pastors craft sermons

and extemporaneously compose prayers that are geared to contexts that impose

conditions on how these lexical elements function. Not surprisingly, religious scholars

have studied preaching, preachers, and sermons extensively, yet few have considered

how new media shapes time-tested discursive forms. In order to interpret the ascribed meaning in evangelical preaching, altar calls, and benedictions, researchers do well to locate a multidimensional framework that understands that "who we are to each other…is accomplished, disputed, ascribed, resisted, managed and negotiated in discourse" (Benwell & Stokoe 2006: 4). By closely analyzing video or audio excerpts and transcripts of salvation appeals and the prayers that follow them and applying the basic criteria of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (Machin & Mayr 2012), I was able to extrapolate several salient features of contemporary American evangelical Christian culture and the chief practitioners' prevalent practices for proselytizing via the Internet.

Literature review

Much of the discussion in the broader scope of literature in the field of digital religious studies has centered on users' looking to cyberspace to fulfill spiritual quests for individualized meaning, rather than observing the way sermon content is packaged for online consumption by a larger population. The religious podcast and online sermon video, quickly becoming the primary delivery systems of this content, have not yet been sufficiently studied in leading academic journals or elsewhere. This study is particularly concerned with the way the language of the gospel presentation is shaped by the demands and affordances of new media technology.

Because of their devotion to proselytizing others and marking conversions, evangelicals constitute a fruitful segment of the American religious populace for further study. David Bennett's (2000) history of the altar call acknowledges certain excesses of

public invitations (234-235), before admitting that the Internet—more than television or radio—permits unfamiliar users to access Christian content "in privacy and without embarrassment" (245). Despite these provisions for online exploration, Bennett (2000) labels public invitations as almost "sacramental to evangelicals" (203). To deny the public aspect of the altar call, even by moving it to a virtual space, would in the minds of many churchgoing evangelicals be tantamount to rendering it impotent. Stromberg (1993) confirms my hypothesis that the altar call is often intended for the converted, because the retelling of a meta-conversion story as the final element in a given church service frames the parishioners' "personal experience in canonical language…[,] recreating that experience in the telling" (3). Stromberg's definition of what constitutes evangelical Christianity marks an important jumping off point for this study. The reason I am using the *Outreach 100* list is that fully half of American churchgoers attend the largest 10-percent of the country's megachurches, nearly all of which are evangelical in orientation (Crosby 2013: 23). That demographic fact alone would indicate that a large sector of American evangelical Christianity is familiar with the discourse of public invitations and the respective prayers that follow them.

  Conversion to evangelical Christianity is best understood through a schema that contextualizes the contributing factors to an individual's decision to join the faith. Lewis Rambo, an anthropologist who has concentrated on studying religious conversions, has sketched a "matrix of transformation" composed of relationships, ritual, rhetoric, and roles (1995: 107-108, see Fig. 1 below). The simplicity of this diagram belies the

complex interplay of roles, relationships, rituals, and rhetoric affecting the initiate to adopt evangelical Christianity:
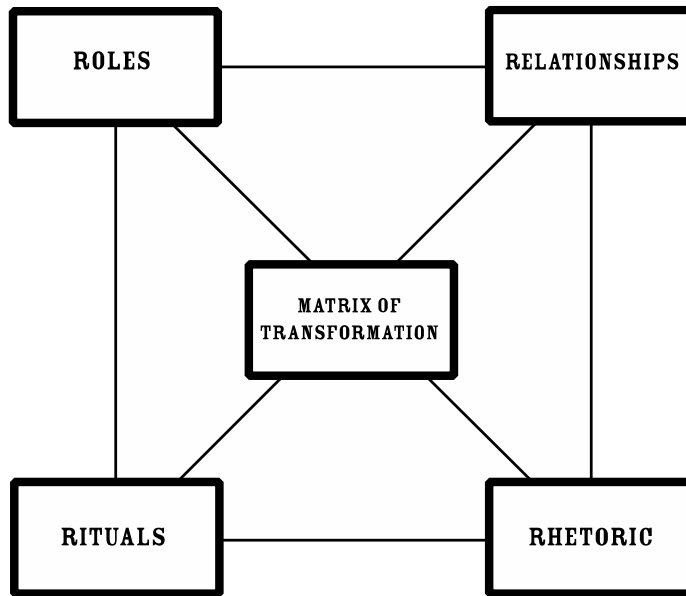
Fig. 1: Rambo's (1995: 107) Matrix of Transformation

Rambo notes that a potential convert's language shifts "dramatically" as soon as s/he interacts with the group, in this case a church, attempting to mimic insider language (119). The individual is not only performing a new *role*; s/he is learning the *roles* of authorities in the new community, most notably the pastor who speaks from the pulpit on Sundays. He further posits that conversion is fundamentally a linguistic phenomenon, thus confirming why a close analysis is warranted for this study: "Conversion…takes place, in part, through the process of learning to apply that language in situations that make it relevant to the convert and to the community to which the convert is speaking" (120). Here he emphasizes the *relationships* that surround the new convert. Examining the language, nonverbal communication, and vocal intonations of the excerpts I have

selected provided significant material for consideration. Because *rhetoric* is a secondary, yet nonetheless significant, lens through which to view this discourse (FitzGerald 2012, Burke 1970), it is helpful note that Rambo (1995) defines the term in relation to religious discourse broadly as "the various linguistic interpretations of a person's actions, feelings, and goals" (118). The myriad ways in which new converts are acculturated into the life of a local church through the use of insider vernacular, or "religiolect" shared by the faith community (Hary & Wein 2013: 88), further emphasizes the *relationships* that are formed to retain a new believer after responding to an altar call. Even something as simple as calling oneself a "sinner" in the words of the preacher leading the recited prayer involves a fundamental shift in one's self-perceived *role* that demands further study for understanding this micro-discourse (Rambo 1995: 119).

Rambo is merely one scholar among many to highlight the importance of *rituals* to the propagation of religious discourse. Mossiere (2007) identifies the "ritual process" that follows identifiable steps to prepare the initiate not only to join a particular faith sect but to alter his/her perception of the world (118). Paradoxically, religious rituals such as altar calls may include "archaic elements" (Du Bois 1986: 317) such as Latinate words, as well as spontaneous linguistic expressions (e.g. informal slang) that eschew "fixity and…formality" (Szuchewycz 1994: 407). Jeffner (1972) proposes that rituals are essential indicators that "correctness conditions" have been met to render certain religious discursive forms as performative speech acts (93). That those gathered in a church building during an ecclesiastical service ascribe to the veracity of what they are performing by the salvation appeals and the resulting prayers is essential to granting the

language exigence[1]. The way in which many contemporary American evangelical

preachers invite the entire assembled congregation to pray aloud along with those making

the decision to follow Christ on a given Sunday extends the ritual of the altar call further.

Stromberg (1993) posits that the recollection of individuals' own conversions, no matter

how long ago, enacted in the moment of repeating the prayer that initiated their faith to

bolster the confidence of the new believer praying for the first time, frames "personal

experience in canonical language" and "recreat[es it] in the telling" (3). Whereas the

moment of participating in others' conversion may exert a reinforcing effect on

committed Christian believers, putting the same discourse online may have a deleterious

effect. Neil Postman's (2005) acerbic take on mediated religion argues that the digital

medium (e.g. radio, computer, or television) strips away the "historic, profound and

sacred," leaving "no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense

of spiritual transcendence" (116). He suggests that taking religion out of its brick and

mortar buildings and displaying it on a screen renders the preacher, as he puts it: "tops;

[while] God comes out as second banana" (117). As cultural critique, Postman's view

that something transcendent in religious discourse is lost in translation from one platform

to the other is worthy of considering, given the parameters of this study.

      Studies of the phenomenon of contemporary evangelical churches in America to

date have yet to concentrate on this important aspect of conversion and the role of online,

archived invitations to become a Christian. Studies have, however, focused on the

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[1] "A pressing state of circumstances, or one demanding immediate action or remedy; a sudden or pressing necessity; an emergency; a difficulty, extremity, strait" (*OED*).

marketing of megachurches and the varied ministries they offer (Twitchell 2004), the use

of self-deprecatory statements and perception of leaders own foibles as a persuasion

tactic (Xanthopolou 2010), broadcasts of televangelists and their parallels with

advertising appeals (Schmidt & Kess 1986), the community appeal for viewers of

religious television programs (Tomaselli & Shepperson 2002), as well as the hybridity of

television monetary appeals and religious content by televangelists (Frankl 1987).

Linguistics has not kept pace with the technological advancements that American

evangelicals have exploited for spreading the gospel—connecting people to the divine

and to the larger community of the devoted.

Religion in general (not to mention evangelical Christianity in particular) has

always been interested in humanity's connection with one another—long before

computers offered to eliminate geographic distance between seekers. Because of its

sweeping importance in shaping interpersonal relationships, the connectivity of social

media, naturally, has exerted its influence on how users interact with spiritual content and

with like-minded fellow users accessing the same streams. As David Morgan (2011)

notes, nothing "seems essentially new" about religion's foray into mediatization; the

faithful have marshaled new media forms since Gutenberg's printing press (140). What

has emerged, however, with the digital age is what he terms as a "complicated relation"

(Morgan 2011: 141) between media and religion that has resulted in "a culture in which

consumption and media production are indistinguishable as forms of meaning making"

(Morgan 2011: 140). Online users do not merely take in content; they help to shape the

content being posted, even just by recommending a video clip so often that it becomes

"viral" and results in millions of "hits" or "clicks" of a computer mouse. Call-and-response preaching that used to garner a hearty "Amen!" from the church pew now often results in hundreds of comments generated in response to sermon content posted on social media sites.

The video channel YouTube provides a unique site for the forces of mediatization to influence directly religious practice today. Churches, ministry organizations, and preachers may upload religious content, provided it fits the length parameters specified by the hosting site. Moreover, individual users can upload content they may have surreptitiously captured on their mobile phones or tablets, without the consent of the preacher. Issues of copyright and ownership of content, even that which a consumer bought, are nothing new for the World Wide Web. What is groundbreaking, however, is how the Internet provides a domain for the democratization of religious practice and dissent. While many scholars discussing mediatization zero in on the substantive changes being exerted by individuals on religion, others note that new media forms carve out spaces that did not exist prior—spaces that users are all too eager to inhabit and to transform.

The discursive genre of a podcast is a relatively young yet influential medium that many ministries are seizing without knowing the long-term effects it may have on their evangelism efforts. A *Guardian* newspaper article from ten years ago is credited with coining the term "podcasting" (Hammersley 2004). While not the media contender of cable television or radio, podcast subscriptions on Apple iTunes surpass the 1 billion mark (Weiner 2014), with 39 million monthly listeners (or 13 million per day) to

programs ranging from comedy to home improvement to faith (Edison Research 2014).

Speaking of Apple, the iPhone, from version 5 forward, comes with a Podcast app pre-

installed, enabling mobile listening through ear buds or on an increasing number of

"connected cars" that allow for streaming audio (Roose 2014). New podcast users will

only grow more numerous in coming years. The audience is devoted to this "sticky"

medium, luring listeners to return and to explore new content (Bowers 2014). Not all

evangelical theologians are enthusiastic about new technological vistas for promulgation

of the Christian gospel. Wax (2014) cites a 2011 conference presentation with a dean

from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Russell Moore, who labeled

"dangerous" the contemporary practice of considering a mentor a "celebrity preacher" or

"a disembodied voice that they have heard on a podcast" (*The Gospel Coalition*).

Moore's concern represents a growing tension over the role of the local church and the

physical relationships enacted therein compared to online media forms of religious

discourse.

Forty years ago, Peter Donovan's research on religious speech acts laid the

groundwork for this present study, making key connections while failing to address the

unique parameters of evangelical Christian discourse. While not meant to infantilize

them, Donovan (1976) characterized religions as "games" (88), meaning that their

language follows certain prescribed rules and their praxis conforms to certain social

settings. The group educates the new initiate in the appropriate vernacular, training the

individual how to sound like an in-group participant, thereby playing by the inherently

and intuitively understood rules (Donovan 1976: 88). This process starts early—often

before and just after conversion. Donovan noted that religious "words and symbolic actions" allow "believers [to] bind themselves to God" in an exchange that they deem reciprocal with their Deity (84). Moreover, religious language includes "non-believers" through exhortations ("challenge[s] inviting a religious response") such as "Choose you this day whom you will serve" and "Repent, and believe the Gospel" (85). Donovan labeled these utterances "performatives" in an appropriation of key linguistic taxonomies of Searle (1975) and Austin (1975), particularly linked to notions of what prayer accomplishes. He specifically highlighted benedictions ("the asking of blessings on something or someone…a special kind of invocatory prayer") as akin to "negotiable instruments, like cheques drawn on God" (Donovan 1976: 85). This arrangement involves vital reciprocity.

This interactional conception of God's response to human language is essential to understanding Donovan's central argument and his contribution to the study of religious discourse. He cited none other than the solemnizing of a vow as exemplary of "invoking God as a witness or guarantor of what one says, vows or promises" (Donovan 1976: 85). Determining the perlocutionary force of an utterance requires monitoring its effect on the hearer, a condition problematized when the recipient lacks corporeal form. Donovan's distinction that religious language meets the requisite conditions of two-way communication enables this study. Where Donovan falls short, however, is the wholesale neglect of evangelical discourse related to the public invitation, the altar call, and the recitation of the Sinner's Prayer as the initiatory ritual of conversion to Christianity, a rite of passage accomplished through very specifically-chosen language fed to the penitent by

a preacher invested with ecclesiastical and communicative authority under certain social conditions.

Donovan's groundbreaking work is not the only scholarship to issue a call that this study attempts to answer. This research answers calls issued by previous studies in religious discourse. Staples and Mauss (1987) encourage further study of language's role in the conversion process as a transformative agent (134, 137). Earlier functionalist work by Snow and Machalek (1983, 1984) fails to distinguish between language use between the converted and the committed in the suspension of analogical reasoning, or the "willingness of the subject to equate his or her beliefs of ideas with the beliefs of ideas of other individuals or groups" (qtd, in Staples & Mauss 1987: 134, 141). Eckstein (2005) notes a scholarly omission "in interpersonal communication and social-cognition research" regarding religious conversion messages (417). The nexus of rhetoric and religious practice offers another underexplored area for study (Pernot 2006: 254). How religious content providers harness the Internet for evangelistic persuasion is significant. A linguist studying audience reception of religious videos online, Pihlaja (2014) fills what he labels as a "rare" scholarly gap by applying CDA to YouTube, a site of "different communities of practice" (4, 11). Whereas his study examined where these varying communities collide vociferously, my study concentrated instead on a close examination of one discourse community: evangelical megachurch preachers in America.

Methodology

Finding digital sermon content for linguistic analysis online poses very little challenge.

Many American evangelical churches offer a tab on their websites for listening to or

watching the latest sermons. Quickly I determined that I would need to use some other

means for selecting suitable preachers for study other than my own limited awareness of

the genre. I opted to use the annual list of 100 of the fastest-growing or largest churches

in the United States published annually in a special edition of *Outreach Magazine,* a

periodical produced by (according to their website) Outreach, Inc., "a nondenominational

publication adhering to traditional biblical Christianity" ("About Us" *Outreach*). The

company itself, similar to the medium it specializes in, is relatively young—18 years old

("About Outreach Media Group" *OutreachMediaGroup*). Many of the services Outreach,

Inc. offers to local churches are fee-based: consulting, advertising, and marketing, along

with sponsoring several websites (including the popular SermonCentral, a clearinghouse

of ministers' shared sermon notes) and publishing a subscription-based magazine.

Outreach boasts that it is "a church communication company reaching thousands of

churches across the United States and Canada and around the world[,]" although the

survey of fastest-growing congregations is limited to U.S.-based churches ("About

Outreach Media Group" *OutreachMediaGroup*). The surveys that supply the numerical

data used annually to compile the list of megachurches and those growing at an

exponential rate were composed by LifeWay Research, a branch of LifeWay Publishing,

the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, a large Protestant denomination.

This special report releases each September (yet is distributed a few weeks early on newsstands), serving as an ad hoc state of the American evangelical church. The introduction to the report is quick to assert that the finalized list is neither "comprehensive" nor "exhaustive," as it leaves self-reporting of key measures of data to the churches themselves. Several large American churches, therefore, such as the Oklahoma-based, multisite LifeChurch.tv (Craig Groeschel, pastor) and San Antonio's Cornerstone Church (John Hagee, pastor), are excluded from the list. Because the list skews toward evangelical branches of American Christianity, it appears to neglect large mainline, denominational churches pastored by best-selling authors (e.g., Tim Keller's Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City or John Piper's Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis). No Catholic parishes, LDS (Mormon) wards, or splinter congregations (e.g. Unitarian Universalist Societies) are represented on either list.

Given this evangelical tone to the churches included, I surmised that these congregations could pose as suitable referents for further analysis. Given the ubiquity of the American evangelical megachurch, I find it safe to assume that a large sector of American churchgoers is familiar with the discourse of public invitations and the respective prayers that follow them. Because I was interested in the language used in concluding prayers, evangelical churches constituted an appropriate target, given the long history of concluding sermons with public invitations for the penitent to convert to Christianity. Despite this common practice, evangelical churches differ dramatically in worship styles, modes of dress and address, and doctrine. I found in the Outreach 100 list a broad sampling of contemporary American evangelical thought and practice across

several denominations—Fundamentalist to charismatic to nondenominational—rife for study. The special report includes two primary lists—America's largest megachurches in attendance and those (no matter the overall size) that logged the greatest numerical growth by percentage, per annum. Read together, these lists represent mid-sized and enormous congregations.

Because critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA), the guiding framework for this study, requires close examination of linguistic and media extracts, I knew these lists required paring down to a manageable sample size. None of the pastors on either list was a woman. While evangelicals debate vociferously the biblical validity of female ordination, many Protestant denominations boast women pastors—some of whom, however, are relegated to associate pastor status over women's or children's ministries. This report, however, suggests that none of the largest or fastest-growing churches in the United States are currently led by women. The linguistic results were going to be composed entirely of men's speech and could, therefore, bias the findings. Therefore, I determined to locate women megachurch pastors and speakers through other means for salvation appeals to analyze. A 2015 online report (Breen) highlights the top 100 Christian leaders, including several women (e.g. Joyce Meyer, Nadia Bolz-Weber, and Cynthia Hale). I was able to locate sermons and altar calls/prayers online (*viz,* on YouTube or ministry websites) from these women clergy, as well as an outlier, not listed on *Newsmax,* but nonetheless influential. Jeanne Mayo, labeled "America's #1 Youth Pastor" (Green 2005), speaks primarily to young adults and women.

Next, I examined the locations, the names of the preachers, and the types of churches for any indication of racial or ethnic diversity to augment the linguistic data being collected. While not nonexistent (e.g. Hispanic, African American, and Asian congregations make both lists), the majority of the churches and speakers are primarily white. I found some preachers with varied ethnic backgrounds to include, such as Alex Himaya, a pastor with Egyptian heritage, from Tulsa, Oklahoma. Here Breen's (2015) listing of 100 influential Christian leaders proved helpful with the addition of Kirbyjon Caldwell, a United Methodist pastor from Houston, an African American clergy member. Rev. Hale, one of the women I selected, pastors an African American church in suburban Atlanta.

Starting with the top of each list, I selected approximately 10-12 churches and pastors in each grouping to investigate by visiting their respective websites. *Outreach Magazine* was again helpful to this end by publishing the URLs of each of the listed ministries. If I suspected that a congregation could possibly be composed of a majority of non-whites (e.g. Miami's King Jesus International Ministry, pastored by Guillermo Maldonado or Boston's Chinese Evangelical Church pastored by Steven Chin), I included it in the initial group for investigation. To make the comparison of disparate data (e.g., denominations, audio/video content, etc.) more efficient, I landed on the notion of selecting a particular day on the calendar—24 August 2014—looking only at the sermon content archived for that Sunday. My rationale was simple: All of the sermons would come from the same date for continuity, purposely not a holiday or special day on the liturgical calendar (e.g. Easter, Christmas, or Back to School emphasis).

American evangelical pastors generally launch new sermon series to coincide with the start of the school year because parishioner families tend to settle into a consistent attendance routine once summer vacations have ended. While the academic year begins at various times depending on the region of the country, I felt that late August was a good choice. I wanted to include excerpts from the senior pastor or main teaching pastor. If the speaker was not present in the pulpit on 24 August, I searched the archives for the book-ending Sundays (i.e., 17 August or 31 August) to see if the customary preacher would be listed as speaker. Occasionally I deviated by two weeks, but nearly all of the excerpts were collected from this limited date range. Several of the websites had a very limited archive, particularly for video footage—presumably to conserve bandwidth. I collected the footage in September 2014, ensuring that the congregations had had sufficient time to upload the content but it had not expired from their available window. Those few sampled congregations using YouTube to upload sermons can presumably expect them to be accessible indefinitely. If the main preacher was not speaking during the date range, I eliminated the church from consideration.

I allowed myself to include for consideration some outliers that did not get included in either the Outreach 100 or Newsmax 100 lists. For the outliers, my dates were more flexible. One nontraditional church I included is Mosaic in Los Angeles, California, led by Erwin McManus (originally from El Salvador) and Hank Fortener. Two other young megachurch pastors from either coast, Seattle's Judah Smith and New York City's Carl Lentz, have loyal young adult followings on social media platforms. Neither of these preachers bears little resemblance to robed or suited clergy of yesteryear. Another

significant connection these two share is a public and private relationship with pop music superstar Justin Bieber, further underscoring the encroachment of popular culture into religious discourse. Lentz and Smith are friends who have shared pulpits; Lentz's chosen excerpt actually was filmed at Smith's home church in suburban Kirkland, Washington. The inclusion of excerpts by innovative, unorthodox communicators (McManus, Fortener, Smith, and Lentz) provided lexical richness to the study that would not have been possible had they been excluded as not having been related to one of America's largest or fastest-growing congregations, perhaps because they opted not to report themselves for the award.

If it was apparent that the entire sermon was delivered in a produced format for television broadcast or even highly edited for a radio show or specialized podcast with narrative voiceover, those churches would be eliminated from consideration. One such example is the 2014 largest church, NorthPoint Church in suburban Atlanta, Georgia, pastored by *New York Times* best-selling author Andy Stanley. The son of televangelist and pastor Charles Stanley, Andy's sermons generally appear in segments, broken up by a third party who offers merchandise for sale or requests donations. The younger Stanley's preaching podcast, "Your Move," one of several podcasts his team produces weekly, is hosted by a third party acting as narrator. For the purpose of this study, I wanted to listen/watch "pure" church services—not ones that had been repackaged for delivery via some other medium. Despite these parameters, several of the videos begin with elaborate opening graphics and video montages. The audio tracks open with a music bed and a spoken introduction. Rarely does a typical evangelical preacher's file begin by

the speaker's introducing himself, outside of the way some do as part of greeting newcomers to the live service. Some level of production is apparently required before uploading the content to the respective church's website for mass distribution and download.

Over several days, I pointed my Internet browser to the URLs, endeavoring to locate the sermon archives for 24 August 2014. This task proved more difficult than it might first seem. While an examination of the rhetoric of church-based websites lies outside the parameters of this CDA study, the task could yield noteworthy results. Several of the websites positioned a link to the media (i.e., sermon audio and video files) prominently on the home page, whereas others required drilling down through various search tools. Most URLs played the file in an embedded reader on the site itself. Occasionally the file opened a YouTube page or redirected the user to the Apple iTunes store to "purchase" (for free) the podcast or to subscribe to a digital feed. Customarily the sermons were grouped by a sermon series with a unique title and a corresponding graphic image, presumably one designed for the event and perhaps shown onscreen in the live service or used in promotional pieces. Most of the megachurches' websites scale for mobile (handheld) devices, although others did not offer this option. Instead, these retained the look of the full website, appearing small and somewhat clunky on a smartphone, the device increasingly more users prefer to access digital content on the go.

Watching several of the selected videos confirmed that the sample, confined to salvation invitations and the prayers that follow them, was carefully chosen as a micro-discourse for analysis. The sermons themselves vary greatly in terms of length and

format. A seated speaker delivers some, while others include a person standing behind a lectern of sorts (although none appear to use a wooden pulpit associated with the High Church tradition). Some preachers are clad in denim blue jeans and untucked shirts, while others sport ties and dress pants. The preachers themselves range in age from late 20s to perhaps nearly age 60, with most being around their mid-30s. Some utilize video clips and onscreen graphics, while others appear to prefer a more simplified speaking style unassisted by visual aids. By isolating the closing moments of the sermonic event, the language of the prayer itself, I ensured that my comparisons could be drawn between more similar discursive segments. For context, I often watched or listened to the longer sermons to gain a sense of the language the speakers use when addressing the flock.

The chosen speakers selected for critical discourse analysis are as follows:

Table 1: American Evangelical Megachurch Pastors Studied

Preacher's Name	Sermon Title	Date	Church Name	Location
Mark Batterson	"Make Each Day Your Masterpiece"	24 Aug. 2014	National Community Church	Washington. D.C.
Matt Chandler	"Holiness and Humility"	17 Aug. 2014	The Village Church	Dallas, TX
Dave Dummitt	"Names: It's Not Just about Numbers: REACH"	Week Two: 24 Aug. 2014?	24community church	Brighton, MI
Shane Farmer	"All Things New: Week One"	7 Sept. 2014	Cherry Hills Community Church	Highlands Ranch, CO
Hank Fortener	"Rethinking God: God is Disappointed in You"	14 Sept. 2014	Mosaic	Los Angeles, CA
Steven Furtick	"Meant to Be: Part I"	23 Aug. 2014	Elevation Church	Matthews, NC
Cynthia Hale	'I Am a Giver"	22 Feb. 2014	Ray of Hope	Decatur, GA
Alex Himaya	"Gone Fishin'—Pt. 3"	24 Aug. 2014	TheChurch.at	Tulsa, OK
Chris Hodges	"Worship God's Way"	17 Aug. 2014	Church of the Highlands	Grants Mill, AL
Carl Lentz	"The Love You've Been Looking For"	12 Apr. 2015	City Church (guest)	Kirkland, WA
Jeanne Mayo	"God's Waiting Room"	13 Oct. 2011	Hillsong Church Colour Conference	Sidney, Australia
Erwin McManus	"Resilience"	29 Sept. 2014	Mosaic	Los Angeles, CA
Joyce Meyer	"Joyce Meyer – Altar Call"	Uploaded 22 Sept. 2014	YouTube: Good Sermon for You 2015	https://youtu.be/xfe2GXjuBsM
Perry Noble	"The Best Weekend Ever"	24 Aug. 2014	NewSpring Church	Anderson, SC
Judah Smith	"The Problem with Hope"	24 Aug. 2014	The City Church	Kirkland, WA
Adam Weber	"Anyone. Everything"	7 Sept. 2014	Embrace Church	Sioux Falls, SD
Jud Wilhite	"Focus: Week One"	24 Aug. 2014	Central Christian Church	Las Vegas, NV

As expected, some of the speakers do not issue a particular salvific "altar call," choosing

instead to pray for the faithful who are gathered on some issue related to the sermon's

theme (e.g. Matt Chandler's [2014] sermon about exposing unbiblical thought patterns

that vie for parishioners' attention). When an invitation is issued, it tends to follow a

fairly familiar pattern traceable by anyone who has frequently attended American

evangelical churches. Some speakers improvise on the customary format, but most hold to a particular model of the gospel presentation, a practice with a storied history in American Christendom (outlined in detail under "salvation formulae"). The various ways in which these preachers enact their ecclesiastic roles while positioning themselves in terms of authority and power as they commence their public prayers was immediately interesting, beckoning me to attend very closely to the ways lexical choices, nonverbal communicative gestures, and vocal inflections and intonation, are used in service of these aims.

Quickly I began to notice patterns emerge that would lend themselves to CDA analysis, yielding fruitful results for interpretation and greater societal implications. In order to trace these patterns most explicitly, I began the labor-intensive practice of transcribing the excerpts. Next, I replayed each video file to check my linguistic accuracy, regularly stopping the playback in order to edit the transcript. I tried to include every stumble, repair, parapraxis ("slips of the tongue"), and fluency error, as well as all discourse markers and fillers (e.g., "y'know?"). Since this section of the sermons came across as more extemporaneous than some of the teaching moments—given the reliance upon written notes versus the eye contact speakers maintain during the public invitations, I concluded early on that the preachers were following internalized scripts rather than reading verbatim the information expressed. Several of the speakers on the videos close their eyes while praying (thus restricting any reliance on written sermon notes), although most keep their eyes open and scan the assembled audience while praying—a unique posture that contradicts the usual imperative issued: "Close your eyes and bow your

heads." Presumably, the speaker feels the need to monitor the response to his/her prayer, so closing one's eyes would hinder that process. In only one case does the prayer come across as pre-written. That church tends to favor a more formalized liturgy despite its contemporary worship style, so the authored prayers make sense.

Once I had amassed a fairly substantial amount of data to analyze in the form of transcribed excerpts, I set to work identifying salient linguistic and rhetorical features of each communicative moment. I coded the findings with similar labels if it appeared that speakers were making similar rhetorical moves. I thoroughly annotated each extract, labeling the transcripts by identifying various terms relevant to CDA, such as pronouns, specialized jargon, metaphorical language, intertextual references, insider language (with references to shared group mores), repeated phrasing, and so on. The extracts began to fall into recognizable patterns, aided by the categories established by Rambo "matrix of transformation" composed of relationships, ritual, rhetoric, and roles (1993: 107-108). Examining the language, nonverbal communication, and vocal intonations of the excerpts provided interesting avenues for consideration. Having prepared the extracts, I was then ready to begin analyzing.

Conceptual frameworks

The scholars studying religious discourse today represent an array of academic disciplines: linguistics, rhetoric, cultural anthropology, history, religious studies, communication studies (including mass communication), and such ministerial training fields as homiletics and hermeneutics; therefore, the line of inquiry I followed borrows

from multiple fields. Noel Heather's *Religious Language and Critical Discourse Analysis* (2000) serves as an exemplar of applying critical discourse analysis (CDA) techniques, the guiding framework for the dissertation as defined below, to religious discourse. Heather labels "linguists interested in theology" as *theolinguists* who are "likely to consider ways in which the detailed analysis of contemporary religious language may help provide insights into both religious theory and practice" (26). This is the stance I adopted over the course of this research as both an *insider* (one quite familiar with this particular mini-discourse) and an *outsider* (an academic committed to closely analyzing language within its context). Heather (2000) explores the evangelical movement, the Internet, religious jargon, and language of leaders/preachers—all factors that shape sermon discourse, and maintains the scholarly detachment of an academic in this seminal work. He distinguishes CDA as "exploit[ing] DA techniques to highlight issues of social inequality and the desirability of social change" (18). The biblical New Testament chastises miracle-seekers as a generation of people "who seek a sign;" the digital generation finds in hundreds of uploaded sermon videos many semiotic signs over which to consider and to debate contemporary American religious practice.

To ascertain the various layers embedded in the evangelical sermonic discourse, I selected critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the primary theoretical base or conceptual framework grounding this study. I viewed these chosen extracts as representative of this influential discourse community in contemporary American society, looking for traces of connections between power, language, and ideology, vital links of CDA outlined by Norman Fairclough (1995, 2003, 2010) and Teun van Dijk (1985, 1995, 2001). My

approach to CDA is informed by the groundbreaking work of Norman Fairclough and

Teun van Dijk, particularly "specific linguistic properties of a particular type of discourse

in terms of ideologies and relations of power[,]" including those embedded in "other

types of semiotic activity…[such as] visual images and non-verbal communication"

(Fairclough: 1995: 54). Although van Dijk (2000) readily admits that CDA does not have

a singular guiding methodology or even a unifying theoretical framework, certain

commonalities exist in the practices of CDA linguists. Fairclough (2000), for instance,

outlines agreed-upon principles of CDA: Discourse is constrained by social structures

and culture, allowing language to further shape individual and corporate identities,

relationships, and systems of knowledge and beliefs. CDA practitioners who follow these

leaders foreground latent or undiscovered properties of language used in various

discourse communities. Fairclough (1989) advises adopting a three-dimensional view of

discourse as encompassing text, discursive practice, and social practice, emphasizing the

context in which discourses operate. Further, Fairclough (2000) notes that discourse

"projects certain social values and ideas and in turn contribute to the (re)production of

social life…[or] how we talk about the world influences the society we create, the

knowledge we celebrate and despise, and the institutions we build" (21). CDA studies not

just what is present but what is redacted or suppressed from a communicative moment.

Fairclough (2003) emphasizes that "what is missing from a text is just as important as

what is in a text" (qtd. in Machin & Mayr 85). This attending to what is said and left out

becomes instrumental in understanding a certain discursive excerpt—particular a digital

one.

Building on the work of the originator of Systematic Functional Grammar M.A.K. Halliday (1978), David Machin and Andrea Mayr's (2012) Social Semiotics approach to talk, texts, and images, wherein resources such as "words, images, sounds, colours, [and] postures" convey "meaning potentials" rife for analysis (223), guided the analyses and results that follow in subsequent chapters. Their work applies Cultural Studies to media texts that seem to proliferate with every passing year in the form of broadcasts, websites, banner ads, and print advertising in fashion magazines. This mediated approach to CDA extends the analytic practices into the Digital age. These researchers emphasize identifying in any discourse the participants, processes, and circumstance (66). The multimedia aspects of online videos offer each of these semiotic resources for purview and interpretation. Applying CDA best practices to these audio/video segments involves foregrounding the underlying warrants and assumptions each speaker brings to the sermonic event, looking for "links between language, power, and ideology" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 4). Machin and Mayr (2012) repeatedly emphasize how "[v]isual communication, as well as language, both *shapes* and is *shaped by* society" (10, italics in original). The authors pay homage to their predecessors in CDA and Cultural Studies while laying out a fairly comprehensive way of analyzing multimodal forms of communication (including, I found, archived digital sermons).

I discovered that the more systematically I approached the altar calls and final prayers, the easier my comparisons emerged. To this end, the discourse analysis (DA) strategies of James Paul Gee (2011) help form the basis of analyzing the texts, posing basic questions of every discourse excerpt. Gee's diagnostic questions help to identify

what typical consumers of religious discourse decode from these utterances. If language does shape society meaningfully, then the way we construct our perceptions of reality (and even of transcendence) is evident in the way we figure (or represent) the world around us via the words we use and the non-verbal communication we invoke. Gee (2011) refers to a "figured world" as a

> socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others…a picture of a simplified world that captures what is taken to be typical or normal. (71)

Later in the same monograph, Gee (2011) attributes to a *figured world* the "theories or stories that often help guide us in the process of constructing situated meanings" (104). Figured worlds operate unconsciously, guiding individuals' decisions and molding their impressions of others. The durability of figured worlds should not imply, however, that individuals arrive at these mental pictures solely by themselves. In fact, the groups and networks to which people belong help shape the figured worlds that they hold dear. Moreover, examining shared communicative practices indicates that "…figured worlds shape a community's discourse" (Vander Lei 2015: 67). This cyclical arrangement—whereby the community shapes the speech of individuals who then reinforce the community's shared values and vernacular—demonstrates the symbiotic nature of figured worlds.

