

Faithful Films: An Exploration of Habitus and Implicit Functionality in Recent
Evangelical Cinema

by
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Dedication

I dedicate this project to my parents, Earle and Paula Pierce. Though you never totally understood my field of study and often disagreed with my contentions and conclusions, you both believed in my capacity to succeed in my scholarship. Whenever I began to feel as though this project was too ambitious to complete, you were both there to assure me that it was within my capabilities. You have shown patience throughout an undergraduate career that has taken longer than most. I hope in my life, I can give as freely and selflessly to others as you have given to me. You know that I love you both. Amid our ideological differences, I hope I have still made you proud.

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Abstract

Evangelical film experienced a resurgence in the twenty-first century. Since this resurgence began, Great American Pure Flix and Kendrick Brothers Productions have set their films apart as the standard by which all other evangelical films are measured. In this project, I explore the plots of several Kendrick Brothers Productions' films, as well as Great American Pure Flix's *God's Not Dead* series, to analyze their themes and overall structure. I suggest that these films be divided into two genres, which I have created, to classify them according to their purposes. I will put these themes in conversation with current Religious Studies scholarship to argue that the films of Kendrick Brothers Productions demonstrate underlying assumptions and commitments of the evangelical worldview. Using the same approach, I will demonstrate that the *God's Not Dead* series instructs its audience in the proper embodiment of the evangelical worldview.

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Introduction

Evangelical cinema is as old as the medium of film itself. Some of the earliest films were reenactments of biblical stories, and they were often screened in church buildings. These early efforts at evangelical film eventually tapered off, and by the 1970s, biblical films ceased debuting on the cinema screen altogether. Other than a few subversive efforts by Hollywood film studios, such as Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) or Carl Reiner's *Oh God!* (1977), biblical films were largely absent from the American theater for over thirty years. In 2003, a group of evangelicals from Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia, brought biblical cinematic narratives back to theaters with the release of *Flywheel*. Its producers were Stephen and Alex Kendrick, members of Sherwood's pastoral staff. Their low-budget evangelical film far exceeded their expectations and was the progenitor of an evangelical film explosion over the next two decades. The Kendrick brothers eventually started their own production company, Kendrick Brothers Productions, which continues to be one of the most prolific studios in evangelical film. They were later joined by Great American Pure Flix (formerly Pure Flix), which achieved similar box office success with its *God's Not Dead* series.

Despite being part of the same genre (evangelical film), this thesis shows that the films of Kendrick Brothers Productions and the *God's Not Dead* series belong to two different subcategories of evangelical film. In making this argument, I turn to the work of columnist J.W. McCormack for inspiration regarding descriptions of types of Christian films. In an opinion piece that can best be described as a blend of satirical commentary and cultural critique, using dark humor and provocative irreverence, McCormack delves into the history of the contemporary evangelical film industry (McCormack 2019, 64-67).

While the piece is a work of gonzo-style journalism and not a scholarly assessment, McCormack observes the fact that not all evangelical films are the same. He suggests two subgenres to deal with the issue of differentiation, which I find quite useful (McCormack 2019, 64-65). Following conventional scholarship on the topic, McCormack recognizes the biblical epic as the most prominent category of Christian film before the 1970s (McCormack 2019, 64-65). He further suggests two categories that emerged during the 1970s, which are somewhat unique to evangelical film. McCormack terms these categories as “the end-times picture” and “Christoploitation” (McCormack 2019, 65). The term “end-times” picture is perfectly appropriate, but I will not be making use of the second term, as it conveys an element of judgment and disapproval that would not be appropriate for academic purposes. Instead, I will refer to this last category as evangelization epics, which, to the best of my knowledge, has not been used before. It is these evangelization epics that will be my primary focus.¹

In this thesis, I will offer pedagogy, salvation, and discipleship as further subcategories of evangelization epics. Their purpose decides the categorization of these films. Discipleship films are primarily intended for an audience with an established evangelical worldview. As such, these films serve as examples of insider-to-insider communication. The salvation genre attempts to convert outsiders to the evangelical worldview, so that they may become insiders. Films in the salvation genre serve as examples of insider-to-outsider communication. Finally, there is pedagogy. Pedagogy follows the salvation film, bridging the gap between discipleship and salvation films. Films in the pedagogy category differ from those in the discipleship category in that they

¹ For discussions concerning end-times films, see Mathewson (2009), Walliss (2008), and Schaefer (2009).

are focused on instructing new evangelicals on how to view social and political issues, as well as the way they should embody evangelical belief. Films in the discipleship category can assume insider knowledge that the discipleship category cannot. This thesis examines the narratives, themes, and theology that structure the films of the Kendrick Brothers and the *God's Not Dead* series. In doing so, I will attempt to show how the films of the Kendrick Brothers display and reinforce implicit beliefs and commitments of an evangelical worldview. I will also show ways that the *God's Not Dead* series uses narrative to change the viewer's worldview and invite them to embody the evangelical worldview.

My discussion begins with a brief overview of the history of evangelical film in chapter one, followed by a detailed analysis of the Kendrick Brother's films in chapter two. An examination of the *God's Not Dead* series will encompass the following chapter before some closing thoughts on identity negotiation and the function of belief. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to explore the implicit functionality of these films and put them into conversation with current Religious Studies scholarship.

Chapter I:

Uncovering the Origins of the Church Film Movement

To adequately address the phenomenon that has come to be known as the “Church Film Movement,” one must first dispose of the notion that the phenomenon in question is unprecedented. It certainly may be the case that this modern movement possesses its own distinct peculiarities. However, the idea that what is being witnessed is a dramatic paradigm shift could not be further from the truth. Rather, the new “Church Film Movement” is the latest chapter in a long, convoluted, and contentious history between Christianity and cinema. I am indebted to the work of J. Ryan Parker in documenting the origins and development of this latest chapter between Christianity and film. Whilst the modern movement certainly has its own unique properties, it cannot be viewed in isolation without losing much of the context of the more extensive history from which it emerged. This chapter will explore the origins of the evangelical film industry to provide the reader with the context required to understand the contemporary evangelical film movement.

From Pulpit to Projector: Theology in Film

In attempting to understand the roots of the “Church Film Movement” that emerged in the early twenty-first century, a painstaking effort has been expended to trace the movement’s history (Parker 2012, 17-36). Literature on the subject would seem to suggest no consensus among academics concerning the movement’s origin. My preliminary research gave the impression that a Christian habitus could be assumed for most early twentieth-century cinema audiences in North America. As Film Studies

scholar James Russell contends these existing commitments led to a presumption on the part of filmmakers that the audience they were addressing would all share this same habitus (Russell 2010, 394).² Further research supports this notion. Indeed, Christians were the targets of many early film productions. Religious Studies scholar Terry Lindvall's *Sanctuary Cinema* is an invaluable resource for documenting audiences' and producers' attitudes in the initial years of film production.³

The movement's origin can be traced to the earliest forms of cinema, and, in some ways, evangelical interests in film contributed to several of the earliest advancements in film technology (Lindvall 2007, 56). For example, Lindvall mentions the existence of motion picture technology patents belonging to late nineteenth-century clergy of evangelical churches. This history conveys early interest and the involvement of church leadership in motion picture technology. Lindvall also reports that many Christian leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century did not shy away from using church buildings to show everything from early biblical epics to simple cartoons (Lindvall 2007, 57-59). For some, movies served as a means to get people into churches, luring the masses in with the promise of cheap or free entertainment where, inevitably, a sermon would act as the prelude or the following act (Lindvall 2007, 70-71). In other cases, some clergy of this time believed that films had the potential to draw the attention of their audiences in a way that a typical sermon seemed unable to (Lindvall 2007, 67). During the era of silent film, for example, film was seen as an almost universal language capable

² An abridged version of habitus would describe it as the set of dispositions, tastes, and common knowledge that an individual engrained in an individual as a result of their upbringing (Martin 2017, 86-87). This notion will be further elaborated in chapter two.

³ Terry Lindvall is the C.S. Lewis Endowed Chair in Communication and Christian Thought at Virginia Wesleyan College. His work plays a significant role in the subfield of theology and film, focusing on how film can serve as a medium for theological reflection, exploring themes such as grace, redemption, and portraying spiritual experiences on screen (C.S. Lewis Institute n.d.).

of transcending the bounds of class and even race and sex in some cases (Lindvall 2007, 206). In this way, some clergy saw the medium of film as a force to be harnessed for their purposes while simultaneously being an object of great trepidation (Lindvall 2007, 207).

Shadows of Doubt: Early Evangelical Hesitations

Much more could be noted concerning the early years of cinema and their relation to the evangelical church of the era. For the purposes of this thesis, it is most important to note the attitudes adopted by evangelicals towards the medium of film during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite many evangelical leaders' early assimilation of the medium, there has always been an equally large (if not larger) contingent of evangelical leaders who fear film's capabilities (Lindvall 2007, 211). Like their optimistic counterparts, this contingent perceived cinema as able to engender spiritual and moral improvement in large masses (Lindvall 2007, 68-69). However, unlike their optimistic peers, they believed that the risks of film were too significant (Lindvall 2007, 60). From the perspective of its detractors, its perceived transformative potential meant that the risks associated with film as a medium outweighed any positive potential it may have possessed.

There seems to be at least some consensus among the vast majority of evangelicals around the turn of the twentieth century that cinema had great potential to create positive and negative outcomes in society (Lindvall 2007, 60). For example, many felt that films depicting biblical narratives would be useful visual aids for sermons or Sunday school (Lindvall 2007, 175). As a result, in the interest of promoting and maintaining morality, churches began providing biblically-based cinematic experiences

not only for their parishioners but also for their communities at large (Lindvall 2007, 68-69). The result was a fascinating early boom of biblical cinema. During this period, it was thought that Hollywood might become a holy land of sorts, a central hub that would serve as the home of Christian entertainment (Lindvall 2007, 59). However, this vision was not to last, and cinema production did not continue panning out in such a manner.

The Last Testament: Final Gasps of the Biblical Epic

Biblical epics continued to be made through the mid-1960s, and for a while, Christian leaders maintained dominance over the rules for acceptable content in Hollywood films. Much like the Christian-led temperance movement of earlier eras, which sought to better society as a whole through the prohibition of alcohol, American entertainment was governed through the implementation of a production code that regulated on-screen content from Hollywood production to ensure that “Judeo-Christian values” were not violated (Vaughn 1990, 59-61; Lindvall 2007, 204-205). However, this level of influence was short-lived.

The 1960s were a decade full of turbulence and change in the United States. The decade included a war that, perhaps for the first time, received overwhelming disapproval from a significant percentage of the United States population. Civil rights movements had leadership that inspired their bases and got results. A president was assassinated, as were some of those same Civil Rights leaders. Movements encouraging young people to engage with new music, philosophies, and substances were becoming so large that they could almost be considered mainstream. Exploring the actual depth of content in the

United States during the 1960s would take the entirety of a very dense book.⁴ For my purposes, it suffices to say that those who lived through the era experienced a whirlwind of rapid yet hard-fought changes that fundamentally transformed life for nearly everyone in the United States in some manner (Chalmers 2013, 181-184). Naturally, these changes affected Hollywood and the local theater as well. Suddenly, the biblical epics that once drew audiences in droves to theaters no longer had the same reach they previously achieved consistently. After two Hollywood-produced biblical epics flopped at the box office, Hollywood effectively separated itself from the religious institutions that once played a large part in regulating their content (Russell 2010, 394). This separation did not just consist of Hollywood ceasing production on the aforementioned biblical epics, but it also meant that Hollywood began production of content that had been previously taboo (Russell 2010, 394). Without prior regulation, Hollywood producers and scriptwriters were free to push the boundaries of what was acceptable (Russell 2010, 394-395). Much to the chagrin of evangelical leaders, the result of this boundary-pushing was box-office success (Russell 2010, 394-395). Having ceased being lucrative to Hollywood or desirable to a significant enough percentage of the public, the separation of Hollywood and evangelicalism was effectively final.