Many of the preachers I analyzed are proficient at their craft of sermonizing. They wield rhetorical tools to persuade their "live" congregations adeptly. What became more interesting to me over the course of this study were the myriad ways in which these

situated meanings come into question in the public sphere of YouTube or even archived messages on their churches' websites.

Other theories played a tangential role in my chosen line of inquiry. The interpretative framework, is heavily indebted to speech act theory delineated by J.L. Austin (1962, 1975) and John Searle (1975), William FitzGerald's (2012) and Peter Donovan's (1976) designation of prayer and religious language as performative communication, and Lewis Rambo's (1995) matrix of transformation and seven-stage model of conversion, particularly the importance of rituals. The conclusions are informed by recent work in conversion studies, a subset of cultural anthropology, as well as principles of the rhetorical analysis of religion, outlined by the seminal work of Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (1970). Burke considers religion to be primarily a linguistic phenomenon rather than an ontological system, noting that "religious cosmogonies are designed, in the last analysis, as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion[, composed of]…a body of spoken and written *words*" (v-vi, italics in original). Christian conversion—to be verifiable—must evidence itself in the ways new converts speak and the ways in which the social actors (*viz.,* evangelical preachers) tasked with the promulgation of gospel beliefs impose this vernacular upon them systematically at the initial point of their entry into the discourse community: the public invitation, the altar call, and the salvific, pastoral prayer.

CHAPTER THREE: FAITH LANGUAGE: Talking the Talk, Walking the Walk

"[T]he evangelical speaker is also perforce a listener, attending to a message that achieves an important part of its purpose merely by being powerfully and passionately projected out into the world."
—Nancy Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the New World* (1987: 24)

Chapter Abstract

This chapter covers two strategic areas of an evangelical preacher's sermon: the words

chosen and aspects of extra-linguistic, audience-inferred communication that reinforce

the intended messages, especially through online videos. The verbal components include

structural oppositions, unwritten scripts used to present evangelical views of salvation,

vernacular of this discourse community, and references to the Bible and to popular

culture. Salience, spatial references, broad cultural conversations, and implied messaging

comprise the extra-linguistic elements that find their way into the micro-discourse.

What is said (Content)

The preachers' comments featured in each video/audio extract represent an entire

discursive strand: evangelical Christian content. So called "canonical language" is

integral to the conversion process in prayers, sermons, hymns/songs, and conversations

initiates experience as they try to become fluent in the discourse of the faithful in order to

fit in better (Borg 2012; Stromberg 1993: 15). The specific lexical choices these speakers

make encode ideologies[1] that emerge when closer attention is paid to what is actually

said. Given the nature of the argument presented *(viz.,* to embrace the new religion),

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[1] "Ideologies are basic frameworks of social cognition, shared by members of social groups, constituted by relevant selections of sociocultural values, and organized by an ideological schema that represents the self-definition of a group. Besides their social function of sustaining the interests of groups, ideologies have the cognitive function of organizing the social representations (attitudes, knowledge) of the group, and thus indirectly monitor the group-related social practices, and hence also the text and talk of its members" (van Dijk 1995: 248).

many of the preachers rely upon structural oppositions[2] to persuade the penitent toward the desired outcome. Others label the opposing classes of concepts (e.g. sin, indecision, devil, and the flesh) in a discourse differently; van Dijk (1998) refers to this tension as "ideological squaring." Although few of those speakers studied rely on written notes, a formulaic approach surfaced when they began presenting the claims of the Christian gospel.

Given a certain improvisational license common to evangelical preaching, it is unsurprising that the transcripts' wording varies from preacher to preacher. After accounting for the stylistic divergence, it became apparent that these ministers follow prescribed, memorized altar appeals that they modify in the moment. These orators are conversant in in-group language (Rambo 1995: 119), interspersing unique terms throughout their public invitations to familiarize neophyte parishioners in religious jargon. Some ministers float in/out of prayer easily without preparatory words (e.g. "let us pray"). The only way a listener knows they are praying is by the lexical items *God* or *Jesus* as forms of direct address to the deity being named. That preachers base their remarks on biblical narratives is not a surprising use of intertextuality[3], yet it can be easy to "overlook the profound implication of this way of using language…linking the sacred and the profane of construing the present in terms of the eternal" (Stromberg 2014: 121). Evangelicals tend to rely upon the Bible as ecclesiastical and rhetorical authority (Rambo

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[2] "In representational strategies it may be common to find that one side of an opposition is used to imply its opposite, which is absent from the text" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 224).

[3] French semiotician Julia Kristeva (1980) coined and used this term to describe references built into any discourse to previous works, since "any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (66).

1995). Beyond the ancient text held sacred, many of these preachers also refer to "traces" familiar to their audience in contemporary areas of pop culture and technology (Gee, 2011: 112-113). What results is a sophisticated blend of old and new, memorized and extemporaneous language, in terms of altar calls and prayers.

Structural oppositions

Preachers rely upon structural oppositions when framing the salvific moment. In order to imply that converting to Christianity is the preferred outcome, they often take great pains depicting the penitent audience members as particularly heinous. By emphasizing the inherent vice in each person listening to their voices, they seek to underscore how much better life will be for those who renounce their sinful condition in favor of Christ's regeneration.

In a redoubling of this implied representation of a beneficial outcome, several of the preachers surveyed actually feed lines to their congregations to parrot back to them, thus heightening the expectation that the life to follow this recitation would be sunnier than what has preceded this moment. While never stating that one expects a much improved existence from this moment forward, the very past they are made to renounce implies a flip side to be enjoyed ahead. While differing in singular or plural forms, several preachers require their congregations to acknowledge how bad they have been in a nod to how good the choice to convert to evangelical Christianity is by contrast. The *sin* versus *sins* distinction is much more than a semantic predilection. Treating *sin* as a mass noun renders it as an inescapable human condition after Adam and Eve's Fall in Eden.

On the other hand, the count noun *sins* pins responsibility squarely on the individual for piling up each transgression, necessitating their public acknowledgement at the altar. In either usage, however, the preacher uses this moment to highlight how much better the congregation's standing before God will be as no longer sinners (i.e., those who knowingly or unconsciously practice egregious behavior) but Christians. Perry Noble instructs those who have come forward to thank Jesus personally that he came "to pay for my sin" (Noble). Steven Furtick rehearses the definition of the word *repent* in leading the congregation to say individually: "I turn from my sin" (Furtick). By emphasizing the active verb *turn*, he implies a departure from a wrongful lifestyle toward one that promises to be substantially better. Jud Wilhite situates the penitent person as a culprit of sorts—the guilty party whose trespasses require him/her to acknowledge Christ as the acquitter: "you died on the cross for my sins" (Wilhite). This painting of the new initiates as formerly corrupt or particularly culpable sets up the expectation that what God will replace their fallen past with has to be significantly better than their present lot in life.

Putting words in the mouths of the people who are responding to their sermons allows preachers to depict situations in a way that tips the scales toward one result they want to accentuate. Joyce Meyer emphasizes the parent-child analogy of approaching God by directing the congregation to admit individually: "I'm sorry for my sins" (Meyer). Meyer holds the distinction as the only preacher of those studied to emphasize sorrow or contrition over one's wrongdoing. By making people apologize to God in a public fashion, she implies that restitution of a broken trust will be effected. In an ideal parenting role, the offended parent, upon hearing a rueful child admit her wrongdoing,

welcomes the child in a loving embrace that demonstrates love and forgiveness. By taking the audience through an act of apologizing to God, Meyer portrays God as a similarly responsive Father who will welcome the new convert. Drawing upon such a universal association of parenting and remorse, she uses one polarity in the structural opposition to imply the other, more preferred course of action.

Certainly, religions rely upon dichotomies to convince people of their veracity; evangelical Christianity has as its backdrop numerous binaries that animate the choice to follow Jesus Christ. Traditional evangelicalism, cut from the cloth of revivalist preachers—from First Great Awakening ministers such as Jonathan Edwards to twentieth-century American evangelists D.L. Mayo and Billy Sunday—insists on the reality of heaven and hell, sin and righteousness, and Jesus and the devil. When just one side of the argument is emphasized, however, the polar extreme is implied—even in its absence. Of the set of preachers surveyed, Jeanne Mayo is the only person to mention "the devil" and "the enemy." In context, she lends evil a voice by suggesting that personal discouragement has satanic origins: "And when the enemy whispers to ya and says, 'You're an idiot. You know it'll never change…'" (Mayo). By referencing the devil overtly, Mayo insinuates that an opposing "voice," one belonging to the Divine, counterbalances the disheartening messages her audience hears in their interior lives. The landscape of Fundamentalism has shifted dramatically from Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" or the hell fire and brimstone admonitions of tent meeting evangelists of 100 years ago. Satan is no longer the marauder of lives; he has been replaced with a subtle discourager who preys upon the self-confidence of the average

person. Spiritual warfare imagery, as Mayo enacts with her mentioning the "enemy,"

broadens to a larger lexical field, wherein preachers depict conversion as a turning from a

chaotic order to one governed by Christ's peace. This subtle shift eliminates the need to

point directly to the devil, while nonetheless dangling a better option for those ready to

leave their supposed turmoil for something promised as better. Dave Dummitt refers to

"enemy territory where there's evil, war and cancer and sadness and pain" (Dummitt).

This present existence is not easy, argues Dummitt, but following Jesus as he portrays

him, is superior for its attendant lifestyle improvements.

Salvation formulae

Evangelical churches, unlike their Catholic or mainline Protestant counterparts, tend to

eschew formalized, printed liturgy in favor of a more extemporaneous ecclesiastical style.

Many of these churches rely on a printed order of service, enabling all participants—from

the worship leader playing the songs to the person making announcements—to know the

chronological sequence of the various components in the public meeting. What some

evangelicals take umbrage with from printed liturgy—whether novenas or the recited

Apostle's Creed—is that memorized speech lacks an immediacy or authenticity.

One might expect, therefore, that evangelical discourse would be marked by a

spontaneity as preachers speak extempore, yet altar responses belie a certain rehearsed

quality that suggests an unwritten script that preachers follow for this portion of the

church service. While the actual lexical terms vary slightly in form and in sequence in the

extracts, the elements tend to be similar and are ordered similarly. Upon closer analysis,

it would appear that the preachers in question follow an unwritten liturgy with certain

component parts during the final part of the sermon. What surfaces, then, from the transcripts is a rudimentary linguistic formula enacted by preachers from various stripes of American evangelical Christianity to effect salvation on behalf of those repeating the carefully chosen and sequenced wording.

Paying close attention to the way each preacher constructs the response section after the sermon demonstrates a variety of ways that each points to this memorized formula. Chris Hodges uses New Testament language that echoes medieval class strictures when instructing initiates to request that Jesus will "[b]e the Lord of my life" (Hodges). This ubiquitous term *Lord* is indicative of submerging the new person into an unfamiliar vocabulary with words that lack cognates in their lived experience outside of the church setting. Moreover, the term connotes an ancient feudal system that involves surrendering control to one who is entitled to such service. As Americans, neither the speakers nor those sitting in the pews have firsthand experience of living under a monarchy—especially one with absolute control of its subjects. By invoking such an archaic term, the preacher links this moment to the kind of life-altering experience that is all but lost on the contemporary seeker of spirituality. Hodges continues to construct a moment of surrender by insisting that "[t]his is the important part; say: 'Forgive me for going my own way'" (Hodges) By labeling a portion of the prayer that he feeds line-by-line to participants as "important," Hodges suggests that he finds certain linguistic codes essential for "doing it right." If certain words must be said at particular points in the prayerful transaction to be viewed as significant, then at least for the speaker leading the

event there are required phases or communicative conditions to be satisfied for the prayer to count as legitimate communication with God.

This ticking off of mental boxes appears to be a measure of fidelity to evangelical dogma. Jud Wilhite's prayer stands as the most robust example of a traditional evangelical altar call. Nearly every element is present and in order:

> Dear God, I thank you for loving me. Thank you for sending Jesus into the world. I believe you died on the cross for my sins. *(lip smack)* I believe you rose again. Forgive me for all my sins. Give me the gift of eternal life. And help me face the challenges that I'm up against. God, I surrender my life to you. *(lip smack)* In Jesus' name. (Wilhite)

Wilhite does not ask his audience to repeat the words after him. Instead, he implies that agreeing with the words silently as he prays them aloud is sufficient for salvation. He first addresses the Christian deity, following this invocation with a statement of gratitude, especially for his expressing love toward humanity. Next, he recommends that the congregation members thank God for allowing Jesus to be born, although his life is reduced to the atoning sacrifice on the cross. Here, Wilhite deftly switches between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity, as Jesus is the figure who was crucified. He moves from the abstract notion of God to a more humane depiction of Jesus who took on a human bodily form while on earth. Wilhite particularizes the reason for the propitiatory death as atoning for the specific sins committed by each person praying along with him. He then makes a doctrinal statement affirming the bodily resurrection of Christ from death—apparently a required leap one must make to be eligible for salvation. The topic

of the resurrection, however, does not surface in the previous sermon. How is he certain, therefore, that each person affirming the words he is speaking into a microphone agrees with this theological jump here? This rhetorical move may be a not-so-subtle way to persuade some of those assembled to agree with these key doctrinal statements. Wilhite adopts an apologetic tone for the next phrase, urging those still praying with him to appeal to God's lenience for mercy. By including the word "all" with the phrase "my sins," he implies that prayer has to be specific in order to work in totality, as if it were possible (however unlikely) to request a partial pardon from one's transgressive record. Next, Wilhite makes a request to receive the "gift of eternal life," using metaphoric language on a micro level. A *gift* is almost always a welcome surprise—not a wage earned for certain behavior. He underscores the undeserved nature of salvation as he regards it. *Eternal life* is more abstract than the words may seem on repeat. If something is eternal, it is timeless and transcendent. It is unclear if Wilhite intends this request to be entrance into heaven or some modicum of spiritual regeneration and vitality in the here-and-now.

Wilhite's prayer acknowledges that life beyond the final "amen" is fraught with challenges, insisting that the new convert should not expect to navigate these seasons alone. He points to a divine supply of strength or guidance to be tapped to address current or impending obstacles. In a recursive moment, Wilhite prays about surrendering his life (as the model to follow), even though the earlier steps were supposedly intended to accomplish the act of surrender for those praying dutifully and silently with him. By relinquishing one's self-control to the Almighty, Wilhite leads the congregation in a

confession of humility and acquiescence. This final phrase, "in Jesus' name," is highly

essential in most evangelical discourse. More than a sign-off salutation, "in Jesus' name"

is the preferred way to linguistically render the balance of the prayer to God. Collocated

with the word "amen," from the Latin word meaning "so be it" that draws from Hebrew

and Greek transliterations, "in Jesus' name" marks authentic evangelical prayer. To close

a prayer without this ultimate insider term is to leave it somehow unfinished. In this

instance, however, Wilhite refrains from using *amen*, instead launching into a direct

address to those who might need to signal to him that they want to go on record as

following Christ publicly. By refusing to say *amen*, Wilhite continues to "hold the floor"

conversationally, although he switches from a prayer directed to God to an exhortation

directed at those sitting with their heads bowed and eyes closed.

While less developed than Wilhite's prayerful appeal, Judah Smith's exhortation

to his audience nonetheless includes a bulleted list of the key considerations the typical

evangelical preacher presents to persuade the penitent to convert to Christianity. His

rapid-fire list is fairly comprehensive in scope and orthodox in its doctrinal adherence to

institutionalized Christianity: "He went to the cross for you; he died for you; he bled for

you; he's forgiven you, [and] he's forgotten your sins" (Smith). The frequent use of the

second-person pronoun, able to straddle first- and second-person cases in English,

becomes an efficient way that Smith addresses audience members individually and

corporately. The phrase "went to the cross" implies intentionality—as if Jesus were in

charge of that form of his death and not the victim of public execution at the hands of the

Roman curate Pontius Pilate on charges of insurrection. By further emphasizing that

Jesus "bled," Smith underscores the physical pain that Christ endured as well as the substitutionary atonement this death accomplished (according to New Testament epistles). Interestingly, Smith neglects to mention the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead, an oversight perhaps rather than a definite, revisionist doctrinal position. By calling the audience's sins "forgiven" prior to their praying with him, Smith sets up his view of what many evangelicals label "the finished work of the cross," a status that new initiates appropriate for themselves at the moment of conversion. By describing sins as "forgotten," Smith nods to the Old Testament prophetic books of Isaiah and Jeremiah, wherein Jehovah promises that the sins of his people will be "remember[ed] no more" (cf. Isaiah 43:25 and Jeremiah 31:34), a theme echoed twice in the New Testament book of Hebrews (cf. Hebrews 8:12, 10:17). This willful forgetting of a sinful record by God may be meant to reassure Smith's audience that the conversionary prayer allows a wiping clean of one's spiritual slate—a premise he seems to find satisfactory enough to pass along to the audience in the video.

Not only do some of the surveyed preachers ascribe to an unwritten script of conversion-related steps, they also insist that those who are serious about intending this meaning articulate these steps aloud. Carl Lentz, preaching at City Church in suburban Seattle (pastored by Judah Smith, another one of the preachers under study), insists in the video extract: "Everybody say aloud. Say: 'Jesus, I need you. I am a sinner. And I need your grace….'" (Lentz). What is of interest to note is that certain steps are presented in a similar order as other preachers, although Lentz paces across the stage without consulting written notes. First, he directs the congregation to address Jesus directly with their

prayers with a simple proper name. No "dear" comes before invoking the name of Jesus, thereby contemporizing this prayer as a conversation between first-name-only parties. The recognition of one's need precedes admission of offense. When Lentz frames the corporate and individual acknowledgement of sin, he does so by making the people repeating his words own their trespasses by audibly identifying themselves as "sinners." This identification labels the penitent with a word fraught with numerous negative connotations: *sinner*. This appellation ranges from the teller of a "little white lie" to the most ruthless dictator bent on genocide. Moreover, this agentive form of the word ascribes guilt to the person performing the sinful action. It could be, therefore, difficult for those wanting to pray along with Lentz to make such an admission. Perhaps in hearing others make the same confession Lentz's audience feels less self-conscious about being affixed with an unfavorable label. He quickly follows the word *sinner* with a spoken admission of how much these listeners need the grace of God. This lexical term *grace* is used without much contextualization. Lentz appears to be relying upon the religious setting and the frequent invocation of encoded messages in ecclesiastical vernacular to carry the meaning for his audience.

Not all of the preachers surveyed are performing their sermons in a dedicated church building, so their discourse is shaped by different attendant features and the speaking context. Meyer, famous televangelist and speaker, stands in front of a curtain backdrop in a large arena—the site of many of her conferences held in major U.S. cities. Numerous indicators in the video point to an audience composed mostly of women. How the discourse is shaped by perceptions of gendered speech is found in linguistic traces in

ways similar to Mayo's sermon recorded at a women's conference in Australia. What does not seem to vary significantly, however, between Meyer's persuasive appeal for new converts is the order of required steps and the way the transaction is described lexically. Meyer urges her audience to both "surrender" and "yield" to God's leading. She instructs those who are interested in becoming Christians to repeat the following phrases verbatim: "I receive Jesus as my savior…and my Lord" (Meyer), thereby reifying the inherent power dynamics and authority structures a new convert must submit to in order to be seen as abiding in the new religion. By "receiving" Jesus, the new believer is positioned to accept something offered, rather than being forced against her will to an unwelcome stance. Meyer, further, tells the audience to word the invitation to Jesus simply: "Come into me" (Meyer). The person in the auditorium becomes the metaphoric container whom Christ inhabits, although she fails to explain how such an abstract notion occurs—even theologically. This is likely an evangelical catchphrase, spoken yet unexplained in laypersons' terms. Later in the video, Meyer refers to a segment of the audience as "you who received Christ" (Meyer). By using a past-tense verb (*viz., received*), Meyer is able to argue that something tangible has occurred that can be now explained as a complete action without ever fully describing to her audience what transpired during the prayer— even from her experienced vantage point.

Meyer is hardly the only preacher of the selected group to use similar analogies to explain what she presumes occurs as a result of repeating the words of the prayer she feeds to her audience phrase by phrase. Erwin McManus and Adam Weber, pastors who vary in age and church context (e.g. McManus pastors in Los Angeles, while Weber

serves in Sioux Falls, S.D.), both sketch their altar call in terms that sound similar to those used by Meyer: *come in, receive, accept,* and *invite*. This emphasis on receptivity should not imply, however, that the individual in a traditional evangelical altar call is allowed to call the shots. On the contrary, Meyer and Wilhite both use the word *surrender* prominently in their prayers. Asking their audience to verbalize or to affirm this level of acquiescence to an invisible God reinforces the internalized script each preacher follows. Surrender is a volitional act—a personal decision that may be done at the front of a church building or quietly in the privacy of one's seat. What appears to matter most is capitulating completely to the ways of God, although what that level of total submission may require is not stipulated in any of the sermons being studied. The context for the secular use of *surrender* may help map some of the meaningful domains being referenced. Enemy states surrender to superpowers when they are out-weaponed. Sports teams surrender to opponents in a match when they are out-played. Surrender evokes subordination. By requiring new initiates to verbally or consciously surrender at the behest of the person leading the meeting, very strong messages about group conformity come across loudly (if not subconsciously).

In-group language

American evangelicals have a long history of linguistic homogeneity. Since the days of Roger Williams and the first Baptist church in America literally exiled to Rhode Island for its seditious teachings, evangelicals have flourished in a relatively undisturbed environment, encoding their experiences in language that—although not different per se from vocabulary used in the larger secular culture—nonetheless takes on specialized

connotations when uttered within particular discursive contexts. This invoking of insider

terminology marks linguistic territory at the same time sacred to the speakers and

listeners and familiar to those steeped in its traditions. While some of these terms have

biblical corollaries and traces, other familiar phrases have earned their recognizable status

simply due to their prevalence in sermons and conversations held between members of

the religious in-group.

One notable instance of insider language can be found in phrasal verb formations

that one rarely hears outside of the evangelical church setting. While several phrasal

verbs may be cited, two surface in the extracts, interestingly, paired with the word *come*.

Dummitt issues an impassioned invitation to his audience in the video, pleading, "will

you come forward?" (Dummitt). This particular usage of a prepositional verb

combination may confuse the uninitiated because it would appear that the call is to come

to stand where the speaker is situated in the room, necessitating forward motion. The

trained ear, however, picks up on a familiar collocation of *come* and *forward*—the action

of answering a salvific invitation by publicly identifying with Christ, leaving one's pew,

and meeting the preacher at the altar area or communion table immediately in front of the

pulpit. With the shift from traditional ecclesiastical architecture to contemporary

arena/theater settings complete with stages, lighting, black walls, backdrops, sets, and

minimal stands in place of ornate wooden pulpits, this phrase nonetheless survives as a

linguistic trace of a bygone era in twentieth-century American evangelicalism. Preachers

have for decades promised, "Now, I am going to ask you to come forward to meet me at

this altar," or words to this effect. Committed Christians reflect on the moment they

responded to a gospel invitation as the day "I went forward," changing the verb tense but retaining the prepositional verb structure as encouraged by insider usage. By using "come forward," Dummitt both satisfies his experienced congregation members that he retains the evangelical dogma as well as grounds new initiates in the insider language they are expected to adopt as their own.

The lexical term *come* forms a different phrasal verb that resonates with evangelical audiences: *come before.* Mark Batterson concludes his sermon "Make Each Day Your Masterpiece" not with a formal altar call but with a more generalized benediction. He commences the prayer with a term that would sound very familiar to the typical evangelical church member: "Father, we *come before* you this weekend and pray that you would help us" (Batterson, emphasis added). Even before presenting a specific request, Batterson states the obvious: He is bringing the focus of the congregation to God's attention in prayer. In this instance, the preposition *before* loses its primary connotation of preceding anything else. In this common usage, *come before* resembles the appearing before a monarch, head of state, or deity—with dutiful obeisance and respectful homage. Perhaps this phrase hearkens to a practice of approaching one in authority with a certain sacrifice or gift in hand to appease the one being approached. This phrase finds its placement most frequently at the beginning of a prayer as some of the more formulaic verbiage one uses to pray formally in a reverential manner in certain evangelical settings. The phrase almost always denotes a corporate surrender of sorts, although it is conceivable within this discourse to overhear *come before* paired with the first-person singular pronoun. It is most often spoken on behalf of others by one leading

the prayer, tasked to do so in a more official capacity incumbent upon those who hold a leadership status within the congregation. Batterson certainly possesses this cachet of authority, so he unsurprisingly repeats the familiar phrase at the start of his final prayer, preceding the admission of the congregation's need for divine assistance. Prayer, because of its place as a permanent fixture of evangelical gatherings provides numerous occasions to overhear insider language.

How each preacher commences the prayer, drawing the congregation into the corporate act of intercession, is significant linguistically. The act of dropping one's head and closing one's eyes seems correlated to evangelical prayer posture. Positioning oneself in this common stance then helps the preacher measure complicity with the prayer being performed. Lentz, for instance, frames his invitation to prayer as a request in two different ways: "Can you bow your heads" and "Can you bow your head one more time?" (Lentz). He asks permission with this rhetorical question. He would likely still begin praying without complete audience participation. In the first instance, Lentz uses the plural version of the second-person pronoun. By using the singular noun *head* in the second instance, perhaps Lentz addresses the individual within the larger group—seeking to make prayer more personal. Chris Hodges uses a similar posture, although he blankets the entire congregation with his twice-mentioned exhortation: "every head bowed, every eye closed" (Hodges). Wilhite repeats Hodges's phrase exactly, albeit only saying the statement once in his excerpt. Furtick, one of the youngest preachers included in the group of megachurch clergy, uses a more imperative tone in his direct command: "heads bowed, eyes closed" (Furtick). Furtick utters this phrase two times. In the video,

hundreds of people shown in the first few rows of the audience dutifully drop their chins. The specific term *bow* while certainly monosyllabic and understandable, is rarely applied to a part of the human anatomy. In its standard usage, *bow* is the whole body motion of bending at the waist, generally to acknowledge applause or to demonstrate respect in some cultures toward someone of high rank. Of course, *bow* is correlated to the act of worship in the most anthropological sense—although the very invoking of this context accentuates its foreignness to the person describing the act. To bow one's head, therefore, is a posture of worship enacted in a relatively unobtrusive way. *Bow* is not used transitively in many linguistic settings. This phrase "bow your head" is, however, so commonplace in evangelical church settings, that it hardly sounds odd, except to the ear untrained by prolonged discursive exposure. Moreover, the dropping of chins alone does not constitute the prayerful posture. This phrase is usually associated with an admonition to close one's eyes. This eliminates distraction, while simultaneously heightening the sense of the preacher's speaking to each person in the church auditorium.

Bow is certainly not the only term reserved for an ecclesiastical context that emerges from this close reading of the micro-discourse. The salvation appeal conducted by an unnamed woman associate pastor in the Ray of Hope video is peppered with terms that find little popular usage outside church settings. For instance, the minister refers to her leading of the "benediction" and "doxology" once she has issued an invitation to all of those interested in making professions of faith (Ray of Hope). A *benediction* is a final prayer in a typical evangelical church, generally marked by a certain level of formality by its being pronounced by a ministry leader. The benediction also officially closes the

church service in many Christian churches—not just those of an evangelical bent. Generally, the benediction includes prayers that God will bless and protect those present until they meet again. The latter word this pastor names, *doxology*, is marked with a higher degree of clerical formality. The Greek-by-way-of-Latin term refers to an utterance of praise in honor of a deity. In some circles, the doxology is sung corporately. As the Ray of Hope video attests, a choir leads the doxology. This term finds its place in the High Church liturgy of mainline denominational Christianity, thereby suggesting that this particular Baptist congregation values a modicum of reverential formalism.

Several other words that surface in the excerpts are much less formal in tone yet nonetheless act as typical discursive markers in evangelical settings. Dummitt urges his congregation to realize their decision to follow Christianity is "for eternity," meaning the implications have lasting cosmological significance. To emphasize the urgency of the moment, Dummitt appropriates the idiom "at the edge of your seat" to argue that "God is on…the edge of his throne" (Dummitt). This way of depicting heavenly attentiveness to the earth-bound decision being enacted in the prayer is not atypical. In fact, a whole evangelical lingo has developed to refer to the supposed result of praying the dedicatory prayer along with the preacher. Furtick labels the time set aside at the conclusion of the sermon to dedicate oneself to following the teachings of Christianity as a "moment of ministry" (Furtick). He ostensibly refers not to the ministry being performed by the human actors present—himself, chiefly, as the preacher of record. The *ministry* in evangelical code is the praxis of the Holy Spirit's influencing the potential convert to dedicate him- or herself to Christ. The *moment* lasts as long, then, as is warranted by the

importance ascribed to the result. Scheduled chronological time becomes less important than coaxing people to decide to pray along with the preacher. This opportune moment can be stretched as long as it needs to be to yield more converts. Even the act of choosing to pray results in "decisions of faith" (*viz.,* first-time commitments to Jesus) and "rededication[s]" of those who have backslidden or reverted to former behavior indicative of their previous (i.e. pre-conversion) lifestyles (Hodges). These two lexical terms, *decision* and *rededication*, reduce the abstract to a concrete response that can be counted, celebrated, valorized, and quantified as new "salvations," key measures of evangelical success.

Two of the preachers invoke a specific insider lexical term that corresponds with the conversionary prayer: *saved*. While linked to salvation (itself a nominalization), *saved* becomes a badge of honor worn by evangelicals who make the decision to convert to Christianity. The term refers to the moment at which the person "surrendered to the Lordship of Christ." The tense of the verb becomes essential for detailing their understanding of the conversion process. Noble leads the congregation to pray aloud: "Thank you, Jesus,…for saving me" (Noble). This use of the present progressive verb indicates a belief that the propitiatory act of Christ's death on the cross is ongoing as it is applied by twenty-first century people who pray to him. The word also connotes something that is finished in this instance, since Noble fashions the prayer in such a way as to thank God for something that seemingly has already been assured. Meyer is much more direct in insisting that the prayer she is leading has power to accomplish something that has lasting effects. She instructs her congregation to repeat these phrases: "I believe

I'm saved…[;] I'm on my way to heaven" (Meyer). Following a prayer of confession of

sin with the use of *saved* (past tense) suggests that, at least for Meyer, the status of any

person who parrots her words is settled as having achieved the intended effect of right

standing before God. She quickly follows this statement with a clarifying assurance of the

eternal whereabouts of the souls of those performing the prayer.

Intertextuality

It is not unexpected that these preachers being studied rely on verses from the Bible in

their sermons, even in the final moments of their public performances. For these women

and men, the Bible represents the highest level of authority. By invoking the ancient text,

these preachers base their remarks on a source deemed authoritative by the majority of

their assembled live audience members. By uploading their sermons to the Internet,

however, the mutual regard for the Christian scripture found in their church buildings is

contested by the multiple audiences who may view the sermons. The reliance on biblical

texts in a mediated environment appears differently—almost as an apologetic for the

doctrine they profess. In other words, what may be intended as reassurance to the

religious audience could come across as defensive to the virtual audience who may be

unfamiliar with the customary protocol in an evangelical church service. How the

invocation of the Bible may operate differently between the original sermon's

performance and the way it appears through the computer or mobile device screen

renders the external feature of the Bible an instantiation of intertextuality.

Fewer excerpts contain references to the Bible than I would have predicted at the outset of this study. Batterson's concluding remarks and prayer reference Psalm 145:2, wherein the psalmist remarks, "Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever" (NIV). By linking his contemporary experience with King David of ancient Israel, Batterson patterns himself in the lineage of other devoted followers of the God of the Bible. Dummitt cites a New Testament epistle, 2 Peter 3:9, in his altar appeal. In the verse, the Apostle Peter anticipates the "day of judgment," a touchy topic that reads very differently in varying contexts. Such eschatological ponderings within the evangelical church setting are often intended to accomplish two separate but associated objectives: provoke nonbelievers to convert to Christianity and reinforce the veracity of the conversion for those already in the flock. Outside this context, as the video may be viewed by anyone with a Wi-Fi-enabled device, the concept of a day of reckoning where God judges humankind is met with various responses: incredulity, skepticism, disdain, mockery, curiosity, or ambivalence, to name a few. The insistence on mentioning the numerical reference to the location (i.e. chapter and verse) may extend beyond merely proper documentation. By adding the numeric value, the verse seems more grounded, defensible, and reliable.

Some passages become so familiar to the church audience that the phrases may be decontextualized from their original sources yet nonetheless meaningful to the hearers. Shane Farmer's prayer references the end of John the Revelator's panoramic view of heaven in Revelation 21:5: "you are making all things new" (Farmer). This allusion to apocalyptic literature serves as an incentive to his congregation to persevere amid

troubling times as they await a new reality in the next life. This use of scriptural phrases as a form of comforting palliation is fairly commonly practiced. Mayo's message to women assembled at a conference repeats twice the following phrase "weeping may endure for a night…"—while she pronounces the phrase that follows the first in Psalm 30:5 ("joy comes in the morning") three times (Mayo). By the third instance of repeating this phrase, Mayo's voice elevates in pitch and volume. This phrasing underscores the brevity of human suffering experienced in the present in light of how God will turn around even dire circumstances eventually. Mayo invokes the psalmist David's poetic lyrics, rehearsing the rhythm of night giving way to dawn as a metaphor for the eventuality of painful situations yielding to pleasantness. In both Farmer's and Mayo's sermons, the preachers adopt an unenviable rhetorical stance (*viz.,* persuading congregants to delay the acquisition of an answer to their prayers for relief). By relying on ancient religious texts—especially ones that contain narratives of transformed suffering—these preachers soften the potential disappointment of those holding out for their miracle, bolstering their faith.

Preachers today understand that their congregants live in a world bombarded by mass media. Consequently, the ministers whose words are analyzed here link their sermons and even altar appeals to intertextual references that demonstrate their relevance to 21st-century media-saturated, consumer-minded churchgoers. Dummitt's impassioned appeal to bid his listeners to consider converting at the conclusion of his sermon is peppered with several markers of socially recognizable success:

> [D]o you know why… why he leaves you here? Why you get one more
>
> heartbeat? It is not going to make your 401(k) get bigger. It is not for you
>
> to win the Little League championship. It is not for you to get the corner
>
> office. I promise you: It's fine. All that stuff is fine…. (Dummitt)

Here Dummitt (seemingly) randomly selects three accomplishments that his hearers may

take personal pride in achieving: wealth, recognition, and career promotion. He quickly

adds that these pursuits are "fine," repeating the word twice for emphasis. In this

moment, Dummitt sets out to question the flimsiness of lesser pursuits—hence the "Little

League" baseball allusion, a game played by many American boys under the age of 12

years. The other two references are to achievements that do not occur until middle age or

almost retirement, thereby covering the lifespan of the average person occupying a pew.

Dummitt labels these goals as "fine" or even, at times, necessary. To call them frivolous

would be tantamount to upending the contemporary American social order. Instead, he

cites these familiar cultural touchstones to suggest that pouring oneself exclusively into

attainment of outward success may divert a person away from what he finds truly

significant in this life: following the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Reinforcing that his main aim is to prompt his congregation to an intended

action, Caldwell further tugs at their heartstrings by mentioning inspirational Civil Rights

leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Granted, the date of the video recording corresponds to

the national holiday in observance of the slain African-American leader's birthday (i.e. 5

Jan. 2015, uploaded on 29 Jan. 2015):

So… the dream continues. I've got a dream. You've got a dream. All of

God's children got a dream. And I dare you to wait 'til you get to heaven.

The dream starts right here, right now. *(Audience applause)* May Dr. King

and Dr. King's death not be in vain. (Caldwell)

In the video, the choir, dressed in gray and white choir robes, sits and/or stands behind

Caldwell on the platform. Moreover, when the camera pans the congregation, nearly

every person framed within the shot is African American in ethnicity. To this population,

particularly, Dr. King serves an iconic role as hero and exemplar of perseverance despite

trials that nearly shipwrecked the Civil Rights movement in the United States. In a single

phrase, "I've got a dream," Caldwell nods to King's famous March on Washington

speech preached on 28 August 1963, a pivotal moment in American history that

catapulted King to the forefront of the national conversation on race relations. Even

Caldwell's slight edit of King's original wording—turning the transitive verb *have* to

have got—is intentional. He repeats this verbal construction thrice, modifying the third

mention: "I've got a dream[; y]ou've got a dream[; a]ll of God's children got a dream"

(Caldwell). Caldwell adopts this brief usage of African-American Vernacular English to

speak in the dialect, perhaps, of his congregants as a fellow insider in the struggle. Here

his code-switching lexis cashes in on common experience with the individuals he leads

by speaking a vernacular they may share. By vowing that "Dr. King's not be in vain,"

Caldwell situates the slain Civil Rights leader as a martyr, a designation made even more

poignant given the setting.

The other speaker who appears to seek credibility with her audience is Mayo, whose audio track was captured at a Hillsong conference in Australia where she was scheduled as a guest speaker. Hillsong is an international megachurch, headquartered in Sydney, that sponsors satellite locations in major world cities, each pastored by a local preacher, yet the "mother church" serves as the umbrella organization for the individual expressions worldwide in places such as London, New York City, Paris, Kiev, and Moscow. Mayo's speaking style is a mixture of personal stories and historical anecdotes meant to stir the crowd toward inward contemplation and outward behavioral change. To underscore her seriousness, she states that "[t]he God of the universe sent me from the United States of America to give some of you this divine email from him" (Mayo). That she selects the lexical term "email" instead of analog forms of communication (e.g. letter, postcard, or note) is, of course, significant as an intertextual reference. Email, while impersonal in some instances, still qualifies as a person-to-person, immediate, unfiltered communiqué that arrives instantly. Mayo positions herself as the Ethernet cable that enables this Divine-to-human message to be downloaded. Moreover, she explicitly references her national heritage—with all of its attendant connotations—as an American. She claims to have been "sent" by "[t]he God of the universe" for this speaking engagement, rather than simply showing up at the invention of the conference's organizing committee, thereby heightening the significance of her talk. This rhetorical move also permits her to claim, even obliquely, divine inspiration for her sermon—thus making disagreeing with it tantamount to rejecting the voice of God through his oracle.

What comes across in these excerpts is how few of these preachers reference potential audience members outside of those parishioners present in the live moment when the sermon was recorded. A few examples of multisite megachurches are exceptions. These pastors use the closing moments of their videos—assuming that these are shown to satellite locations by some closed-circuit means to other congregations watching the same sermon being performed at the mother church in real time. The largest of the churches in the sample, according to *Outreach Magazine,* is NewSpring in South Carolina, a church that meets in numerous locations. The survey (2014) named the multisite church as the fourth largest in the country (23,055 in attendance weekly) and second fastest-growing church in 2013 (*Outreach* 130). The church's website sports the locations across the state—eighteen plus the main location in Anderson where Noble preaches weekly. Consequently, his inclusion of several representative sites makes sense: "I want you at every campus" and "on every campus" (Noble). He names these cities: Greenville, Greenwood, Boiling Springs, Myrtle Beach, Spartanburg, and Charleston. He requests a particular action: "If you prayed to receive Christ, let's come forward," no matter the location (Noble). Moreover, he references people sitting at the Anderson building in "an atrium or an overflow" to also make their way into the main auditorium to be counted in the number of respondents (Noble). Once this moment ends, however, no provision is given for future respondents. In other words, if viewers were to watch this video months (or even hours) after it was uploaded, they are not instructed at any point to know what to do in response to the appeal.

This timeliness issue seems to escape the multisite preachers, who clearly have

the vagaries of their present speaking situation at the top of their minds. At least in one

other instance beyond Noble's case does the preacher sound like he is coaching his

pastoral staff through his remarks. Hodges interrupts his direct remarks to the people who

have decided to convert to Christianity based on his sermon to mention: "Campus pastors

are going to come to the stage and help me pray with you" (Hodges). One can imagine

that coordinating multi-campus religious services would take intricate timing and deft

organization. The overt cue to the onsite staff may be prearranged. From a linguistic

perspective, however, the discourse reads as a promise—one that Hodges cannot

immediately monitor whether it is fulfilled, thereby putting his ethos as a rhetor at risk. In

one instance, a preacher is caught off-guard as he recalls that his audience is potentially

much larger than the faces he can see. Fortener urges his audience not to put off the

decision to become a Christian—even by walking out to the church's parking lot and

praying privately in their automobiles. At this moment in the podcast Fortener pauses

momentarily and in a jovial tone adds an aside: "Unless you're on live stream, because in

which case you better pull over right now" (Fortener). Here is the only explicit reference

to an online audience—to individuals accessing sermon content on their computers or

mobile devices—in all of the sermons. Even in this example, however, the preacher refers

to synchronous communication; live-streamed church services are available as they

happen in real, synchronous time.

What is ironic, therefore, is that each of the sermon extracts included in this

sample was archived to the Internet in some format: a YouTube video, a church website

as video, an audio podcast, and so on. Despite efforts to keep only certain content available for a brief time, any online content is ultimately retrievable forever. These time-bound sermons, preached to certain locations with their particular expectations, are now available free of charge on a worldwide medium accessible by billions of Internet users. That the speakers creating the content uploaded weekly fail to recognize the multiplied audiences who access and interact with the messages is curious—an indication that the decision makers in these communicative events have not fully grasped the innovative medium they have harnessed for the propagation of the Christian gospel. Some phrases, however, translate despite the location or time frame. For example, Smith prays for his congregation in Kirkland, Washington, an east-side suburb of Seattle, with gratitude expressed to God in words that escape narrow constrictions: "Thank you for what you are doing in our church, in our community; God, thank you that in the unpredictable days we're living in, you are sure and you are the same yesterday, today and forever" (Smith). The statement works well beyond the Pacific Northwest and the year it was recorded (2014). Smith refers to the *church*, which can be a universal term, and "our community," a space that may be contextualized to whatever setting in which Web users find themselves. Even the phrase "unpredictable days we're living in" becomes less linked to a certain era and floats more as a commentary on the growing secularism of the culture and the bleakness of mainstream news reports (Smith).

What is unsaid (Context)

Video enhances the analysis of contemporary evangelistic preachers' altar calls and

prayers by granting access to various nonlinguistic elements that nonetheless shape and typify the genre. Among the many semiotic resources preachers may marshal in a speech event, several are particularly effective and convincing: language, images, sounds, and gestures (Kress 2010). By far, the most illustrative nonverbal communication forms these preachers use are the distinct gestures and poses employed and how they serve illocutionary acts of religious discourse and whether these mimic nonreligious discourse forms (Ravenhill 1976: 34, 37). How the preachers convey intimacy, close proximity, emotional distance, and openness/closed-ness via gestures provided a significant line of inquiry. From the verbal (e.g., vocal inflection, pitch, tone, and satire) to the nonverbal (how prominently speakers are framed by the camera), the preachers surveyed indicate what Leone (2004) surmises, namely that "from the point of view of semiotics, conversion often consists in the process through which someone becomes a convert by interpreting certain signification[4] phenomena as phenomena of communication determined by a transcendent agency and addressed to the convert herself" (370). Preachers possess several semiotic tools to employ in service of convincing people to adopt Christian beliefs as their own: iconology[5], multimodality[6] and iconography[7]. The

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[4] "[T]he phenomenon through which a perceptible element of reality can be referred by someone to a nonperceptible element of reality" (Leone 2004: 369).

[5] "A term used in art history and the analysis of art, it is a process whereby elements and features of paintings and sculptures are analysed in terms of their symbolic and historical meaning….So too can we consider the origins of meaning of elements and features in contemporary representations" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 224).

[6] "In linguistics, this term came to be associated with the realization that meaning was communicated not only through the linguistic mode, but by the other semiotic modes such as the visual, sound or gesture" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 222).

[7] "[T]he visual equivalent of lexical analysis. It is the analysis of the visual elements and features of any image, layout, picture or photograph" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 220).

final term may seem out of place in the megachurch auditorium. True, modern church buildings bear little resemblance to ancient cathedrals decorated in stained glass windows. Instead, American evangelical churches range from austere Fundamentalist churches "bereft of iconography" to interactive, theatrical stages with rotating sets that connote "public ritual space" (Ward 2010: 121). Focusing on the images, graphics, and colors, and questioning the choices made therein helped me to ascertain the ideal world these preachers were projecting (Machin & Mayr 2012: 19). As public rhetors, the preachers studied demonstrate an interest (if not always a conscious stance) in salience[8]—that is, making certain parts of the discourse stand out as actionable communication—even if that feature is nonverbal.

Salience

Viewing the video segments makes one observation evident: Some megachurches invest significant staff resources and finances into creating backdrops, graphics for sermons, and resources that accompany the teachings. Additionally, the costs underwriting theatrical lighting, state-of-the-art sound, and quality musicianship are significant. Video production (i.e., camerawork, editing, graphics/post-production, and formatting and uploading sermon videos to the Internet) is another considerable expense, although some of the churches' videos are less polished than others. For example, the video for Ray of

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[8] "In images, there are a number of ways that elements and features can be made to attract our attention or be given importance…[that is,] a feature might be foreground *(sic),* given a brighter colour, or a central position" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 223).

Hope comes from two cameras that switch quickly from shot to shot with a rather grainy effect. By contrast, Batterson's National Community Church service from Washington, DC, is recorded in distinct high definition from a stationary camera that does not follow him as he paces. The video frames the speaker, limiting the field of view to just what is visible; in Batterson's case, this includes sermon graphic banners, a metal music stand, and Batterson from the waist up. Despite the variety among the video approaches, in each instance the most important feature is the pastor/preacher. He or she is made salient. For example, for McManus's talk entitled "Resilience" delivered at Mosaic on September 29, 2014, the mid-50s, thin Latino pastor with salt-and-paper, short-cropped hair is dressed entirely in black casual clothing. A banner behind him reads: "MOSAIC: You belong here." The band plays a very soft, chord-based melody underneath his appeal. His face shows up against the darkened stage. His face is lit to appear warm, not cast in shadow despite the dim auditorium. His body is centered in the frame, mostly just his torso. His image is foregrounded, against a black curtain. With the exception of "bright colours," McManus's image onscreen has met the other examples Machin and Mayr (2012) provide for salience (223). Clearly, MCDA criteria fit the preaching discourse for the purposes of salient analysis—in multiple instances.

An interesting example of salience comes from the sermon video produced by Central Christian Church. Finding the archived sermon Wilhite preached in his home church in Las Vegas from this time period requires going to the church's website. Each sermon series has its own graphic: "Matched: Keeping the Flame Alive," two wooden matches put tip to tip, one blue and the other red; a green screen that resembles the

opening credits of the television program *Breaking Bad* with its Periodic Table graphic

image; and a broken, running gingerbread man whose abdomen sports a calligraphic

script that reads "Holiday Hustle." The week's message for 24 August 2014, the target

date for this study, forms the first installment in a three-part series entitled "Focus." The

graphic behind the word is a gray-scale, blurry version of an optometrist's manual

refractor (a.k.a. a phoropter), where the lens itself forms the "O" in the lexical term

"FOCUS." Underneath this word in upper- and lower-case white lettering (sans

punctuation) reads "Love God Love others" (Wilhite). A viewer chooses to watch the

entire service or "teaching only" (Wilhite). Prior to watching the sermon video, music

with a driving beat and bass plays as the screen fades in from black. A video clip comes

on featuring a young Caucasian man (late 20s/early 30s), unnamed, wearing a gray

button-up shirt, cuffed at the elbows, and a wedding ring. He looks directly at the camera.

He stands in front of a light-gray wall with no sense of depth of field. The window is

highlighted with red graphics. He thanks the viewer(s) and asks for them to email

mystory@centralonline.tv "if Central has impacted your life at all" and to do "the giving

link" on the church's website "at the top right of the page" (Wilhite). He ends by pointing

with his left index finger, as he says, "Let's join Jud for week one of Focus" (Wilhite).

The screen fades to black before coming up on the church's main auditorium in Las

Vegas.

Wilhite looks down through the sermon video, as if the stage is elevated slightly

above the heads of the seated audience. The preacher wears a blue, Western-style,

brushed denim chambray shirt with white snaps, untucked; black, thick-rimmed glasses; a

head microphone; tan, tight-fitting jeans, blue shoes, and a shiny gold wedding ring. His

dark brown hair is parted on the right side. His "pulpit" is a high-top table with a black

top and silver, metal legs. On it sit an open leather Bible and some white pieces of paper.

The backdrop is completely black, except for groupings of tomato-red lights in the

trapezoidal shapes. Each shape is made of six small lights. They are placed

approximately at shoulder height for Wilhite. A par can (a type of theatrical light) with

the same red-orange gel glows at an angle toward the pulpit. Four amber-colored lights

shine from the backdrop on the sides. Wilhite obviously is lit by theatrical lighting, as he

is shown brightly against the subdued background. His name comes up on a lower-screen

graphic—a silver rectangle with the image of a camera lens displayed on the left side.

One can watch the Vimeo video in a "player" on the church's website under the archived

sermon series "FOCUS." The player appears in front of a black and white photograph of

the church's band (presumably) during an upbeat musical number, causing the sermon

video to play within an aesthetic that highlights the church's auditorium. The black-and-

white photograph itself is interesting as a composition, showing the backs of the audience

all attentively watching the stage. The picture shows theatre lighting splaying at obtuse

angles. The image is grainy. Every spectator in the crowd appears to be standing, as if

attending a concert. Alternately, the video may be expanded to fill the entire scan.

Additional buttons available on the player include two clickable tables that propose

answers to the question "Need to Connect?": "I just accepted Jesus" and "I need prayer"

(centralonline.tv). Both of these tabs link to a "First Steps" page that requires populating

fields about one's name and email address. Among all 18 ministries studies, Central

Christian Church offers the most comprehensive streaming experience of their church services for the virtual parishioners.

In Wilhite's sermon, when he refers to an image, that photograph fills the screen: the preacher and his two children surfing on the beach, a sleeping spider monkey in Mexico, his late parents, and his wife, son, and daughter from years ago. He smiles broadly. He closes his eyes during the prayer and tucks his head down as he leads the congregation to follow him as he dictates the prayer. He opens his eyes when he says, "Make eye contact with me" (Wilhite). Ironically, the tight camera shot permits viewers to see Wilhite well—much better than viewing him in a large church auditorium, but (of course) he cannot see someone who is peering into a computer screen. Wilhite, by being featured prominently in the camera shot, benefits from appearing congenial, welcoming, and amiable. His image comes across more positively perhaps than seeing him in person, unless the church uses image magnification to put his picture up in the live service on giant screens. Once again, even with live audiences, many churchgoers end up watching the jumbotron instead of the proportionally tiny man standing on a stage yards away.

When a megachurch meets in multiple locations *(viz.,* a mother church and several satellite sites), it behooves the lead pastor to project a consistent impression on the various platforms that comprise the church. Chandler's The Village Church keeps a fairly simple aesthetic. The preacher himself wears a blue polo short-sleeved shirt, jeans, black leather shoes, and a watch on his left wrist and a wedding ring. He stands in front of a green backdrop with angular shapes (complete with diamonds, triangles, and trapezoids, obvious when the camera zooms in) in different shades. The backdrop is likely a large

screen because it emits a faintly greenish glow. A black wall is evident underneath the screen. The floor of the stage is black, so it reflects the green light. Chandler's pulpit is a simple, black, metal music stand. He wears a head mic. He is young (mid-30s) and thin. He has a leather-bound Bible and notes. A black rectangle appears on screen with white lettering to show the scripture passage. During the final comments and prayer, Chandler is only shown from the waist up. As a preacher, Chandler seems to favor a stripped-down presentation aesthetic. That look and feel is consistent with his no-nonsense, straightforward speaking style, devoid of pretense.

In contrast, Furtick's Elevation Church elects to use a more ostentatious approach, all the while prominently spotlighting their young (mid-30s) pastor. Unlike Chandler's straight-on shot, Elevation uses a boom camera, swinging across the spectators. The frame shows several rows of audience members. Their physical appearance reveals the church to be an ethnically-diverse crowd. People appear to be young and middle-aged adults. They are wearing short-sleeved shirts and appear to be casually dressed, perhaps to suit the late-August North Carolina heat. Furtick stands on a lower rectangular stage. Pink neon tube lights crisscross behind him. Black two-dimensional silhouettes of male/female couples of apparently different ages stand behind him against a rosy-pink backdrop. The pulpit is composed of brushed silver metal with a v-shaped figure cut into the front. Furtick wears a heather gray, short-sleeved polo shirt with small black polka dots, buttoned to the collar. He sports visible underarm sweat stains. He has a muscular build and shaved hair. A television monitor on the right side of the screen displays the "Meant to Be" sermon graphic rendered in greens and oranges. Stage lights shine out and

up at the audience. The auditorium's visible sidewall is covered with a black curtain.

Several audience members have their hands raised. Large side screen is visible showing

image magnification of Furtick. A cameraman is seated on the stage in shadows. When

the preacher moves into his public invitation, the camera zooms in to show him from the

chest up. His face fills the frame, accenting the flat affect and expressionless countenance

he assumes while chanting "great grace" over and over (Furtick). When it comes to

representing the ministry of Elevation Church, it is the face of Furtick, the Netflix "star"

and author of several books geared toward the evangelical community, many of which

are based on sermon series preached at the church.

Speaking event contextualized

Conversion is contextualized in overt acts the group reinforces as important markers of

initiation into the nascent faith, while participating in the live religious event. The

"virtual" penitent person, however, is inadvertently left out of this arrangement. Being

present at a brick-and-mortar church represents fundamental differences from listening to

or merely watching uploaded videos captured at live church services. Watching a church

service at which the user is not physically present (only virtually "attending" through a

digital device) is akin to a type of innocuous voyeurism. Users watch a profoundly

intimate experience—the moment at which new converts supposedly (in the terms of

many of the preachers surveyed) "open their hearts to Jesus." These virtual onlookers

may (often *do*) not have the same background, speak in the nativist vernacular, or ascribe

to the same dogmas being espoused on the downloaded videos recorded at live church services.

The computer screen turns the church into a type of exhibit where onlookers observe believers in their native habitat(s). Postman (2005), writing ostensibly about televangelism, what he labels as the $500 million-per-year "electric church" (120), questions the destructive effect of making religion tantamount to screen-based entertainment (124). The advent of Netflix sermon "seasons" was not even on Postman's radar a decade ago. Watched from a digital distance, these TV-based religious contexts were easier to spot for the "prolonged…, hypnotic, and manipulative" appeals backed by soothing music and "psychological pressure on the hearers" exerted at times by preachers "making plaintive pleas with arms outstretched, Christlike" that Bennett (2000) describes (234-235). All religious discourse, however, to be properly understood, must be viewed in the larger context where it originates, or the fundamental questions ring with little resonance (Donovan 1976: 89). Horsfield and Teusner (2007) use the term "mediated" to explain the production, propagation, and promulgation of evangelical Christianity with its attendant "grammar, logic, validations, sensibilities, frames…[and] power relationships" (279). Given this immersive model of religious contextualization, these authors maintain that online Christianity could not, by its essential nature, serve as a "replacement" to its material expressions because there exist "elements of 'real' church that cannot be replicated online" (291). Several of the churches studied nonetheless offer some version of a "live stream" church service—labeling the virtual expression equivalent to attending a seated church service.

The digital age has forever altered the way the actual church service operate, as evident in the videos amassed for this study. Bourgeois's (2013) monograph for churches to launch/focus digital ministries specifies that the essential question is not "if" but "[h]ow does the [Christian] message change when it is communicated via these digital tools" such as streaming church services? (50). Without a doubt, expanding a church's influence through a solid Internet and social media presence gathers a potential audience much larger than the parish surrounding the steeple. What may be sacrificed in terms of pastoral care or rituals in the flesh-and-blood arena may have no virtual corollaries as ministries move rapidly online (Beckerlegge 2004: 235). While still protected as tax-exempt, non-profit organizations, American evangelical congregations nonetheless conduct themselves in a free-market, capitalistic framework prone to competitive goals to target an increasingly individualistically-oriented populace with a so-called "personal relationship with Jesus" (Bailey 2009: 51). This give-and-take arrangement appeals to the individual responding to a gospel which corresponds to one's self-centered nature as well as to a church looking for "measurable goals" that "define a successful digital ministry by numbers of hits, specific mouse clicks, and page views (Bourgeois 2013: 89-90). Numbers quantifying the conversions in these sermon excerpts, however, often come across as "aggregations" or abstractions that replace actual headcounts (Machin & Mayr 2012: 84). When a videotaped speaker utters a phrase such as "hundreds of hands are going up all over the building," I took note that the individuals were being viewed en masse. Even the metaphorically inflected term *count* problematizes the anonymity of the online churchgoer *(viz.,* does it *count* if someone "makes a commitment" although no

clergy person is present to affirm the commitment?). Ethnographer Heriot (1994) asserts that evangelical preachers mark the "success of the revival, the skill of the evangelist who preached, and the spiritual viability of the audience" by counting those who "came to the altar" as a form of religious ritual (150). It seems suspect to believe that the opportunity to reach a larger audience means displacing a long-held tradition of counting those who are "saved" at the altar.

To reconstruct properly the context in which these taped church services occurred, I had to think deeply about how making these spaces visible onscreen alters the message or the rhetoric performed in the live setting. Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) point out that studying any discourse requires consideration of elements much broader than language—elements such as the goals, the locations, the participants, and the behaviors. I was consciously aware every time I listened to an excerpt from one of the women preachers that this speaker was both disruptive toward and complicit with a patriarchal ecclesiastical structure that affords fewer preaching venues to female clergy within the larger evangelical faith community. Even the words chosen to appeal to women and men in the congregation encode gendered identity in certain linguistic patterns rehearsed every time a person sits in church or watches a religious service online (Jule 2006: 55). Time ended up being a very significant aspect where the context differed dramatically between the imagined live church setting and the virtual version. Preachers regularly repeat phrases that lack significant meaning past the moment of their utterance: for example, any indication to the present moment relative to the speaker (e.g. "If you're here today…"). Obviously a person listening to an archived sermon podcast on the treadmill

weeks later is not included in the communicative intent of the original message. Similarly, spatial references to a specific local church setting call to mind situated meanings that become elusive outside that discursive space. It means little to the person watching a church service weeks later when the preacher directs the respondents to "come forward," since s/he cannot participate in this behavior. Whether that inability to respond excludes the person listening online calls into question a fundamental principle of CDA: "how we talk about the world influences the society we create, the knowledge we celebrate and despise, and the institutions we build" (Fairclough 2000; Machin & Mayr 2012: 21). If religious media exempts online listeners from complying with the most basic instructions given, do these discursive forms constitute institutional Christianity or an abrogation of it?

Spatial references

When the preachers in this study zero in on the people whom they are targeting for salvation, many refer to close proximity to them as a way to call potential converts out from the crowd. The various ways in which this sense of spatiality is configured allow for nuances in persuasive appeal. Fortener, for instance, refers to the physical dimensions of the place where he is preaching three times over the course of his sermon. He refers to regular attenders of Mosaic (or even those familiar with the way they conduct church services) as those who "have been around here enough" (Fortener). The church building, therefore, becomes a familiar place—a refuge of sorts. When he wants, however, to single out those who have yet to commit to Christianity, he states (as if by divine insight):

"There are those of you in this room, I know… I know that this is your moment"

(Fortener). Perhaps he knows this piece of information by simple deductive reasoning;

few churchgoers on any given Sunday have not experienced being "born again" in the

evangelical sense. By stating the observation thusly, however, Fortener can make himself

seem wise or even prophetic, as if he enjoys a special connection to heaven. This

statement meant to connect with the audience breaks down the moment the discourse is

uploaded to the iTunes Store. The entire potential listening audience of the recording is

excluded from his statement, since no one is seated in the same room where Fortener

stands behind the pulpit. In other words, it is not technically their "moment" to follow

Jesus, even though he outlines the basic tenets of the evangelical message and invites

people to pray along with him. Spatiality reads like conditionality in this statement. In

fact, one of the results of converting to Christianity, according to this preacher, affords

new believers the privilege "to stand here in this place as a part of this tribe" (Fortener).

This benefit is denied to anyone living outside the greater Los Angeles area who cannot

make it physically to the location of Mosaic. Besides, those individuals whose only tie to

the church comes from listening to free sermons online may not be accepted as readily as

regular attenders to weekly services held at the church building.

  This fundamental disconnect between framing the altar call in proximal terms and

its neglect of the larger virtual audience listening to the content that these same churches

post online (presumably for evangelistic purposes) is not limited to this single (albeit

frequent) user of spatiality in his preaching. In fact, on the other coastal seaboard, Furtick

assures the congregation through a prayer directed to God that "nobody in here today is

dealing with a sexual dysfunction or a relational failure that is greater than your grace"

(Furtick). The impetus for such a candid or potentially vulnerable admission is the subject

of that day's sermon "Meant to Be": the necessity of sexual fulfillment within the

confines of the traditional marriage covenant between a man and a woman. By naming

the area of weakness and shame publically, the preacher accomplishes two aims. First, he

reassures the penitent that they are not alone; God sees and he cares. Secondly, he

situates Elevation Church as a safe zone where people deal openly and honestly with

secretive, private concerns. Putting this sermon on the Web, however, contradicts the

claim, as none of the people watching the video or listening to the audio after the fact are

technically "in here" with Furtick and his flock. Even streaming a live feed of a church

service as it is in progress changes the context significantly enough to warrant calling the

experience of virtual church attendance something very different from being seated in a

Charlotte-based church building.

These types of spatial references are so customary that many evangelical

preachers would be hard-pressed to eliminate them from the ritualized altar calls.

Himaya, for example, uses two spatial references ("if you're here today" and "so right

where you're seated") (Himaya), while McManus repeats the same phrase "[i]f you're

here tonight" (McManus), a nod to time and space. No online viewer can meet either of

these two conditions embedded in McManus's requisite calls to salvation. Even in the

reporting phase of the evangelical conversion—whereby individuals admit to the pastor

or his designee that they have committed themselves to Christianity—any proximal

references seem out of step with the Internet platform on which the videos are accessed.

Hodges's observation that he can see "[a]ll over this room probably 100 people with their hands up" (Hodges) fails to account for how many people may have viewed the sermon video and converted (or did not) as a result of watching it.

Larger discursive choices

Read together, the transcripts of the chosen sermon excerpts yield interesting insights into the larger, discourse-level moves that evangelical preachers practice. Modern evangelism responds to years of "controversies" within Christianity, a discourse brought into greater suspicion given the issues facing contemporary society (Stromberg 1993: 4). How preachers practice suppression[9] by eliminating certain discussions happening in the larger society (e.g. same-sex marriage and/or homosexuality) from their sermons is revealing. This erasure takes place on a person-by-person basis as well, as certain speakers avoid charged (yet orthodox) canonical language in their public invitations that some parishioners might deem offensive today: *hell, Satan,* or *judgment.* How an individual minister riffs on recognized rhetorical patterns, especially in performing prayer, "makes explicit the relations that exist between speaker and addressee, while avoiding complicated matters of audience" (FitzGerald 2012: 40). Despite the way several of the preachers refer to prayer as a "conversation with God," the multiple audiences they negotiate (the self, the entire congregation, the divine, and [arguably] the uncountable virtual participants) help to define prayer as a "complex auditory space" (FitzGerald

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[9] "This is where social actors or aspects of an event are backgrounded or removed from a representation" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 224).

2012: 40). FitzGerald's answers the call issued by Burke's *Rhetoric of Religion* (1970),

building on the dramatistic notion of scene with "prayer as performance before multiple

audiences" that always includes "overhearers" (40). During any instance when a pastor

prays aloud into a microphone in a public worship service, the goal exists as something

other than merely speaking privately to the Almighty.

Preachers participate—perhaps even unknowingly—in larger cultural

conversations through the language they employ to persuasive effect. Speakers, no matter

how altruistically they may attempt to cast themselves as rhetors, always embed

implicature[10] (implicit meaning[11] of statements) in their public discourse—even in the

form of benedictions. FitzGerald (2012) notes that even "acts of invocation…claim a

measure of agency for oneself" (56), thereby not always "count[ing] as prayer" per se

(57). That statement should not imply that speaking prayerful words while actually

attempting to persuade an assembled audience is somehow suspicious. It simply means

that several things are occurring at once in this speech act—a doubling of implicature that

becomes easier to perform the more familiar a person becomes with the practice. One

famous anthropological theory of conversion, purported by Snow and Machalek (1983)

contends that the change that fundamentally alters the worldview of the newly converted

is essentially a linguistic one, where one experiences "the displacement of one universe

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[10] "[A] way of delivering information implicitly and leaving it to the hearer to make assumptions about its meaning. Implicatures depend on the addressee's capacity to draw inferences when the literal meaning of an utterance is not intended" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 220-221).

[11] "[M]eanings that are not made overtly or explicitly and may need closer analysis to draw out" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 221).

of discourse by another and its attendant grammar or rules for putting things together"

(265). In other words, a person "becomes" a Christian by learning to talk like one.

This simple observation cannot be overstated in the context of the American evangelical

church. Preachers, through their unique vocabulary and characteristic speaking style,

depict a certain way of viewing reality by the words they use to interpret the world

around them. Gee's (2011) "figured world" definition is fundamental to "constructing

situated meanings" (104) or understanding what the preachers intend by the words they

use in a particular rhetorical situation, the altar call section of a sermon delivered in a

contemporary American evangelical megachurch. The shared language of many of these

altar call transcripts suggests strongly held figured worlds that underlie the lexical

choices the preachers make. Take, for example, the lexical term *father* used by one-third

of the preachers. Weber and Furtick both direct their prayers to "Heavenly Father."

Meyer, on the other hand, prefers to pray to "Father God." Four pastors (McManus,

Smith, Batterson, and Chandler) invoke God as "Father" in their salvific and benedictory

prayers.

Despite improvising on the phrasing, calling God by the appellation *Father*

indicates a fairly durable figured world held in evangelical Christianity of the deity as a

type of divine parent to whom all human beings are related in a cosmic family. By

therefore leading the congregation to communally address God as "Father" (or to act on

their behalf as proxy intercessors), the preacher reinforces a significant way of seeing the

world. If God is indeed their father, the congregants can thereby project patriarchal

characteristics onto their ways of perceiving God's provision, protection, and affection.

Further, this familial lexical term has implications upon how the parishioners should therefore relate to one another as spiritual siblings, although the preferred vernacular labels them "brothers and sisters" or "family" in the evangelical tradition. In other words, the language of the "saved" both exposes how they think and how that thinking is perpetuated by the discourse community for future generations. In these sermon excerpts the preachers being studied use different strategies to articulate a vision of the world consistent with their reading of biblical narratives, their denominations' doctrinal statements, their attempts at cultural relevance, and the personas they seek to project.

Implicature

As a hearer infers meaning and acts on it, implicature helps to predict how various audiences may interpret given utterances. As megachurch pastors, these particular evangelical preachers address audiences multiple times per week, often making strong requests of their parishioners by implying what they (the ministers) want them (the churchgoers) to do, so as not to appear as demanding. The praxis Smith models, mimicking what the psalmist David apparently did, is what he expects his audience to do when they find themselves in similar, self-questioning scenarios. He prefaces the soliloquy by indicating that what he is about to perform is his normative practice, although he does not specify the frequency: "You know what I do sometimes? I just use my mouth to remind myself that I'm in the grip of God" (Smith). He launches into a barrage of candid, reorienting phrases meant to sober himself when his thinking goes awry: "Judah, stop it. It's not about you. It's not about your performance. Shake it off.

Step up. Your emotions. You settle, emotions, in Jesus' name" (Smith). All of this

playacting is dramatized excessively for persuasive effect. His exaggeration is an

understandable rhetorical move as a preacher. The theatricality of watching their pastor

hold a frank conversation with himself represents a memorable strategy they can emulate

when they find themselves experiencing moments of self-doubt. The difference, perhaps,

comes in the fact that Smith holds this holds this inner monologue aloud for others to

overhear. What might appear as erratic behavior in certain social situations (*viz.,* a man

talking in abrupt, loud phrases to himself) becomes instead a pattern that the audience

may want to try the next time that they sense personal, spiritual indecision. Occasionally

giving oneself a stern talking-to is the implied takeaway lesson of Smith's sudden

oratorical outburst.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PULPITEER: The Craft of Sermonizing

"It is important to see that *the means* by which the gospel is communicated and accepted conveys as much about the gospel as *what* we say about the gospel."
   —Stephen Bailey, "Contextual Conversion: An Anthropological Perspective." *Contents* 7.1 (2009: 52)

Chapter Abstract

This chapter delves into the linguistic strategies operating within the micro-discourse of evangelical altar calls and benedictory prayers, namely the use of verbs, nominalized lexical terms, transitivity, over-present words (terms one would not typically expect to overhear as often within a discourse), and pronouns. In order to craft a preaching persona, these speakers are able to hide their agency through lexical choices, enabling them to imply that congregants are arriving at the decision to convert to evangelical Christianity with little outside coaxing.