Faithful Friction: Evangelical Animosity for Hollywood

At this point, dialogue from evangelicals concerning Hollywood had become combative and antagonistic, which has continued in the decades since their separation (Russell 2010, 395). It seems that evangelicals possessed the same attitudes concerning

⁴ See David Chalmers' *And the Crooked Places Made Straight: The Struggle for Social Change in the 1960s* for a comprehensive overview of change in the 1960s.

cinema that it could either be very beneficial to their cause or be their greatest enemy (Lindvall 2007, 70). When Hollywood films ceased to further their cause, the prevailing assumption among evangelicals was that Hollywood should now be considered an enemy (Russell 2010, 395; Lindvall 2007, 211). There is little to suggest that the same kind of animosity existed in Hollywood towards evangelicals as there was and continues to be in the other direction. All evidence suggests that Hollywood's decision to change direction was not out of spite towards evangelicals but rather a business decision made in the interest of self-preservation (Russell 2010, 394; Lindvall 2007, 66). Hollywood film studios initially viewed evangelicals as a profitable market for films of the biblical epic genre. In many cases, the studios and stars did not share the evangelical worldview (Lindvall 2007, 203).

Russell's analysis of the events leading up to Hollywood's split from evangelicalism indicates that a lack of profits rather than piety led film studios to pursue other markets (Russell 2010, 394). Hollywood, as one would expect in a capitalist society, chose to invest in film genres that they believed would generate the highest return on their investment (Lindvall 2007, 66). When the religious epic was a reliable source of revenue, the products of Hollywood film studios reflected that reliability (Lindvall 2007, 66). Given the scale and budget of these failed biblical epics, multiple box-office flops had the potential to bankrupt even the most established film studios (Russell 2010, 394-395).⁵ Not wanting to risk financial insolvency, studios simply moved on (Russell 2010, 394-395).

⁵ The failed epics that preceded the end of the Hollywood biblical epic were *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) and *The Bible: In the Beginning* (1966) (Russell 2010, 394-394).

In the proceeding years after the separation between evangelicals and Hollywood, attempts at Christian-produced cinema were made, which, due to factors primarily traceable to inexperience, usually failed to reach even a modicum of the success that the Hollywood-produced epics once had (Brown, Keeler, and Lindvall 2007, 89; Russell 2010, 394-397). However, some interesting divergences happen at this point that split Christian cinema into the genres of end-times film and evangelization epics that I defined in the introduction. As evangelical film began to develop and themes began to vary, I argue that the subcategories of discipleship, salvation, and pedagogy appear in evangelical films of the twenty-first century.

As we have seen, biblical epics defined the early period of Christian films. This thesis investigates the genres of evangelical films that emerged after the dissolution of Christianity's religious influence on Hollywood. When evangelicals began producing their own cinematic pieces, the divergence between end-times pictures and evangelization epics happened very quickly, as early as 1972 (Russell 2010, 394-399; McCormack 2019, 65). It is worth noting that the two need not be mutually exclusive; one production company is capable of producing either genre. However, I have yet to find an example of the two existing in one film without one vastly overpowering the other. In these early years (1970s) of evangelical film production, such productions usually found their footing as teaching materials in churches rather than being viewed at the theater with other popular films (Russell 2010, 394-396). This trend of small-scale films for a limited audience continued for decades, even as production quality improved (Russell 2010, 394-399). However, it was not until the twenty-first century that another emergence occurred in evangelical film, which would forever alter the genre.

With a Budget Like a Mustard Seed: The Story of *Flywheel*

In 2003, Sherwood Baptist Church of Albany, Georgia, released *Flywheel* (2003). This film was produced by amateur members of the church's media ministry. It starred a cast of volunteers drawn from its congregation, including its main character, Jay, played by Alex Kendrick, who was also the director and producer of the film (Parker 2012, 61-63). In the film, Jay is a used car salesman who seems unredeemable on the surface. In the film, Jay's life comes apart due to his poor decisions, but he eventually gives his life to God, who turns everything around for him (Kendrick and Kendrick, 2003). If one watched this film today, one would likely find it unremarkable other than its low production value and stale scriptwriting (Parker 2012, 61-63). Scholar of contemporary religion and film J. Ryan Parker mentions that even the Kendrick Brothers themselves seem somewhat embarrassed about *Flywheel*'s poor production value in comparison to their later films, saying that the Kendrick brothers "still make apologies for their first film, treating it, in a way, like the black sheep of their cinematic family" (Parker 2012, 64). It was released in a single theater, the Carmike Cinema, in Albany, Georgia (Parker 2012, 63). Despite its miniscule release, Sherwood Baptist Church nearly doubled its money (Parker 2012, 63). They found that their church members and their community were highly supportive (Parker 2012, 63-64). Eventually, the film was distributed by Sherwood to other churches who wished to screen the film or use it as teaching material (Parker 2012, 63-65). Despite its diminutive budget, *Flywheel* exceeded the expectations of everyone involved in its production (Parker 2012, 61-64). Although the film was seemingly unimpressive, it heralded some significant changes to come.

Many scholars and those within the general public would consider *The Passion of the Christ* to be the beginning of the modern evangelical film renaissance that has taken place over the past two decades (Brown, Keeler, and Lindvall 2007, 87-88; Lundberg 2009, 387-388; Russell 2010, 397-398). However, I argue that *Flywheel* warrants consideration as the pioneering evangelical film through which we can understand evangelization epics as a genre. *Flywheel* predates *Passion* by a full year. Further, the success of *Passion* has been proven hard to emulate, which is not the case for *Flywheel* (Parker 2012, 70-72; Russell 2010, 398-399). Sherwood Baptist Church was encouraged and emboldened by their success, and they continued to build on them, improving their stories and production quality with each subsequent film (Parker 2012, 70-73). More importantly, the audience response became more extraordinary with every film (Parker 2012, 70-74). Sherwood's films went from making a few thousand dollars on *Flywheel* to millions on every subsequent release (Parker 2012, 82, 99, 118). Sherwood Pictures effectively created a renaissance of evangelical film whilst we are nearing the twentieth anniversary of *Passion*, and a mainstream Hollywood attempt at a religious production has yet to emulate that kind of success again (Russell 2010, 394-399).

Flywheel also remains important as it marks the beginning of the subdivision of the genre of evangelization epics. Rather than evangelization epics being squarely aimed at the conversion of the lost and damned, *Flywheel* preaches to the choir purposefully (Parker 2012, 70-71). I suggest that these new subgenres in evangelization epics could be termed "discipleship," "salvation," and "pedagogy," and all would find success in the years to come.

It should be clear then that evangelical film is no new phenomenon, nor did it come out of nowhere. Rather, it is a genre that is as old as the medium of film itself. It once dominated, controlled, split from the mainstream, and split again amongst itself (Lindvall 2007, 56-59, 215; Russell 2010, 394-395; McCormick 2019, 64-66). It spent years in obscurity, trying to find a way to relevance and mainstream success again, and through the most unlikely source, it returned to a level of prominence that cannot be ignored or denied (Russell 2010, 394-395; Parker 2012, 70-72). The modern evangelical film renaissance began with a whisper, and most missed it. It is from this whisper that I will build my argument.

Chapter II:

Edifying Epics: The Impact of Kendrick Brothers' Evangelization Epics

As mentioned in the closing of the previous chapter, this thesis will focus on the category of evangelization epics that I have suggested. I have coined the term evangelization epic to highlight a genre of Christian film that shares a similar purpose to a sermon. They prioritize instilling biblical principles or morals into viewers, which shapes the contours of the narratives and productions. This genre can be further divided into three subgenres that I am terming pedagogy, salvation, and discipleship. These subgenres denote the primary intended purpose of certain films within the evangelization epic genre of Christian film. The salvation subgenre should be somewhat self-explanatory. Films falling into the salvation subgenre are those whose primary purpose is to reach audiences who do not identify as conservative Christians.⁶ Though the primary audience to whom these films appeal mostly already identifies as conservative Christians, the films within this genre primarily deal with how people already living as Christians should respond to a supposedly hostile secular world. I will deal more with the topic of the salvation subgenre in chapter three.

This chapter will focus on the discipleship subgenre. What distinguishes films in the discipleship subgenre from their salvation and pedagogy counterparts is that films within this genre are primarily intended to edify pre-existing members of the conservative Christian habitus. Whereas films within the salvation and pedagogy subgenre essentially focus on what is wrong with the world, those within the discipleship subgenre focus on

⁶ I will note here that other variations of Christianity could make films that would fall within this genre, however, if they have, they have not achieved a similar level of success to their conservative Christian counterparts. Additionally, there is a significant film industry in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. For an interesting discussion on this topic, see Hall 2012

what could go wrong for those who already call themselves conservative Christians. The point of films in this genre is to show those within the conservative Christian habitus how to live in accordance with the values and commitments that stem from their habitus. Films within this genre certainly do not shy away from criticisms of the world that surrounds them. Instead of focusing their efforts outward towards the world, producers of these films encourage the viewer (who presumably already shares their commitments and worldview) to focus their attention inward and try to change themselves.

From Prayer to Premier: The Kendrick Brothers and Sherwood Pictures

There are no better examples of the discipleship subgenre than the cinematography of the Kendrick Brothers. I referred to the films of Alex and Stephen Kendrick in the previous chapter as products of Sherwood Pictures of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia. At one time, it would have sufficed to refer to any of the Kendrick Brothers' films as the work of Sherwood Pictures, as up until their fifth film, the two entities were one and the same for creative purposes. When referring to the Kendrick Brothers, I am primarily referring to Stephen and Alex Kendrick, two brothers who have become perhaps the most influential force in the subgenre of discipleship films. Additionally, many consider them to have founded the modern church film movement. I should note for accuracy that Stephen and Alex also have an additional brother who is now involved in their production company. This involvement, however, appears to be a very recent development. As I will primarily be referring to films in which this brother was not involved, I will not be referring to him when I mention the Kendrick Brothers.

As I explained when discussing *Flywheel* (2003) in chapter one, Sherwood Pictures was the official production company for the film. It was heavily involved in producing the Kendrick Brothers' next three films, though they partnered with larger distribution companies on subsequent films to achieve greater reach. Alex and Stephen Kendrick were members of the pastoral staff at Sherwood Baptist Church, and they were a large part of the drive to create a biblical film ministry through the church. After *Flywheel*, the Kendrick Brothers continued to partner with Sherwood Baptist Church for nearly a decade, ultimately producing four films through Sherwood Pictures. In the introduction to *Courageous* (2011), a careful viewer may notice that among the production companies credited, a production company simply referred to as Kendrick Brothers is among them. After this film, Sherwood Pictures never produced another film, and the Kendrick brothers continued to produce films on their own, though the format did not change drastically. I have not been able to locate any official reason for this split, and all indications suggest it was amicable. Available information reports that all three Kendrick Brothers are still active members of the Sherwood Baptist Church, and the Kendrick Brothers website seems to suggest that Sherwood Baptist Church was content to continue working with the ministry they developed from the four films they produced (Kendrick Brothers Productions n.d.; Fox 31 News Team 2013).

In the previous chapter, I proposed the categories of discipleship, salvation, and pedagogy for differentiating non-apocalyptic or evangelization-focused, evangelical films. The Kendrick Brothers have stated that the purpose of their films is “the edification of the church” (Kendrick n.d.) which places their films firmly in the pedagogy category. Put plainly, the intended audience of the Kendrick Brothers comprises existing Christians

within and outside of congregations. These are films aimed at insiders to Christianity. Given that these films are examples of insider-to-insider communication, the Kendrick Brothers, as insiders to Christianity themselves, can assume a certain level of requisite knowledge and dispositions in their audience.

More than appealing to their audience, the Kendrick Brothers are responding to a demand for popular culture with a Christian theological orientation. To fully grasp the origin of this demand, it is crucial to understand that the rise of evangelical film is not an independent phenomenon; rather, it is the latest front in a series of so-called “culture wars” that evangelicals are engaged in with what they view as secular society. This notion of a secular society may seem strange to those who observe existing political discourse in the United States, where political leaders regularly draw from passages in the Bible to support their policy proposals. Regardless, the factuality of the notion is irrelevant. Rather, it is key to understand that evangelicals perceive society (and, for my purposes, American society in particular) as secular and distinct from Christian spaces.

Faith Lives Here: Evangelicalism, Habitus, and the Domestic Field

The notion that one can distinguish between secular and Christian spaces stems from what Brian Carwana describes as the domesticity of Christianity (Carwana 2021, 217-218). Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the domestication of Christianity saw religion’s primary sphere of influence shift from public life to the home (Carwana 2021, 217-218). Carwana suggests that as the public sphere became more inaccessible to Christians, they deepened their existing influence in the domestic sphere and shifted their focus to political concerns about family values (Carwana 2021, 217-218).