Preaching in a contemporary American megachurch setting (as most of these videos attest) presents a set of challenges to determining diction. On the one hand, relevance to a Millennial audience is essential to convey that one is in step with the times. On the other hand, evangelical churches are frequently aligned with Christian denominations or credentialing bodies that cherish conservative values, often encoded in speech and writing. Not to mention, the intertextual references to biblical texts often include translations replete with Latinate words. The register of the discourse can float between formal and informal, depending on the moment in the sermon. For instance, a pastor may sound downright folksy as he seeks to connect with parishioners before transitioning to a prayer composed of formal, ecclesiastical terms. The dominant liturgy of the church—from the High Church, staid forms to the very contemporary Low Church mode, to some mixture of the two traditions—may determine the pastor's word choice. In

certain excerpts of the study, pastors employ slang for comedic or persuasive effect. For these professional communicators who address bodies of (up to) thousands in attendance on a weekly basis, diction is hardly a random decision. The competency of matching one's vernacular to the occasion demonstrates intentional efforts of these preachers to connect with their audiences. Moreover, the intermittent formal word adds a measure of dignity or solemnity to the occasion. Matters of style, especially formal language (e.g. marked words from liturgy and Latinate discourse markers) and informal, colloquial language typify the discourse. Some notable examples of specialized slogans include phrases like "we come before you" and "bow your heads." The extent to which, however, this vacillation between formal and informal word choice translates on an Internet interface to a virtual audience remains to be determined. Registering the effect of the preacher's diction upon the audience present at the live event(s) is slightly easier to conjecture.

How it is said

How preachers construct their salvation appeals using particular words reveal specific discursive and rhetorical aims. By isolating verbs (e.g. active vs. passive, directives/ commands/ imperatives [Machin & Mayr, 2012: 47], modals vs. deontic forms), as well as nominalization[1], I was able to identify issues of agency—in other words, who is invited/empowered to act in the final moments of an evangelical worship service.

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[1] "This is where verb processes are represented in the form of nouns" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 222).

Uncovering evidence of transitivity[2] manifests who the person performing the discourse considers to be the most significant figures in the exchange. In an act positioned by the preacher often as a "*personal* decision to receive Christ," an actor who seemingly makes all of the communicative decisions (i.e. the preacher) in the interchange guides the listener to what s/he desires to occur.

Moreover, the preacher's lexis conceals who truly possesses the agency in the religious speech event. Halliday's (1978) six-part classification of processes helped to identify these hidden political structures at work in this grouping of sermon texts. Rereading the transcripts numerous times disclosed oratorical strategies such as overlexicalization[3] (e.g. repetition of a word for emphasis). Some preachers left out concepts or connotative terms that their contemporaries included. The elision of canonical lexical terms such as *sin* or *hell*, or even papering over what the speaker expected to happen in the discourse may constitute suppression, as could simplification of the content to rudimentary elements. Several linguists isolate pronoun usage, no matter how elusive they may be at times to locate precisely (Fairclough 2000: 152) as key markers of personalizing discourse or establishing equal footing with one's audience (Fairclough 1995: 181; Stawarska 2009: 63), especially in an evangelical context (Cragg, 2002: 142). The various ways in which preachers may employ language toward their

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[2] "In CDA, this is the study of social action. It is the study of verbs in order to reveal who is represented as the agent or otherwise in texts" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 224).

[3] "This is where we find a word or its synonyms 'overpresent' in a text (i.e. the word or its synonyms are used more than we would normally expect)…[in an] attempt to over-persuade" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 222).

intended objective—convincing new churchgoers to take the plunge into evangelicalism—becomes even more significant at the lexical and homiletical levels.

Verbs

Verbs connote activity. Conveying action, verbs carry the heft of persuasion in discourse, particularly when a speaker seeks to motivate an audience toward a course of action that they may feel less than inclined to undertake without prompting. Imperative verbs, for instance, permit the speaker to embed a *you*-subject in a sentence, requesting a certain behavior from the audience without sounding commanding in tone. This attention to coming across as mannerly preoccupies several of the ministers. Two preachers are fond of the phrasal verb "slip up," as in "slip up your hand" to indicate interest in being included in the salvific prayer that follows on the video. Furtick and Wilhite, speakers whose oratorical style differs dramatically, both use this phrase as they directly appeal for a physical response from their audience. The verb *slip* implies a quick action requiring very little effort on the part of the person responding. Speed or rapidity is implied in this gliding action. Although in certain contexts raising one's hand indicates an inquiry or even a vote in a meeting, slipping up one's hand seems less intrusive to others. Occasionally, evangelical preachers will invite the penitent to "slip out of your seats" to join them at the front of the church for a public altar call. While none of the contemporary preachers surveyed use this phrase specifically, maybe Furtick's and Wilhite's use of the phrase is linked somehow to that other usage. What becomes readily apparent to the respondents who briefly raise their hands before dropping them, this

gesture is not the only one required to convert to Christianity. Often, they will be required

subsequent to slipping up their hands to pray along with the pastor—sometimes aloud—

and even walk to the front of the church to meet with a volunteer or paid staff person to

cement the nascent decision. The diminishing sense of the word *slip*, therefore, with its

short vowel and blended consonant reminiscent of *slide*, *slippery*, and *slight/sleight,* helps

to soften the extensive commitment such self-identification in public may require the

initiate to evangelicalism.

Some of the verbs that stand out in the extracts relate to ways the preachers advise

that their audiences respond to God and what they should expect in return. The very fact

that these verbs suggest actions that imply certain concepts about the personality of the

Almighty is telling. Furtick, for example, invites the congregation to pray aloud: "I

embrace you now" (Furtick). To embrace another person implies intimacy, while

embracing a concept means one is open-minded to new ideas. This double meaning of the

verb reinforces what the preacher seeks to convey about the transaction he is leading. The

woman issuing the public call at Ray of Hope uses a different verb, *invite*, that

nonetheless has similar multiple connotations. In the video she issues a general call: "We

invite you into a relationship with Jesus; we invite you into a relationship with the one

who first gave to us" (Ray of Hope). One invites close friends and associates to events of

significance. Scanning the crowd yet seemingly seeing no respondents, she alters the verb

on the third call: "Try Jesus this morning" (Ray of Hope). The lexical term *try* carries

little honor or mystery that *invite* conveys. One tries something for a temporary period

before abandoning it. The term also implies a pragmatic suggestion: Try Jesus and see what the results might be in the life that attempts to believe in him.

The venture that many of these preachers set up with the altar call and prayer that follows is sketched by the verbs employed. Fortener's seven instances of the lexical verb *choose* throughout his sermonic segment indicate how he may wish congregants to conceptualize their converting to Christianity: a decision of their wills. In addition to the word *choice*, *choose* appears in Fortener's appeal collocated with *Jesus* (five times) and *grace* (twice). In at least one instance he even adopts the voice of a potential churchgoer, speaking on his/her behalf: "And I'll go, 'I want to choose Jesus; I want to choose grace'" (Fortener). Of course, *go* is a colloquial form for *say*. Implying that the option of becoming a Christian is a decision one would "want" to make allows Fortener to valorize the choice in favor of embracing the Christian gospel while denigrating the other position or questioning why some may consider delaying making the choice altogether. Despite citing *choose* so frequently, Fortener uses another term that implies that becoming an evangelical Christian requires more than mental assent to a set of beliefs or volitional choice: *release*. This term implies letting go of something by willful action, a concept congruent with Fortener's statement: "I will release that old god that someone put in my brain is a child… into my brain as a child" (Fortener). The repetition of the second phrase "my brain as a child" repairs a linguistic stumble he made substituting the word *is* for *as* initially. Asking his audience to topple the idol(s) that have occupied their mindsets since childhood seems like hardly a release, however. In two more uses of the lexical term, the word *release* seems particularly incongruous with the transaction he arranges: "This is

your conversation that you've needed—the moment you have needed to release those things to bring grace in your life" (Fortener). He fails to specify what is meant by "those things," but he does suggest that certain excuses hinder God's grace. In other words, letting go of reasons or behaviors will release the grace needed to transform lives offered to God. Fortener's phrasing sounds as if grace is a faucet where the spigot is closed so tightly that only one's willful action will release it to flow.

A few of the prominent verbs in the excerpts are difficult to pin down in terms of agency. It is challenging to ascertain the identity of the person performing the implied action. When Hodges states that he felt that God had "spoke[n]" to him that morning about people who would become Christians, he uses a rarely used verb: *nudge*. The divine message (as he relays it) promised that many would report that they had "just got nudged across the line of faith" (Hodges). Sports or war metaphors aside (i.e. "line of faith"), *nudging* someone involves a gentle pressure or a very slight push. The term falls short of forcing or even impressing upon another a course of action, but it nonetheless implies outward pressure upon the subject. Some audience members, however, could infer that "nudging" refers to their own cognitive processes—a personal epiphany of sorts or of the rhetorical pressure applied by the pastor's sermon. This tension between what God does and what people are responsible to do lingers in other sermons. Batterson, after confessing his own lapses of religious devotion, prays: "Lord, I have a new resolve to press in, to seek you and to, God, see what you can do" (Batterson). The term *seek* has a well-worn usage in ecclesiastical circles stemming from biblical texts, Old and New Testament, that admonish seeking the Lord. What behaviors that *seeking* encompasses

are unclear, but the prepositional verb "press in" suggests ardent, intentional pursuit or religious fervor. Whether the pursuit or the consequence of it results in a perceived closeness to God, Batterson models the type of prayer he advises his congregants to utter.

Some of the verbs imply that the responsibility for certain actions lies squarely with God or with human beings, whether that can be determined conclusively—even within the theological confines of evangelical Christianity. For instance, when Batterson claims on behalf of the congregation to have "stolen" from God twice, he uses a term laden with culpability. The implied robbery involves "things" taken away from God by acting selfishly toward the attainment of personal aims. Some of the preachers studied claim that their hearers can do some positive actions, too. Farmer frames his prayer before a final song "to express our hope and our faith and our belief in this gospel and in no other gospel" (Farmer). People express emotions or impassioned pleas. Requiring a song to encompass all of these factors renders it difficult to compose. On the other end of the spectrum, Chandler requests that God will do two things: "expose ways of thinking that don't line up with your word" and "stir in our heart a desire for justice, tempered with a heart of grace, compassion and empathy" (Chandler). Upon closer examination of these two requests, one could argue that either could be a self-directed activity: examining a stream of thoughts or increasing empathy for others. By lumping these outcomes under the request that God would "do work in our hearts," Chandler can elevate the incentive for the congregants to work on these personal matters themselves. In one case, a preacher speculates how differently he would act if he were appointed as God: "It makes sense to me that as soon as we give our life to Christ, God will just sweep us

up" (Dummitt). By this statement, Dummitt suggests that allowing people to live by their own choices post-conversion opens God to the risk of betrayal or abandonment. Were he to be suddenly rendered divine, Dummitt envisions God's rescue operation through the phrasal verb "sweep up," avoiding what could follow were recent converts left to their own devices. Of course, this proposal is patently philosophical, so "sweep up" adds to the hyperbolic nature of the implied avoidance strategy.

None of the preachers captures the tension inherent in verbs connoting spiritual activity as well as Smith does. On the one hand, he claims that "God's got you"—an informal, slang way to convey reassurance that all those hearing his voice are protected by God (Smith). While this promise is intended to comfort, he presses the point further by reminding those assembled of key tenets of the Christian gospel, namely the redemption afforded by the cross. He maintains twice that "[i]t's not that easy to shake God" (Smith). In this usage, *shaking* someone involves losing them while being pursued or forcing them to drop something held within their grasp. Moreover, being shaken implies emotional turmoil brought on when one feels overwhelmed. Smith relies on this added definition to assuage his audience's concerns that their actions may have upset God to the point of his abandoning them. Oddly then, Smith picks the same word again to urge his listeners to drop their own anxious doubts: "Shake it off" (Smith). Rather than commanding the parishioners to perform this act of relinquishing their worries, Smith aims this admonition at himself: "Judah, stop it. It's not about you. It's not about your performance. Shake it off. Step up. Your emotions. You settle, emotions, in Jesus' name" (Smith). Later, he contextualizes the interior monologue he has just enacted aloud as a

conversation King David conducts in the book of Psalms with his own soul: "He literally would talk to his soul. Remind his soul: … 'Hey, soul, shut up. I'mmo be alright. I'm a man of God. I'm righteous'" (Smith). By using himself as the flawed model needing attention, Smith can employ the stronger forms of verbs that would come across as rude if he directed them at his hearers.

Nominalization

The act of preaching in a contemporary evangelical church setting has its own attendant challenges. The speaker must connect with audience members of different walks of life and varied levels of exposure to religious concepts and terminology. One way these preachers encode simplicity in their discourse is through nominalization—substituting nouns (even multisyllabic ones) for verbs. The effect of nominalizing verbs, according to Machin and Mayr (2012) is "to conceal agents, simplify complex processes, and to delete time and space" (222) from the verbal exchange. Where locating important verbs (above) is somewhat difficult to achieve in the transcripts, determining systemic nominalization practices is much easier within these sermon excerpts. Nearly every sermon or prayer examined boasts at least one instance of this discursive practice, lending credence to the theory that nominalization is a regular (albeit, perhaps, unconscious) linguistic practice of evangelical preachers in the United States. Some of the practitioners rely on this speech practice more than others, while certain words appear more often in a nominalized form than as a verb—i.e. *commitment* versus *commit* (Hodges). Asking a congregation to "make a commitment" seems less of a strenuous requirement than "to commit to Christ,"

which could involve a renunciation of other belief systems or a public identification followed by potentially negative repercussions. In several instances, the nominalization is apparent only syntactically as the noun and the verb form are identical, varying only in their placement within a given sentence: "hurts," "fears," "doubt," and "embrace" (McManus); "regret" (Batterson); "struggle" (Furtick); "journey" (Meyer); "volunteers" (Noble); "contact," "focus," and "praise" (Wilhite); "dream" (Caldwell); "picture," "twist," and "need" (Lentz); and the five-time use of "grip" (Smith). The nominalization in some of these cases is indicated by a pronoun that precedes the nominalized lexical term, as in "your prowl," describing God's vigilant attentiveness (Smith). Other nominalizations are constructed by placing an article before the word. Preachers urge congregations to offer "a shout" of thanksgiving to God (Lentz) or even "a hand clap of praise" (Ray of Hope) in appreciation to the numbers of respondents or to what they label the "goodness of God." In these two examples, two normally loud, boisterous verbs (*viz., shout* and *clap*) are turned into a crowd's response to be regulated the way audiences perform in other settings where they respond en masse to someone from a stage/platform giving cues to do so (e.g. theater, concert, or sporting event). Nominalization achieves its results with a more subdued tone.

It may be argued that preachers speaking in pulpits they do not inhabit weekly may use nominalization as a way to negotiate their footing as guest speakers in an unfamiliar setting. Were this the case, the transcripts produced by Lentz, speaking at Smith's Seattle church and not to his own congregation in New York City, and Mayo, guest speaking in Australia instead of her native Atlanta, make more sense with the

frequent use of nominalization by both preachers. Mayo's audio was captured at a women's conference comprised of many cultures. Perhaps she was especially aware of the boundaries inherent in a cross-cultural speaking event, although Australians speak the same lingua franca as Americans. This desire to compress the geographic distance that separates speaker from the audience might explain Mayo's excessive nominalization, as evident in lexical terms such as "answers," "commitment," "love," "points," "doubt," "communication," and "proclamation" (Mayo). The final word in that list, *proclamation*, comes at the end of her sermon, as the "worship team" prepares to play a final song. Mayo instructs the audience "to make this [their] proclamation of faith" (Mayo). By substituting *make* for the verbal form of proclamation, *proclaim*, Mayo de-intensifies the response to which she calls her audience. Proclaiming something—especially one's religion—might feel akin to fanaticism, whereas "making a proclamation" might be easier to persuade the conference attendees to attempt to utter. Even the use of the biblical gerund in the phrase "weeping endures for the night, but joy comes in the morning" helps to set a binary that she can readily address as a speaker. The opposite of weeping is joy, a preferred outcome. Joy practically sells itself. By calling depression or discouragement or prolonged hardship by the nominalization "weeping," it is a much easier topic to identify and refute. It is easily packaged as a noun, whereas *weeping* as a verb becomes merely a symptom, signaling a larger, more difficult problem to counter, especially as an outsider invited to preach at a conference.

Lentz references his own outsider status at several points in the ending of his sermon. He points out that Seattle boasts its own culture—traits that presumably he does

not share. His nominalizations, therefore, serve to simplify the theological abstraction of

salvation in order to present it to a region of the country he does not share as a New

Yorker. Besides the crowd directives mentioned above (e.g. "lift up a shout of praise"

instead of *shout*), Lentz abridges some of the theologically knotty concepts surrounding

evangelical conversion through nominalization. When he posits that "[o]ne confession of

need changes your entire life," he can quantify *confession* to a single act. Had he required

the Seattle churchgoers that morning to *confess* something, on the other hand, he would

be upping the rhetorical stakes significantly, potentially making the audience

uncomfortable. When he models the type of prayer he will lead the crowd to repeat

eventually, Lentz states (in first-person pronouns) the reaction he elicits by requesting

that interested parties raise their hands: "Lift it high: Jesus, I need forgiveness" (Lentz).

By choosing the nominal form, *forgiveness* becomes a status—a footing with God as one

freed from sin—rather than an action resulting from an apology. Asking God to *forgive* a

person might be more intimidating than admitting that s/he needs to be conferred

forgiveness, a thing or concept.

Once again, McManus is the outlier in the group using multiple nominalizations

while preaching in his home church. He is the pastor of Mosaic, but it is hardly a typical

Southern Baptist congregation. The Los Angeles-based church intentionally targets

actors, musicians, and artists with a deliberately non-churchy vibe. McManus comes

across in his numerous books and in his speaking style as an unorthodox communicator,

employing vocabulary not typically associated with the evangelical church. I was curious

to analyze whether this unique vernacular was evident in the way he issues altar calls.

The younger preacher, Fortener, is cast in McManus's mold, while retaining a certain

youthful zeal in his speaking style. Both speakers seem to view their congregation in

Hollywood quite differently compared to many other American congregations: ethnically

diverse, artistic/creative, and vibrant. A unique preaching style may work effectively in

this setting, since his associate pastor Fortener uses several interesting nominal forms

himself (e.g. "conversation," "a to-do," "decision," and "judgment" [Fortener]). Because

Mosaic ministers to people who do not possess the typical ecclesiastical pedigree,

McManus exerts extra effort to eliminate any hurdles between his congregation and the

nascent faith he wants them to adopt. By concealing agency through nominalization,

McManus obscures who is answerable for the pain he hopes to alleviate with the gospel:

> I'm so convinced that here tonight there are some of you, you just look so
>
> good on the outside but the **cut** is deep in… some of the ones are deep.
>
> Some of them inflicted by others and some of them are inflicted it by
>
> yourselves. (McManus, **emphasis** added)

McManus is dealing with dicey subjects (*viz.,* emotional pain and interpersonal

relationship difficulties) in a very public space. For this reason, he replaces the violent

verb *cut* (meaning to stab or slice) with the noun form—the resulting injury. How the

pain was inflicted (i.e. who is to blame for injuring them) is less important than dealing

with the aftereffects. This elision of discussions of causality, however, collapses all

emotional turmoil and relational distress into the same category. This same principle may

explain the two instances of the lexical term "wounds," even ascribing the following to a

fictional man (for whom the preacher speaks) whose response to the altar is tantamount to

a public admission: "I've got a lot of deep wounds" (McManus). Referring to pain in such contained, sanitized, and manageable terms ("brokenness" [two occasions]; "hurts"; "self-loathing"; "fears"; and "mess") sets up the cure McManus situates in Christ (McManus). The antidote to the congregational pain is similarly nominalized. Three times "healing" appears in the transcript, equating God's transforming power to an instantaneous (or eventual) miracle, as in the prayer McManus dictates for the audience to parrot: "I know that you are the God who brings healing; you are the God who brings hope" (McManus). The pairing of *healing* and *hope* in this prayer heightens the audience's expectation that something will transpire immediately to alleviate their pain, reinstating an optimistic outlook. McManus even seeks to demystify something as ethereal as hearing God's voice through a nominalized term: "That pulling you feel right now—that's just Jesus saying: 'I am here for you right now'" (McManus). The gerund *pulling* (one of three instances in the text) can encompass sensations as varied as nervousness, unsettled thoughts, and even growing religious convictions as evidence of Christ's personal communication. In case his hearers remain unconvinced, McManus even slips into prophetic mode, speaking on behalf of the Messiah with the first-person pronoun *I*. Speaking on behalf of God makes his voice accessible to contemporary listeners and the message inviting.

This tendency to make converting to Christianity appear palatable—even attractive—may lead speakers to reinterpret the theology and praxis involved into nouns because the original verbs could seem as actions too demanding for initiates to attempt. Chandler's prayer asks God to "expose… um… ways of interacting that are inconsistent

with gospel belief and behavior" (Chandler). By reducing the Christian experience of

believing in God and behaving consistently with biblical teachings to two

nominalizations, this preacher subsumes the variety of ways in which his congregants

have deviated in thought and deed under two umbrella categories. Similarly, the associate

pastor concluding the Ray of Hope service articulates what sounds like the church's

mission statement, complete with nominalizations: "We go forth evangelizing the seeker,

being empowered through stewardship and elevating society" (Ray of Hope). While the

rehearsed tagline contains verbs, the nominal terms *seeker* (one who seeks) and

stewardship (the practice of stewarding resources efficiently) generalizes two somewhat

abstract actions that each take quite a bit of time to achieve. Abstract notions do not make

for inspiring sermon subjects, so these preachers use nouns to concretize ideas. Meyer,

for instance, uses "relationship" four times, three of which sound similar to this prayer: "I

want a personal relationship with Jesus Christ" (Meyer). A *relationship* indicates a

standing with God; *relating* to God, on the other hand, is harder to conceptualize. Smith's

sermon, entitled "The Problem of Hope," concludes with 11 mentions of *hope*, yet only

two of which are verbs (*viz., you*-understood imperatives) that follow one right after

another: "Hope on that; hope on that" (Smith). Curiously, the word *hope* is collocated

with the pronoun *my* six times, with "our hope" appearing twice. Hoping in something is

harder to visualize or to describe for an audience's understanding than calling that

abstraction a thing—even if that object is less than identifiable.

One of the linguistic objects of this study, prayer, is itself the ultimate

nominalization in evangelical sermon discourse. Rather than asking respondents to

compose their own forms of intercession, most of the preachers either feed prayers for them to repeat or pray on their behalf. When a prayer becomes something "said" or a conversation uttered on the congregation's behalf by the pastor holding a microphone, it becomes less formidable than being asked to pray when one lacks experience with the dominant discursive strategies of the genre. Trying to define this nominalization, Noble describes prayer as "just the outpouring of your heart" (Noble). This nominal gerund need not specify how much the penitent must divulge or how long the utterance should last. Once again, referring to "the outpouring" seems emotionally safer than requiring churchgoers to "pour out" their hearts to God, especially since speaking to an invisible recipient could be problematic. Nominalizing behavior quantifies and contains it to the explainable. Like *prayer*, the lexical term *sin* is easier to communicate as being redeemable than the prolonged behavior of sinning. Even by owning the label *sinner*, the penitent supplicant is a person to change not a behavior to discontinue (Himaya). Trying to convince a room full of people to follow the teachings of evangelical Christianity can seem daunting. It is no wonder, therefore, that the preachers who comprise this study resort to constructing nominalizations to appeal to their audiences while masking whose responsibility it will be to exert the lifestyle changes accompanying their conversion. The connection between agency and nominalization, however, is so strong that it even shows up in appellations for Christ directed to pastoral prayer. Some of the new coinages are not in the Bible, including "forgiver," but are nonetheless descriptive (Himaya). Calling Jesus a *forgiver* does not require asking the Almighty to forgive the person seeking salvation.

Transitivity/agency

Preaching shares corollaries with its secular counterpart, motivational speaking, yet the biggest difference lies with agency enacted in the discourse itself. On the exterior, both types of speeches seek to inspire audiences to contemplate new perspectives and to strive for changed behaviors. Yet while a moving oration spells out individual responsibility (albeit based on books and systems authored by the speaker), a sermon appears to stir congregants to act, but in the sermon discourse the minister is the sole figure in charge of the communicative act. Moreover, preachers often obscure their own powerful position by overemphasizing language that implies the average churchgoer is the active agent. Because the customary context of the evangelical sermon *(viz.,* a preacher standing front and center, all eyes trained on him/her by spectators sitting quietly in rows, only vocalizing approved "call and response" utterances such as "amen" or "c'mon on, pastor") is very familiar to the Sunday evangelical churchgoer, the embedded power relationships in the discourse rarely raise questions, let alone protests. The preachers' desire to be viewed as relational and approachable may also be to blame for the preponderance of transitivity incidence in the transcripts. The altar call, an emotionally resonant section of the sermon, may present a distinct occasion for preachers' concealing agency in order to persuade those considering becoming Christians that the deciding power rests entirely with them.

Salvation as a sticky theological proposition is frequently simplified for congregations to reach a quick decision. It must not behoove an evangelical pastor to belabor the various doctrines inherent in the Christian gospel, especially if the length of a

church service is a consideration. Where this simplification leads is often to statements

such as Hodges's line: "The Bible says that if you are going to come to God, all you have

to do is tell him" (Hodges). At first blush, this line may seem straightforward in terms of

agency: Hodges uses the second-person pronoun *you* twice to address his congregation.

He seems to illuminate biblical teaching, condensing thousands of years of textual

scholarship to a salient point. (Whether this biblical interpretation is accurate is another

matter entirely.) However, the remainder of his sermon subverts this abbreviation of

requirements inherent in Christian conversion. Hodges even uses the same lexical term,

tell, to add further conditions to the religious exchange:

> If you will confess Jesus as Lord, you'll be saved. And so I'm going to
>
> help you with the words, but you can just pray your own prayer. Let me
>
> just help you. OK? Say something like this. Let's just whisper it right
>
> there where you are; say, "God." C'mon, **tell** him that: "Today, I am going
>
> all in. I've been holding back. I've been close. Today's my day. I am
>
> giving you heart and soul. I'm giving you mind and strength. Everything.
>
> **Tell** him this. This is an important part. Say: "Forgive me…."
>
> (Hodges, **emphasis** added)

By stipulating requisite confessional statements, worded carefully, Hodges leads his

hearers to think they are the ones taking initiative, while he feeds lines in a prescribed

order to them to repeat. He tiptoes circumspectly through this part of the public invitation

by requesting that the congregation grant him permission (e.g. "OK?"), as if there would

be an acceptable negative response to his rhetorical question. This request follows a

pertinent instance of his concealing dialogic agency. He insists that the audience may

pray their "own prayer," but he will "help…with words" (Hodges). His offer of

assistance (twice) allows Hodges to portray himself as the helpful ally, when he actually

is the one guiding the prayerful interaction: selecting the words, determining the order of

the statements, and specifying the physical responses (e.g., raised hands or applause)

appropriate for the moment. Hodges can feign objectivity as merely a supportive aide

while the congregation prays, while a closer examination of the transcript reveals who

holds the power to direct the petition.

This layering of agency—his seeming non-directive while purposefully guiding

the entire altar response—manifests itself in other sermons in the study. Smith, for

example, vacillates between taking very strong positions to cement his ethos as a

preacher ("Let me tell you" and "you gotta do this") and more passive requests that

appear to ask for audience permission ("let me pray for you") (Smith). Clearly he feels

strongly about what he is saying. This tension allows him to negotiate his footing as an

authoritative, credible rhetor without sounding rude. Just before his benediction, Smith's

closing remarks include a line directed to the audience: "thanks for letting me just

challenge you today" (Smith). The wording is curious; is the audience truly granting him

approval? In other words, the typical congregation member has very little say in

determining the topic on which an evangelical minister preaches. The line, however,

allows Smith to imply that he delivers his sermon as a two-way conversation between

equal partners. He might be the speaker determining the sermon content, but (by this line)

he suggests that the audience signals their endorsement of that message by nodding and

attending to the preaching, even by remaining in their pews and not walking out if they disagree with the message. Of course, the audience member does very little in the exchange beyond listening. The phrase also assists with Smith's image management. If his words come across as severe, this line tries to smooth over any disgruntled reaction.

Batterson also tries to repair whatever damage he may have inflicted upon the church's perception of their pastor in the concluding remarks of his sermon. His prayer, directed to God, confuses agency: "I…I pray that…uh… that this would be received, I hope, in the spirit in which it is shared…" (Batterson). Along with disfluencies and fillers (e.g., "uh"), Batterson asks God to perform an action that only the people present in the speaking event could monitor for themselves: receiving his message without prejudice. Perhaps he utters this phrase because it casts him more sympathetically as a man who prays than if he were to confront the audience explicitly, telling those assembled to get over any of their misgivings about the sermon. Also, because this is technically a prayer, he situates the audience in the powerful position of answering a prayer through the simple act of acting magnanimously toward him regarding his sermon performance.

Not everyone studied uses the strategies of agency and transitivity to make up a deficit position the preacher senses at the end of an especially confrontational sermon; some employ pronouns and verbs to conceal the true social actors at work in the sermon discourse. Machin and Mayr (2012) base this analytical aspect of their MCDA framework on the verb classification system of Halliday's (1978) work on Social Semiotics. Rather than merely searching the transcripts for verbs that take a direct object or do not, Halliday's distinguishing between material, behavioral, mental, verbal,

existential, and relational verbs permits scholars to ascertain "who or what does what to whom or what?" by foregrounding "actor, action and goal as affected" aspects of the discourse (Haratyan 2011: 261). How these preachers conceptualize conversion in terms of a relational process—that of being or becoming a Christian—by using inherently verbal processes (e.g. "say these words," "pray after/along with me," or "tell him that") allows the agency of the person(s) actually meeting the inherent discursive conditions to become elusive to pin down. In some cases, the preacher references reaching an intellectual conclusion about religion but refers to it in material (*viz.,* actual, physically active) terms. For example, Weber prays on behalf of his congregants a salvation-oriented supplication: "If we've never invited you into our life, if we've never accepted your invitation, I pray that we do so today; we just invite you in" (Weber). Despite the negations, the verbs *invite/d* and *accepted* represent relational and material (albeit metaphorical) processes. One invites a guest to visit, offering hospitality by literally opening a door to that person. The actor is the person issuing the invitation, with the goal (in Halliday's terms) being the one affected by the invitation. In a spiritual context such as an evangelical church setting, that assumed goal is meeting Christ. The lexical term *accepted* is similarly material, setting up the altar respondents to act as recipients, in this case, of Christ himself. Halliday's (1994) material process makes room for beneficiaries, those for whom something is done. The preacher, Weber, here skillfully negotiates a tenuous position: asking on behalf of his congregation that they would receive something intangible using very concrete language. From some theological or philosophical vantage points, conversion is primarily a mental process, involving shifts in perceptions (beliefs)

and affections (values). Does *invite* fully cover the nuances of embracing a new-found

religious devotion? If the individuals undergoing said religious mental processes are not

the ones actually uttering these statements, how is the process enacted? The very fact that

Weber uses pronouns such as *we* and *I* interchangeably in his prayer makes the implied

processes suspect. After all, is it even possible within the evangelical context to pray

something as essential to their dogma as salvation with the phrase "we just invite you

in"? It would seem implausible for someone else to make this statement on behalf of a

penitent person desiring salvation in this type of Fundamentalist Christian church.

The utterances used as repeat-after-me prayers often suggest fundamentally verbal

processes. These prayers focus consistently on verbs such as *say, tell, pray,* and *repeat*.

The praying person is supposed to be the individual who has come forward to receive

Christ, but often the words are not his/her own. Instead, the clergy persons dictate what to

say, placing themselves as the true speaker of the utterance. The addressee presumably is

God or Jesus, although this cannot be verified from a communicative standpoint. In many

ways, those desiring conversion become the addressees—they are, of course, the people

physically present in the room to hear the utterances. The fact that some of these

preachers jump in and out of prayers, alternating their comments to the supplicants with

prayers directed heavenward, demonstrates the porosity of this communicative barrier.

What is actually said in these verbal processes becomes important to qualify the utterance

as transitive. Here again, the actual transcripts evidence myriad ways in which

determining who is actually speaking to whom becomes slippery to pinpoint. The act of

praying is fundamentally a speech act—a verbal process, as evident in the sign-off

salutation: "And we pray this, in the name of Jesus" (Weber). This pastor claims "we" are praying, when only he is speaking (i.e., the congregation remains silent in this video). The verbiage in the sentence that follows the verb *pray* is the pronoun *this*, apparently referring to everything that came before this final segment in the prayer. In other words, all of the other processes as he has constructed them (material, mental, relational, not to mention the implied behavioral ones) are subsumed as verbal processes. Burke's iconic definition of religious conversion as fundamentally a linguistic change applies in this case. When viewed more holistically, Weber's prayer encompasses the totality of his audience's lives as gifts to the Almighty, as he offers "our marriage, our finances, our future; Lord, we give you our everything" (Weber). The plural pronouns paired with singular nouns is telling; Weber appears to emphasize conversion as a communal activity. This transaction, however, is still composed of words spoken aloud in a public setting, no matter how many other processes are indicated by the actual words chosen.

This speaking for others while standing in front of a congregation must present unique challenges for the evangelical church pastor. From a rhetorical perspective, the preachers in this study appear to be striving to persuade churchgoers toward a certain course of action: converting to Christianity. By hedging their language, blurring pronouns, and selecting terms that describe primary linguistic (verbal) processes as accomplishing material, relational, or mental processes, these preachers hide their own powerful role by making it seem that it is the idea of the people "coming forward" to conceptualize salvation in certain ways. For instance, Farmer's excerpt marks the beginning of a multi-week sermon series. Perhaps because he is embarking on a lengthier

study of a particular doctrine over the weeks that followed the video in question, his benedictory prayer reads summatively:

> Jesus, you are making all things new. And I ask in my own life over the course of the next several months as I commit to study the life and ministry of the Messiah, Jesus, that you would not leave me the same. That you would do a new thing in me. And I pray that you would do that in all of us. (Farmer)

The commitment to study the "Messiah" is emblematic of heightened religious devotion. He uses his life as a model for the Colorado congregation to emulate. Where the agency becomes tougher to locate, however, is in his final line. He admits that he is the one praying—that is, acting as the speaker of the utterance. What he prays (the clausal complement) involves asking God to work in the lives of his congregation, but he does so by praying that the people will be committed to practice the same spiritual disciplines he mentions. It is hardly his place to make commitments for other actors, let alone asking God to do the work that seems (at least by the lexical term *employed*) to lie squarely with the individuals themselves. He shows his hand as a preacher who wants the congregation to act in a certain way by praying that they will commit themselves to do what he has prescribed as optimal behavior for them to practice. This showing of one's hand is even more evident in the next section where the words overly present in the text point to the preachers' priorities in crafting the discourse itself.

Overlexicalization

When certain lexical terms are overtly present in a discursive sample than a seasoned listener might typically expect to hear, it is appropriate to question the motivation of the person making the utterance. Perhaps the preachers know precisely what they are doing, attempting to persuade their congregations toward an intended objective through verbal repetition. On the other hand, these speakers may seek to conceal their aims by overemphasizing certain concepts as a diversion. Standing at the pulpit commands attention in a way that is very powerful. It may be important for some congregants, therefore, to please the authoritative clergy member who is specifying the steps they should take. When, for instance, that preacher foregrounds an unequivocal need through lexis surrounding desire, it becomes significant. In Fortener's altar call, the preacher uses the lexical term *want* 13 times. In only three instances is *want* collocated with the second-person pronoun, as in the offer: "if you want to choose Jesus for your life" (Fortener). Of the other 10 occasions, four of these involve Fortener's adopting a persona, speaking as if he is one of the penitent supplicants coming forward to become a Christian. He repeats the phrase "I want" under several constructions, such as: "I want that all purged in my life" and "I want to live in grace" (Fortener). In six other places Fortener acknowledges as the pastor preaching to the crowd assembled what he wants from those whom he has primed to respond. He makes statements such as "So I want to invite you to make a choice…to make that choice; I want to invite you to make that decision" (Fortener). For congregants who desire to comply with the wishes of a leader in charge of a religious

gathering, this overuse of *want* seems to direct their behavior toward an intended

direction or even to establish a want inside of them to convert to Christianity.

Fortener's overlexicalization of *want* may locate its origins in the way he was

mentored in the preaching ministry by his boss, McManus, who matches the frequency of

the lexical term, using it in similar ways. The older preacher, McManus, uses "I want"

eight times, whereas he modifies the phrase slightly with one of his other favorite,

overused terms (*viz., just*) with five instances of "I just want" (McManus). Belaboring the

point of what the preacher prefers might be perceived by some observers as browbeating

the congregation into submission. Those individuals hardwired to accede to the pleasure

of leaders may sense an unnecessary pressure to perform the action McManus outlines in

his altar call. It is the introduction of the adverb *just* to the phrase that complicates the

discourse. The phrase "I just want" adds a sense of urgency or priority to the statement.

This emphasis is more effective when speakers use the construction conservatively.

Twice this phrase is placed in the mouths of the repentant, modeling how their own

prayers should sound: "Tonight, I just want to give my brokenness, my life to Jesus [;]

…I just want to give myself completely to Jesus" (McManus). This dual usage allows

McManus to raise the stakes for those getting ready to respond. By the fifth occasion,

McManus has undercut his own urgent pleas; it can be confusing for his listeners to sort

out which desire is the most important to prioritize in terms of complicity. McManus

states "I just want," thereby placing each of the following statements on an equal plane of

meaning: "I just want it to be a moment of quietness"; "I just want you to stand right

now"; and "I just want you…just to… just in your own heart... just say right now, Jesus, I

give my life to you" (McManus). This repetition of "I just want" permits McManus to demonstrate earnestness and timely relevance.

Urgency is not the only virtue in evangelical altar calls; authenticity and honesty rank highly in this discursive form. One marker of true evangelical, extemporaneous prayer is the use of the filler word *just,* often used in adverbial form. While this trope is commonly known among evangelicals (and is the focus of many jokes and blog entries among insiders), few linguists have studied this ubiquitous phenomenon. While other fillers (e.g. *y'know, um, uh, er, like,* and *sorta*) show up in the transcripts, the overuse of the adverb *just* seems unique to evangelical Christian prayer. This practice is so commonplace as to render prayers that refrain from using *just* sounding inauthentic, stilted, and rehearsed. McManus is the worst offender in this category, uttering the lexical term *just* a remarkable 30 times within his altar call. Some of the uses are spoken to the crowd to underscore his genuine concern: "Maybe tonight…maybe tonight is the night that you all just cross that line of faith" (McManus). In other instances, however, the same term is repeated twice or three times in the same sentence, muddying the syntax and making the appeal seem overeager: "But tonight I'm going to ask everyone just to bow your heads and just close your eyes; I just want it to be a moment of quietness" (McManus). If *just* in this case means *only, simply,* or *exclusively*, the thrice-repeated lexical term becomes redundant. If, however, McManus uses the word to ease into his point, the exaggerated use of *just* sounds like hedging after awhile: "[E]ven it is just one of you tonight, I want this moment to be for you…. just want you to stand right now" (McManus). The term *just* can also carry connotations of *completely* or *instantaneously*,

as in: "Jesus wants to just receive you to himself right now…[; i]s there someone anyone else who just needs to stand right now before I pray?" (McManus). This overuse constitutes more than a verbal tic, a go-to phrase that has become habitual. In terms of establishing his credibility as a preacher, it behooves McManus to convey as clearly as he can that he is sincere. One way in which he may try to convey that he is earnest is by mentioning the phrase "I give" a dozen times. He says: "Tell him whatever you need to say: 'I give you my pain; I give you my fear'" (McManus). By using this phrase frequently, McManus can emphasize that his hearers retain agency in the communication, despite the fact that he is the one feeding the lines to them to repeat. The lexical term *just*, encompassing the connotation carried by words such as *really, seriously, emphatically,* or *immediately,* accentuates the persuasive power of "I want."

Other preachers overload their public invitations with the phrase *I want* to ensure standardized corporate responses. Noble, for instance, utters the exact phrase "I want you" nine separate times within his closing comments and public invitation. This overuse of a phrase that reiterates what the person with the power in the communicative exchange desires from those wanting to comply is significant. Because he addresses thousands at the Anderson, South Carolina, campus of NewSpring, as well as multiple sites via video screens, Noble may be concerned about what could occur if individuals fail to respond in the exact ways he specifies. Moving potentially hundreds of respondents through the paces required by his take on evangelicalism may prompt him toward the overlexicalization of his own aims: "I want you to pray with me right now…[;] I want you at every campus…[; and] I want you to walk forward" (Noble). He must trust that the

individual campuses can handle the logistics involved with attending to the scores of people streaming forward in the various church services. To mark the occasion with a measure of solemnity, Noble holds aloft a certificate he offers to anyone courageous enough to come to the front of their respective campus. His language is undeniably bold with instances of the verbs *want*:

> **I want you** to come forward to get this (*holds up card with left hand*). It says: "In Christ, August 24th, 2014." And **I want you** to take this, and **I want you** to put it where you can see it. You can frame it. You can put in a scrapbook or whatever. And on the back, it's got Romans 8:38 and 39, tellin' you that you are in Christ, so you are never out of God's love. (applause). And **I want you** to do this, **I want you** to listen…. Some of you might be scared to death, and you're like, "I can't do that." Sure, you can 'cause you're in Christ. (Noble, **emphasis** added)

Noble not only expresses how strongly that he desires people to embrace Christ with this overlexicalization; he leans on his status as a megachurch pastor to sway those still waffling on this matter of religious devotion toward the encouraged behavior. Dangling a paper bag of souvenirs (e.g. a bible and a "worship CD") fails to reward the same way as doing what the person in charge articulates one should do. For some passive personality types, deferring to what someone in an important position requests carries its own benefits.

Similarly to foregrounding the preacher's wants is the overuse of lexical terms indicating recognition of veracity. Fortener's sermon is filled with overlexicalization,

particularly emphasizing what he believes to be true about the Christian gospel. A religion is much more believable when it is propagated by a convinced (and convincing) spokesperson. Painting himself as a person who has settled his own mind regarding the correctness of his own theological stance, Fortener peppers his public invitation with the lexical term *know*, using it in various forms over a dozen times. The filler term "y'know" fails to show up a single time, suggesting that every one of the 14 uses is purposeful. The word means different things—even in this sermon. Occasionally, Fortener uses *know* to mean becoming acquainted or initiating a relationship, or even having amassed personal experience, as in: "you don't know the grace that Jesus brings" (Fortener). He implies here that his congregants are bereft of the firsthand knowledge of Christ's forgiveness. At other times, and more frequently, he speaks about knowing in the cognitive sense: "There are those of you in this room, I know… I know that this is your moment" (Fortener). Even in this usage, *know* refers less to intellectual information as to possessing a personal certitude. Fortener seems to prefer this meaning, using it often: "And that's how I know that you know because your heart starts beating like crazy, and you know: 'I've wanted Jesus my whole life'" (Fortener). Here the minister uses *know* to mean everything from thinking to speaking (even to oneself through inner thoughts). Also, *know* comes to mean a position he has been convinced of as preferable to other options: "[W]e know that Jesus changes everything—that when you connect your life to Jesus, that grace transforms your brain" (Fortener). After this statement, Fortener references an unnamed neuroscientist, underscoring the value of knowledge in this segment.

Knowledge is compiled over time, rarely accruing instantly. The frequency of Fortener's using *moment* in connection with this altar call, therefore, is curious. On seven occasions, he points to this temporal instant to accentuate the urgency of seizing the gospel he extends to his audience. Twice the lexical term is collocated with the second-person pronoun: "this is your moment [;]… this is, like, your moment" (Fortener). By attaching possession to a time period, Fortener is able to capitalize on the slipperiness of the pronoun *you* (which can mean the individual listener or the entire audience). He can insinuate that God offers a very limited timeframe to people to respond and that this exact timing is predestined. What happens if someone misses the moment? He jokes around about the churchgoers waiting a week until McManus resumes his place in the pulpit:

> This is your time. I know there's some of you that if I am too quick, you're going to miss it, and I'll get it next week. I might not do this next week. Like, Erwin's speaking next week. And he might do it and he might not. I don't know. I can't even control that, so. All I can say is: This is, like, your moment here, and I've done that and I've missed it. So I know I know if I count too quick you're going to just be like (*laughter*), and you'll be in the car and you'll be like, "I'll do it in the car." No. (Fortener)

Clearly, Fortener stands to gain if people respond to his altar call. He can count the respondents as evidence of his effective communication. By overlexicalizing the word *moment* he can heighten the urgency and influence many to make the decision to convert.

The repeated phrases and words in these sermon extracts suggest that in this discourse the way to emphasize a point is to overstate it for persuasive effect. In a very

short prayer, Chandler uses the lexical term *expose* twice, asking God to expose ways of thinking and interacting that are "inconsistent with gospel belief and behavior" (Chandler). While the prayer is compatible with evangelical doctrine, these two areas, some would argue, are under the purview of the individuals themselves. By asking God to "expose" these deviations, he can more subtly signal that incompatible behavior is sinful—something that God must uncover. Some overlexicalizations can be attributed to preachers' trying to link the closing moments to their sermons' central theme. In the case of Farmer's sermon from September 7, 2014, this Sunday kicks off a sermon series highlighting the idea of newness. His five-time mentioning of *new* (e.g. "God is making all things new") does not merely reinforce the sermon topic (Farmer). He can infuse his sermon with novelty by simply pointing to a word that embeds this energetic notion in its lexis. Weber's sermon relies on overlexicalization in the form of the first-person plural pronoun *our*. The minister cites the lexical term nine times, making the prayer seem like a communal act of communication rather than a solo act of a preacher's making singular statements in front of a crowd of onlookers. Evangelical dogma relies upon the assumption that people open their own hearts to Christ, but in this sermon Weber continually speaks on behalf of the entire congregation: "I pray today that all of us— starting with myself—would lay it at your feet…our marriage, our finances, our future, our worries, our past; Lord, we give you our everything" (Weber). Overusing the term *our* implies that everyone agrees with this course of action, minimizing dissent and emphasizing conformity. Furtick's sermon ends with several measures meant to

emphasize a similar sense of assent. At one juncture in the service, Furtick is heard chanting in a rhythmic manner:

> We declare your grace is greater, your grace is greater, your grace is greater, your grace is greater… your grace is greater… the blood is stronger. The blood is stronger. The blood is stronger. Your name is higher. Your name is higher; your name is higher. Great grace. Great grace. (Furtick)

The nearly hypnotic tone of his voice makes Furtick's repetition come across as trying to persuade people by wearing down their individuality, coaxing them to be more like the group. Coupled with his nearly affectless expression as his eyes scan the crowd, this portion of the sermon is one of the most chilling to observe—especially online.

Finally, some of the instances of overlexicalization seek to delineate what the preachers' topic is and what it is not. Smith's message entitled "The Problem of Hope" sets up a dichotomy throughout the sermon. By the end of his preaching, Smith is repeating the lexical term *hope* many times. Twice he states: "This is our hope" (Smith). He specifies that "[m]y hope is not in my strength[,]…my performance[,]…my accessing the presence of God[,] and my…choices" (Smith). Though he is negating false hopes that others put stock in, Smith herein relies upon the upbeat nature of the lexical term *hope*. Moreover, Smith's six-time invocation of the phrase "[m]y hope is" allows the word *hope* to be paired with a possessive pronoun. This phrasing bolsters one's confidence in how hope operates. *Hope* is not equivalent to mere wishful thinking. Smith uses other negative phrases (e.g. "He will not let" [twice] and "This isn't about my" [three times]) (Smith).

Despite the multiple negations, the tone of the sermon remains optimistic and encouraging. Smith conveys to his audience that he is speaking "straight talk" to them—no pretense involved.

What becomes apparent when the sermon is going well is that certain key concepts are elided from the text—including major Christian doctrines being eliminated from evangelical usage today. If the overuse of particular lexical terms is suspect of encoded power relations in discourse, the elision of language similarly belies manipulation of communication for purposeful ends. Machin and Mayr (2012) refer to "suppression" as the term for omitting lexical terms customary to the discursive context. Linguistic suppression, purposely restricting access to key theological vocabulary and other lexical terms, becomes more challenging to spot in the discourse. Identifying what subjects and lexical terms are left out becomes nearly as important as locating instances of overlexicalization when noting the systemic changes the discourse has endured.

Pronoun usage

Pronouns represent actors in the preaching discourse: speakers, audience members, the "outside world," God, Christ, the devil, and even fictitious interlocutors with whom the minister may engage in a mock debate—albeit with only one person holding the microphone. These pronouns, therefore, come into focus at the moment when instructions are relayed about how to respond to an altar call. Frequently in the extracts the preachers in question rely upon pronouns, sometimes divorced from precise referents, to convey somewhat abstract notions or to demonstrate the desire to connect personally with

audience members. When prayer commences, the pronoun usage becomes particularly interesting, as ascertaining who is covered by a certain pronoun becomes elusive to determine. The rhetorical skill with which some of the preachers being studied float between pronouns to reinforce public perceptions of their humility or sincerity in leading confessional prayers is uncanny. Occasionally when a preacher invokes a pronoun that speaker makes a thing out of an idea, a doctrine, or a state of being that would be difficult to refer to otherwise as a bounded concept. Using pronouns, therefore, bears resemblance to the process of nominalization, in that a bounded word becomes easier to discuss, to promote, to quantify, to measure, to evaluate, and to trade dialogically.

Two of the preachers in the sample use the same two pronouns—*this* and *it*—in similarly ambiguous ways in order to simplify the theological and conversionary processes they hope to enact in the altar calls. Fortener repeatedly uses the lexical terms *it* and *this* throughout his public invitation to refer to the Christian doctrines of salvation and conversion, or even the very opportunity he extends to his congregation to respond to his charge. These vague pronouns serve to muddy the discourse in places, potentially hindering understanding. For example, of the 14 occurrences of the pronoun *this* in the sermon segment, only four of them are paired with nouns: "this one thing," "this conversation," and "this place as a part of this tribe" (Fortener). The remaining 10 incidences of *this* stand alone: "'Cause this is your moment; this is your time" (Fortener). In this particular instance, Fortener presses the crowd to respond to his invitation to "make a choice" to follow Christ. Herein the lexical term *this* points to the opportune moment. Elsewhere, however, Fortener employs phrases such as "This is the Jesus I have

wanted in my life" (Fortener). The demonstrative use of the pronoun *this* breaks down quickly. What becomes hazy is the pronoun's referent. He seems to imply in the previous sentences that palpitations (i.e., "My heart would beat like crazy when a person was talking like I'm talking right now") or responding in a "meeting" when the altar call is given might be the referent for *this* (Fortener). Similarly vague is Fortener's use of the pronoun *it*, a lexical term that appears in the transcript 16 times. After pointing to the "Jesus I have wanted," Fortener employs the pronoun *it* in multiple forms:

> I will release that old god that someone put in my brain is a child into my brain as a child. I'll let *it* go. And I'll go, "I want to choose Jesus; I want to choose grace." Because when you choose grace *it* takes all of your past, buries *it* deep in the ground sends *it* as far as the east is from the west, and gives you a free future. And if you want that, in your life, if you want to choose Jesus for your life on the count of three I'm going to just count *it* off. And by the way, our tribe, our crew here is going to go absolutely nuts, for you. They are. Because *it's* a, because *it's* our favorite thing, and be… because we know that Jesus changes everything.
>
> (Fortener, *italics* added)

The first *it* refers to the "old god" being replaced. The second *it* either refers to "grace" or to the choosing of grace. The third and fourth instances are the interlocutor's "past," perhaps the record of wrongdoing each respondent has accrued. By "I just want to count it off," Fortener has lost the referent completely (Fortener). The final two occurrences of

the pronoun *it* in the quoted section refer presumably to the public presentation of the

Christian gospel, but that is unclear, even from the context.

Another preacher in the group, however, wields pronouns with aplomb. Weber

shifts seamlessly between two pronouns: *we* and *our*. These first-person plural pronouns

allow the preacher to identify with his congregants and to connect with their needs.

Weber uses *we* and *I* as he prays for the penitent, thereby including himself as culpable:

> Heavenly Father, gracious God, we… we come before you today…. Lord,
>
> I know that for myself so often I make my …my whole life about me.
>
> […We] declare that you are the center; we're not…. So, Lord, if… if
>
> we've never invited you into our life, if we've never accepted your… your
>
> invitation, I pray that we do so today. We just invite you in. And if we've
>
> yet to give you our everything, I pray today that all of us—starting with
>
> myself—would lay it at your feet. (Weber)

Notice how he uses the pronoun *we* for positive, collective prayers: greeting God and

declaring God central. When it comes, however, to admission of potential wrongdoing,

Weber switches the pronoun to first-person singular *I* for confessions of self-

centeredness. The conditional *if* is followed by we, as in "if we've never invited you into

our life" (Weber). Later, he follows up by using "I pray that we do so" as a stand-in for "I

wish" or "I hope," thereby enforcing his influence on the group's behavior by

foregrounding his desire for their compliance. When it comes to admitting vulnerability,

Weber puts himself forward as exemplar: "I pray today that all of us—starting with

myself—would lay it at your feet" (Weber). He becomes the example for others to follow

because he is doing the "right thing." A moment later, he specifies what encompasses the "it" is that is laid at the "feet" of Christ: "Our marriage, our finances, our future, our worries, our past; Lord, we give you our everything" (Weber). Weber uses *our* with singular nouns, as if these attributes are shared among them. Moreover, he takes the lead, asking God to act on the corporate congregation's behalf while surrendering the totality of their being for them (and without their expressed permission). Weber concludes his prayer with a customary sign-off that is significant again for its pronoun usage: "And we pray this, in the name of Jesus" (Weber). It seems curious to use the phrase "we pray" when only Weber is the one speaking into the microphone, let alone determining the parameters of the communication. By saying "we pray," Weber gains the cachet for appearing altruistic, even though he alone runs the exchange. The pronouns allow the preacher to act powerfully while hiding his agency, a particularly persuasive effect for convincing parishioners that the choice to convert to evangelicalism was their idea.

CHAPTER FIVE: "CAN I GET AN AMEN?": How Preachers Persuade

"People can be induced to pray such a prayer for many reasons—as an act of courtesy, as an act of desperation to get rid of us, as a desire to curry our favor and gain some advantage."
—James F. Engel, *Contemporary Christian Communications: Its Theory and Practice* (1979: 212)

Chapter Abstract

This chapter initially explores the myriad ways preachers demarcate what evangelical faith is, utilizing metaphors that involve various conceptual domains. Next, it focuses on recontextualization, the process preachers undergo for making Christian conversion attractive to potential converts by downplaying or burnishing features of the evangelical gospel. Then, the chapter considers the various lexical fields that preachers construct to persuade people to join the nascent faith. Finally, I highlight four persuasive arenas that prove to be effective with their target audience: emotional appeals, urgency depictions, *if*-conditional statements, and divine invocations, known colloquially as "playing the God card."

Figurative language employed

While similar in content, the preachers' extracts vary in terms of figurative language used for rhetorical effect. Metaphors[1] for faith, conversion, and response are integral to the sermonic art, not the least of which is spiritual rebirth, the very act supposedly being accomplished in the altar call and benedictory prayer (Borg, 2012: 169). To be an American evangelical has been synonymous for decades with the lexical phrase "born-again Christian," a label popularized when Jimmy Carter ran for the Presidency in the 1970s. Drawn from the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3, this

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[1] "This is the means by which we understand one concept in terms of another, through a process which involves a transference or 'mapping' between the two concepts…. Metaphors can be deliberately persuasive and often conceal underlying power relations" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 221).

metaphor has been problematic since its advent. The Gospel narrative records the Pharisee's confusion over having to reenter his mother's womb a second time (cf. John 3:4). Christ's retort in verse 5 clarifies that this rebirth occurs to those "born of water and the Spirit" (cf. John 3:6, AKJV). Evangelicals have interpreted this duality to refer to water baptism and repentance from sin. Therefore, the preachers under this study believe that they are acting metaphorically as midwives, helping to deliver new babies into the Kingdom of God, during this final segment of their sermons. This conceptualizing of their role lends it spiritual gravitas (and warrants this extensive study because of the meaning attached by practitioners). What remains a point of cognitive dissonance for them, however, is that while valorizing the end result of this discourse—producing converts—preachers often fail to acknowledge what they are really up to as persuasive rhetors whose primary tool of their craft is language.

This mismatch between goal (conversions) and praxis (speaking words professionally) also explains why many of them resort to figurative language in the same manner Jesus did with Nicodemus. At one point in the biblical conversation, Jesus talks about how not being able to see the wind is akin to being unable to trace God's working on planet earth to produce reborn lives (cf. John 3:8). To bridge this cognitive gap with their audiences, many contemporary preachers tell a truncated version of their own conversion experience as a motivator to those ready to respond to the public invitation. Analogous language reinforces the "verbal performance of conversion narratives" that often comprises the salvation call (Stromberg, 2014: 162). In other words, whether telling their own testimonials or attempting to set the conditions suitably to convince people to

convert, these preachers employ figurative language in various forms to achieve certain aims.

Metaphors for faith, conversion, and response

Metaphorical language is inherent in evangelical Christian preaching, as preachers seek to define faith and to draw people to follow their particular interpretations of its domains. Evaluating the metaphors present in the sermon discourse was enabled by the (2007) Pragglejaz Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), as outlined below:

- Read the entire text-discourse to establish a general understanding of the meaning.

- Determine the lexical units in the text-discourse.

- For each lexical unit in the text, establish its meaning in context….

- For each lexical unit, determine if it has a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts than the one in the given context…[m]ore concrete…[r]elated to bodily action…[m]ore precise… [and h]istorically older.

- If the lexical unit has a more basic current – contemporary meaning in other contexts than the given context, decide whether the contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in comparison with it.

- If yes, mark the lexical unit as metaphorical. (2007: 3)

The international research consortium Pragglejaz Group (2007) posits that their method could prove valuable to critical discourse analysts working with a variety of discursive genres (34-35). Indeed, Pihlaja applied MIP principles to his study of religious YouTube videos and the ensuing combative comments between avowed Christians and atheists. (2007:3). Steen (2007) reinterprets the Pragglejaz MIP methodology (16) to be fundamentally concerned with thoughts rather than language (17), before modifying it to result in clearly identifying "cross-domain mapping" (19). What is being transmitted in these altar calls via analogous lexical terms is essential to the meaning the preachers attempt to enact. Metaphors function as vehicles for signification (Cameron & Maslen 2010: 43). They map meanings from one domain to another, often at the singular lexical term level. Beckerlegge (2004) acknowledges that contemporary American preachers, the "Brahmins of the digital age," live with a constant awareness of an inherent metaphor: that God exists at the intersection between spirituality and technology (259). An interpretive reading of the sermons comprising this study reveals that these preachers are adept at wielding metaphorical language for persuasive effect.

One of evangelical preachers' main objectives with their sermons is to inspire others toward what they applaud as laudable actions. By depicting conversion as a daring act, they tap into the human longing for heroism. For example, Noble uses words such as *bold* and *radical* to set up the request for interested parties to "come forward" to indicate their desire to follow Christ (Noble). He claims that any trepidation felt by the audience members who have just prayed with him moments before is banished since they are now "in Christ," a phrase he repeats several times and even offers in printed form on the card

he holds aloft (Noble). By promising that Christ will lend them "the courage to step out,"

Noble references the affective domain wherein the metaphor FAITH AS ADVENTURE

operates (Noble). The capitalization of central metaphors is a linguistic strategy for

foregrounding analogies that often function at a subconscious level. An adventure offers

an escape from a hum-drum existence—a welcome reprieve from the status quo. Courage

requires bold action, thus linking the congregants willing to "stand for their faith" with

other sorts of heroic individuals celebrated in other contexts. Soldiers, for example, often

receive a hero's welcome when they return from the theater of operations. Their heroic

behavior on the battlefield supposedly warrants the acclaim they receive for risking their

lives. When Dummitt speaks about "enemy territory" in his altar appeal, he enters the

political domain that recognizes battle imagery for conveying the metaphor FAITH AS

WARFARE (Dummitt). The *enemy* in this case may be the devil, but making this

identification stick is not the purpose of the metaphor. Dummitt instead portrays the vast

battlefield of human challenges facing "a son or a daughter" who ventures into the fray of

"evil, war, and cancer and sadness and pain" (Dummitt). Where the metaphor turns

decidedly political is his mentioning of the power of God to "bring them home" safely

from these skirmishes, since no leader would elect to "leave them there" (Dummitt). He

compares the evangelical Christian God to the President who alone holds the capability to

end enemy occupation by American troops. As images of ticker-tape parades and

widespread celebrations on V.E. Day marking the end of World War II come to mind, the

preacher has effectively persuaded his listeners to view themselves as soldiers leaving the

battlefield for the safety of peaceful shores. The attendant patriotic feelings help reinforce this association.

In a few instances within the sample, however, preachers opt for a more logic-based persuasive technique by using metaphors of faith that appeal to the cognitive domain. That statement should not imply that any of the preachers studied attempt an extensive exploration of Christian apologetics. Instead, they depict conversion with metaphors that map matters of faith with rational decision-making processes. By posing the question: "Would you say yes to Jesus?", Dummitt links to the metaphoric notion of FAITH AS A QUESTION TO BE ANSWERED (Dummitt). This preacher follows the rhetorical question with this declarative statement: "I have, and it's changed my life" (Dummitt). While the faith question is simplified to the binary *yes/no* or *true/false*, Dummitt implies that an affirmative response carries transformative power. The pronoun *it* is insightful. One might expect the preacher to use *he* or *He* for Christ, but *it* refers to the antecedent of saying yes. He further reinforces this approach a moment later with the admonition "say yes to Jesus," describing FAITH AS A DECISION OR RESPONSE TO A QUESTION (Dummitt). Choosing Christian faith becomes akin to pulling a lever in a voting booth—making an easy decision between few options, only one of which makes sense. Hodges reiterates this metaphor by reporting in his altar call to congregants with their eyes closed that "[p]eople are making decisions of faith today" (Hodges). All he can definitively report on is raised hands, which he reports as made-up minds, reinforcing the FAITH AS A DECISION metaphor. Even a brief phrase such as "choose Jesus" makes an abstract, ethereal notion a concrete, logical decision that represents the metaphor

FAITH AS THE BEST DECISION AMONG VARIOUS OPTIONS (Fortener). These

preachers gesture toward the cognitive mode to imply that Christian faith makes logical

sense, albeit in portraying conversion in a very simplistic fashion.

Because of the ways in which evangelical Christian creeds characterize

conversion in lexical terms normally reserved for labor and delivery, the existential

domain corresponds to the implied meaning, as well as opening up new connotations and

comparisons. Lentz hyperbolizes the importance of the prayer he will lead momentarily

with sweeping repercussions:

> In this moment, you are saved; you are forgiven; the old is gone, the new
>
> is here. What God has done, the world cannot take away, so for you:
>
> "Happy birthday." Your whole life begins now. You are free; you are
>
> anointed; you are filled with the grace of God; and you will never be the
>
> same. (Lentz)

This list of supposed benefits is comprehensive. What stands out from this excerpt is the

congratulatory message "Happy birthday," a greeting reserved for well-wishers to offer

others on the anniversary of their birth. By inserting this lexical phrase into an

ecclesiastical context, Lentz may quickly share his estimation of what will transpire at the

moment his prayer ends in the lives of the parishioners. Furthermore, Lentz employs the

metaphor FAITH AS REBIRTH, a comparison associated with the conversation of Jesus

and Nicodemus in John 3. The other phrases in the quoted lines above ring with Christian

doctrinal overtones; the phrase "Happy birthday," however, operates metaphorically in

the discourse to suggest an alternate, transcendent state of being enacted by the sincere

salvific prayer. While the metaphor is somewhat mixed by the time Lentz gets to uttering "You are free," the statement nonetheless appertains to the existential domain. In the final words of the prayer, Lentz directs the congregation to say aloud: "And by your power, I am set free; it is a new day, in Jesus' name" (Lentz). This metaphor carries deep connotations to many people, particularly those who know someone who is or has been incarcerated, whose ancestors were victims of enslavement, or anyone who has dealt with life-controlling addictions. Lentz presents FAITH AS THE RELEASE FROM PRISON, thereby offering freedom in place of captivity (Lentz).The status of newly released prisoners is similar to the concept of human birth: Outside of the prison walls former convicts exist autonomously, free to live their lives in whatever manner they choose. Life as a free person bears little resemblance to existence behind bars. From what the congregants listening attentively to Lentz's preaching have been freed is not immediately clear, only implied from the twice-mentioned admission to their formerly being "sinner[s]" (Lentz).

Much more frequently, these preachers draw comparisons that rely upon the relational domain. At one end of the spectrum, Christ proposes a merger or meeting with the supplicant. Weber, for example, includes a caveat in his prayer: "if we've never accepted your invitation," thereby invoking the metaphor of FAITH AS INVITATION (Weber). Christ follows etiquette rules, issuing appeals that are declined or accepted. At a more modulated point on the cline between choosing an acquaintance or a loved one, McManus encourages the audience to admit: "I want a relationship with Jesus" (McManus). The metaphor of FAITH AS FRIENDSHIP/FAMILY suggests interpersonal

closeness without specifying the degree of warmth exchanged. Moments later, however, McManus has applied a wedding motif to the relationship by dictating that the churchgoers pray aloud: "I just want to give myself completely to Jesus" (McManus). By this language, McManus has raised the stakes, referring to FAITH AS FULL SURRENDER, akin to two lovers who devote themselves wholeheartedly to each other. This analogy permits McManus to characterize the tenacity of God's love as "no one or nothing can take them out of your love or of your embrace," enacting a metaphor of FAITH AS INTIMACY, albeit undefined as that of a lover or of a devoted parent (McManus). By portraying Christ in tender terms, these preachers heighten the positive appeal of converting to evangelical Christianity, even for those people who may have lost a parent or been neglected or abused by a spouse.

Within the evangelical sermonic discourse, the figure of a "Heavenly Father" becomes the perfect example of divine love, after whom all human relationships are patterned and from whom all negative, earthly examples deviate as selfish aberrations. By situating this central image in the minds of listeners, the preacher is able to make further rhetorical moves. Furtick, for instance, leads his congregation to voice the following phrase: "I embrace you now" (Furtick). The verb *embrace* is one where the Pragglejaz MIP process is helpful to decode. In context, Furtick means more than giving mental assent to a philosophical concept. The type of *embrace* he ascribes primary meaning to is a physical one, the type of hug shared between two parties who share strong affection. With this contextual definition in mind, Furtick metaphorically uses FAITH AS INTIMACY. This reading accords with at least one other preacher's depiction of

conversion. Meyer informs the conference attendees in her video segment: "[Y]ou need a family" (Meyer). The larger community of believers in Christ becomes that familial replacement as she utilizes FAITH AS ADOPTION. Insinuating that people need to abandon their families of origin for a group of people she implies will be more understanding, loving, and supportive than their flesh-and-blood relatives positions the new community as vital and herself, as well as other Christian ministers, as important parental surrogates. By reinforcing the comparison between God/the church with one's parents, these preachers bolster the notion that salvation restores the relation between the human and the divine. It is this symbiotic relationship Smith references with his overt metaphor: "Salvation is not a dangling rope from heaven that you grip on; salvation is God's grip on you" (Smith). The assumed reciprocity of this relationship with an invisible God emphasizes the view of FAITH AS CONNECTION TO GOD.

Two entities—one human and the other otherworldly—may relate to one another if they may be associated within the spatial domain. Weber constructs a distinctly spatial arrangement with his petition: "[D]uring worship is the one time every week when we declare that you are the center; we're not" (Weber). By labeling God "the source of everything," he constructs a circular model with the Almighty situated at the hub. He relegates all other issues of the human life to the periphery—mere spokes off of the hub. Batterson also uses this lexical term, albeit apologizing publically to God for the seasons when "I wasn't in your word, where you weren't really at the center of my life" (Batterson). Viewing one's life as orbiting around the centrality of Christian faith develops the metaphor of FAITH AS OCCUPYING GEOMETRIC SPACE. This

impression of spatiality is essential for other common metaphorical expression to gain

entrée into the discourse. Notably, if Christian faith can be mapped on a spatial plane,

then preachers such as Furtick may refer to churchgoers who are "far from God,"

measuring distance in a relationship in proximal terms. Conveying FAITH AS

PROXIMITY in this way opens channels for other geographic analogies. Wilhite, for

one, refers to penitent individuals' "moving out of those waters of faith" (Wilhite). Not

only does this image allude to the Old Testament Jewish exodus from Egypt via the

parted Red Sea, it also hearkens to the waters of baptism that await the nascent converts.