Social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu's theories about field, habitus, and capital, offer a valuable framework for comprehending this development. Habitus is best understood as a set of dispositions and predispositions cultivated in an individual (or an agent) through social interaction. Habitus informs how agents think and act, and perhaps most importantly, it affects how they perceive their world (Carwana 2021, 216; Rey 2007, 46-47). Most agents go through life without any awareness of their habitus. Anthropologist of religion Terry Rey defines Bourdieu's habitus as follows: "In addition to being 'the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences,' the habitus' is equally characterized as any individual's 'set of dispositions' that inclines the agent to act in a certain fashion, thus to a great extent shaping (or generating) her or his 'practice'" (Rey 2007, 46). Simplified, we can understand this to mean that every person is socialized into certain ways of viewing the world (Rey 2007, 46-48). Habitus equips a person with a certain worldview and set of experiences that color their perception of the world (Rey 2007, 46-48). This perception decides how a person will interact with the world, what they value, and what they consider to be "common sense."

Critical religious studies scholar Craig Martin elaborates on habitus, noting that dispositions can encompass tastes, the ability to discern subtle differences, general aspirations, and common sense (Martin 2017, 88). Martin uses caviar as an example of a place where one's habitus may become evident. A person raised in a working-class background might regard eating fish eggs as disgusting, while a person from a wealthier background would be more likely to consider it a delicacy (Martin 2017, 88). The two people are viewing the same dish, yet engrained social dispositions and tastes decide whether the dish is appetizing to them. Martin then uses himself as an example to show

that his blue-collar background continues to affect his contemporary habitus as an academic. Even though Martin has long since left home and spent years away from his blue-collar roots, he can still tell the subtle differences between the first three years of the Chevrolet Camaro model due to his father's interest in muscle cars (Martin 2017, 88-89). In these ways, habitus is deeply engrained and difficult to fully change.

Bourdieu uses the term 'field' to describe structured spaces where social agents engage in a battle over capital (Rey 2007, 44-45). Capital is created and consumed by agents within these fields as they negotiate their positions (Rey 2007, 44-45). Capital, in this instance, should not be understood to mean physical currency; rather, it is a blanket term used to signify cultural or social capital within fields (Rey 2007, 44-45). In any field, capital is in constant negotiation. As with economic capital, those agents within a field that maintain a high level of capital have the highest level of control and influence (Rey 2007, 44-45). Though fields are, in theory, independent, agents who have social capital in one field can often transport it to another (Rey 2007, 45). Like any currency exchange, the exchange value of a currency in a different field will vary, but nonetheless, this notion of capital transfer allows agents with accumulated capital to act in multiple fields (Rey 2007, 44-45, 51).

According to Bourdieu, field and habitus are interrelated and act upon each other. Field acts upon habitus by shaping its social development, and habitus acts upon field by giving it meaning (Rey 2007, 46). That habitus can act on field essentially means that the habitus of those who are consumers of capital in a particular field will decide the structure of the field and what counts as capital within it (Rey 2007, 46). Bourdieu also

suggested that all habitus is informed by an agent's class (Rey 2007, 50).⁷ The habitus of agents within the same economic classes (under the same economic system) will be relatively homogenous due to their similar formative experiences (Rey 2007, 49-50).

Regarding religion, Bourdieu's theory suggests that its primary function is to allow agents to make sense of their position in the overall social order (Rey 2007, 57). Bourdieu proposes that religion's ability to appeal to a divine will as an explanation for injustices and inequalities makes it difficult to challenge them and advocate for change (Rey 2007, 58). In simple terms, Bourdieu believes that religion is a strong force to legitimate and perpetuate the existing social order (Rey 2007, 58). Furthermore, Bourdieu thought that religion could act as a tool that allows agents to preserve and perpetuate their culture in times of instability (Rey 2007, 62).

Translating this theory into the current discussion of evangelical film, we can understand evangelicalism as a field and the evangelicals within it as agents. The agents in this field have a habitus that is informed simultaneously by the field of evangelicalism and the conditions of their class. I will note here that evangelicals are not a unified class. They range in economic status from financially destitute to incredibly wealthy. However, following the work of sociologist of religion Sean McCloud, I place them in a common evangelical class due to their shared lens and common language for speaking about the world (McCloud 2007, 28). Their varying degrees of economic success may differ, but they possess a shared set of aspirations informed by their religious commitments. (McCloud 2007, 28). Like the Christians McCloud describes, evangelicals place greater emphasis on what they associate money with or how they choose to invest it than the

⁷ By class, Bourdieu means an agent's socio-economic class (Martin 2017, 87-90).

need to accumulate wealth (McCloud 2007, 20-21). Money to evangelicals is not a good in itself. Instead, it is a way to do good and achieve the aspirational goals of the evangelical habitus. Essentially, money is seen by evangelicals as a means of furthering God's will (Noll 2007, 16; McCloud 2007, 20-21). Given that Bourdieu's theory of habitus is concerned with sets of dispositions and predispositions, the group's economic worldview matters more in discussing their habitus than their material conditions of existence (Martin 2017, 87-90; McCloud 2007, 28).

We should also note that, for the most part, these agents also exist in other fields that comprise society, and we can expect them to be influenced by these fields in certain ways. Though, the level to which these other fields influence those within the evangelical field is limited by the amount of capital that agents in other fields are willing to expend to reach them, as well as the exchange value of that capital. Social and cultural capital from other fields will not be worth as much to people inside the evangelical field, and the inverse is also true. We can infer this conclusion from the fact that evangelicals display a certain level of suspicion for any field deemed secular or secular agents in evangelical-dominated fields (Carwana 2021, 222). We should further understand that as agents can operate in more than one field, they can exert influence in more than one field (Rey 2007, 44-45). Limitations on this influence are imposed by the fact that an agent has a finite amount of social and cultural capital at any one time and that some fields are diametrically opposed, meaning that influence in both is unlikely.

With Bourdieu's theoretical framework in mind, we can understand that the habitus of current evangelical agents is strongly informed by the fields of evangelicalism

and the domestic field.⁸ Carwana argues that evangelical concern over morality in the domestic field results from sexual and family values debates that began in the 1920s and reached their height in the 1960s (Carwana 2021, 215-220). He notes that the sexual and family values that evangelicals espouse can trace their lineage to Christianity's earliest documents (Carwana 2021, 216). It is not unusual that evangelicals would be concerned with such issues, as they are part of the direct lineage of their belief system. Carwana suggests that Christianity has seen many developments throughout history that have caused its primary field of influence to be reduced to the home (Carwana 2021, 217-218). As Carwana observes, evangelicalism emerged during Christianity's trend toward domestication (Carwana 2021, 217-218). Early evangelicalism was influenced by concerns regarding sexuality, marriage, children, and general family life (Carwana 2021, 217-219). Due to the circumstances of its emergence, evangelicalism exhibits a heightened concern about the domestic field (Carwana 2021, 217-219). The greatest concern of evangelicals is ultimately the reproduction of the evangelical habitus, though they would likely term it slightly differently (Carwana 2021, 216, 225).

Evangelicals are committed to the idea of the family as an institution, meaning that they are committed to promoting it as a moral good (Carwana 2021, 225).⁹ This idea of the family as a moral good derives from the idea that the nuclear family structure is the most efficient way of reproducing the evangelical habitus (Carwana 2021, 225-226). It is

⁸ The core tenets of evangelicalism can be described by Bebbington's quadrilateral. These suggest that at its core, evangelicalism is conversionist, activist, biblicist, and crucicentric. This definition should be understood to mean that there is an emphasis on changing lives by spreading the gospel, that it is the duty of existing Christians to spread the gospel, the Bible is the only true source of the gospel, and the doctrine of Jesus Christ's crucifixion is the focus of the gospels (Bebbington 2021, 3).

⁹ This commitment is evidenced in evangelical organizations such as James Dobson's *Focus on the Family*, which provides pro-family instructional material to evangelical churches and regularly lobbies the federal government on family issues (Draper 2010).

not that other family structures, such as single-parent or multi-generational families, cannot reproduce the evangelical habitus in their children, but rather that the chances of success are reduced in such circumstances (Carwana 2021, 225-226). This commitment to the idea of the nuclear family could be seen as the most resonant with their worldview, moral principles, and conception of human nature (Carwana 2021, 226). It is due to this alignment of the nuclear family with the evangelical worldview, as well as the perceived need of the family for the reproduction of the evangelical habitus, that the acceptance and promotion of a family structure that deviates from the nuclear family model is seen to threaten the very concept of the evangelical family (Carwana 2021, 226-227).

The family values debates of the mid-twentieth century saw much of the structure of the Christian family challenged (Carwana 2021, 220). Following Carwana's analysis, it becomes clear that evangelical agents were once able to easily utilize their cultural capital in many fields of society in the United States. However, over the past century and a half, the cultural capital of evangelical agents has become devalued in many fields, and the secularization thesis would suggest that this pattern is only continuing.¹⁰ Evangelicals are keenly aware of this devaluing of their cultural capital and the perceived threats to their conception of the family. Discourse from leaders such as Jerry Falwell Sr. suggests a significant segment of evangelical agents seek to reverse the trend and revalue their cultural capital in other fields.¹¹

¹⁰ The Secularization Thesis was postulated by several notable sociologists in the twentieth century, including Peter Berger and Bryan Wilson. They suggested that modernization in societies necessarily leads to increasing differentiation between the secular and religious spheres of societies. The proposed result of this process was that religion would eventually become completely marginalized or disappear altogether (Furseth 2003, 191-192)

¹¹ Jerry Falwell Sr. was a well-known conservative evangelical pastor who founded Liberty University and is credited with cofounding the Moral Majority (King 2022b, 211). See Harding (2000) For an in-depth look at how Falwell's ministry and rhetoric shaped both the religious and political landscapes of late 20th-century America, influencing the rise of the Christian Right and its engagement with broader U.S. culture.

Most evangelicals do not see their efforts to revalue their cultural capital as an offensive strategy but rather a defensive one. However, closer inspection suggests that they have taken an offensive approach. I suggest that the loss of value of evangelical capital in other fields has made evangelical leadership quite sensitive to any perceived outside influence in fields where their capital is still highly valued. One such field is the domestic realm. In recent years, agents from other fields have exerted their influence in the field of domesticity in ways that have expanded the conception of what a family can look like, which has included the extolling of single mothers, the acceptance of 2SLGBTQ+ parental figures, and supporting children in their efforts to assert their own gender identities, regardless of how they were assigned upon birth.¹² Given the conservative habitus of evangelical agents, changes such as these are not in alignment with their theological or ideological commitments. Considering that evangelical agents' habitus contains their matrix of perception, they see these alternate perspectives as though they are diametrically opposed to evangelical commitments.¹³ Therefore, from the evangelical point of view, for these other agents to influence the domestic field means that evangelical agents must lose some of their influence. Many evangelical agents are not prepared to face such a reality. Faced with what they believe is the threat of losing

Especially relevant to this discussion, Harding investigates how conversion stories, often told in a certain formulaic way, serve to reaffirm personal faith and help the community maintain its boundaries, reinforcing the dichotomy between being "saved" and "lost" (Harding 2000, 36-40).

¹² While not standard in the United States, my use of the term 2SLGBTQ+ follows conventions within Canadian academic and governmental policies that recognize the fact that Indigenous peoples were the first to build communities that honored sexual and gender diversity in North America. The term 2S is a culturally specific term used by some Indigenous peoples to describe a person whose gender identity, spiritual identity, and/or sexual orientation embodies both masculine and feminine spirits, or neither (See Smithers 2022; Thurston 2022).

¹³ The matrix of perception is defined as the classificatory system engrained in agents, which acts as the lens through which they perceive the world. These sets of classifications structure and, in many ways, build the world through our perceptions. This world, through the structures of society, then acts upon us, shaping our habitus and making us who we are. In this way, we create the world that creates us (Martin 2017, 87).

influence within the domestic field, evangelical agents treat more progressive agents in the field of domesticity as a threat that is coming to take one of their last fields of influence from them.