References to geographic locales and historic/biblical places permit the preachers

to trace comparisons between religion and the travel domain. This transportation motif is

a favorite one for evangelical preachers, as evidenced by the four ministers who enact the

permutations of this metaphor in this sample alone. Wilhite marks the salvation prayer as

the beginning of a trip of sorts: "[Y]ou can begin that journey by repeating after me"

(Wilhite). With FAITH AS EMBARKATION, the preacher may benefit from the

connotations that accompany the idea of setting out on a sojourn toward God. Meyer

echoes this pilgrimage idea by calling the "new life" in Christ some have initiated "an

exciting journey" (Meyer). The metaphoric view of FAITH AS A JOURNEY enables the

speakers using it to contend that the new believers have several more steps to take—ones

ostensibly that require guidance by others (such as themselves) who have "walked this

path" before them. Curiously, the transportation domain (especially on foot) does not

always rely on the linear mapping of a journey. Where Wilhite links salvation to

embarking on a trip, McManus refers to conversion as the culmination of a marathon. He

encourages those assembled to "cross that line of faith" (McManus). By pointing to

FAITH AS A RACE, McManus positions himself as a cheering spectator, applauding

those to make every effort to reach a definite—albeit in this case metaphorical—place.

Evangelicals are accustomed to this travel domain, particularly regarding FAITH AS A

WALK. Therefore, when Chandler refers how "often" Christians "stumble," he obliquely

references this metaphor (Chandler). A hike makes forward progress, has a destination in

mind, is more enjoyable with partners, and trains the hiker for more challenging paths.

The metaphor allows the preacher to introduce related theological principles by

association.

The ultimate destination of the faithful believer is the hereafter. The phrase "I'm

on my way to heaven" (Meyer) is so characteristic of the evangelical discourse that it

seems downright pedantic to highlight its use. How it functions metaphorically, however,

building on the central comparison of faith to a journey one is taking is essential to

understanding how evangelicals view their current, earthly existence in light of the future.

Being on one's way to heaven implies a setting out on a journey that requires vigilance to

stay on the path. Even the inclusion of the lexical term *way* in the phrase becomes

emblematic of the evangelical penchant for intertextuality; Jesus calls himself the "way"

in John 14:6. Before being labeled Christians (a derogatory term used as a pejorative

diminution), the earliest followers of Jesus in the Book of Acts were called members of

"the Way" (cf. Acts 9:2). Apparently, those on their way to heaven need some pastoral

nudging to get there expeditiously.

Because the altar call customarily occurs at the conclusion of a sermon lasting

anywhere between 20 and 45 minutes (usually), it behooves the clock-watching

megachurch pastor (perhaps with multiple services ahead) to emphasize the temporal

domain to heighten the sense of urgency for respondents. Himaya does just this with the

biblical phrase "day of salvation," first used by the prophet Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 49:8) and

picked up by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:2, who links immediacy to the

messianic prophecy: "I tell you now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of

salvation" ("Second Corinthians 6:2" 2016). This urgent salvation plea accentuates

FAITH AS OPPORTUNE TIME. Each of the preachers shown in videotaped form

evidence earnestness in their altar appeal—some with more demonstrative passion or

emotion. Noble emphasizes the date of the Sunday service: "If you're ready to say

August 24th, 2014, is my day, I want you to pray with me right now" (Noble). Not only

can he reiterate the word *now* from Paul's epistle to the church at Corinth; Noble

constructs a more unique metaphor of FAITH AS A MEMORIAL TOUCHSTONE.

Many evangelicals point out the specific date that they "met Jesus" as a way to highlight

that something significant occurred to demarcate the newfound relationship. Noble plays

into this tradition, underscoring a key virtue of the discourse: nostalgia. Attempting to

concretize ethereal moments into dates or memorable moments may include metaphorical

language. Wilhite alludes to Old and New Testament narratives in his call to those

present who are "moving out of those waters of faith" (Wilhite). By using this familiar

phrase, he links the new initiate to the Israelites' crossing the Red Sea under the

leadership of Moses or even Jesus' coming out of the Jordan River after being baptized

by John in the Gospels. This phrase may also foreshadow the importance—especially at Wilhite's church—of being baptized in water as evidentiary of making this commitment to Christianity.

The virtuous domain provides the final noteworthy metaphorical arena within the sermon excerpts. McManus admits that his listeners may experience difficulty confessing their need for Christ. The key, he claims, is that they must "be vulnerable—to be transparent, 'cause it's going to take that level of honesty with God and with others to say, 'Man, I need you, Jesus'" (McManus). With this advice, McManus depicts FAITH AS HONESTY, linking religion with a respected ethic. This sense of coming clean allows the judgment of God to be sketched in a less intimidating rendition than other depictions. In other words, salvation allows a person to tell God what he already knows to be true (due to the Judeo-Christian theological principle of God's omniscience) about the sinfulness of his/her own heart. Similarly, Meyer reiterates what she sees as essential about the conversionary prayer—that it must be public and intentional. While admitting that it would be possible to pray surreptitiously or in the privacy of one's home, Meyer relies on metaphorical language of (oddly enough) personification: "I don't want him sneaking around in my life" (Meyer). What is pivotal in this discussion is not whether it is objectionable to attribute burglary behaviors to God; Meyer justifies taking bold steps of public identification with Christ—standing up or streaming forward in the arena with others to pray collectively in the altar area—to depict FAITH AS AN UPRIGHT ACTIVITY. If a person is serious about becoming a Christian, she ought, according to Meyer's logic, to be willing to respond forthrightly. This metaphor enables Meyer to

begin inculcating the new converts into behavioral expectations of their new community. While suppressing the social pressures that will come into play for these new believers, Meyer appeals to the moral sensibilities of her congregation. Noble also invokes a similar metaphor regarding sincerity by claiming "there's nothin' magical about this prayer" (Noble). If the prayer is not a talisman to be rubbed, he associates FAITH AS AN ANTIDOTE to the problem of sin.

As will be evident in a subsequent chapter on persuasion, Noble uses an "on the count of three" approach to build anticipation the way an illusionist does before performing a sleight-of-hand-trick. (He is not the only preacher in the group to use this technique.) After promising he is not reciting a "magical" prayer, he resembles a magician in this bit of rhetorical showmanship. This final metaphor parses prayer in a way that attempts to recontextualize its results as being logical, reasonable, and evidential.

Recontextualization

The Internet provides ample opportunities for recognizing recontextualization[2] of language. Referring to the sort of paradigmatic life change most evangelical preachers surveyed attempt to execute through the altar call, figurative language allows the preacher to heighten the "emotional turmoil or enduring stress" required to foster connection between the seeker and the salvific solution as presented (Zinnbauer &

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[2] "This is where language is used to transform events and practices where elements are changed, replaced, removed or simplified" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 223).

Pargament 2000: 162). Whenever preachers simplify an abstract process—most notably converting to a Christian worldview—they participate in recontextualization by truncating the necessary aspects of the process to render the intended decision more desirable for the audience they address. Many of these examples have appeared in the close reading above under other MCDA categories. In essence, when a pastor fails to mention the personal demands of adopting the evangelical lifestyle at the point of initiation, he/she is potentially guilty of removing vital information to close the sale. What is stricken from the record is any mention of the now-expected weekly church attendance, daily Bible reading, financial giving and volunteer service, circumspect living according to narrowly-defined interpretations of biblical teachings, and presumptions of involvement in testifying to one's conversion, called commonly in evangelical vernacular "witnessing." Even in an excerpt that lacks a formal altar call one can readily recognize such recontextualization. To Farmer, embarking on the sermon series from the Book of Mark at Cherry Hills Community Church, "All Things New," *new* is the goal without explaining what this will require of parishioners who take his sermons to heart over the multi-week presentation. Even in the written promotional blurb for the series (archived on YouTube as well as on the church's website), the underlying costs personally to the congregation are not foregrounded: "There are unique moments in life when we realize the old things and the old ways just don't work any more" (Farmer 2014). The aforementioned junctures represent "the exact moment where God can break in, do what only he can do and make all things new" (Farmer 2014). This sentence positions God to perform a unique yet unidentified work in a person's life, "mak[ing] all things new"

(Farmer). Newness is correlated with freshness, vitality, invigoration, and energy. Therefore, being made new sounds inherently positive. It is this repackaging of Christian conversion and devotion that makes it much more palatable than the plea of Jesus to interested parties to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow" Him (cf. Mark 8:34, NIV). Even when Farmer prays for God to "do a new thing in [him] and…in all of us," he does not raise any of the challenges that such a heightened fidelity to Christ may pose to these people (Farmer). Instead, he recasts adherence to Christianity as the adoption of a new, positive identity with many attendant benefits and zero drawbacks.

Another congregation within the study sample recasts what a local church resembles with key figurative language, as well as a carefully chosen tagline. In the video produced by the Ray of Hope Christian Church in suburban Atlanta, the unnamed woman (presumably an associate pastor), paints the church building itself as symbolic of a welcoming community. She speaks about conversion and church membership in the same utterance:

> Possibly, you may have already given your life to Jesus, but you haven't connected, you haven't landed in a church that will love you, in a church that will teach you, a church that will walk with you. So if you need a church home in this community, we open the doors to you now. We invite you to come. Come and be a part of us. Come help us transform this world. Amen. Is everyone saved in the house? Everyone have a personal relationship with Jesus? I invite you to ask your neighbor. Maybe they need a personal invitation from you. (Ray of Hope)

The church represents both the heretofore unspoken needs that audience members feel and the means to fulfill them, in promised arenas this associate pastor outlines: connection, love, teaching, companionship, and a sense of feeling at home. The invitation to "[c]ome and be a part of us" makes it clear that if newcomers want to join, the onus lies with them (Ray of Hope). The church is situated in a metaphorically and physically stable place that others are welcome to come to pursue *transformation*, apparently a laudable commodity, albeit an undefined one. She closes her remarks with what sounds similar to a memorized spiel about "evangelizing the seeker, being empowered through stewardship and elevating society" (Ray of Hope). The assonance and alliteration invoked by words beginning with the letters *e* and *s* aside, this phrase rings with an official tone of formality. These quasi-religious objectives may be defined elsewhere—even on the church's website—but here they resonate as a closing creed—a synopsis of the guiding principles that govern their praxis as a congregation. The term *evangelizing*, rife with colonial and patriarchal layers in other discourses, comes across quite glowingly—as if the church members are offering "seekers" exactly the answers for which they are seeking. The phrase "empowered through stewardship" reinforces the point Pastor Cynthia Hale makes in the body of the sermon about financial giving—that for evangelical Christians, money does not solely belong to the person who earns it (Ray of Hope). God and, by default, his representatives may lay a claim to how well parishioners handle the economic resources entrusted to them. The final phrase in the triad (*viz.,* "elevating society") sounds commendable, while failing to describe at all who might benefit from this aim or what actions it may entail.

Lexical fields constructed

When a preacher concludes a sermon with an altar call or just a benedictory prayer, that speech event could be transcribed into a several-thousand-word transcript. Many of these professional communicators—especially at the megachurch level—build their weekly messages around carefully-chosen themes that often sport a brief catchphrase as a reminder of the embedded life lesson. This approach lends itself to constructing meaning through a network of related words. Savvy communicators in various disciplines build elaborate lexical fields (domains of representation) that lend themselves well to in-depth lexical analysis[3]. The rich vein evident in these 17 sermon extracts provides an opportunity to explore how this linguistic property operates in the discourse. A lexical field contains terms that offer meaning as the associate ideas conveyed are seen and read in relation to those surrounding them within the domain, even when they overlap in connotations. Two instances delimit meaning within a given lexical field. Farmer's use of *new* reveals the *newness* domain with its attendant terms: *thing, hope, faith, belief,* and *gospel*. The minister links these notions together in a single domain of signification as exciting, fresh, and vital—all features of newness. The final item in the list, *gospel*, represents the most marked member of the domain, as its use is primarily restricted to religious settings—the exception being the idiom "the gospel truth." The closing comments in the Ray of Hope video build a lexical field around the concept of invitation (*invite, accepted, personal invitation, offer, try, doors, connected, evangelizing,* and

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[3] "[L]ooking at the kinds of word choices found in texts and their significations" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 221).

generous) and church (*open doors, house, home, community, benediction,* and *doxology*).

In these domains, *evangelizing* represents a technical register—a word carrying positive

connotative meaning within this discourse community but not shared outside

evangelicalism. Technical and formal terms such as *benediction* or *doxology* find little

traction in the larger secular culture. It is this pairing of what the church actually is (*viz.,* a

somewhat-closed-to-outsiders community with its own specialized vernacular) and what

image it projects of itself to those interested in joining (i.e., a home of sorts with doors

flung wide open to the community) that makes these lexical fields so instructive. These

two examples are less pronounced than some of the others present within the samples.

Within this study, substantial semantic meaning often may be effectively

determined by replicating the lexical fields the preachers in question set up while

speaking. Dummitt, for instance, pairs the concepts of heartbeats (i.e., representing

physical animus) with time as an opportune moment for salvation, asserting that our

physical pulse is regulated by God's permission:

> Do you know why God let your heart beat one more time? Two more
>
> times? Why he gives you tomorrow, or the next day, or the next? Sunday
>
> next Sunday or the next we--. He is despe---. I believe that God is on the
>
> end of his throne, the edge of his throne, just going, "I gotta give them a
>
> few more heartbeats. Because they have not yet said yes to me." And to
>
> you, I would say, "Today—make today the day." (Dummitt)

The linkage between physical life and spiritual vitality is a favorite topic for evangelical

preachers, made more understandable by the domain of representation. Another similar

lexical field is frequently drawn around the concepts of imagination and dreams one cultivates while physically alive. Caldwell uses rhetorical flourishes to connect the notions of dreams, hopes, aspirations (a marked term), and strength, along with his own mortality following a recent cardiac surgery. The overarching term defining this lexical field is *heart*—a physical organ essential for human life and the emotional repository of one's ambitions and longings. Mayo similarly relies upon the multiple definitions of common lexical terms to map new meanings within a lexical field. Central to her sermon is the metaphor of "God's waiting room," enabling her to construct a lexical field around the passage of time (*weeks, months, years,* "38 years," and "so stinkin' long") as a measure of one's patience (Mayo). By emphasizing the biblical passage "weeping may endure for a night," Mayo links the idea of having to undergo difficulty for an extended period of time—that may last up to 38 years, as in her personal case—to waiting for God to move on her behalf without impatiently giving up prematurely. Waiting implies an eventual payoff—a reward promised to the patient supplicant. Smith builds a comparable lexical field surrounding *hope* with his central metaphor of a rope. This preacher links terms such as "God's grip" or "got ahold," along with God's hand, a rope, knot imagery, and the term "tethered" (Smith). Each of these analogies and terms tie hopefulness to being held tightly. Hope, in this preacher's estimation, is less like wishful thinking and more like hanging onto God's firm grasp.

Preaching represents persuasive communication. The language and the ways it is organized constitute the bulk of sermonic persuasion, but there are more factors that explain how preachers influence their congregations to follow Christ. These linguistic

and extra-linguistic features of evangelical discourse also provide numerous venues for encoding power relations within the discourse, reinforcing ideological positions and strengthening the authoritative personas of those ministers conducting the altar calls and benedictory prayers that follow.

Persuasive tactics enacted

Fundamentally, evangelical preachers operate as a sales force trying to convince potential consumers to "buy-in" to their particular ways of viewing the world. What comes along with the decision to join an evangelical faith, however, is often more than these buyers were bargaining for in terms of accepting certain perspectives toward those leaders who are peddling the gospel, their unique ideological commodity. Fairclough (1995) states that ideology functions as the "means through which social relations of power are reproduced" (17) and is "instantiated in the fine detail of daily practices, include discourse" (65). A significant component to altar calls involves preachers' manipulation of congregants' emotions—referring to them, drumming them up, invoking them, and validating them as legitimate. This rhetorical/discursive move is consistent with Mossière's (2007) contention that emotional experiences connect those desiring to convert to Christianity to the rituals being rehearsed (114-115). Emotionalism in the context of a religious service can be too easily dismissed as "disreputable" crowd manipulation of susceptible minds (Eckstein 2005: 402). Not every preacher's invoking of pathetic rhetorical appeals deserves to be reduced to hucksterism. Donovan (1976) points out that the "*affective* function of words" for "inspiring, arousing feelings, and

stimulating actions" can be harnessed for beneficent means (86-87). Of course, MCDA can (and in several cases, does) uncover instances where emotions are contrived to depict a sense of urgency or moral panic[4], insisting that congregant must act immediately to consider the evidence as presented (Du Bois 1986: 323). Szuchewycz (1994) clarifies that the listener to religious discourse evaluates the "evidentials" for signs that "the speaker's message is spiritual in origin" (398) or acts as divine "confirmation" of an individualized message (399). This viewpoint allows individuals to tell themselves that the heightened emotional response is warranted because God is talking to them.

In myriad ways, the selected preachers are found to be "playing the God card" through charged phrases meant to work persuasively on the volition of the audience (e.g. "you are not here by accident" and "God spoke to me"). The power to sway a crowd's decisions can be problematized by a speaker's conscience. Some writers addressing preaching practitioners try to emphasize the need to be careful to avoid manipulation; Hegstad's (1964) admonition to his fellow ministers to avoid humor in favor of "earnestness" in the pulpit seems out of step with the contemporary preaching practice representative in the sample collected. When preachers gesture to the idea that a person sitting in the pew is "not here by accident" or even by his/her own decision-making, the virtual audience is left completely out of that discussion. Such an obvious neglect of a portion of the potential audience is hampered by the "codified…usage" of similar discursive/rhetorical moves practiced by hundreds of American Protestant pastors (Pernot

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[4] "This is a sporadic episode which makes society worry that the values and principles it upholds may be in jeopardy" (Machin & Mayr 2012: 221).

2006: 241). Preachers are rhetoricians of the first order, so their capacity to move a crowd toward an intended action is hardly surprising.

Emotions

Evangelical churches differ in their expectation of emotional expression in public. While some Fundamentalist churches may be staid and austere, other congregations—chiefly African-American, charismatic, and Pentecostal churches—welcome exuberant outpourings of emotions. It is not uncommon to see boxes of facial tissue placed around the altar areas of these churches to aid those whose salvation may be accompanied by tears. Similarly, the "gifts of the Holy Spirit" may be present in such expressions as congregants' being "slain in the Spirit" or dancing or shouting. While these characteristics of certain Protestant denominations might be intriguing from an anthropological or ethnographic perspective, what becomes important for the MCDA framework are the myriad ways in which preachers solicit emotions through linguistic enticements. Often, these impassioned appeals are directed to the "heart" of the parishioner, thereby building on the multivariate meaning ascribed to certain lexical terms.

Preachers, when appealing for new converts to Christianity, obviously target the heart for its cultural connotations; this physical/emotive association lends itself to blurring the lines between the opposing sides of this binary. Both preachers at Mosaic in Los Angeles use the same tactic. Fortener shares his "testimony" of becoming a Christian by relating how he felt sitting in a church service where an altar call was issued. How he typifies the physiological symptoms of hearing "a person… constantly and consistently

inviting me to choose Jesus and I just didn't have the courage to say" that he wanted to respond is entirely cardiac in origin: "My heart would beat like crazy when a person was talking like I'm talking right now; my heart would be thumping out of my chest" (Fortener). He claims that he can now verify God's moving simply due to the palpitations he experienced. Attaching physical traits to affective states allows Fortener to suggest more measurable signs of readiness for conversion than ambiguous emotions (*viz.,* how congregants should be feeling emotionally or what thoughts they should be pondering at the moment of making a decision deemed as valuable). What Fortener describes sounds eerily similar to symptoms of a panic attack. What remains unclear from his testimony is whether he gauges all incidents of anxiety as evidential of spiritual epiphany. This rhetorical appeal may be commonplace for the Mosaic congregation, as McManus, the senior pastor, utters a similar statement two weeks later: "If there's something stirring right now, inside if your heart's pounding…." (McManus). Apparently, the rapidity of one's physical heartbeat indicates a receptive mind to religious propositions.

These two instances are broader than mere references to a heightened pulse. By equating restlessness with God's moving, McManus acknowledges an emotional response before moderating the condition to include a more inhibited reaction: "or if you're going just, 'Man, I just… I hope he finishes'" (McManus). In either case—ecstatic or reserved—McManus situates the heart as central to the conversion process. In a synecdoche, the heart represents the total person—all of his/her affections and pursuits: "I give you my heart, my bitterness" (McManus). The heart becomes synonymous with one's volition and past interpersonal grudges. The heart is rendered as the

domain/location of God's intervention—the place where sincere decisions are made and important interior conversations are held: "I just want you… just to… just in your own heart…just say right now, 'Jesus, I give my life to you'" (McManus). McManus includes in the conversion process an emotional catharsis characterized by intense, metaphoric language for parishioners who are "drowning in self-loathing and…drowning in despair and…drowning in so much pain…in so much pain, and you feel like you're trapped in a tar pit and you can't move forward" (McManus). By using elevated phrases, he raises the stakes for those considering joining evangelical Christianity. Whether pointing to emotional states or to physical sensations, these two preachers render "heart" as a singular noun (even when addressing hundreds of people), as if the heart is possessed corporately.

This homogenization of audience members' experience into one common emotional expression allows the preacher to paint him- or herself as compassionate by acknowledging them. For instance, Noble recognizes that some in the audience "might be scared to death" at the prospect of walking to the front of the auditorium as evidence of their newfound conversion. This phrase is both hyperbolic and idiomatic—indicating the most severe reaction imaginable (i.e., complete panic) in order to mollify anyone who might be nervous in the moment. He further encourages those feeling reticent to respond publically to solicit assistance from an acquaintance: "If you're scared to step out, ask the person that brought you or ask the person next to you: 'Hey, would you go with me?'" (Noble). This gesture allows Noble to offer the community of the corporate church as a remedy for anxiety, although some might consider asking for assistance from a complete

stranger another source of apprehension. The other emotion preachers recognize is feeling self-conscious about responding in a public setting. Meyer mentions embarrassment on the part of the penitent: "[We] don't ask you to get up to embarrass you" (Meyer). In a didactic move, she specifies that making these people behave in an uncomfortable fashion is intentional: "[I]f you won't take a stand in here, there's no chance you'll go back out in the world and take one" (Meyer). Again, the church setting, surrounded by strangers who are described as welcoming and supportive, becomes the arena for both provoking emotional reaction and assuaging it corporately.

Urgency

A rhetorical ploy of successful persuasion involves heightening the sense of urgency individuals feel to register their response posthaste. In evangelical preaching, certain theological beliefs may be employed for importunate effect—namely, the supposed imminent Second Coming of Christ or the inevitable likelihood of one's demise. A common phrase echoed by thousands of evangelical Christians learning evangelism tactics is morbid: "If you were to die tonight and stand before God…." Selling people on their own mortality can be difficult. In the absence of existential motivations, some preachers may rely on other measures to exaggerate the sense of seriousness of the salvation appeal and the need to decide in the current moment.

A surprise within the sermon collection concerns noticing a common tactic for heightening urgency—a rhetorical flourish that five different preachers share that seems similar to the showmanship of professional illusionists. When magicians seek to amplify

the crowd's curiosity of how a magic trick will turn out, they often count to three for

dramatic effect. Moreover, they will occasionally interrupt themselves between each

number interval to intensify the audience's suspense. Some of these interruptions are

comedic in tone, whereas others sound as if they are adding further conditions before the

final reveal. The corollaries between this technique and what nearly a third of the

preachers in the study practice are astounding. One of the preachers, Meyer, does not

prolong the counting the way the others do: "Stand up right now: 1, 2, 3… Up! If you

need to be up, up!" (Meyer). This instance sounds more like a parental reprimand than an

illusionist trick. Fortener, on the other hand, announces "[s]o when I count to three:

1…2…. You ready? 'Cause this is your moment" (Fortener). Audible laughter may be

overheard on the audio track. Instead of saying "three," Fortener abruptly changes course,

inserting several sentences about the significance of the decision to convert to

Christianity. He buys more time to convince the stragglers to pray. The final utterance of

the podcast on which this sermon appears returns to the numbering convention: "I'm

going to count to three: 1-2-3… go; O.K." (Fortener). By announcing that he will be

counting to three and then stopping midway, this preacher makes a point to assert that he

is in charge of the communicative event.

The formulaic method of this persuasive appeal cuts across types of evangelical

Christian denominations. Meyer is a popular Charismatic preacher, while Fortener's

church is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (S.B.C.), America's largest

Protestant denomination. McManus serves as the pastor, although he does not use this

tactic in his sermon in the group. Of the remaining three instances of the technique,

Noble's South Carolina-based NewSpring Church and Furtick's Elevation Church in

Charlotte are both members of the S.B.C., while Lentz is affiliated with the international

Hillsong Church, a Pentecostal congregation aligned with the Assemblies of God. This

cross-section of evangelical genres is germane to the discussion, because while the

teachings and methods practiced within these churches often differ significantly (at least

to insiders), a similar preaching strategy shared across several stripes of evangelicalism is

curious. This would not be the first time Furtick was accused of hucksterism in his

appeals. *The Washington Post* (2014) published a story of Elevation's "spontaneous

baptisms," enacted by individuals planted within the church service whose pseudo-

voluntary response (*viz.,* rising from their seats to be baptized in the moment, as if

unprepared) prompts others to follow after Furtick "gives the call" by "mov[ing]

intentionally through the highest visibility areas and the longest walk" (Bailey 2014). If

the end justifies the means for these megachurch preachers—*viz.,* provoking a positive

response from those interested in salvation—then a flashy display, if effective, is perhaps

warranted in their minds—despite how manipulative the tactic may appear to discourse

outsiders. Furtick holds the numbering gimmick until the end of his remarks:

> If you just prayed that prayer with me, on the count of three, I want you to
>
> slip your hand in the air, and let's celebrate your new beginning on the
>
> count of three. One. Two. Three. Shoot your hand up. Thank God for you.
>
> Thank God for you. Thank God for you. Come on, church, let's celebrate.
>
> Come on, let's celebrate. (Furtick)

One wonders, given the practice of "spontaneous baptisms" at Elevation, whether any of the respondents shown in the video were pre-planted to help spark a greater response.

In the final two examples of counting to three, preachers Lentz and Noble set up a supposedly pivotal moment for the assembled audience. Lentz lists the conditions very pointedly:

> If you need Jesus, when I say "three," lift it up high. Are you ready?
>
> One: Jesus loves you. He died and rose again so that you could have life.
>
> Two: The Bible says right now is the time for salvation. Do not wait another day.
>
> Three: Lift your hand. And all over this place, shoot it up high. Leave it up. Anybody else? Shoot it up. Feels good, "dudn't" *(sic)* it? (Lentz)

Although he has previously outlined the requisite evangelical beliefs for one to be converted, Lentz reiterates the major doctrines between reciting the numbers. The suspense is palpable. After saying "three," he switches to soliciting physical responses (e.g. a lifted hand or congregational applause). Similarly, Noble addresses the congregation before calling them to come forward:

> If you just prayed to receive Christ, I want you at every campus… In just a second I'm gonna ask you to do somethin' that's kind of bold and that's kinda radical. On the count of "three," and when I hit three, I just want you to step out of your aisle and I want you to walk forward.
>
> . . .
>
> Here we go: 1, 2, 3. Let's go. (Noble)

Between announcing his intention to number off and the actual verbal counting, Noble

urges those who would rather "keep it private" to react publically on the various

NewSpring campuses. His counting makes the moment seem crucial.

Noble's "on-the-count-of-three" approach builds anticipation the way an

illusionist does before performing a sleight-of-hand-trick. After promising he was not

using a "magical" prayer, he resembles a magician in this bit of theatricality. Beyond this

irony, one wonders: How does the end user who is not physically present in one of the

campuses of NewSpring respond affirmatively to Pastor Noble's prayer? What does

"coming forward" look like to a computer owner in Tennessee who just happens to watch

the sermon, praying along with Noble at the end? He promises that the prayer can "save"

people, but how they respond when not being present in the live moment is suspect. Time

is an odd sermonic referent, as the Internet archives video virtually indefinitely. The

sense of terminal urgency is undercut by these videos' being uploaded. Evangelicals have

historically counted converts with great care, yet Noble would not know how many

virtual parishioners may have joined the ranks of the converted as a result of this message

put online. If someone outside the direct influence of the live/satellite preaching event

cannot be included, then why put this part of the church service up for the public to view?

The chance to watch an altar call in progress may become a litmus test for already "born

again" Christians to evaluate the orthodoxy of Noble's dogma before visiting a campus of

his church.

If-*conditionals*

A variety of audience members attend the typical American evangelical church service; their diverse religious backgrounds require addressing them separately—especially those who have yet to take the plunge spiritually into the life of the ardent Christ-follower. How the preachers single these latter individuals out for petition and prayer involves semantic maneuvering of a skillful order. While trying to sound polite, these preachers also must make a hefty request of people whom they barely know: go public with what many might deem a private matter. To aid in this endeavor, several of the ministers studied employ *if*-conditionals—syntactic structures that set up provisions both to apply pressure to the unconverted and to offer them an out if necessary. The basic form of an *if*-conditional (*if*—antecedent/*then*—consequent) does not always apply to the sermonic utterances. What it does resemble, however, is Sweetser's (1990) label of *speech-act conditionals,* the "nebulous[ly]…pragmatic status" of utterances where the "usual compliance conditions bind the hearer precisely if the request is appropriate" in a Gricean sense of politeness, referring to H.P. Grice's famous study (1981: 118). In other words, if the assessment of the audience member's spiritually bereft condition is correct, then the preacher is well within his/her bounds of ecclesiastical duty to call people to conversion. Further, if the "general felicity conditions" for conversion are established, then the speaker may infer that a speech act is warranted (even if only they would label it as such) (Sweetser 1990: 121). However, these preachers often set the salvific bar quite low to include nearly everyone present, while unwittingly (*viz.,* linguistically) excluding those who might be watching the sermons after the fact by way of online videos.

The most discordant *if*-conditional for the virtual audience happens also to be the

most frequently posed one within the group of sermons. To single out those ready to

respond while casting as broad a net as possible, several of the preachers use a version of

the phrase "if you're here." Ironically, this conditional phrase applies to everyone present

during the video- or audiotaping of the sermon performance. Himaya does add other

contingencies after the initial call:

> And if you're here today, as I mentioned earlier, and you're not a
>
> Christian yet, you're just an observer, and you're checking it all out,
>
> we've been praying for you. And we've been praying that today could be
>
> the day of salvation for you. (Himaya)

To be included in the promised, ongoing prayer, people must not have yet committed

themselves to Christianity. By being present at the live church service, that attendance

qualifies all of the churchgoers as observers. By "checking it all out," perhaps Himaya

means that these people are investigating the claims of the faith. This phrasing is familiar

to one used by the preaching team at Mosaic. Before stating the apodosis: "I want to give

you a chance," Fortener adds the following conditions to the protasis: "you have not yet

connected your life to Jesus" and "you don't know the grace that Jesus brings"

(Fortener). It is significant that he does not foreground personal acknowledgement of

their spiritual status or even their desire for religion to be the beneficiaries of the

"chance" this preacher extends via a prolonged public appeal. His boss McManus uses

the phrasal construction twice within his sermon, albeit to a slightly different effect: "If

you're here tonight and that's you, I want to give you a moment" (McManus). The

antecedent to the pronoun *that* refers to his long, previous description of what he means

by bringing one's "broken and simple" life to God (McManus). The second instance of

"if you're here tonight" is followed by "and you would say, 'Erwin, tonight I get it…'"

(McManus). The statement "I get it" apparently does not need to be repeated audibly to

meet his qualification standards, since McManus does not request that response from the

audience. Hodges adds yet another condition to the *if*-conditional clause: "If you're here

today and say, 'Chris, I'm right up to that line and for several weeks now I've known I

need to take a step toward God and it's coming back to God" (Hodges). Now to the

provisions, this preacher affixes a growing sense of needing to acquiesce to Christianity,

implying that the person has attended Alabama's Church of the Highlands (where Hodges

serves as senior minister) for some time. This conditional clause ("if you're here"),

however, excludes anyone watching the service after the fact online. Do people know to

ignore that advice and listen anyway to the preacher on video? What tells them that

context-based statements such as this one are able to be disregarded?

 Similar to above, other *if*-conditionals more pointedly appeal to the non-

Christians in the respective live audience yet neglect the Internet audience. Lentz calls

out a subgroup with a conditional phrase: "If you don't know Jesus in here, I've got the

best news of the day" (Lentz). His having "the best news of the day" is not dependent

upon any condition—just that the news is only geared to those churchgoers who do not

subscribe to evangelical Christian faith. This phrase proposes that what will follow

constitutes (at least in Lentz's mind) the enacting of a speech act. In this case, as well as

when McManus issues a second invitation (e.g. "If anyone else wants to stand"

[McManus]), the subordinating conjunctions still omit the virtual audience. Technically, a computer user watching a sermon video is not "in here" if *here* stands for the City Church sanctuary in Kirkland, Washington, where Lentz is a guest speaker on the date the video was created. Neither can one's standing while listening to McManus's recorded sermon be measured as compliance with the imposed conditions for salvation. Whether potential viewers sense that they are barred from the gospel appeals on online videos because they cannot carry out the required conditions is unclear. Another instance where a condition is presented allows the preacher to meet the consequent (somewhat): "So, Lord, if…if we've never invited you into our life, if we've never accepted your invitation, I pray that we do so today; we invite you in" (Weber). Under the strictest definitions of evangelicalism, one may not make a faith decision on another person's behalf; it is incumbent upon the individual to "invite" Jesus into his/her heart. Also, in the previous utterance the lexical term *pray* reads synonymously with *wish, hope,* or *intend*.