One may wonder why the field of domesticity is so important to the evangelical community. Aside from being one of the few fields in which evangelicalism maintains a significant influence, the domestic field is also key to reproducing the evangelical habitus (Carwana 2021, 216-221). Evangelical agents desire their offspring to adopt their same habitus as a means of cultural self-preservation (Carwana 2021, 221). Additionally, evangelicals believe in a divine mandate to spread the gospel (Bebbington 2021, 3). As habitus is adopted through socialization from an early age, maintaining control of the domestic field is crucial to reproducing an evangelical habitus (Martin 2017, 87; Carwana 2021, 221). One could argue that the existence of non-nuclear forms of domestic life does not necessarily mean that the evangelical way of rearing children is under threat. Bourdieu, however, would likely respond that what makes the evangelical habitus powerful is the way it is portrayed as natural or God's will by those with the most cultural capital in the evangelical field (Rey 2007, 47-50; Martin 2017, 85-93; Carwana 2021, 230-231). To open the field of domesticity to methods of embodiment that evangelicals perceive to be in direct opposition to their habitus is to acknowledge that the evangelical habitus is a matter of preference and not nature, which is to expose it to the possibility of criticism (Carwana 2021, 222-223). One might be tempted to accuse Pierre Bourdieu and me of attributing a level of intentionality to evangelical hostility that is not actually present. I will acknowledge that I do not believe that the average evangelical agent is cognizant of the danger of exposing the evangelical habitus to criticism. Rather, I contend

that the importance of the traditional family has been reinforced in subsequent generations of evangelicals, rendering defense to perceived threats no more than a natural response.

As stated earlier, the current culture war began as a battle over sexual and family values during the 1920s before reaching its peak in the 1960s (Carwana 2021, 220). At the same time as this debate reached its peak, biblical films ceased their box office success.¹⁴ Once biblical films represented a financial liability to Hollywood film studios, the film studios stopped producing them, and the genre of biblical epic disappeared from the box office. Eventually, political events of the 1970s and 1980s, along with charismatic evangelical leaders such as Jerry Falwell Sr., led to a new coalition of conservative evangelicals prioritizing family values. In many ways, this coalition still exists, and some argue that it is due to the strength of this coalition that Donald Trump was elected President of the United States in 2016 and 2024 (Haynes 2021, 3-5). Given the strength of this coalition, their commitment to evangelical tenets, and their concerns over family values, it should be no surprise that this cohort received the films of the Kendrick Brothers with excitement.

It should now be clear that the films of the Kendrick Brothers emerged within longstanding evangelical theological commitments, concerns over family values, and an ongoing culture war. Due to the importance of the domestic field in maintaining and reproducing the evangelical habitus, evangelical agents who are cognizant of the increasing prevalence of non-evangelical agents exercising influence in the field of

¹⁴ Biblical epics such as Cecil B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments* (1923) and *Samson and Delilah* (1949) proved very popular with audiences during the first half of the twentieth century (Lindvall 2007, 193). However, George Steven's *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) and John Hurston's *The Bible: In the Beginning* (1966) proved to be commercial failures (Russell 2010, 394).

domesticity are concerned that the emergence of these alternative versions of domesticity may expose the evangelical version of domesticity to criticism, and by virtue of their interconnectedness, expose the evangelical habitus as a whole to criticism. If the evangelical habitus becomes open to criticism, it could jeopardize the ability of the evangelical habitus to reproduce itself, as well as devalue evangelical capital in fields outside its own, which could cause the field to collapse. Though it has many fronts, I argue that the culture war is primarily over this field of domesticity.

Due to their medium, the Kendrick Brothers are effectively on the front lines of the culture war. As the medium of film is part of popular culture, it tends to reflect the issues of its time, and in most cases, it will reflect the habitus of those involved in its production. As such, we can expect the films of the Kendrick Brothers to reflect what they consider to be the issues of their times, which is the decline in the prevalence of traditional family values, and we can expect it to reflect their evangelical habitus.

The term “evangelical habitus” sounds simple enough, though its functionality is far more complex. It manifests through various commitments, some explicit and some implicit. The explicit commitments are likely familiar to many people who were raised in the “Bible belt” region of the United States. Nonetheless, they may be unfamiliar to some readers. The most important tenets of evangelicalism to understand are its commitment to biblical literalism, strict adherence to biblically prescribed morals and social values, a belief in a future return of Jesus Christ, a belief in the requirement for all believers to engage in evangelization efforts, a belief in the idea that all aspects of life are meant to be used to honor and glorify God, and the imperative of conversion (Bebbington 2021, 3). However, there are also accompanying implicit connotations for many explicit beliefs

and doctrines. There is an explicit belief in the doctrine of gender complementarity. This doctrine essentially states that God made two genders, male and female, and they play complementary roles. In keeping with the commitment to biblical literalism, they typically draw from the story of Adam and Eve being exiled from the garden in the book of Genesis to claim that men are to be the dominant sex, though there are certainly New Testament passages that could be pointed to as well (Trible 2018, 32). These patriarchal attitudes are extended to daughters as well (Jacobs 2018, 337-338). Both wives and daughters are often treated as the property of the male patriarch of the family (Jacobs 2018, 337-338).

In some strains of evangelicalism, there is a notion that some races are superior to others. This notion is often based on the story of Noah in Genesis, where Noah became drunk, and one of his sons did nothing about it, while the other two covered him so he could retain his dignity (Park 2021, 1-2; Whitford 2009, 2-5). Noah is said to have cursed the son who did nothing, and in some strains of evangelicalism, the descendants of this cursed son are considered to be people who are either black or racialized in some way (Park 2021, 1-2; Whitford 2009, 2-5). This interpretation is an extreme version of evangelical rhetoric, and in most cases, it is not so explicitly articulated (Bjork-James 2020, 59). As a result of civil rights movements that progressed societal racial relations and discourse, the rhetoric of racial inferiority has reached a point of unacceptability in mainstream society. In the contemporary era, communities or individuals that express such opinions openly are likely to face backlash and consequences. Rather, as anthropologist of religion Sophie Bjork-James shows, among the religious Right, this rhetoric often takes the form of insinuations in sermons and media (Bjork-James 2020,

59). These observations should not be taken to mean these implications are always intentional, though in some cases, they are. It is entirely possible that many of them used in evangelical sermons and media feel completely natural to evangelicals due to their matrix of perception, even though they may be perceived as racist or prejudiced by outsiders.

Finally, there are the prescriptions regarding men's roles in evangelicalism. Men are to be the spiritual leaders of their home; they are to lead the direction of the lives of their entire families. Men are portrayed as the lynchpin, without which the family is aimless, misguided, and miserable. Further, continuing to build from the doctrine of complementarianism, divorce is forbidden. There are almost no circumstances that would necessitate or even justify divorce. If absolutely necessary, and the man agrees to it, a divorce may be permitted, but usually only if the woman has committed an infidelity of some sort (Hobbs 2019, 196, 210). Even in circumstances where the man has committed infidelity, the woman is usually urged not to consider divorce (Hobbs 2019, 210; Cowart 2024, 108-110; Toews 1992, 122-123). Should a divorce occur, the blame will often be laid at the woman's feet for her failure to perform her wifely duties (Hobbs 2019, 210; Cowart 2024, 108-110; Toews 1992, 122-123).

Depending on the congregation and context, these may be explicit or implicit commitments. As Bourdieu's theory suggests, in many cases, agents may not be aware of some of the commitments of their habitus; rather, they are committed to them unconsciously, in a manner befitting a reflex more than an ideology (Martin 2017, 85). No matter the form, I argue that the films written and directed by Alex and Stephen Kendrick embody the explicit and implicit aspects of the evangelical habitus almost

perfectly. In what follows, I will explore themes of race, gender, and class to show how the evangelical habitus operates.

Reel Faith, Real Roles: Marriage Dynamics and Gender Roles in the Public and Private Sphere

Every Kendrick Brothers film, except *Fireproof* (2008) and *Facing the Giants* (2006), centers around a family with at least one child. Even in the case of *Facing the Giants*, Brooke Taylor's (wife of Grant Taylor, the main character) only wish in life was to have a child. Faced with her inability to bear children, she faces despair, as she does not know how to define herself otherwise. When Grant and Brooke are grappling with his sterility, he asks her, "If the Lord never gives us children, will you still love him?" At this moment, Brooke is unable to answer this question, which displays the extent to which she has defined herself by her ability to bear children. Further, this portrayal also displays the extent to which the films promote the idea that women should define themselves based on their reproductive capabilities. Eventually, having once again been told by the fertility clinic that she is not pregnant, Brooke has a moment in her car where she briefly speaks to God through tears and says she will still love him. Rather than exploring this development where Brooke would have to redefine herself, the Kendrick Brothers resolve the problem by revealing that the clinic accidentally read Brooke the wrong results and that she is pregnant after all. The narrative is meant to play out in such a way that Brooke learns that she has to love and trust God, even if that means he has different plans for her. It implicitly suggests that a woman's value resides entirely in her presumed ability to bear children.

Alongside Brooke's story, Grant Taylor is struggling in his role as a husband and his career as a football coach. As a husband, he is unable to give his wife children due to being sterile, and he struggles to provide for her financially. In his role as a football coach at a local Christian high school, he struggles with a team that is both apathetic about the game they are playing, as well as the faith that their school is supposed to represent. Much like Brooke, he is able to triumph over all of these struggles by letting go of his concerns and trusting God to take care of them. Grant's struggles are presented in a manner that sees them play out parallel to Brooke's. Their parallel storylines do the work of equivocating their struggles. Brooke's primary struggle is domestic, and Grant's primary struggle is professional. Though the story sees them both triumph, they triumph in their respective fields. The way in which the story unfolds reinforces notions that women primarily belong in the domestic field and the professional field belongs to men.

These implications reflect the evangelical habitus, as Carwana discusses it. He mentions that churches, pastors, and evangelical media reinforce the narratives supporting the evangelical habitus (Carwana 2021, 237). Traditionally, evangelical leaders have had a disapproving view of career-oriented women (Carwana 2021, 237). However, broader socioeconomic conditions have significantly decreased the feasibility of maintaining the strict boundaries preventing evangelical women from pursuing careers (Carwana 2021, 237). These conditions are reflected in the film, as Brooke has a part-time job at a florist's shop. However, Brooke is not shown to have any aspirations or desires regarding her career. Her only aspirations are to have children and spend her life raising them. This portrayal seems to recognize the compromise evangelicals have had to make in recent years regarding women working outside the home. Brooke does work

outside the home, but the traditional evangelical view is reinforced by the portrayal of Brooke's desires revolving around home and family life.

Guiding Lights: Parental Archetypes in Evangelical Films

In their other films where the family already has children, such as *Flywheel* and *Courageous*, the mother figures in these films often play the role of homemaker and are only seen working out of necessity. Judy and Victoria (The wives of the respective main characters) are fairly frequently shown as submissive to Jay and Adam (the respective husbands/ main characters) or shamed for not being submissive to their husbands. Early in *Flywheel*, when the Austin family is at the dinner table, Judy admonishes Jay for selling a previously wrecked car to someone without telling them its history. Jay immediately shuts this line of questioning down by telling her, "That's enough." Further, the overall narrative of *Flywheel* does not develop Judy's character much. She does not have a career or ambitions of her own and stays in the domestic field exclusively. When introduced into the narrative, she is not as much an independent character as she is an extension of Jay's story. Jay's story takes place primarily in the professional field, with brief segments in the domestic field. Judy exists in the domestic field, and it is in that field where she is seen and occasionally heard. Even when she speaks, it is only on matters related to Jay's narrative. In this film, Judy exists as an extension of Jay.

The same is true of Victoria (the wife of the main character, Adam, in *Courageous*). Victoria and Adam have two children together: their nine-year-old daughter, Emily, and their fifteen-year-old son, Dylan. In a heart-wrenching series of events, Emily is killed in a car accident when a drunk driver hits the friend's car in which

she is riding. Though Victoria and Adam rush to the hospital, Emily passes away before they arrive. As one would expect, all members of the family struggle with their grief and regret in the wake of their loss. Yet, all of the focus is on Adam's journey through grief. Further problematizing this depiction, Victoria and Dylan are both able to return to a new normal due to Adam's improved relationship with God, which resulted from his grief. Here, we see an instance in which the woman's emotional well-being is presented as dependent upon her husband's state of mind.

Further, the overall narrative of *Courageous* focuses on fathers exclusively. The film does not comment overtly on the role of mothers. If one were to infer the role of mothers from how they are portrayed in the film, their field would once again be the domestic realm. Only one mother, Amanda, is employed in *Courageous*, and the reason for her entering the professional field is that David (the youngest of the fathers in the film) disappeared when she told him she was pregnant. Amanda is only shown twice in the film, and both depictions portray her as a character in a tragic circumstance that she would not be in if David had fulfilled his responsibility as a father. David and Amanda were not married when she became pregnant, allowing the film to give subtle commentary on the dangers of premarital sex. Ultimately, in elevating the father's role, the film implicitly devalues the role of the mother, particularly the single mother. The single mother in this film is a tragic figure who needs rescue rather than a strong figure to be celebrated.

Single mothers are a rarity in Kendrick Brothers' films. Only two have ever made an appearance. The first was Amanda in *Courageous*. In this film, it is portrayed as shameful that David did not step up to marry Amanda so they could have a traditional

family structure. It is also implied at the end that they reconcile. This series of events suggests that David (and, by extension, the father figure) is the lynchpin of the family. In David's absence, Amanda is miserable and barely scraping by; if David steps in, all her problems will be solved. It suggests that the conditions of Amanda's existence and the level of happiness she is capable of achieving are decided by David's (or another male spouse figure's) presence.

The Kendrick Brothers' most recent release, *Overcomer* (2019), has a similar theme. In this film, Hannah, the main character, is being raised by her grandmother, Barbara. Barbara is raising her because her father, Thomas, did not want to be part of her life, and her mother died of a drug overdose. Even though Barbara gives Hannah plenty of attention and sets fairly rigid standards for her behavior, Hannah acts out by committing petty theft. This behavior only changes after Hannah eventually meets Thomas, her father, and he leads her to accept Jesus so she can start a relationship with her "heavenly father." These narratives imply that even under the best of circumstances, with the most attentive of single mothers, they cannot equal the value of the traditional nuclear family.

Some of their films offer subtle warnings about the possibility of women having to take the role of head of households if the man does not fulfill the role properly. In the case of *Fireproof*, the failure of the husband to be a strong leader of their family forces the wives to step up to lead their household.¹⁵ Each time, they are shown to be unable to do so. In *Fireproof*, rather than being tasked with taking care of children, Catherine is responsible for caring for her aging parents, an equally daunting responsibility. Her

¹⁵ In addition, *Flywheel* and *War Room* (2015) share this narrative.

husband, Caleb, refuses to contribute in any meaningful way, both in terms of finances and domestic responsibilities. Caleb's resentful behavior and lack of financial contribution are the primary focuses of his character arc. Once Caleb has learned to love God, his hostility melts away, and he begins contributing to the medical expenses that Catherine is paying for her parents.¹⁶ However, the domestic responsibilities that Caleb complains about Catherine not completing remain her problem. Even in their fights before Caleb's character transformation, the problems of domesticity are framed in a way that makes them exclusively Catherine's problem.

The explanation given in instances where Caleb is upset that Catherine does not have a meal ready for him is that Catherine has not had a chance to make or get any food because she has to work or that Caleb did not communicate his needs to her. In no instance is it acknowledged that Caleb is an adult and is capable of feeding himself. Rather, Catherine accepts that these are her duties, but some failure on Caleb's part has prevented her from completing her role as an agent in the field of domesticity. Catherine is shown at times having an emotional breakdown due to her stress and having to shoulder all her responsibilities. Once Caleb begins communicating his needs and contributing financially, it is implied that she will be able to fulfill her role as a domestic agent. This portrayal is supposed to be an example to men that they should not be leaving

¹⁶ It is noteworthy that Caleb's transformation is sparked when his father gives him a copy of *Love Dare* (2008), a devotional book for couples written by Stephen and Alex Kendrick. The book combines spiritual lessons with practical exercises, structured as a 40-day challenge. Each day offers a scripture-based lesson on love, a specific challenge or dare that applies that lesson, and a journaling area for reflection. Within the film, daily dares from the book guide Caleb through tasks to demonstrate forms of love. For example, one of the early dares involves showing kindness, while another asks him to refrain from saying anything negative to his wife. As Caleb progresses through the 40-day challenge, his actions begin to change his heart and influence Catherine's feelings as well.

their wives to shoulder the burden alone. However, it implies that women are incapable of leading their families purely by virtue of their gender.

Additionally, while Catherine and Caleb are beginning to file for divorce, Gavin, a doctor at the hospital where Catherine works, makes subtle romantic advances toward her that Catherine entertains. Catherine is shamed by one of the patients in the hospital for entertaining his advances, even though it has not moved beyond a few arguably flirtatious conversations. Once Caleb completes his spiritual transformation, he comes to the hospital and, in a display of male aggression, tells Gavin to stay away from his wife. I argue that this series of events functions in two ways. First, it sends a message to evangelical men that it is dangerous to allow their wives to be in the professional field, as they may encounter male agents in that field who would steal their wives. Second, it establishes that marriage, in effect, makes the man's wife an object.

This notion is evidenced by the idea that someone's wife can be stolen. In the scene in question, Caleb tells Gavin, "This is concerning Catherine, *my* wife. I know what you're doing. And have no intention of stepping aside while you try to steal *my* wife's heart." These lines are immediately followed by Caleb holding up his fist a few inches from Gavin's face as a fairly obvious threat of physical violence should he continue to pursue Catherine romantically. While stealing someone's heart is normally considered a romantic way of saying that one is winning a person's affection, I contend that its normal romantic connotation is being used here to attempt to shroud an air of possessiveness that otherwise pervades the scene. Caleb's continued referral to Catherine as "*my* wife" rather than her name, in addition to the implication of violent consequences, has the effect of

objectifying Catherine, making her an object to be won or manipulated rather than a person with agency who is capable of choosing her preferred romantic partner.

Visualizing Virtue: The Objectification of Girls and Women

An element of objectification of women is present in most of the films in the Kendrick Brother's filmography. In most of their films, there is an implication that a woman is an object that a man can win. These notions are reminiscent of sexual economics theory. This theory proposes that sex is often treated as a marketplace in which women are the sellers of sexual goods, and men are in competition with each other for the opportunity to enjoy these sexual goods (Baumeister et al. 2016, 230-231). Once he has won her, it is his job to take care of her. Referring to women in terms such as these dehumanizes them in a way that likens them more to a commodity to be traded rather than a person with agency. Things that can be won are necessarily items, and if they are items, then they are objects. As we saw in the case of Caleb, the threat that Gavin's advances of Catherine posed feels like the loss of a possession (i.e., *my wife*).

This notion of the objectification of women is further reinforced by the way that daughters are treated in the films. In *Courageous*, Nathan asks his daughter, Jade, to promise herself to him. During this scene, Nathan sits with Jade in a quiet, intimate restaurant, explaining how much he loves her and how valuable she is, not only to him but also in the eyes of God. He then presents her with a small ring, asking her to make a commitment—not to a general principle, but directly to him—to remain pure until marriage. As he gives her the ring, he tells her she must wear it every day until it is replaced by her wedding ring, emphasizing the ring's role as a daily reminder of this

promise. Jade tearfully agrees and accepts the ring, a physical representation of her pledge to him. This promise essentially means a commitment to not have sex before marriage and to allow Nathan to have the final say over whether or not she can date someone. Allowing such a situation is giving away one's autonomy. One might argue that this is a decision made willingly by the daughter. Before arriving at that assumption, I would encourage a view of the larger picture. As we have established, in the evangelical world, the father is the head of the household and, ultimately, the family's leader. There is a power differential between parent and child, even further complicated by the fact that she is a minor. This dynamic means that she is not in an ideal position to refuse him, and unsurprisingly, she goes along with it.

As scholar of religion Sara Moslener discusses in her work *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence*, this notion of pledging one's purity until marriage is not new (Moslener 2016, 3-4). Rather, this movement is several decades old (Moselner 2016, 3-4). It emerges from the culture war over family values, much like the evangelical film movement itself (Moslener 2016, 3-8; Carwana 2021, 214-225). This purity movement, and indeed the moment of this decision in *Courageous*, frames it as a free choice made by fully informed and consenting adolescents (Moslener 2016, 3-10). However, it is worth considering the investments and power dynamics active in such a commitment. As Moslener rightly points out, the debates over family values are tied intrinsically to sexual purity (Moslener 2016, 3-10; Carwana 2021, 214). These affective investments lead to a notion that sexual impurity can lead to the erosion of the traditional family as a societal structure (Moslener 2016, 3-10). The erosion of the family as a social

structure would subsequently lead to an inhibited ability to reproduce the evangelical habitus (Carwana 2021, 221).

Also worth considering is that Nathan asks his daughter for this promise in his role as a father. As established earlier, evangelical family dynamics include a strong patriarchal structure that usually sees the father as the head of the household. Further, the dynamics between parent and child are active in this situation. Psychologist Martin Hoffman suggests that parents may elicit desired behavior from their children voluntarily using emotional appeal (Hoffman 1960, 130). Given that we can assume that Jade has been thoroughly exposed to the evangelical habitus from a young age, Nathan's appeal through terms loaded with evangelical meaning would be a particularly effective means of eliciting the behavior he desires from her (Hoffman 1960, 130; Carwana 2021, 221). Given the dynamics in the situation, I am arguing that Jade is essentially agreeing to give up her bodily autonomy under duress. She is now his to give away and will be her husband's to receive. There is a sense that Jade will always belong to someone. She will always be an object.

Seeing Color: Race in Evangelical Films

Turning to race, the cast of the Kendrick Brothers' films is predominantly white, however, every film has had at least one racialized character. While the actors themselves are racialized, the characters they are playing in the films are written by Stephen and Alex Kendrick, who are both white. The Kendrick Brothers' construction of these racialized characters has led to some problematic depictions in their films that are worth exploring. The racial stereotyping in *Flywheel* and *Facing the Giants* is quite obvious. Both films

feature one black character (played by the same actor both times) who speaks in a manner that differentiates him from the white characters in terms of vocabulary and delivery. One of the most famous scenes from *Facing the Giants* demonstrates this delivery well. In this case, J.T. Hawkins (the black assistant coach) is talking to David, the team's kicker, about having more confidence to be more consistent in his field goal attempts. J.T. tells David, "Anybody can kick it wide left or wide right. My mama can kick it wide left and wide right. That ain't what's gonna get you home. It don't have to look great. It don't have to look smooth. It can look like a dying duck. But the ball has got to go through the middle." Grant even acknowledges that J.T. talks differently by commenting, "David, I've never heard it that way before, but there's a lot of truth to what he's saying." In both films, the singular racialized character exists primarily as comic relief in movies that can be otherwise quite serious and potentially emotionally taxing.

In *Fireproof* and *Courageous*, there are serious racialized characters that play supporting roles. In *Fireproof*, the racialized character is Michael, who works at the fire station, along with the main character, Caleb. Michael is remarkably free of the many stereotypes that tend to be written into characters of the Kendrick Brothers' films. However, in the film, two black supporting actresses work as nurses in the hospital where Caleb's wife works. These women are portrayed similarly to the single black character of the first two films: having a vernacular and manner of delivery that draws from a gendered stereotype, portraying them as less intelligent than their white counterparts and particularly prone to gossip.

In *Courageous*, the same actor who played Micheal in *Fireproof* returns to play another supporting role as a local police deputy named Nathan (who, as discussed above,

asks his daughter to promise her sexual purity to him). This film emphasizes the importance of fathers and the dangers of growing up without one. Once again, falling prey to stereotyping, of the five fathers the film focuses on, Nathan is the one who grew up without a father. Further, the film has extensive scenes dealing with criminals, and every single criminal is black. All the criminals are portrayed as gang members who drive vehicles with oversized wheels, listen to rap music, engage in hazing rituals, and generally cause unwelcome disturbances in the otherwise peaceful city of Albany, Georgia. The implication in the film is that these gang members are not from Albany (which would seem to suggest they came from nearby Atlanta). This notion also suggests that they do not belong there. In her fieldwork with a southern evangelical community, anthropologist of religion Rebekka King observed that for white southern evangelicals, people of different races, classes, genders, etc., exist in an imagined elsewhere (in that they are outside of the evangelical community) (King 2022a, 146). However, evangelicals are still aware of the presence of people with “other” identities, and they pay close attention, as they know these “others” are lurking just beyond the horizon (King 2022a, 146). I contend that the non-belonging of the groups portrayed as a threat in *Courageous* is a visual embodiment of the notion of elsewhere that King discusses in her work (King 2022a, 146). It is not as though the characters in the film were not aware of the existence of gang members before they came to Albany. It is simply that these gang members always existed elsewhere to them. Now that gang members have a presence in Albany, the notion that gang activity is something that happens “elsewhere” persists, and therefore, these gang members must not be from Albany.