Two of the preachers apparently intend to stipulate the conditions for including churchgoers in their final prayers. Wilhite addresses the interested parties overtly: "If you'd like to become a follower of Jesus today" (Wilhite). In the subsequent mentions of the *if*-conditionals, Wilhite follows up the supplication with a request: "[I]f it's your prayer today…if that's your commitment, I wanna ask you to just slip your hand in the air and just make eye contact with me" (Wilhite). The physical responses (e.g. raising a hand or looking the preacher in the eye) indicate willingness to become a Christian. Again, these definitive signs are only germane to those present when the sermon is delivered the first time. In the case of Meyer's women's conference, she applies strong

pressure, perhaps knowing that she will be moving on to a different city's convention center the next evening. She adjures those seated in the arena: "If you're ready to surrender tonight and say, 'Only Jesus'" (Meyer). By utilizing the lexical term *surrender*, Meyer situates God as the Victor against whom any struggling is deemed futile. The antecedent of the conditional phrase involves acquiescing to God's leadership and acknowledging the primacy of evangelical Christology over other options. By specifying the additional contingencies to the *if*-conditionals, it may be apparent that these preachers clearly want to include the person in the altar call…maybe even count them in some numeric or measurable way.

In each of the uses of the lexical term *if* to this point the preacher employs conditionality to make parishioners' responses seem imminent. One preacher, however, advances a different occasion for the lexical term: "If he hasn't let go of me, I know for a fact he hasn't let go of you" (Smith). In this lone usage of *if*, unique within the samples, Smith sets himself as the example of egregious behavior that only Christ could alter. He uses the lexical term *if* to establish himself as a proxy of sorts. If his congregants attest that God is using him presently and if they take his word that he was previously the infidel he claims to have been, then his present status corroborates his hypothesis that God has "let go" of no one listening to his voice. This application of his experience as a former ruffian to others' lives sounds a bit like the phenomenon of the "humblebrag," a neologism studied by Alfano and Robinson (2014) The word was coined to cover "ostensibly modest or self-deprecating statement[s] whose actual purpose is to draw attention to something of which one is proud" ("Humblebrag" 2015). Smith may presume

that it bolsters his credibility as a minister to have undergone the transformation implied in his conditional phrase. He stands to gain if his congregation perceives him as someone in whom God has performed a miraculous work.

Playing the "God card"

It would be difficult to estimate the importance that claiming to speak for God holds within this discourse community. Among evangelical Christians, certain doctrinal differences separate what that may mean in real-time. In Charismatic/Pentecostal circles, for instance, a pastor may claim to be speaking firsthand via a word of prophecy or could testify that divine revelation inspired a particular sermon. For Fundamentalists who believe in cessation (i.e., the Holy Spirit stopped speaking directly to humankind once the Bible was written and the age of the apostles ended), the speaking-on-God's-behalf is nonetheless apparent in any sermon based on the Bible to which these particular preachers ascribe verbal and plenary inspiration. At nearly every point between these two theological polarities, evangelical preachers may still claim to have "heard from God"— not audibly but in the interiority of their hearts—and to report this stance occasionally in the course of a sermon to establish credibility as a divine spokesperson. One of the assumed duties these ministers perform daily is to spend time in prayer—what is known colloquially as "having a quiet time" or "doing devotions." Not only does this daily session affirm the minister's commitment to personal spiritual disciplines; the chance to claim to be a divine oracle further cements the perception the congregation maintains of their parson.

Within the sample of sermons culled for this study, at least two preachers "play the God card" to bolster their ethos with their respective congregations. If the choice were posed to listen to the voice of God or simply to a human who works for him, many of the people who attend evangelical churches would opt for the former. Therefore, it is hard to ignore when a preacher alludes to hearing the voice of God. Hodges, for example, opens his altar call with a weighty claim: "I felt like God spoke to me and said tell them that—that there would be scores of people today who want it more than anything else and today was the day when you just got nudged across the line of faith" (Hodges). If this assertion were true (which, of course, is unverifiable), then the people present would risk disobeying the God of the Bible by not responding in "scores" to the altar call. If one "score" equals twenty persons, then the minimal response Hodges would accept as confirming his divine message would be 40 people. Depending on how compliance is measured, then, being "nudged across that line of faith" might happen interiorly and cannot be assessed by the congregation to see if Hodges's claim were fraudulent. In fact, he does specify that he has no plans to "make [anyone] stand up or come to the front" (Hodges), choosing instead to measure congregational tractability by counting raised hands. After requesting that everyone closes his or her eyes, he appeals for the sincere seekers to raise their hands. Interestingly, he reports, "Yeah, you see dozens and dozens of hands" (Hodges). The congregation, however, was told to close their eyes, so they cannot verify his count. Next, he refers to the "probably one hundred people with their hands up," but that number—if correct—represents only those present at the main campus service in Grant Mills, Alabama (Hodges). He would have no way to judge the

response at the other campuses, where presumably hundreds more are listening to his voice and watching the live video feed. Because he refers to "campus pastors…com[ing] to the stage to help me pray for you," one can safely assume that people at these other Church of the Highlands locations are lifting their hands. Their pastor, then, may confidently attest that he is justified in sharing his message from God.

This pragmatic way of verifying of something as seemingly ethereal as hearing from God also relates to implied inspiration. When a preacher stops mid-message to make a confident statement about the presence of a person in need, that phrase may resonate with divine inspiration, provided that at least one person walks forward at the end of the service to confirm the veracity of his/her statement. Furtick makes just such a confident statement after conducting one round of Sinner's Prayer and hand-lifted response: "There's somebody in this place today who needs to begin a relationship with Jesus Christ" (Furtick). Statistically speaking, with a congregation totaling over 14,000 in weekly attendance, the odds of someone being present who does not share evangelical convictions are high. Perhaps a visitor has wandered in to the Charlotte, North Carolina, church building out of sheer curiosity. The pastor has just commanded: "Heads bowed, eyes closed," and he will state the same abrupt order four sentences later (Furtick). This gesture toward privacy also heightens the sobriety of the moment—implying that people are alone with their thoughts as all distractions are shut out to allow them to focus primarily on his voice. What follows may be intended to resemble compassion, but the words themselves are tinged with control: "We can't let you leave until your relationship with God… the relationship with your Heavenly Father is secure; until you get that

relationship right, none of the others will ever be" (Furtick). Now, the people who are present who have not self-identified with Christianity may feel pressure to respond because they are being held somewhat captive by the preacher who stresses that they must do so in order to be dismissed from the service. How this statement comes across tangentially as hearing from God is evident as people visible in the video audience lift their hands in deference to Furtick's request. They meet the qualifications (i.e. being present without Christ yet now submissive to the minister's suggestions). Apparently, he is right in his assessment. He must have seen something not visible to the naked eye—something only God could have revealed to him, according to his argument.

CHAPTER SIX: "I KNOW HOW YOU FEEL": Audience Connections

"In the ideal sermon it is the Word itself which speaks, or rather, God in and through his Word. The less the preacher comes between the Word and its hearers, the better."
—John R.W. Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait: Some New Testament Word Studies* (1961: 30)

Chapter Abstract

This chapter examines the sermon performance as a means for displaying and encoding rhetorical and political power in the evangelical discourse community. First, I feature the speaker's role as something positioned intentionally, effecting a first-name-basis, conversational style and offering a personal exemplar to emulate. Next, I consider the preferred audience response, especially in terms of new converts' performing a "speech act" as the preachers enact its terms. Finally, I describe the multiple ways the preacher includes the other audience members to reinforce the new convert's decision—invoking semblances of privacy while also speaking on behalf of the idealized evangelical.

Speaker's role performed

The public speaker praying aloud in a religious service may be easy for some people to bracket as performing a higher form of communication exempt from the types of rhetorical moves that persuade audience members to follow them as spiritual leaders. This view of religious discourse, however, fails to take into account the typologies enacted by a variety of prayers, what Pernot (2006) identifies as "rhetorical criteria (the situation, the aim of the speech, [and] the arguments used)" to establish a preacher's ethos or pathos (240). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) posit that no matter the discursive event or speech type, "language reflects and reproduces power relations in society" (273). The way that preachers carry themselves linguistically discloses important information about the way they would like a congregation to view them.

This speaker positioning becomes particularly poignant in the case of the women preachers I examined. Religiously-based language tends to act inclusively and as a marginalizing force toward women (Jule 2007: 3). How a woman speaks in the pulpit typically reserved for men offers critiques on how she perceives her call to ministry and her place in the church community. Women clergy who hail from egalitarian religious backgrounds tend to have a somewhat easier time as preachers than those affiliated with complementarian theology that insists men and women differ in terms of their God-ordained roles in marriage and church leadership (Jule 2008: 91). Even in liberal evangelical congregations on matters of gender—including Pentecostal/ charismatic congregations led by women—ordained women must "manage the contradiction" within the thorny subject of whether God calls evangelical women to serve as ministers (Ingersoll 2003: 163). Each time an American woman assumes the pulpit, she encounters "societal and discoursal construction, negotiation, and contestation of gender" (Sunderland, qtd. in Jule 2007: xii). That a speaker's individual positioning during a given sermon bears traces of larger issues of hegemony is proof that this genre is rife with societal implications.

As I read the sermon transcripts carefully, I noted many direct commands as well as requests issued. Clearly, the person doing the speaking expects to be followed. Often these preachers would use themselves as the prime examples to follow, further establishing themselves as the model to be emulated. Despite the fact that the ministerial title "Pastor" is often used as an honorific in evangelical churches (especially African-American and Latino congregations) to place symbolic value on the role s/he fills in the

faith community (Ward 2010: 119), I was struck by how many of the preachers whose sermons I sampled cite their own names throughout the discussion. Fairclough (1995) might classify this move as exemplary of "synthetic personalisation," wherein public figures try to simulate "private, face-to-face, person-to-person discourse in public mass-audience discourse—print, radio, [and] television…[in] a concomitant process of the breaking down of divisions between public and private" (80). It is to the advantage of preachers if a particular audience views them as empathetic and understanding. Positioning themselves as caring friends on a first-name basis with their congregations may accomplish this aim.

Speaker positioning

Standing behind a pulpit in an evangelical megachurch setting represents a very powerful position within this discourse community. Not only do congregants stay quiet for at least 30 minutes per week listening to their minister's words; churchgoers also download their videos, purchase their books, and (in some cases) demonstrate their allegiance to their pastor by referring to their church not by its official name (e.g. Elevation, City Church, Ray of Hope, or Windsor Village United Methodist Church) but colloquially as Steven Furtick's, Judah Smith's, Cynthia Hale's, or Kirbyjon Caldwell's church, respectively. The celebrity status of the pastor situates the church's prominence in a given municipality. Some of the parishioners at these large churches continue to attend because of the prestige afforded to the lead teacher, shepherd, and face of the church. It is not uncommon in certain cities to see billboards advertising a large church emblazoned with

the faces of the married couple who serve as senior pastors. In the special case of Joyce

Meyer, arguably the most famous Christian celebrity in the group, her ministry advertises

widely through various media—television, print media, and signage—to draw attendees

to her local appearances. All of this promotion—made instantly retrievable on the

Internet, especially through social media platforms—assures these preachers' influential

position for this subculture of evangelical Christians.

These video extracts elucidate the subtle linguistic and rhetorical moves preachers

make to position themselves within the congregation or meeting as the chief

spokesperson in ways that appear less self-aggrandizing than the pious setting would

disallow. Holding the floor is easier, of course, for the preacher bathed in the glow of a

follow spotlight while a microphone amplifies his/her voice. Beyond these overt means

of claiming rhetorical dominance, these preachers portray themselves as divinely

anointed to pray—to serve as sole intercessors between God and the people. This not

only is implied by launching into words associated with prayer (e.g. "Dear God"). Many

of the preachers forecast the fact that they *will be* praying for the group. Farmer promises,

"I'm gonna pray" (Farmer), while Lentz details: "I'm going to lead you in a prayer"

(Lentz). Announcing the prayer that will follow the gospel presentations allows these

preachers to claim the attendant status of being permitted to pray on others' behalf. In

Lentz's case, prayer is something that lay people need to be led to practice—apparently

they cannot know how to select appropriate words for themselves. Wilhite tries a slightly

more nuanced approach in setting up his prayer: "I wanna pray for you; we're gonna lead

you in a prayer…" (Wilhite). By describing his desire to pray, rather than announcing the

inevitability of it, Wilhite sounds less forceful. His selection of the first-person plural *we* is curious. Perhaps he means to imply that the congregation praying with him supplies the sufficient support to make it seem that he is not solely leading this discourse, although he is the only speaker and intercessor. He moves right into dispensing lines to the potential converts (e.g. "I believe you died on the cross for my sins; I believe you rose again…" (Wilhite). His feeding lines to the penitent churchgoers, professing a personal belief in first-person language vicariously for others, reveals that he is the speaker endowed with the true power in the rhetorical situation.

Representing oneself as trustworthy is a clever way to build rapport with the audience, ensuring that they will more readily buy into the inherent message of the sermon. Smith, for instance, offers a statement and a question that help position him as a speaker to whom his parishioners ought to be paying attention. First, his statement is meant to reassure the most anxious and doubtful ones: "If he hasn't let go of me, I know for a fact he hasn't let go of you" (Smith). I will establish the rhetorical flourish used here—the uniquely evangelical "humblebrag," whereby one claims to hail from a reprehensible beginning in order to serve as exemplar. What warrants attention at this point is Smith's certitude. To claim to "know for a fact" something that many in American society (e.g. atheists, agnostics, or members of other religions) would label an opinion allows the preacher to present a sense of *logos* or rationality to an argument that others would claim fundamentally lacks it. Moreover, Smith admits that he is convinced beyond reasonable doubt that he has experienced redemption firsthand. While this certainty comes across merely as his trying to assuage the fears and skepticism of his

audience, the lexis itself reveals that Smith is claiming to be knowledgeable, clever, discerning, and intelligent—even enlightened in a way others are not. This position makes his question even more poignant: "You hear me?" (Smith). Smith here does not conduct an auditory experiment, a sound check of sorts to monitor if the public address system is operating efficiently. He has uttered this conciliatory statement just prior to the rhetorical question: "I am sure, beloved, in your case that you're not going to fall away because God's got you; that is my hope" (Smith). In evangelical vernacular, the lexical phrase "fall away" is perceived negatively; it means to this subculture that a devout person will abandon the Christian faith for apostasy or licentious living—either through willful rejection or sinful rebellion, enticed by the memories of past sinful pursuits. Smith reassures those who might be anxious that it is God's responsibility—not solely theirs— to keep them connected to the faith. He turns the conversation toward a positive dimension with the word *hope*, a simple lexical term marked by inspirational connotations. The question that follows (*viz.,* "You hear me?") appears to be intended as a comprehension check equivalent to the phrase "Do you understand?" Again, he inquires with no expectation of receiving an audible response from the audience. This is not a dialogue. Smith, by holding the microphone and the title of "lead pastor," maintains the floor for the entire 45-minute sermon. Implied in the question "Do you hear me?" is an insistence that he deserves to be listened to as the unquestioned leader of the congregation.

To come across as an insistent leader, however, can undermine the casual, intimate atmosphere several of the preachers create diligently through their altar calls.

Even Meyer's brusque-sounding statement (*viz.,* "Listen to me just a second; I'm only going to ask one more time") is tempered contextually by her admission that she does not "want anybody to be left out" (Meyer). A rather forceful imperative (e.g., "Listen to me") is turned into an expression of her compassion—perhaps another crafty rhetorical technique. The second use of *listen* is more abrupt: "Now listen" (Meyer). It is unlikely that she is trying to hush the crowd's chatter to be heard. She addresses a sub-section of her conference attendees, "[t]hose of you who received Christ tonight" (Meyer). In this usage, she honors these audience members as worthy of a special message delivered just to them. She goes on to stipulate that these people should locate a local church to attend in their respective communities, since she will only be available through conferences, broadcasts, and publications. An undercurrent in this sermonic response time is reinforcing Meyer's rare position as an evangelical woman, Bible teacher, and preacher who deserves the attention she receives when she addresses crowds that number weekly in the thousands. Perhaps to counter any negative implications of sounding too commanding, Meyer calls the women listening to her sermon whom she plans to enlist as de facto prayer partners: "You lovely, anointed sisters in the Lord" (Meyer). The word *anointed* in certain circles of evangelicals carries a hefty sense of God's pleasure (indeed, even his hand) on an individual. The word seems synonymous with being "filled with the Holy Spirit." Through this appellation, Meyer elevates these women whom she needs to press into service—fanning out across the convention center to pray with the respondents—because she cannot provide the "loving touch…[and] anointed love" as merely one person, compared to the thousands assembled.

Women evangelical preachers and teachers sometimes resort to inspirational affirmations to position themselves as empathetic, compassionate, and open-hearted. Meyer's tone as she solicits people to stand alongside those ready to convert is motherly: "Don't let anybody not have a loving touch right now" (Meyer). She wants all who stand up for salvation to sense that she herself is embracing them, even though she stands on the stage—lit by theatrical lighting and framed by the camera. Mayo's sermon, available only in audio format online, contains at least three similarly heart-warming statements to enable the audience to connect with her as approachable and relevant. Twice she uses the diminutive term *girls*, a risky move that could be misinterpreted outside this tight-knit discourse community. She even pairs the lexical term with *listen* (*viz.,* "Listen, girls") to set up an assertion (Meyer). Rather than sounding scolding in tone, Mayo uses this moment to connect with her audience colloquially as "just one of the girls." In other words, her unspoken message conveys the sentiment: "You ought to listen to me because I am one of you—the kind of trusted confidante you would like to include in your circle of intimate friends." She risks over-sentimentality by calling her audience "you masterpieces" (Mayo). A masterpiece has a designer or an artist responsible for the creation. In this instance, Mayo implies that God made all woman special—despite their occasional doubts to the contrary. She presses the point: "You are not a woman in ten thousand" (Mayo). In other words, Mayo posits that each woman is unique and, therefore, worthy of Christ's redemptive sacrifice. These attempts at bolstering the self-esteem of several thousand women at once also reveal Mayo's ethos as a speaker. She

wants to portray herself as a friend chatting with friends in order to persuade many to follow the tenets of Christianity.

The implication of friendship as a speaker-positioning rhetorical device knows no gender divide. Two of the men in the survey group rely on the term *friends* during their closing commentary and altar appeal. Smith, as mentioned above, carefully constructs his position as viable spokesman on hope, since he has undergone the restoration of destroyed hope through believing in Christ. He effects a candid conversation with asides such as: "This is real-life, friends" (Smith). He earns points with his audience as a truth-telling buddy—someone who cares enough for them to give them straight truth (at least as he defines it). By fostering the perception that Smith is their friend who will deal honestly with them, the audience perhaps can ignore the fact that their pastor will likely never know their names, let alone ever converse personally with them, due to the sheer size of the City Church with its multiple locations and varied weekend service times. Wilhite's Central Christian Church in Las Vegas is similarly large, making personal interactions with the senior pastor inconceivable. By his calling those wanting to be included in the salvific prayer "friends," Wilhite conveys personal warmth as part of his public persona. Since some of those praying along with him are new and recent guests at the church, the term *friend* is inapt, as Wilhite has likely never been introduced personally to these people. Nonetheless, he uses the term to sound personable, winsome, and convivial. The establishing of an ersatz friendship between megachurch pastor and the thousands in attendance or online permits the establishment of trust—a necessary component to agreeing to convert to Christianity. Being on a first-name basis with that

preacher is yet another manifestation of the speaker positioning phenomenon central to this micro-discourse.

Naming

Serving as the pastor of an American megachurch carries with it a certain cachet in religious circles. After all, this person holds a position of extensive (sub)cultural influence. Many have publishing contracts with numbers of best-selling book titles. Others host television programs (and now Netflix streaming seasons) and radio broadcasts. They write small group curricula. The make numerous personal appearances at ministry conferences. Their names are akin to brands. Their personas are constructions shaped by their numerous media touches. By archiving sermon videos on their church websites, iTunes, and YouTube, these preachers contribute to the public perception of themselves as a media commodity. Ironically, however, "big-name" evangelicals earn this elevated status by their association with a figure customarily described as meek, humble, and deferential: Jesus Christ. The massaging of their personal brand to appear as similarly lowly as Christ's takes constant effort via social media. One way in which these powerful individuals attempt to portray themselves as average, run-of-the-mill people leading unassuming lives is through dropping their first names during their altar calls. For some of the same preachers who call themselves by their first names in their sermons, however, evangelical decorum requires referring to them in person by title plus last name (e.g., Pastor Hodges). This carefully-crafted attempt to mimic a heartfelt conversation

with a person who will likely not meet individually with parishioners due to the sheer numbers involved.

Many of the preachers in the study use this rhetorical technique—calling themselves by their first names instead of the earned titles traditionally given to evangelical clergy (e.g. *Pastor* or *Reverend*). Being on a first-name basis with a (semi- or locally) famous person implies a relational closeness. By using their names, these preachers attempt to come across as approachable. Mayo, for instance, begins the salvation challenge by putting words in the mouths of the conference attendees: "Jeanne, you taught on God's waiting room; what does that story from history have to do with our attitudes, our heart, our spirit as we live those… those inevitable times that I'm living through now and probably most of you are?" Officially, Mayo does not maintain ministerial credentials (e.g. ordination), so a title would not fit in her specific case as it would with some of their other preachers surveyed. However, she names herself for other reasons. Mayo, a guest speaker visiting Sydney, Australia, from the United States probably cannot conduct a conversation with each woman who paid an entrance fee to the conference before returning home. She can, on the other hand, approximate a conversation, where she plays both speaker and receiver roles, to signify that her audience and she are on the same communicative level. The conversation, however, gets away from her toward the end as she slips back into her own voice, using the pronoun *I*. Another speaker who also slips his own name into the pivotal point in the altar call where respondents are garnered is McManus: "you would say, 'Erwin, tonight…I get it tonight'" (McManus). In this instance, McManus may want to portray himself—and

Mosaic in general—as less stodgy and formal as he would be forced to behave in a traditional, ecclesiastical congregation where he would be known as Pastor McManus. This departure from tradition pairs well with the West Coast, informal vibe that he has worked for years to cultivate at Mosaic.

In a different geographic region, the South, an evangelical church might be customarily led by a pastor who introduces him- or herself by a clerical title. For instance, at the Ray of Hope, the unnamed associate pastor states that Cynthia Hale's sermon displayed "God's Word so eloquently through our pastor" (Ray of Hope). Hale becomes synonymous with her title. Not far away from Atlanta, though, in Birmingham, Alabama, a different nomenclature is practiced. Hodges issues the public invitation at Church of the Highlands by stating, "I want you to say, 'Chris, that's…that's the decision I'm making today…." (Hodges). The pastor of a church totaling 30,000 in weekly attendance uses his first name to appear folksy and genial, even though he may never personally meet with any of the people to whom he mentions his name. This unapproachability of the megachurch pastor may simply be attributed to a numbers game. How could one person remember the names of thousands of parishioners? Since such a feat would be nearly impossible if not at least highly improbable, the preachers use their names—as if people who sometimes choose a church based on the celebrity of the pastor installed as the leader would need a reminder of his/her name.

Smith, another West Coast pastor from suburban Seattle, discloses that the likelihood of churchgoers ever meeting their pastor is slim. City Church's website, under a tab for "frequently asked questions" dismisses the possibility of a face-to-face meeting

with "Pastor Judah," as "his responsibilities…limit him from being able to do so"

("Frequently asked questions" 2016). The website offers a "pastoral team" as a substitute.

Instead of a personal meeting, anyone who visits the church can encounter the preacher in

a public space. He narrows the discursive gap between audience and the pulpit through

his informality and use of anecdotes. As he illustrates positive self-talk, Smith drops his

first name as evidence of how he battles the similar negative thoughts of his churchgoers:

"Judah, stop it" (Smith). The naming allows him to portray himself as a relatable

example. Preaching at the same venue, Lentz, however, does not use his first name

(*Carl*). Instead, he humorously calls himself "this random, sweating, yelling guy that you

don't know" (Lentz). It is not as important in this congregation that Lentz's name become

as well-known as their pastor's for building cohesion in the ranks. Both Smith and Lentz

are well-known in contemporary Christian circles and have cultivated a public/private

friendship with pop music star Justin Bieber, tweeting and posting multiple "selfies"

(photographs taken of oneself, especially with a famous person) with the platinum-selling

musician. Their names are very well known to a portion of younger American

evangelicals (i.e. Millennials), especially those who pay to see them at conferences or to

buy their books. Being on a first-name basis with (or even getting to see) such Christian

celebrities affords these devoted "fans" a level of interpersonal intimacy.

Self as example to follow/shun

Evangelical preachers grapple to find suitable tactics to drive home a persuasive point in

a sermon. Common rhetorical tools available in this discourse include anecdotes about

one's life or family, historical stories, inspirational quotes, biblical narratives, visual aids in the form of photographs or professionally designed graphics, songs, whiteboards for scribing notes, and live testimonials. Another ubiquitous technique is self-denigration or self-exaltation, depending on the effect being pursued. Smith's sermon includes an extended version of the negative exemplar mode. As evidenced above under "speaker positioning," Smith implies that he led a pre-conversion lifestyle of iniquity by the following statement: "If he hasn't let go of me, I know for a fact he hasn't let go of you" (Smith). He expands the notion of how this background affects his day-to-day thinking and behavior: "My hope is not in my strength [,…]in my performance[,…]in my accessing the presence of God[, or…]in my infrequent…lifestyle and choices" (Smith). This dodging a past that dogs one's self-confidence is a frequent theme in evangelical preaching. Whether this disclosure ranks as Smith's honest admission or a performance meant to sound relatable to parishioners who might be battling self-doubts, the effect is unmistakable. Smith comes across as a pastor who identifies with the lay people of his congregation and with their struggles.

Smith's depicting of himself as particularly needy of God's grace appropriates a biblical line of persuasion first enacted by the Apostle Paul. This New Testament writer of the pastoral epistles was born Saul of Tarsus. The Book of Acts records his zeal persecuting the early Church. It is in 1 Corinthians 15:9 that Paul institutes this tactic: "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (NIV). This same early church leader who elsewhere in the Bible sounds bombastic in his boasting, here claims only to have done

things so badly that he does not deserve to be numbered among the devout followers of Jesus. He immediately follows this humble-sounding assertion with what could be called a defense of his apostleship, his hard work, his life's message, and his confidence in the grace that carries the transformative power to impact the recipients of his impassioned letter, the church at Corinth. Paul's putting himself down to connect with his audience as a model of the very "least" likely convert finding redemption becomes an exemplar to follow. By referring to a checkered past as a way to establish his need for salvific redemption, Smith casts himself in the tradition of the Apostle Paul (arguably a powerful figure in the minds of evangelicals), thereby using time-tested rhetorical moves that reinforce the effectiveness of the gospel.

The practice of preachers' modeling behavior also works positively for persuasive purposes. Within the same sermon excerpt, Smith switches from discrediting himself to pointing out how his experience is generalizable to others' lives. He asks: "You know what I do sometimes?" (Smith). He goes on to describe a strategy that he uses to reorient his thoughts when they wander awry from the straight and narrow path. He acts out the inward confab for the audience's benefit, demonstrating how he counters distractions in his mind as they arise. What is significant is that he makes his own life the pedagogical resource; he teaches a lesson using his own praxis as the instructional aid. Lentz, as one of the few guest speakers in an unfamiliar pulpit in the study cohort, cannot rely on his audience's knowing him well, since this New York-based preacher stands on stage in Seattle. He is Smith's replacement at City Church for that day only. Rather than referring to himself even by name, Lentz calls himself humorously "this random, sweating, yelling

guy that you don't know" (Lentz). He insists that those interested in becoming

evangelical Christians, those who have dutifully raised a hand to indicate their choice, to

"lift [their] head[s] and look at" him (Lentz). He equates here churchgoers' looking at

him with their becoming followers of Christianity. This placing of himself as

intermediary between Christ and the people in the audience is emblematic of what occurs

when a preacher acts as a divine surrogate of sorts.

Audience response invoked

Central to this dissertation is determining how (if at all) religious discourse involves bona

fide speech acts—notably within the altar call and final prayers of evangelical church

services uploaded to church websites. Heriot (1994) defines altar calls as "the

interactional dimension of the worship service" (134) as "optional, marked segment"

(136) of the sermon that was framed or "keyed" in the minister's verbal performance

(138) through signal phrases (e.g. "let us pray" or "would you bow your heads, please")

that form a porous boundary between the sermon itself and the call that follows (145). In

the ethnographic study Heriot performed, church members used the act of "going

forward" as conclusive proof of a parishioner's spiritual condition in ways that mere

"verbal attestations of religious belief" could not articulate (158). It may be significant to

point out that no altars exist per se. Evangelicals (particularly Fundamentalists such as the

ones Heriot met) refer to the front space of the church sanctuary as the altar (1994: 23i, n.

1). What matters more in this discourse than a particular section of the room where the

new believers gather is what they say to join the ranks of the committed.

To better contextualize these utterances, it is essential to consider how the evangelical preachers set and achieve for themselves the requisite conditions that must take place to render certain lexical units as performative speech acts. Ravenhill (1976) asserts that speech act analysis demands investigating "native intuitions in order to explicate the conditions necessary and sufficient for the particular illoctionary act" (31). Even when listening to or watching church services uploaded to the Internet, it becomes important to consider what is occurring in the live event (the "actual contexts of usages" [Ravenhill 1976: 29]) where these words were taped. Austin (1962) makes similar demands—namely that there "must exist an accepted conventional procedure" (26) or "social conventions" that are followed (Jeffner 1972: 89). His detailed taxonomy of utterances describes various aspects of the Sinner's Prayer and response. When the new believer utters, "I repent," s/he is uttering a behabitive[1] (Austin 1962: 79). Repentance is certainly not the only type of religious speech act.

Austin (1962) delineates two others types that may relate to the confessional speech enacted by praying with the preacher: excertives[2] (155) and commissives[3] (157). Donovan (1976) refers to language used in the solemnizing of vows, as well as invoking, praying, blessing, exhorting, and inspiring (84). Jeffner (1972) uses even more simplified language: "I promise," "I swear," and "I baptize" (11-12). Bejerholm and Hornig even

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[1] "[A] kind of performative concerned roughly with reactions to behaviour and with behaviour towards others and designed to exhibit attitudes and feelings" (Austin 1962: 83).

[2] "An excertive is the giving of a decision in favour of or against a certain course of action, or advocacy of it" (Austin 1962: 155) and "the exercising of power, rights, or influences…a decision that something is to be so as distinct from a judgement that it is so" (Austin 1962: 154).

[3] "The whole point of a commissive is to commit the speaker to a certain course of action" (e.g. covenant, binding oneself, giving one's word, or dedicating oneself) (Austin 1962: 157-158).

attribute indirect speech acts to religious discourse; in "elliptical instances," the statement "I believe in God" may function as a confession, a declaration, or a promise (qtd. in Jeffner 1972: 192). What remains key to this study is Austin's insistence that the "uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action…" (1975: 5). Unlike certain speech acts that follow legal precedents (e.g. conducting a wedding), the act of becoming a Christian is monitored by the faith community to determine if it meets the required conditions (Jeffner 1972: 92). Something as liturgical as reciting a creed in a public setting (e.g. the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed) is "not simply giving assent to a proposition" (Robinson 1970: 2). The preacher serves as an "activated social actor… [one of] the active, dynamic force[s]" in discourse enabling the speech act (Van Leeuwen 1996: 43-44). Perhaps no other portion of the sermon is as fraught as a speech act than the benedictory prayer "where primary, secondary, and even tertiary audiences may figure in as performers pray with, for, before, and even at others," lending them to rhetorical analyses (FitzGerald 2012: 40).

Preachers call new converts to respond through various physical actions that are inappropriate to a virtual audience who cannot practice the same in-group behaviors depicted onscreen. The group recitation of a conversionary prayer enacts social conformity, whereas the physical act of identifying intent to join (lifting one's hand or standing up or catching the preacher's eye) requires social capital and risks potential embarrassment in a low-stakes environment where this act will be rewarded with attention or even a free gift. One can still practice both requested actions (*viz.,* responding verbally and standing up) given by the preachers onscreen, A computer user, however,

will not hear what a live-service churchgoers would hear: their pastor's saying, "I see that hand." The virtual convert would fail to hear reinforcement the significance of the "moment of decision."

Implied speech acts

One may contest how prayer as religious discourse can constitute a "speech act," given the fact that a divine being is the supposed receiver of such messages. For this study, however, it is hard to discount that human beings craft their language to be overheard by other human beings—from the words that link the various prayer elements together by appealing to people to convert to Christianity to the prayers themselves spoken into microphones through sound systems that amplify their voices for large crowds to hear, enabling video and audio recording of the sermon. Beyond this simple point, these evangelical preachers fundamentally attest that the way to join their ranks is to "pray a prayer," committing oneself to following Christ. Therefore, this study takes the implication of a speech act—*viz.,* that to this set of evangelical ministers saying certain words enacts a constitutive state—as sufficient grounds for studying how the religious language is structured, coded, distributed, parroted back, and affirmed as authentic. The speech act of conversion is frequently established based on a lexical phrases containing the term *if.* Sweetser (1990) recognizes speech act conditionals whereby an *if*-clause communicates the factor which allows or operationalizes the performance of the speech act in utterances such as *"If you went to the party, did you see John?"* (120). Astute rhetoricians in their own field, evangelical preachers often combine *if*-conditionals with

other metaphorical language in order effectively to close the sale. Wilhite, for instance, describes a conceptual motif for understanding the speech act that he designates with a conditional statement: "If you'd like to become a follower of Jesus, you can begin that journey by repeating after me, by saying, 'Dear God….'" (Wilhite). This statement posits that the act of becoming a Christian occurs by speaking particular, formulaic words—certain words and phrases in a set sequence that start a spiritual trek of sorts.

The path toward evangelical Christianity is paved with a common vernacular shared by several preachers in this study. For example, Hodges readies his congregation by setting the conditions as clearly as he can by using biblical allusions (to Pauline epistles):

> If you will confess Jesus as Lord, you'll be saved. And so I'm going to help you with the words, but you can just pray your own prayer. Let me help you. OK? Say something like this. Let's just whisper it right there where you are, say, "God." C'mon, tell him that: "Today, I am going all in. I've been holding back. I've been close. Today's my day. I am giving you heart and soul. I'm giving you mind and strength. Everything." Tell him this: this is an important part. Say: "Forgive me. For going my…oh…own way. Be the Lord of my life. Take over my life. I surrender completely to you. In your name I pray, amen." (Hodges)

At the most basic level, Hodges informs the congregation that they must utter a certain phrase to be counted as an evangelical (*viz.,* "Jesus is Lord"). Instead of this succinct phrase, Hodges leads the congregation to utter particular statements he pulls from

memory (i.e. he does not glance at notes). These statements bind the speaker of the words

in the form of promises. By repeating the lexical terms *whisper* (once); *tell* (once); and

say (three times); it is clear that to Hodges confessional prayer to commit to following

Christ must be audible and verbal; one cannot merely give mental assent to the Christian

gospel for it to count as accurate or effectual to evangelicals.