It is worth noting that though it is acknowledged in *Courageous* that issues of fatherhood are issues that plague all of society, the manifestations of the fatherhood problem are different between the racialized and non-racialized communities in the film. Though there is at least one white person (David) who has shirked his fatherly duties in the film, Amanda, the mother (also white), is shown to be scraping by, and the child is doing all right. The situation is portrayed as less than ideal, but it is far better than that of the racialized characters. For racialized communities, fatherlessness is not shown to be an anomaly but rather an epidemic. To be clear, the film is essentially portraying the white fathers as often falling short, but they are at least trying, while the fathers in the black communities are shown to be mostly absent.

Courageous also features the first, and to date only, Latinx character in a Kendrick Brothers film. The character's name is Javier, and he is also the first and only character in a Kendrick Brothers film not to be a member of the middle class (I will return to this depiction of class later). Javier is depicted as a caricature of a Latinx person in much the same way as the black characters in early Kendrick Brothers movies. Perhaps the greatest evidence of this notion is that he is an intermittently employed, blue-collar construction worker. Ultimately, he finds work by being introduced to one of the white main characters, who hires him to help build a shed. In many ways, Javier's entire character is reduced to his ability to work, with his work ethic being his defining characteristic and even one of his three sources of joy in life (the other two being God and family). At best, Javier's portrayal is fairly flat, though it could easily be seen as stereotyping.

War Room (2015) and *Overcomer* introduced audiences to the first black lead characters in a Kendrick Brothers film. Audiences received these films enthusiastically; *War Room* remains the highest-grossing film that Kendrick Brothers Productions has ever produced. This increasing focus on racialized characters offers an opportunity for greater insight into racial themes in the Kendrick Brothers' filmography. As mentioned previously, in *Overcomer*, the main character is Hannah, a black high school girl raised by her grandmother, Barbara. In this narrative, fatherlessness is once again the primary theme. The film presents her behavioral issues as being the direct result of having been raised without a male role model. This issue is ultimately solved when she finds her biological father, Thomas, who had been absent in her life due to his drug addiction. Thomas is revealed to be a former cross-country runner, like Hannah, and he has been cured of his drug addiction through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Their shared commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ allows Hannah to forgive Thomas eventually. Through his experience with cross-country running, Thomas mentors Hannah to become a state champion. While Thomas' drug addiction creates a powerful personal testimony for his character, it continues to play into many of the same stereotypes (the continual association of black characters with gangs, drugs, and fatherlessness) that have proved problematic throughout the Kendrick Brothers' filmography.¹⁷

It is worth noting that each of these films was written and directed by the Kendrick Brothers themselves. I argue that the depictions of racialized characters in each of these films are an attempt at code-switching by the Kendrick Brothers in an effort to extend their habitus beyond its given field. Critical religious studies scholar Vaia Touna

¹⁷ These themes can be observed in *Courageous*, *War Room*, *Overcomer*.

notes that code-switching is an attempt to perform practices that are not a natural part of one's habitus to gain access to and capital within spaces where the speaker would normally lack both (Touna 2018, 175). Some scholars have referred to presidential candidates as examples of people who code-switch regularly as a means to gain the support of a wide array of communities (Young 2009, 49). I contend that the ways that the Kendrick Brothers write and produce racialized characters in their films are attempts at code-switching to appeal to racialized audiences.

Regardless of the success of their attempts, it appears that the Kendrick Brothers are attempting to make some attempt at appealing to a diverse audience. I contend that their habitus limits the success of their attempts. Ultimately, the Kendrick Brothers are both middle-class, white, middle-aged men. They lack the cultural fluency and capital to reach the spaces or people that they are attempting to reach through these racialized characters. These shortcomings show in the fact that their attempts at code-switching quite often digress into stereotyping. In addition, the fact that the few racialized characters in the films are the only representations of this code in their respective films further serves to other these characters.

Screening Social Strata: Depictions of Class

Finally, I would like to turn to class. Interestingly, wealthy characters rarely appear in Kendrick Brothers' productions; the same is true of poor people. Every character is decidedly middle class, though the audience is often meant to receive the impression that the characters are struggling financially. Even Javier, who is not middle class at the beginning of *Courageous*, achieves middle-class status by the end of the film.

In *Flywheel*, despite the comfortable living conditions of Jay and his family, and even though he owns his own business, we are supposed to receive the impression that his income is extremely modest. Yet, when Jay engages in business practices so honest that he nearly goes out of business, he adopts a carefree attitude that God will provide. Ultimately, Jay is right. God does provide, but Jay maintains that he is at peace if things do not go that way. This attitude seems to imply that Jay has done well enough that he will not immediately become homeless if he loses his business.

There are similar themes in *Facing the Giants*. In the film, Brooke and Grant discuss how they cannot afford to fix their house or car and make due on a family income of approximately \$40,000 yearly. Perplexingly, their financial situation is not shown to restrain their ability or desire to have children, despite children representing a significant increase in expenses for most families. In *Fireproof*, Catherine and Caleb live comfortably in a generously sized home with two fairly new cars in what appears to be a nice neighborhood. However, they still struggle to help with the cost of some medical supplies needed by Catherine's mother. The notion that they have money troubles would seem normal, as they both have modest jobs, but their living conditions betray them.

This theme of economic precarity runs through most of the films in the Kendrick Brothers' catalog, including their most recent film, *Overcomer*, where the family lives comfortably in a beautiful home despite both being teachers at a Christian school in a town devastated by the recent closure of a manufacturing plant. The typical (Baptist) Christian school teacher already makes a modest salary; during the film, they lose twenty percent of their income due to pay cuts. Further compounding their financial situation, their son loses his job entirely. However, this situation does not bother them, even though

the average middle-class person would likely be economically devastated by such developments.

Given these examples, I contend that the Kendrick Brothers understand the living conditions of the middle class, as that is the habitus they were raised in and where they originated. Despite their background, I suggest that their success and subsequent earnings from their films have placed them entirely out of touch with the middle class they originated from, to the point where the economic problems that are written into the plot generate cognitive dissonance due to their inconsistency with the living conditions of the characters.

In critical religious studies scholar James LoRusso's work *Capitalism, the Hero's Journey, and the Myth of Entrepreneurship in "The Secret of My Success" (1987) and "Joy" (2015)*, LoRusso encourages the reader to be cognizant of the fact that films have a marketing function that often operates unseen (LoRusso 2022, 55). The hidden nature of this marketing function can be explained by the nature of film itself, which is to entertain (LoRusso 2022, 55). Further, it is worth noting that film studios (more specifically, the people operating them), whether they are large and independent, such as Disney or A24, or smaller ones, such as Kendrick Brothers Productions, have motivations and commitments that determine how their films are written and presented (LoRusso 2022, 55). I propose that the Kendrick Brothers understand their primarily white, middle-class, evangelical viewers well. They demonstrate this understanding in their films by representing the financial struggles and worries that likely resonate with many in their audience. However, the Kendrick Brothers also understand that their audience, through their habitus as citizens of the southeastern region of the United States, is invested in the

prevailing ideologies of late modern capitalism, namely individual responsibility and upward mobility (Clark and Stroop 2018, 242). These simultaneous investments are the prerequisites that lead to the dissonance between the living conditions of the characters and the narrative that they are struggling financially. The commitment of the Kendrick Brothers (along with their audience) to evangelicalism shapes how the narrative addresses this dissonance.

By virtue of their evangelical habitus, the Kendrick Brothers have an affective investment in creating and maintaining the evangelical habitus (Carwana 2021, 221). This investment is displayed in the way they overcome the previously mentioned dissonance by putting faith in God. The Kendrick Brothers have received criticism from outsiders and insiders in the evangelical field for the seemingly simplistic way they resolve many of their plots via divine intervention (Parker 2012, 84-85). I propose that the evangelical habitus of the Kendrick Brothers predisposes them to construct their plots in this way. Without divine intervention, the dissonance generated from the friction between commitments to capitalistic/ individualistic ideals of upward mobility and the increasing infeasibility of maintaining the lifestyle aspirations of the former would inevitably cause one to dominate the other. By evoking the evangelical commitment to trust in God's omnipotence, the Kendrick Brothers can appeal to their viewers in their roles as agents in the evangelical field and as agents in the larger field of society, which is capitalist. While it may seem simplistic to some, due to their habitus and the habitus of their audience, it would not be fair to expect the Kendrick Brothers to create a narrative that would diverge from these commitments.

It should be clear by now that the filmography of the Kendrick Brothers is a rich source of insider discourse within evangelical circles. Through various academic lenses, I have attempted to show several cases of what I contend are instances where implicit commitments of the evangelical habitus are evident. I do not doubt that far more could be done in terms of academic analysis regarding the Kendrick Brothers' filmography. They continue to release films every two to three years. As long as they do so, I expect that their films will continue to be a resource that scholars concentrating on evangelical discourse can evaluate to reveal evangelical communities' explicit and implicit commitments and their continued evolution.

Chapter III:

Salvation on a Screen: The Story of *God's Not Dead*

On September 6, 2023, I sat in a corner seat in the back of the Tucker Theater at Middle Tennessee State University. I was there to see a presentation by author Rice Brooks, who wrote *God's Not Dead: Evidence for God in an Age of Uncertainty* (2013), the book that inspired the now-famous series of films. I sat in the back because I primarily just wanted to observe. Often, the audience's reaction to a lecture, speech, or performance can reveal insights that one cannot receive from the content of the performance alone. Even though tickets were free, and the event was held in the colloquial "Bible Belt," I was surprised to see that the auditorium floor was only about two-thirds full, and the balcony was closed off.

Brooks began his presentation by addressing Friedrich Nietzsche's famous utterance, "God is Dead" (Brooks 2023). Over the course of the evening, I listened to Brooks pose many questions, all of which he was the only one who could answer, partially due to the fact that he was the only person with a working microphone during the presentation and partially because he invited no one of opposing opinion (Brooks 2023). His points came so fast that I could barely write them down before he moved on. What was clear was that he sought to position himself in opposition to atheists (Brooks 2023). Given the quotes Brooks rebutted from figures such as Nietzsche, Dawkins, and Hawking, it was clear that he invoked them only insofar as their arguments were useful to make his point (Brooks 2023). In almost every case, opposing views were repudiated even though, in many cases, they were fragments of a sentence or missing from their original context (Brooks 2023). Regardless, it was not Brook's argument that God is

real that I found fascinating, but rather his effort to position himself as a defender of God. Though it is circumstantial, judging from the amount of participation I observed in the closing prayer, the majority of the audience was aligned with Broocks (at least in their belief that reports of God's death have been greatly exaggerated). Despite leading the event and writing the book, Broocks and likely many of the people who participated in that final prayer appeared to think they were defending God (Broocks 2023).

In the course of the presentation, he portrayed science and academic institutions as desiring to deny God's existence and mock Christians for their faith (Broocks 2023). He portrayed himself as merely responding to atheist vitriol, and according to him, his presentation provided such a convincing account that the burden of proof should now be on scientists and philosophers to prove that God does not exist (Broocks 2023). This positioning of atheists as people who hate God and want to convert everyone to atheism exposes the fact that Broocks (and he is certainly not alone in this) attributes a level of intentionality and evangelism to atheism that is not true for many, if not most.

By virtue of its core tenets, evangelical Christianity requires members of its field to work to convert as many people as possible and defend their faith by engaging in apologetics (Carwana 2021, 221; Bebbington 2021, 3). These core tenets of the field of evangelicalism are ingrained into the habitus of evangelical agents (Carwana 2021, 221). Their habitus decides their perspectives and commitments. Among these commitments are mandates to proselytize to the unsaved and defend the faith from potential threats. Given the shape of their habitus, they assume the same of those they perceive to be diametrically opposed to them (Broocks 2013, 36). Religious studies scholar Adam D. J. Brett elaborates on this notion in *Catastrophic Christianity: an Iconological Study of the*

Messianic Idea in American Protestant Christianity Circa 1900-1940. Brett proposes that evangelical fundamentalists partially construct their identities in opposition to liberalism and progressivism in all forms (Brett 2022, 49). Brett suggests that the result has been the construction of a binary in which values held by evangelical insiders and outsiders are framed as mirrored opposites, usually in terms such as “good versus evil, modernity versus tradition, liberalism versus conservatism” (Brett 2022, 84). Brett’s work supports the idea that atheists likely serve as Broocks’ proximate other. In her work *The New Heretics: Skepticism, Secularism, and Progressive Christianity*, Rebekka King draws from Johnathan Z. Smith to define the proximate other as a useful prototype that a given group can define themselves in opposition to (King 2022b, 117). Understanding this concept reveals that the prototypical atheist is effectively functioning as Broocks’ proximate other in his presentation and his book.

The prototype that Broocks uses assumes that all atheists undertake conversion efforts and engage in polemics. While this idea may be true of some, it is certainly not universally representative of all atheists. Even attributing the same desire to all atheists is a misattribution. To posit that atheists are all aligned in this way would assume that they are an organized community committed to certain principles and socialized to certain dispositions. It seems that Broocks assumes atheism is a field that produces agents with a certain habitus. It is debatable whether atheism can qualify as a field under Bourdieu’s theory; atheism lacks a unifying habitus across agents of the field (Schnell and Keenan 2011, 73-74; Pérez and Vallières 2019, 10). Aside from the shared belief that there is no divine higher power, atheism would be a fairly disorganized field compared to most (Schnell and Keenan 2011, 73-74).

I call into question the idea of an atheist field because fields and habitus are co-constituting (Rey 2007, 46). Given their nature, it would be difficult to argue that the habitus of various atheists is homogeneous enough to constitute a specific field for atheism. Even if I grant that there is such a field and such a habitus, it would be difficult to argue that a general atheist habitus includes a proselytization element to the same extent as evangelicalism. My point is that Brooks' habitus informs his perception in such a way that he perceives atheists as completely opposed to the evangelical habitus in every sense and thus treats them as though their habitus mirrors his (in the sense that everything is backward). This viewpoint causes him to proceed under a Christian-derived pretense that atheists seek to convert everyone to atheism and that all of them are actively engaging in polemics against evangelical Christianity (Brooks 2023). These assumptions structure Brooks' notion that Christianity and the concept of God are under attack. This idea of Christianity under attack informed Brooks' presentation that night and informed the films based on his book.

God's Not Dead: Evidence for God in an Age of Uncertainty consists of nine arguments for God's existence, each comprising a book chapter. The film series does not take this same form but rather takes its inspiration and title from Brooks' original work. The films now have five installments, with the fifth debuting just a month ago. All five installments were produced by Great American Pure Flix (formerly Pure Flix) and have been generally well-received by evangelicals, though none of the subsequent installments have enjoyed quite as much attention as the first. Each subsequent installment of the film revolves more around politics than the last. The political theming of the films has continually escalated to the point that Pastor Dave Hill (the main character followed

through all five films played by David A. R. White) is running as a congressional candidate in the most recent installment. The ever-increasing presence of politics in the *God's Not Dead* series is interesting in itself, and it is an issue to which I will return shortly.

I would like to point out a dynamic at work in Broocks' presentation that I also see in the films that followed from his book. In Broocks' presentation, he spoke about evidence for God, as one would expect him to do (Broocks 2023). As he reached the climax of his argument, he accused the fields of science of being materialistic, and he posited that there are truths that cannot be proven because "the truth is bigger than proof" (Broocks, 2023; see also, Broocks 2013, 20). Such a notion is quite convenient, as it absolves Broocks of any further need to argue proofs for or against God. Rather, he is able to declare victory no matter the result of scientific inquiry. Broocks' discursive technique, in this case, is fascinating. Anthropologist of religion Susan Harding discusses in *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* how an ethnographic encounter of only a few hours with an evangelical preacher she was studying succeeded in adjusting her thought processes in ways that were conducive to conversion (Harding 2000, 33-36). I argue that Broocks' presentation attempted to accomplish something similar. Broocks began his presentation under the pretense that he was going to engage atheists in a scholarly debate over God's existence and subtly changed his language over the course of the presentation until he finally got to the point that he dismissed all scientific inquiry into God's existence altogether. The change happened slowly and could have easily been missed.

Rice Brooks' presentation changed course near the end when he began to discuss the existence of Jesus Christ (Brooks 2023). This turn led Brooks' to the point where he proposed that the story of Jesus Christ in the Bible must be true because his disciples are said to have died for that truth (Brooks 2023). Brooks contended that no one willingly dies in defense of something they know to be false (Brooks 2023). Brooks' presentation began with a presentation on the general existence of God, yet through a series of arguments, it ended with a declaration of the truth of the gospel stories of Jesus Christ (Brooks 2023). My notes from the event reflect that I thought that the turn to the topic of Jesus was sudden. However, upon further review, the situation is a perfect example of the type of discursive strategy that Susan Harding describes in her work.

Harding suggests that as the saved person speaks and the unsaved person listens, a discursive process occurs in which the language of the saved speaker penetrates the mind of the unsaved listener, causing a subtle shift to occur in which the unsaved listener begins to unintentionally adopt the viewpoint and language of the saved speaker (Harding 2000, 34). Harding notes that people convert to evangelical Christianity because they become convinced that its content and worldview are factually true. In her work, she seeks to uncover how they come to this realization (Harding 2000, 36). Further, Harding proposes that evangelical Christians consider the gospel of Jesus Christ to be the locus of conversion power. However, one must first be able to listen to the message of Jesus Christ with an open ear for such a conversion to happen (Harding 2000, 36). According to Harding, the saved speaker is aware that the unsaved listener does not share their understanding of the world and makes use of oratory narrative to create a new reality for the unsaved listener. If successful, the unsaved listener becomes detached from their

former reality and enters the new reality that the saved speaker has composed for them (Harding 2000, 37).¹⁸ Once in this reality, the “truth” that the saved person is attempting to impress upon the unsaved listener becomes self-evident and experienceable, leading to the complete conversion of the unsaved listener.

Naturally, committed atheists are likely to be opposed to hearing a message of salvation straightaway, so Broocks instead opened with a discussion about God’s existence. I contend that although Broocks’ presentation was marketed as a simple discussion about the existence of God, it also functioned as a method of making atheists receptive to hearing and understanding the world in terms of evangelical Christianity. By converting the language of the unbeliever to that of the believer, Broocks created the possibility of complete conversion. Given that the audience that Broocks targeted was atheists or skeptics, successful instances of his attempt to penetrate the skeptical mind of the unbeliever and make it receptive to the possibility of salvation would be quite remarkable.

In a similar manner to Broocks’ book, the *God’s Not Dead* franchise understands itself as a response to hostility from atheists and humanists seeking to devalue evangelical capital in public and domestic fields. The plot of the first film in the franchise follows college freshman Josh Wheaton as he takes an introductory philosophy course with Professor Radisson, a militant atheist. Within the first few minutes of the first class session, Professor Radisson demands that each student sign a sheet of paper with the

¹⁸ Harding describes how she was the subject of such a transformation during an encounter with Reverend Melvin Campbell (Harding 2000, 33). She recalls how she was nearly in a car accident on her way home from meeting Campbell, which caused her to speculate if God was attempting to communicate with her (Harding 2000, 33). Harding recognizes that this voice was not her own but the voice of the saved speaker, Campbell (Harding 2000, 33). Her encounter with Campbell transformed her perspective and way of speaking (temporarily) into that of the saved speaker (Harding 2000, 33).

words “God is dead” as their first assignment. As expected, Josh refuses this assignment and is forced to debate with his professor about God’s existence for the final minutes of the first few classes. Through a great struggle, Josh eventually defeats Professor Radisson and succeeds in goading him into admitting that he hates God because he believes that God killed his mother. Josh takes this moment to point out that it is impossible to hate someone who is not real. This point effectively wins the debate, and all the students in the class stand up and profess that God is not dead.

For the sake of examination, it is important to understand that the *God’s Not Dead* series is a singular, continuous narrative. The films of the Kendrick Brothers in the previous chapter contain independent narratives. By independent narratives, I mean that each film, though often having overlapping themes, follows a unique cast of characters in a particular situation. In contrast, the *God’s Not Dead* series unfolds interconnectedly, with each film picking up very close to where its predecessor finished, with Reverend Dave serving as a constant presence. Essentially, the films of the *God’s Not Dead* franchise comprise a unified narrative as opposed to the multiple narratives of the Kendrick Brothers’ films.

In the previous discussion of the work of Susan Harding, I noted her theory about evangelical language’s effect on the listener’s narrative-building capability. If we view the *God’s Not Dead* films as the construction of a unified narrative while drawing from Harding, the direction of the narrative becomes comprehensible. Harding suggests that evangelical rhetoric, through the use of narrative, slowly transforms the listener’s language so that the listener begins to reformulate their own views of the world into the language of the saved speaker (Harding 2000, 34-37). Ultimately, by adapting this

language, the listener becomes more receptive to the message and narrative of the speaker. Eventually, the process is complete when the unsaved listener completes a metamorphosis into a saved speaker.

The *God's Not Dead* film franchise changed its focus after the first film to target what it perceives as threats to Christianity in government and education. As mentioned in the first chapter and the title of this chapter, I consider the *God's Not Dead* film franchise to be part of what I am terming the “salvation” genre of evangelical film. By “salvation,” I mean that the intended audience of the *God's Not Dead* series consists of both established evangelicals and outsiders to the field. This attempt to reach and convert outsiders differentiates it from the discipleship genre, which is aimed at an audience of established evangelicals.

Upon viewing these films, one would likely notice that the later films cease much of their outreach efforts to atheists, which were defining characteristics of *God's Not Dead* (2014), and Brooks' book, *God's Not Dead: Evidence for God in an Age of Uncertainty*. To some, this change in focus may seem to separate the later films of the *God's Not Dead* franchise from the “salvation” genre that I am proposing. However, I counter that we should examine the films' narrative through Harding's discussion of fundamentalist language ideologies. Examined in this light, I argue that transforming the listener's language is primarily attempted in the first film, *God's Not Dead* (2014). What follows in the sequels is a natural continuation of the narrative since (in the case of a successful conversion) the language of the listener can be assumed to be the same as that of the speaker. To clarify, I am arguing that just as the transformation of language prepares the lost mind to receive salvation, this transformation of language also prepares

the mind to think about societal issues in evangelical terms. Once this transformation is accomplished in the first film, the later films transition the series to the pedagogy genre. The pedagogy subgenre is focused on reconstituting the new believer's worldview and attempting to convince the new believer to align with dominant evangelical positions.

The series is premised on the notion that Christianity is under attack and that Christians are victims of increasing hostility from atheists and humanists who want to see their influence erased from all fields of society for no other reason than because they are hateful, miserable people. The original film's success spurred the development of four sequels, each enjoying slightly less success than the last. None of the sequels captured public attention as much as the first film. This gradual decline in success may stem from the fact that each subsequent film has deviated to a certain extent from the original Rice Brooks source material. In subsequent films, the angry and miserable atheists have expanded their reach outside the college lecture hall to eventually reach the federal government by the fifth film.

In a piece discussing depictions of race in the *God's Not Dead* series, communication studies scholar Courtney Dreyer proposes that the films have a participatory element (Dreyer 2023, 245). Dreyer describes these films as having an affective nature, inviting the audience to place themselves in the main character's situation (Dreyer 2023, 245-247). In each film, the main protagonist is shamed for their belief in God and compelled by antagonists to give up their belief, in the case of the first film, or to keep their beliefs to themselves, as in the subsequent films. As Dreyer notes, each film sees the main character go through a struggle in which they are made to feel ashamed of their beliefs (Dreyer 2023, 247-249).

The primary plot development sees the main characters undergo a transformative process. Their shame eventually becomes pride as they triumph over the atheists and secularists who stand against them (Dreyer 2023, 247-249). Dreyer argues that the affective nature of the films invites the evangelical viewer to experience this transformative process as they watch the film (Dreyer 2023, 247-249). I argue that evangelicals are particularly predisposed to be affected by the narratives of the various *God's Not Dead* films. As Dreyer rightly points out, evangelicals are invested in the idea that they are marginalized. This idea of marginalization is important in framing the position of evangelicals in the larger culture war. As mentioned earlier, evangelicals position themselves as defensive in culture war issues. To justify a defensive position, one must necessarily be under attack. As such, evangelicals expend significant effort to frame their cultural concerns in a way that portrays them as victims unfairly bullied by a supposedly secular society and government. As mentioned in the first chapter, the culture wars have been ongoing since the sexual revolution and concurrent civil rights movement of the early 1960s.