How the preachers refer to the prayers reveals the value they invest in the words

being spoken aloud and the transformative power they ascribe to them. Meyer first

downplays the complexity of the confessional prayer: "Now I just want you to pray this

prayer after me, [a] very simple prayer—not complicated… [;]you pray it loud, and you

mean it" (Meyer). By praying first, Meyer situates herself as a model to follow. As a

Christian celebrity in certain circles, she uses her inspirational cachet to bring to bear on

those assembled at the women's conference. The prayer might be worded "very

simpl[y]," but that does not lessen its significance to the speaker herself—especially in

this context. She has undoubtedly prayed this prayer with numerous groups previously, so

she is qualified to select the lexical terms. Similar to Hodges, Meyer directs her audience

to pray aloud, yet she adds volume as proof of their sincerity. Again, authenticity is left

up to the individual, although she does imply that the prayer will not matter if uttered

under false pretenses or if the person is lying. Not all of the preachers, however, seem to

agree that prayers must be audible to deem them as enacting genuine conversions.

McManus, for instance, allows for the possibility of silent prayers as actual speech acts:

"I just want you just… to just in your own heart, just say right now, 'Jesus, I give my life

to you;" Tell him what ever you need to say" (McManus). Not only may prayers be

soundless to McManus, he eschews formulas for performing salvations. He permits

improvisational prayers, even encouraging the congregants to divulge hurtful memories

in these pleas, before slipping into sample phrasing they could approximate:

> "I give you my pain I give you my fear. If you want I give you my heart,
>
> my bitterness." Right now just say, "Jesus, I give my life to you. I give
>
> you everything. Right now just tell him right now, Jesus, I accept your
>
> forgiveness. I receive your love. I receive your life in me. I thank you for
>
> your sacrifice and for your hope." (McManus)

Significantly, preachers such as McManus who claim not to need a blueprint for leading

new converts in prayer still default to familiar phraseology as those who seemingly

follow a memorized script. This example of reverting to a prototypical prayer may

underscore the presumption that the evangelical altar call is a bona fide ritual, according

to Rambo (1995: 107). Rituals rely on inherent rules in this case, the implied rule is that

only a preacher knows which words work best to make new converts.

A final instance of pointing explicitly to a religious speech act deserves critical

attention. Smith chooses the sermon "The Problem of Hope" to model what some

evangelicals—especially Charismatics and Pentecostals—label "telling myself the truth."

Smith introduces this concept—this form of interior monologue meant to accomplish

powerful results when a person acts as both speaker and receiver of a religious

message—by asking a rhetorical question that he answers for himself with an extended

demonstration. He asks: "You know what I do sometimes? I just use my mouth to remind

myself that I'm in the grip of God… (comparing himself to King David) talk[ing] to his

soul" (Smith). The biblical precedent comes from Psalm 103:1,2 (AKJV): "Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name[; b]less the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits" ("Psalm 103:1,2" 2016). Smith demonstrates this discursive act, even dropping his chin as if to pretend that he is addressing his own heart with affirmations and correctives:

> Judah, stop it. It's not about you. It's not about your performance. Shake it off. Step up. Your emotions. You settle, emotions, in Jesus' name. David did this all the time, by the way. He would talk to his soul. He literally would talk to his soul. Remind his soul: "This isn't about my performance. This isn't about my deeds. This isn't about my strength. It is not by might; it is not by power. It is by the strength of the Spirit of God that is holding me." He would say, "Hey, soul, shut up. I'mmo be alright. I'm a man of God. I'm righteous." You gotta do this. This is real life, friends. (Smith)

This section of dialogue is fraught with different communicative factors for analysis. It is didactic; he teaches a life lesson regarding how to combat negative self-talk with affirmation. He links himself with a well-respected biblical character, David. He even alludes to a scripture verse ("not by might… not by power") from the Old Testament, Zechariah 4:6, thereby bolstering his ethos. He performs this action—one that he claims to be highly personal—in a public setting, bringing several hundred people into the "conversation" during the live sermon event and untold thousands by virtue of its being archived online.

Response/physical actions

Signifying a decision as important as evangelical preachers attribute to converting to Christianity, especially one that serves as an important measurement of their effectiveness in achieving corporate ministry goals such as evangelism efforts, can be tricky. In today's modern megachurch auditorium, the lights are often dimmed for theatrical effect. This subdued lighting can make simply spotting respondents problematic. Therefore, preachers frequently rely upon physical actions to signal to them the intentions of this subset of their audience. These bodily responses may take a variety of modes—from the subtle to the grand. Wilhite starts small: "make eye contact with me" before requesting that the churchgoers "just slip [their] hand in the air" (Wilhite). In an expansive room the size of the Central Christian Church sanctuary, it would seem unlikely that Wilhite could see the eyes of people in the congregation, especially past the first few rows of seats. Looking at him is a fairly unobtrusive behavior—one that requires very low risk of public embarrassment. To aid in his detection, he requests that people "slip" up their hands—another example of linguistic downplaying. This is an imperative couched in soft language.

From this point, the evangelical ministers escalate their demands for physical reactions to indicate the desire to convert to Christianity. Lentz, for instance, makes the same request that Wilhite does—yet with stronger language: "I want you to lift your hand…; shoot it up high" (Lentz). While the lexical term *lift* carries little semantic marking, the active verb *shoot* is a much stronger word than Wilhite's *slip*. Clearly, *shoot* conveys rapid, forceful gestures that would be easy to spot. Perhaps Lentz thinks that the

size of their gesture denotes the sincerity of the supplicant. Occasionally, the verbiage of the altar call borders on the rude. This impolite discourse may be excused as passionate preaching, as in the case of Mayo's insistent command: "Get your hands up if that's you" (Mayo). She wants the audience to respond immediately to her appeal for prayer. To tiptoe linguistically through softer entreaties does not work as quickly as a sternly-worded imperative.

Other preachers in the study resort to similarly direct communication, requesting that their audiences comply with their demands by demonstrating physical responses. When Noble looks directly into the camera, he demands the attention of the multiple campuses of NewSpring Church: "Now everybody look at me" (Noble). Virtual audiences can obey this instruction, although the preacher cannot see these people (as he cannot view the people at other sites). Noble tells the crowd to "pray with me right now," instead of asking them to do so. Again, the online congregation can comply. It is when Noble makes this request: "I just want you to step out of your aisle and I want you to walk forward" that alienates the computer user (Noble). Meyer presents a similar set of complex requests, raising the stakes attached to salvation by adjuring the women attending the conference: "You see people all around you; reach out and grab their hand" (Meyer). Not only does Meyer ask people to take the hand of another person; she welcomes people touching one another who have never met: "Don't let anybody not have a loving touch right now…let's just let them feel what an anointed love feels like" (Meyer). People accessing this particular video to watch on their own are denied this interpersonal connection, which may imply that they do not feel "anointed love,"

whatever that phrase connotes. Meyer states outright that not to respond by coming forward, thereby praying on one's own, is akin to trying to "sneak into the kingdom" or to acting cowardly (Meyer). Not to belabor the point, but the specific behaviors Meyer mentions are off limits every time a person watches this video. How Internet users know to determine selectively what content to attend to in the replayed sermon (e.g. considering biblical texts and their related lessons) and what portions to disregard as irrelevant (e.g., to raise one's hands or to stand up from a seated position) demonstrates the way users consume media through a series of innate, unspoken micro-choices.

Audience interaction connected

The moment at which a person decides to convert to Christianity in a brick-and-mortar evangelical megachurch, s/he is affirmed by the crowd and offered an invitation to join the "family of faith." Almost every salvation appeal recorded in the excerpts includes an admonition to the congregation as a "community of practice" (Mills & Mullaney 2011). The community initiates the new converts in participatory language to help them to find their "place in the life and worship of the community of belief" (Donovan 1976: 10). This language affirms the veracity of the conversion by teaching language relevant to the faith community as a "worldviewlect" or specialized vernacular that reflects a particular worldview (Coleman 1980: 141). Perhaps the reason why the preachers insist that the other church members applaud or grasp the hand of someone who is praying is to enable the "group's story [to] become…the convert's story in a very powerful and emotional way" (Harding 1987: 82). This evoking of emotions in the presence of near strangers

does run the risk of public embarrassment when the penitent person is required to pray aloud in public before witnesses (FitzGerald 2012: 13). By requiring others to pray along with the person making a first-time decision for Christ, the preacher leverages the crowd to help allay anxiety.

This interplay with the audience is multi-faceted in evangelical discourse. In live settings, church members signal their intent through their looks, gestures, and attitudes that the preacher "decipher[s] and to which he is meant to reply" (Mossière 2007: 120). This way of democratizing the sermon is lopsided, of course, as the preacher supplies the language that a new convert must pray, rendering "the listener's mind into a contested terrain, a divided self" (Harding 2000: 34). While Harding insists the contested space is the listener's mind, Bielo (2004) identifies the heart as the "decider of belief, the division of right and wrong action, and the ability to understand spiritual matters…the true self[,]…the core of moral identity" (274). I found it interesting how many times the preachers surveyed refer to speaking to the heart(s) of the audience.

In online depictions of evangelical church services, the issues related to audience participation are rendered more problematic. On the one hand, "unanswered altar calls" are repackaged for digital distribution to an "imaginary audience" existing in the ether of the Internet (Coleman 2003: 20). The various ways social media mirrors interpersonal connection promises "more intimate and stronger connections with a relative few" who share similar faith backgrounds (Horsfield & Teusner 2007: 292). Bennett's (2000) dissertation on the history of the altar call, written on the cusp of the twenty-first century, anticipates the Internet's being an effective evangelism tool for the "dedicated surfer"

(note the outdated lingo) who "stumbled upon" religious content as part of a spiritual "quest" (245). This 15-year-old idealization of online religious discourse has not kept pace with the reality of contemporary American evangelical practice.

Privacy/confidentiality

The pastoral admonition for the congregation to "bow" their heads and close their eyes is ubiquitous in evangelical sermon discourse. At the outset, the posture seems synonymous with prayer—as a way to focus one's thoughts and to lessen distractions. Indeed, many prayers are modeled in this way within the evangelical context—whether praying to commence a worship service or to receive a financial offering. The direct call for churchgoers to assume the bowed posture, however, during an altar call appears to have a unique, specific purpose. Occasionally a preacher will follow these comments with a proviso (e.g. "with no one looking around") to further the communal perception of anonymity. Within this set of sermon videos, some of the preachers do appear to keep their eyes closed for the entire prayer, thereby heeding their own advice. Two examples are Wilhite and Chandler, who do not issue a classic altar call.

Other speakers may be seen with eyes open, reading notes, or actively scanning the audience for responses. Furtick's shoulders pivot and his eyes stay wide open during the entire response and prayer(s), as if not to miss a single moment. A viewer only has words to go on to differentiate his prayer discourse (e.g. "God, we thank you that…") from direct appeals to the congregation to surrender to Christianity (e.g. "If you want that grace, would you slip your hands in the air right now?") (Furtick). Interestingly, the

congregation shown in the stadium-style seating seems to have adopted the prayer posture—eyes closes, chins tilted to their chests, some with hands lifted aloft, well before Furtick directs them to do so: "Heads bowed, eyes closed" (Furtick). This preacher clearly has several communicative factors with which to contend. The band's volume swells; he quells a percussionist with a hand gesture with his left hand signaling downward, as if to lower the background noise. At one point it appears that he looks for a split-second directly into the camera, then hurriedly looks away, as if this is an inadvisable angle for him to hold as preacher in charge. Perhaps he notices audience noncompliance, because Furtick repeats his call for privacy: "Heads bowed, eyes closed; if that's you and you'd say, y'know, 'I'm far from God and today I want to give my life to Jesus Christ,' pray this prayer with me" (Furtick). His own head never drops. He does not close his own eyes. Maybe as originator of the discourse, he is exempted from its demands. Keeping his eyes open permits Furtick to monitor how the audience responds to the public invitation. He can estimate the number of salvation "decisions" as signified by upraised hands. He jumps abruptly from the pledge he has caused his parishioners to recite (*viz.,* "I will follow you all the days of my life") into instructions on what he would like others to do as a result of speaking these words: "If you just prayed that prayer with me, on the count of three, I want you to slip your hand in the air and let's celebrate your new beginning on the count of three" (Furtick). His vocal inflection changes only slightly. He has not given verbal permission for the audience to open their eyes. But when he solicits celebratory cheering from the crowd, the impetus for the applause is presumably viewing the scores of hands lifted high. Puzzlingly, though, Furtick has not

asked them to look up, yet they have. Perhaps they are trained to follow the ritual, and they respond accordingly.

Of course, what permits this analysis of how preachers behave during the "heads bowed, eyes closed" portion of their sermon involves ignoring their counsel. "Peeking" during altar calls is the stuff of evangelical jesting in certain circles. By requiring their parishioners to close their eyes, these preachers gain credit for valuing the privacy of their audiences. Any pretense of confidentiality, however, is counteracted by the fact that the preacher, the musicians, and any "campus pastors" (at remote sites) keeping track of the running count of conversions keep their eyes open. Moreover, any person who might view the videotaped sermon performance would violate the conditions spoken by the preacher (unless they also bow their heads and avert their gaze). In other words, what they accuse their live audiences of is what the virtual audience must do. Case in point: When Hodges remarks "with every head bowed and every eye closed" (note the softening of Furtick's imperative command), it seems implausible to presume that anyone viewing the archived message would shut his/her eyes while the video plays. For the sake of argument, suppose a viewer wants to convert to evangelical Christianity based on watching one of the sermon videos in this study. For this hypothetical computer user, meeting the inherent salvation conditions outlined by the Web preacher is problematized by the media interface. Is the conversion, therefore, less authentic than one effected in a brick-and-mortar church building? For example, if this imaginary viewer downloads Hodges's video, it would be impossible to accede to the terms the minister outlines: "I'm going to ask you to do it the way God asks: acknowledge me in public" (Hodges). On the

date of the sermon's performance (17 Aug. 2014), the respondents in Birmingham, Alabama, where Church of the Highlands is located, meet the conditions Hodges specifies, whereas those watching the video after the fact cannot. By claiming that "God asks" conversion to occur a singular way, Hodges has potentially alienated the nearly uncountable online audience to meet these circumstances on one's own—whatever Hodges intends by public acknowledgement—will require the new convert to seek out the means and the contexts for disclosing the nascent religious standing to others.

Because the preachers apparently determine that it behooves contrite individuals to convert in a public (read: in their respective churches' worship service) setting, they frequently valorize the decision people are making to stream forward in the live church service—not admitting how this choice may exclude their Internet congregation. In fact, the privacy inherently enacted by opening a personal computer and logging on becomes the scapegoat for illegitimate conversion. When, for example, Fortener appeals for parties interested in praying the Sinner's Prayer, he sets up his own pre-conversion excuses as a straw man to refute. He dismisses any of their personal doubts by mentioning his own stubborn reasons to the contrary: "I have to choose Jesus; I will just do it somewhere else privately" (Fortener). He equates the desire for privacy with ignoring God's conviction in the moments when he would hear a pastor issue a similar altar call as he does in this sermon. A similar type of privacy, however, occurs whenever an iTunes subscriber downloads the Mosaic podcast and listens to this archived title. Given the cost for bandwidth and labor to prepare the digital content for mass distribution online, one is left wondering why Fortener et al. contradict the very communicative conditions of the

auditory medium on which their messages are streamed. Perhaps some of these preachers view the Internet as "pre-evangelism," a term sometimes encountered in evangelical church contexts. The coinage refers to the preparatory events, conversations, and educational/inspirational content an interested person experiences prior to converting to Christianity. Still, the preachers clearly outline conditions in these sermon videos that online viewers cannot accommodate simply by virtue of the methods by which they access the religious content.

Speaking on others' behalf

In order to persuade people to pray a Sinner's Prayer to become a Christian, evangelical preachers must convince their congregants to trust them implicitly. One way to foster this trust involves demonstrating that the ministers understand their concerns well. In a large public setting such as a worship service, it would prove impossible to hold an individual conversation with each parishioner. As a substitute, these preachers often carry on fictional conversations with made-up people. That is to say, at times the preachers speak for the imaginary audience member. Mayo uses this rhetorical technique frequently in her sermon; for example: "Jeanne, you taught on God's waiting room" and "I don't know that I even believe it" (Mayo). She exercises latitude in selecting words to attribute to her interlocutor. Whether an audience member would actually voice these sentiments is less important than if she puts into words some of the unconscious or just unspoken issues.

In framing these monologues-turned-dialogues, the more spontaneous they sound the more convincing. Meyer, like Mayo, addressing a capacity crowd at a women's

conference, slips several of these comments into her altar call, adopting a casual, even halting diction: "you're just like… 'I…I…I don't even really know if I would go to heaven if I died'" (Meyer). The stumbling speech pattern and the use of the lexical phrase "you're just like" suggest that Meyer is searching for words in the moment—that she has not predetermined what she will say. She also resorts to this technique to eliminate excuses that might impede people from responding: "You say, 'Oh, I don't want to stand up. Can I just sit here and pray'"—almost constructing a straw man to debate (Meyer). When preachers create an imaginary persona to represent the reticent audience member, they benefit from appearing empathetic, all the while controlling both roles in the mock conversation (*viz.,* speaker and receiver).

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION: Implications for Future Research

"Evangelicalism is better at raising questions among its next generations than at giving answers. It is one of the hazards which Evangelicalism creates for itself by attracting the more energetic and intelligent among those not heard from before, and then encouraging the educational aspirations of their children and grandchildren."　　　　　　　　　—David Martin, *Christian Language in the Secular City* (2002: 191)

Chapter Abstract

This chapter raises several implications of the MCDA analyses performed on a

representative sample of American megachurch pastors. After considering the significant

role technological innovation plays on shaping this discourse, I conclude by discussing

how the disconnect between the evangelical Church's attempts to reach new audiences

and the values of an uninitiated online viewer of archived sermon videos will only widen

over time. Finally, I issue a call to other scholars and theologians to explore this growing

expression of evangelical discourse.

A fundamental communicative breakdown in contemporary American religious

discourse happens when something as abstract yet epistemologically essential to

evangelicalism—the process of ministers' calling interested people to become "born-

again" Christians—is discussed linguistically one way, occurs actually in another way,

and appears theologically in the sacred text and recent ecclesiastical practice in a third

way. This inherent tension has been regulated for decades by the near homogeneity of

American evangelical church practice, but the introduction of vaster audiences and varied

features of online transmission by uploaded sermon audio and video promises to disrupt

this strain once and for all in ways that few scholars and practitioners have predicted.

Those religious preachers who opt to marshal the Internet for proselytizing purposes

must, therefore, understand this tension and adapt their lexis (if not their entire public

invitation process in their brick-and-mortar churches) to fit a digitally-saturated landscape where sermons are forever archived and exist as things to be viewed, traded, interrogated, downloaded, and discussed, rather than temporary speech events that happen between 11:00 a.m. and noon on Sunday mornings, before disappearing forever into the ether.

If the Internet is indeed responsible for fostering a new, alternative Christian spirituality that forgoes attending corporate worship services in material churches, one of the outgrowths of this societal shift will be that evangelical content has no more primacy in the minds of the end users than any other online content. Simply put, preachers' inviting computer users to pray along with them to convert to Christianity means little more linguistically than reciting words that lack substantive meaning. Praying along with the Internet pastor fails to result in a conversionary speech act, at least in the way the original speaker performing the altar call in the live setting may have intended. By studying these words and analyzing what the speaker may be encoding in this specialized discursive style, one may effectively question whether uploading the utterance online fundamentally alters the communicative context from its origin to the point that the basic conditions for the altar call are rendered null and void to effect conversion. This clarification should not suggest, however, that posting sermon videos online has little effect on the spiritually curious. The Internet's tearing down of the stained-glass barrier between the non-religious and the faith community, showing actual services as they occur within physical church buildings, reinforces transparency toward outsiders unfamiliar with evangelical discourse. Seeing how a typical church service operates may make visiting that congregation less intimidating. Nevertheless, watching sermon content

separated from the live religious services where these homilies were performed may have an unintended consequence for the virtual audience. People hear the simplicity of the speaker-led altar call and fail to ascribe any epistemological significance to the doctrinal creed being emphasized, thereby diminishing the importance of a conversion event as integral to being an American evangelical.

In the figured world American evangelical preachers have constructed in the latter half of the 20th century (i.e. since the Jesus Movement of the 1960s and the Charismatic renewal in Catholic parishes and mainline Protestant denominations of the 1970s and 1980s), as well as the first 15 years of the 21st century, certain acts retain significance because of the way these ministers interpret them weekly for their congregations (Gee 2011, 71). One significant finding of this research is how passé the subject of sin appears to be in American churches seeking to relate to contemporary American culture. When feeding lines to the respondents to repeat as a conversionary prayer, Hodges instructs the congregation to echo his phrase: "Forgive me for going my own way" (Hodges). What stands out is that this preacher utters no specific mention of *sin* per se. Personal waywardness substitutes conceptually for any recognition of personal culpability. Wrongdoing against the Almighty is implied by the request to "[f]orgive me" (Hodges). Outsiders to evangelical discourse may not immediately recognize the departure this semantic phrasing represents from traditional altar call rituals as practiced in these Christian denominations and nondenominational congregations. Perhaps Hodges feels that the word *sin* is fraught with negative connotations or sounds obsolete in contemporary society. If Burke is correct, however, that religious conversion

demonstrates itself chiefly in the language adopted by the new initiate, then how the discourse changes over time has much to reveal about core evangelical notions of human depravity, free will, contrition, and repentance and how these doctrines are being remapped lexically and semantically by contemporary preachers.

The Internet allows viewers to peer into stained glass windows, viewing church services in progress in ways that used to require a visit to a brick-and-mortar church building when a church service was in process. The problem with looking through stained glass is that the image is distorted and colored by the lens through which one views the experience. For example, preachers' exaggerated urgency to convince churchgoers to decide to follow Christ does not translate well into a medium that archives all sermons, making them readily accessible forever in the form of digital audio and video files. Revivalist preachers have relied on the urgency argument for years. The familiar phrase "if you died tonight" (morbid as the thought is at face value) is formulaic copying of early 20th century evangelists' methods of reeling the audience into a preferred response, that of "walking the aisle" to become a Christian. With no aisle to walk and only virtual parishioners whose applause taped previously is said to apply to all "making first-time decisions to follow Christ," the discursive conditions of a person wanting to embrace the claims of the Christian gospel bear little resemblance to those the audio tracks of megachurch altar calls are narrating.

When the speaker fails to address directly the user/listener who may be accessing the sermon at a future time by downloading the audio or video file, s/he misses an essential opportunity to mark out the discursive conditions for this new hearing.

Moreover, by neglecting to acknowledge the user not present in the sanctuary when the sermon is performed, the preacher in question leaves the listener to negotiate the terms of this communication individually. What appears to be intended in a live church service to be framed as a moment for building connection between the preacher and the listener, even establishing the trust inherent in agreeing to risk embarrassment to "come forward" to meet the "prayer team" or to be "counseled" by volunteer altar workers, becomes online yet another reason to distance oneself from the established Christian church.

On the other hand, listening to a sermon in a live audience along with scores of others presents a fundamentally different experience than downloading the same message to listen to individually. Obviously the rhetorical situations differ dramatically. The virtual listener is not influenced directly or indirectly by those who might be seated nearby. No nods, laughs, knowing glances, sighs, or any such nonverbal communication are accessible. The listener only hears secondhand the "live" (taped) response via the speaker's microphone picking up ambient audience noise such as applause, laughter, or the occasional spoken response.

The virtual listening environment is an entirely different discursive space than the brick-and-mortar (i.e., steepled or non-steepled) church building. How these listeners (let alone any potential converts) "count" in the way that the preachers frame their messages is problematized by several factors relates to the medium itself. While metrics may exist to measure numbers of downloads or discrete website hits or visitors, estimating the size of the digital audience for an online sermon is problematic. Even the running count on each YouTube video only lists the number of times a respective video has been played.

Multiple viewings by the same user are not considered. In short, a preacher has little data

to confirm a sermon is being popularly viewed or shared—that is, until the bandwidth of

a ministry's server is maxed to capacity.

Ironically, perhaps, the speaker's attention is drawn to the humans seated in the

room where the sermon is being performed, a number that may only (at its greatest)

stretch into the hundreds or thousands of bodies. A virtual audience, not bound by

geographic proximity to the sponsoring church, the seating capacity of the sanctuary, or

by the time constraints of the church service being recorded, may balloon into millions of

end users. The fact that this vastly underestimated virtual audience barely registers (if at

all) on the speaker's radar could explain why none of the selected excerpts indicates how

someone not present in the live service is supposed to respond if interested in "being

included in [the] final prayer."

Consider the transcripts: The preachers, seemingly sincere in their persuasive

appeals, narrate a series of physical responses (e.g. lifting one's hand, standing up,

leaving one's pew, meeting a stranger to pray or to converse about the imminent

"salvation decision") while dictating the initiate's initial prayer to be echoed verbatim.

Clearly, these tactics work in an actual church service, as indicated by phrases present in

the excerpts: "dozens/hundreds of hands going up…all over this place." Unless this

recognition of respondents is inflated for persuasive effect, the speakers notice in real

time the people who claim to be ready to follow the Christian faith in the moment being

recorded. While estimating headcounts, especially in the theatrically darkened

auditoriums of today's contemporary megachurch complexes, may prove problematic,

there is a certain degree of accountability present in the live moment because those not dutifully bowing their heads can quickly count responses to verify the preachers' accuracy.

Given this basic communicative breakdown, one wonders how long listeners will continue to "listen in on" live church services where they are not addressed directly, given the widening cultural gap between those who attend church and those who have never visited a Christian church of any denomination. Ministers used to be able to assume the faith background of their parishioners. In previous eras, American churchgoers were somewhat homogeneous in terms of their acceptance of orthodox Christian dogma. While the composition of American churches is changing, the religious interest (as well as lack thereof) of the broader culture is rapidly shifting. These paradigmatic shifts, therefore, represent some fundamental challenges in terms of preachers' reaching their virtual audiences.

For these new media evangelism opportunities to connect with unfamiliar virtual audiences, evangelicals should define certain key ecclesiastical terms initially and often in each sermon video uploaded to the Internet. Preachers cannot assume that online listeners share their religious jargon or vocabulary. Because the Internet is a level medium, available to billions worldwide with little regard to social class, ethnicity, or religion/irreligion/creed, preachers cannot assume that those listening to a sermon archived online understand, let alone believe, what they purport as "gospel truth." In fact, many atheist forums online regularly watch, critique, and comment on religious content from their particular ideological stance. One of their primary critiques that American

evangelicalism is out of step with contemporary times, is supported by abundant linguistic proof in the form of uploaded sermon videos composed in an idiom barely decipherable to the average American. The repeated references to space/time (e.g. "if you're here tonight and need Jesus"), as well as the portrayal of an easy believism ("now you are a Christian") belie the process that some individuals undergo toward embracing the Christian faith. Watching a live church service disconnected from the discursive conditions of being there along with other audience members who intuit the specialized idiomatic vocabulary of the discourse may cause certain viewers to form opinions of what is occurring that differ dramatically from the speaker's intention.

Further, the difficulty with quantifying accurately the number of times distinct users download and listen to an online sermon makes it even more challenging to estimate how many people who have not converted to Christianity (*viz.,* the assumed audience for evangelism) are listening regularly to Christian content online. The way that such content, however, is marketed and presented on church websites or through Faith and Spirituality podcasts on iTunes, it seems likely that the listeners to online evangelical content are the already converted.

Many reasons are available to explain why committed believers listen to sermons that include altar calls. These people may seek spiritual edification or religious instruction during the week. In essence, Sunday is too far away. Others may be trying to "grow in their faith" (i.e., a self-identifying term of many contemporary evangelicals). Still others may amass a list of favorite preachers whose bestselling books line Christian bookstore shelves. They listen weekly to sermon podcasts because they feel an affinity

for that person. He or she speaks their language, conveying spiritual content in language and imagery that resonate with them. If already-converted evangelicals are the computer users more apt to download and listen to their preachers' sermonic content, interested parties must ask a basic question: Why do these faithful believers listen all the way through to the end of the sermon, through the altar call and final prayer, even if they have already committed themselves to follow Christianity? The following character qualities and behaviors may be in play when devoted evangelicals listen to altar calls even after they have converted:

- Deference to tradition (*viz.,* stopping the recording is similar to walking out of a church service early);

- Respect toward ecclesiastical authority;

- Lack of assurance of their redemptive standing in the sight of God;

- Insecurity over religious matters or nagging doubts;

- Rehearsal of one's prior conversion to be "safe" spiritually;

- Not feeling settled spiritually;

- Reaffirmation of the earlier decision converts made as the right one for them;

- Codification of what they believe as essential doctrines; and

- Assessment of the gospel authenticity of the speaker in question.

Committed Christians seem to listen through to the end of their pastors' sermon videos and podcasts the way they would attend a church service—quietly, sequentially, reverently, waiting at the end, refusing to pepper the preacher with questions, assuming

the preacher is the expert in the matter, because they were acculturated to attend a church service this way.

The virtual audience member lacking this church-going experience may not know how the sermon is "supposed" to operate, except that to listen out of curiosity affords one a window on a heretofore secret society, the American evangelical megachurch. This audience member can access religious content in a way not unlike a surveillance tape. The video/audio excerpts included in this multimodal critical discourse analysis allow outsiders to peer into an unfamiliar yet nonetheless popular discourse community: evangelical megachurches. The online sermon content also provides insiders a vantage point to observe common discursive practices shared between various evangelical expressions, how they shift when cultural tides change, and how few churches have considered the way the Internet has recast the sermon from a temporal event to a video available indefinitely to be viewed, discussed, ignored, analyzed, or criticized for its neglect of the larger virtual audience.

Despite the variety between these preachers—younger to older, Caucasian to persons of color, men and women, Baptists to Charismatics to those who eschew denominational affiliations, one certainty remains fairly constant: The altar call is a point of convergence among American evangelicals of different stripes. Watching these videos and listening to audio recordings of these sermons, a ritual emerges with a fairly consistent (albeit unwritten) script that follows church traditions more than even biblically mandated steps. How the language that evokes and enacts the ritual of Christian conversion is undergoing systemic change by being featured on an online platform

deserves further study by linguists, preachers, and scholars interested in contemporary

religious discourse and practice.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Definition of terms

The following lexical terms are essential for understanding this study:

- *Altar call*—A preacher extends the altar call to the penitent in a "request to make 'A public confession for Christ,' by moving to the front of the scene of evangelism or by indicating in some other visible or audible way" (Bennett 2000: xiii). Customarily at the conclusion of a sermon, this persuasive "invitational call…[is a] linguistic and ritual performance" (Heriot 1994: 231, n. 1). Evangelical preaching holds a long tradition of the "traditional call for salvation and rededication…the call to demonstrate commitment through specified actions" like coming forward in a public church service (Heriot 1994: 139, 142). Known variously as the *invitation*, the *response*, or a *salvation appeal*, this term, utilizing a broad definition, refers to any organized method in a public evangelistic invitation that requires people to make an outward response to a presentation of the gospel…usually entailing a "going forward" at a specified time, but often may be limited to a show of hands or the signing of a decision card. (Ehrhard 1994: 28). *Altar call* is used by some preachers interchangeably with "public evangelistic invitation," however the "altar call is only one of many different ways people can be invited to respond to the gospel after a public presentation" (Allen 2014: 9).
- *Conversion*—Conversion may be defined "somewhat broadly to connote change in a person's behavior and behavior…not limited to religious phenomena"

(Richardson 1985, 163). Rather than a "one-time transformation of the self[,]" conversion to Christianity is operationalized as a "a gradual transformation of identity [that] may take place as a believer learns over time to construe herself and her life in terms of the canonical language[, becoming]… a particular identity…acted out in the very performance of the conversion narrative (Stromberg 1993: 15-16).

- *Evangelical/Evangelism*—These terms can convey negative connotations "similar to being 'pushy' about one's religion or proselytizing" (Vermeulen 2013: 69). Given the controversial quality of evangelism, I elected to consult what many evangelicals deem a standard definition by Bebbington (2005): "Evangelicalism typically chose to give prominence to conversion, the Bible, the cross and missionary activity" or "crucicentrism, conversionism, biblicism and activism" (22). Hankins (2008) notes that *conversionism* "refers to the life-transforming and supernatural experience that evangelicals believe is central to the Christian faith... a singular and immediate event, although a minority of evangelicals believe that individuals can grow into conversion over a span of time" (2).

- *Megachurch*—The designation for "a Protestant church that averages at least two thousand total attendees in their weekend services" (Thumma & Travis 2007: xviii). Megachurches, with their "distinctive…social dynamics and organizational characteristics,… their practices, and their leaders are the most influential contemporary dynamic in American religion" (Thumma & Travis 2007: 2).

- *Prayer*—A "discursive art in which capacities central to our human experience with language come together with respect to supersensory, superordinate, supernatural reality, typically imagined in the form of culturally significant otherworldly audiences—divine beings with whom human beings enjoy rich, complex relationships" (FitzGerald 2012: 2). Prayer is "an illocutionary act, one that through the force of utterance contributes to unfolding events perceived as action willed or permitted by divine beings and assented to or challenged by human beings" (FitzGerald 2012: 56).

- *Religion*—Kenneth Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion* (1970) considers religion as a linguistic phenomenon rather than an ontological system, noting that "religious cosmogonies are designed, in the last analysis, as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion[, composed of]…a body of spoken and written *words*" (v-vi, italics in original). Clifford Geertz (1973), building on Burke's seminal work, further defines *religion* as a "system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men *(sic.)* by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence" (90).

- *The Sinner's Prayer*—Robert Howard (2005) links this emic term referring to "an explicit admission of human sinfulness by the individual, and then a request for the divine to begin to act in that individual's life," to a nearly 300-year-old lecture by Peter Clark entitled "A Sinners Prayer for Converted Grace" (178).

- *Unchurched*—A relatively recent neologism, Robert C. Fuller (2001) uses the lexical term to refer to the "38 to 40 percent of the adult population in the United

States [who] have no formal religious affiliation" (2). Used synonymously with the presumptive-sounding term "pre-Christian," the word *unchurched* carries fewer negative connotations among American evangelicals than *unbeliever, pagan, atheist, agnostic,* or *non-Christian.*