Brian Carwana suggests that one of the moments that galvanized evangelical mindsets on culture war topics was Jimmy Carter's threat to revoke tax-exempt status for any Christian colleges that prohibited interracial dating (Carwana 2021, 222). Carwana proposes that this early culture war battle solidified evangelical concern that they were slowly losing the ability to regulate the culture of their own communities (Carwana 2021, 222). To lose control of their communities would endanger the ability of the evangelical habitus to reproduce itself. So, as far as evangelicals are concerned, their purpose in the

ongoing culture war is to fight for self-preservation or the right to reproduce their habitus (Carwana 2021, 221).

Evangelicals have maintained their defensive framing since they first adopted it in the early years of the culture wars. The evangelical framing of the overall culture war is also worth considering. It is easy to declare that evangelicals are merely attempting to reproduce their habitus by fighting battles over domestic values. Nonetheless, culture wars cannot be reduced to a mere battle over the moral trajectory of society. For evangelicals, culture wars involve unseen actors from cosmic planes in a divine struggle between good and evil (Lindhart 2015, 148-151; Berry 2020, 72). The language of spiritual warfare gives evangelicals a way of discussing concerns about the material world in the vocabulary of their habitus (Lindhart 2015, 148-149). In this way, evangelicals are able to merge their material concerns and ontological commitments.

Naturally, these notions raise the question of the content and context of these concerns. As mentioned earlier, evangelical Christians are concerned about the ability to transfer their beliefs to their children (or reproducing the evangelical habitus) (Carwana 2021, 221). Granting this contention, I suggest that there is a deeper conviction that underlies the concerns of evangelicals. Anthropologist Webb Keane discusses the notion of sincerity in relation to Protestantism (Keane 2002, 79). Keane pulls from Susan Harding's work to suggest that salvation in Protestantism is, in part, performative (Keane 2002, 79). As we have seen, Harding suggests that through the process of transitioning from unsaved listener to saved speaker, the reality in which the unsaved person lived is reconstituted into a new reality defined by their new evangelical worldview (Harding 2000, 37). Keane proposes that the only way of confirming the saved status of formerly

lost persons is for them to outwardly demonstrate (by speaking or professing) their now transformed inward state (Keane 2002, 74-79).

We can glean a few insights into the evangelical habitus from Harding and Keane's works. If the unsaved person's worldview is transformed in the process of salvation, we can assume that this process is not directed toward their children. Presumably, evangelical parents will already be raising their children within this worldview, so they will already understand the world in evangelical terms. This assumption is not to say that the children of evangelicals will not have to go through a rite of passage (i.e., go through the official prayer where they make a profession of faith and, in some cases, be baptized). Rather, it is to say that a worldview transformation is unnecessary, as the child should already possess the evangelical habitus by virtue of their upbringing. With this idea in mind, we can see that this process of hearing, accepting, and speaking that Harding and Keane discuss is directed towards outsiders. The process is complete once the unsaved listener has become a saved speaker (Harding 2000, 36-37; Keane 2002, 79). If their role as saved speakers involves speaking to those still unsaved, it suggests that salvation is an ongoing process rather than one completed in a brief moment of transformation. Suppose this is the case, and salvation is a process that the saved speaker completes through ongoing performance (i.e., speaking to and saving the lost). In that case, any impediment or restriction in the ability of the saved person to speak has the potential to jeopardize their salvation.

It would be an understatement to say that salvation is one of the primary concerns of evangelicalism. A brief glance at the history of evangelicalism shows that the nature of evangelical salvation was a defining issue in the emergence of evangelicalism in the late

eighteenth century (Walsh 1994, 31). This emphasis continues in contemporary evangelicalism as well (Elisha 2015, 53). It follows that if a need for salvation is one of the defining elements of an evangelical worldview, any perceived threat to the sanctity of salvation not only threatens to compromise the reproduction of the evangelical habitus but may also jeopardize the ability of the existing believer to attain salvation. With these understandings in mind, it should be clear that Harding and Keane's work can provide insight into the significance of the culture wars for evangelical agents.

Having established the significance of the culture wars in evangelical communities and the participatory nature of the *God's Not Dead* franchise, I propose that the series functions as a recruiting tool and instructional manual for evangelical agents to navigate the culture wars. I find it helpful to compare this recruitment to the experience of people who were recruited into the United States military.

Evolving and Uninterrupted: The Continuous Narrative of *God's Not Dead*

If we frame the discussion in military terms, *God's Not Dead* (2014) would play the recruiter role. As mentioned above, this film is the audience's initial introduction to the series. It follows Josh Wheaton as he debates the existence of God with Professor Radisson, his philosophy teacher. The film takes time to build to its arguments for God, letting the characters endear themselves to the audience first. In the case of Professor Radisson, this time is taken to establish that he has an enormous ego and animosity toward any kind of theism. Once the debates between Wheaton and Radisson begin, Radisson's presentations are barely shown, spending far more time concentrating on Wheaton's arguments for the existence of God. Wheaton's arguments are often logically

problematic. He frequently conflates faith and proof and regularly makes claims about atheists that are gross generalizations. Wheaton attempts to provide his own sources, similar to the philosophers that Radisson quotes. These attempts result in Wheaton quoting figures like Lee Strobel as though their authority equals that of scientists such as Stephen Hawking and Charles Darwin. Ultimately, Wheaton builds his argument primarily in terms of faith, and despite this fact, Radisson rarely challenges many of his spurious claims. When Radisson does challenge Wheaton, it is in a personal manner, which ultimately leads to the climax of Radisson admitting before his entire class that he hates God.

The arguments that Wheaton articulates, and Radisson's lack of engagement with his arguments, are meant to leave the viewer with the impression that believing in God is a logical view.¹⁹ In contrast, the atheist is constructed to look illogical and bitter. This construction is demonstrated in Josh's dialogue, "What you're teaching here isn't Philosophy. It's not even atheism anymore! What you're teaching is anti-theism. It's not enough that you don't believe. You need all of us to not believe with you" (Cronk 2014). *God's Not Dead* constructs Professor Radisson as an "anti-theist." By virtue of presenting him as the representative and defender of atheism, it presents anti-theism as the default position of the atheist. Essentially, *God's Not Dead* seeks to reformat the worldview of the audience in terms where theism and creationism are reasonable and rational, while atheism and evolution are illogical and unreasonable. This attempt to shift the audience's worldview echoes similar notions in Harding's work about the reformatting potential of

¹⁹ The case for creationism is made at the same time as the case for God's existence and appears to believe the two are necessarily related. The film does not seem to allow for a view that would simultaneously posit God's existence and the theory of evolution.

evangelical narrative. The film attempts to reformat the audience's understanding of epistemology to lead them to a view of the world more conducive to conversion (Harding 2000, 34-37).

Further, as Dreyer points out, the film invites viewers to experience and act (Dreyer 2023, 245-247). Once Wheaton and Radisson have finished their arguments, the decision over who won is left to the class, who all stand up and affirm "God's not dead" (Cronk 2014). The entire narrative leads the viewer to this conclusion and effectively invites them to affirm this statement as well. Any doubts about the film's attempts to elicit action from the viewer can be assuaged by the film ending with the text "Join the movement. Text everyone you know" (Dreyer 2023, 252). *God's Not Dead* seeks to convert viewers and encourages them to perform their new role as an evangelical agent.

Having made their case for God in the first film, *God's Not Dead 2* (2016), revolves around a teacher, Grace, whom the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is prosecuting for talking about Jesus Christ in her history class at a public school. Grace's story begins in the advanced placement history course she teaches, where she discusses the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. During her lecture, Brooke, one of her students, asks about a seemingly parallel teaching of Jesus in the Bible. Grace confirms that Jesus did say something similar and goes a bit further in-depth concerning the parallels between his teachings and Dr. King's. The most problematic aspect of this sequence would seem to be Grace's implication that the words of Jesus are as historically verifiable as the words of Dr. King. Regardless, word of this interaction quickly spreads until the school board decides to bring disciplinary action against Grace.

Before proceeding with a trial, the school board offers Grace an opportunity to escape with only a write-up, provided that she gives a written apology and pledges not to engage in theological discussion again. In this scene, the school board and Grace's union representative appear to maintain disapproving attitudes, seemingly shaming Grace for her faith. They note that if she does not take the deal, the ACLU is waiting in the wings to prosecute the case. Grace rejects the deal, at which point the case is handed over to the ACLU to prosecute.

During the trial, Grace is made to feel ashamed and persecuted for her faith. As Dreyer notes, the structure of the film invites the audience to experience this persecution with her (Dreyer 2023, 145-147). Given that her persecution is at the hands of the ACLU, I argue that the audience is also invited to adopt a perception that the ACLU hates Christianity. This notion is further reinforced by the fact that the ACLU lawyer outright admits to Grace's lawyer that he has a personal disdain for Christians, saying, "Do you know what hate is, Tom? I'm not talking about the fairytale stuff. I mean real, actual hate. I hate what people like your client stand for, and what they're doing to our society" (Cronk 2016).

One could attribute the scripting of the ACLU as the antagonist in the film as a move by the conservative filmmakers to position themselves in opposition to a traditionally progressive organization. However, I suggest that an awareness of the cultural milieu in which *God's Not Dead 2* was released can give insight into the positioning of the ACLU in this film. In 1993, the United States Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) (Gatta 2016, 446). The bill was designed to offer a pathway for religious practitioners to claim that the federal government was

inhibiting their ability to practice their beliefs (Gatta 2016, 445). This bill received overwhelming support from evangelicals, and the ACLU argued in favor of it (Gatta 2016, 446-447; Tubb 2023, 346). However, the ACLU's position on RFRA became troubled in 2014 when Hobby Lobby attempted to invoke RFRA to claim that Christian-owned businesses should be exempt from requirements to provide contraception to their employees under their employee health insurance plans (Gatta 2016, 448). The ACLU did not support this interpretation of the law, though the United States Supreme Court eventually sided with Hobby Lobby (Gatta 2016, 448-449).

Given the new shape of the bill, the ACLU issued a statement in the *Washington Post* announcing that they could no longer support RFRA in its current form (Gatta 2016, 450). The new interpretation of RFRA was generally supported by conservative Christian leaders, including evangelicals (Gatta 2016, 450-451). This lack of support placed the ACLU in perceived opposition to religious freedom in the eyes of evangelical leaders (Gatta 2016, 450-451). Given that *God's Not Dead 2* was released shortly after (within two years) the ACLU's denouncement of RFRA and the fact that the plot revolves around legal restrictions on religious freedom, the timing and positioning were perfect to cast the ACLU as anti-religious antagonists.

The story of *God's Not Dead 2* concludes with Grace winning her case against the ACLU. The ACLU decides not to appeal the decision to a higher court for fear of setting a precedent. *God's Not Dead 2* laid the groundwork for its sequel in the middle of its plot. Reverend David Hill (known affectionately as Reverend Dave) plays a supporting role in the first two films. In the first, he and fellow pastor, Jude, provide comedic relief via a subplot where they are trying to rent a car to go to Disneyworld, but every car they rent

breaks down before they can leave. Reverend Dave also advises Josh Wheaton in the first film as he prepares to debate Professor Radisson. In *God's Not Dead 2*, Reverend Dave is called to be a juror for Grace's trial, though he ultimately ends up being replaced due to a ruptured appendix. In the middle of *God's Not Dead 2*, Reverend Dave meets with several area pastors to discuss the fact that they have all been served with subpoenas, requesting that they all turn over their sermon transcripts for the past three months. No clear reason is given for their sermons being requested, and it is unrelated to Grace's case. Most of the pastors seem quite perturbed at this turn of events. Nonetheless, they agree they will comply with the order, as they see no other choice. Later in the film, inspired by witnessing Grace on trial for her faith, Reverend Dave decides he will not comply with the subpoena and instead sends a letter of refusal. These small plot points lead to Reverend Dave being arrested at the end of *God's Not Dead 2*.

God's Not Dead 3: A Light in Darkness (2018) begins with the resolution of the cliffhanger from the previous film. Reverend Dave is released after the previously mentioned subpoena is declared unconstitutional. However, the publicity surrounding Reverend Dave's arrest causes controversy on the college campus where his church shares land. Over the course of the film, it is established that the church was founded first, then the church founded the university before the university later became independent. The remaining vestige of their connection is that the church now sits on land technically owned by the university. Reverend Dave's arrest and sudden release generate controversy among the university's student body who want to see the church forced off campus grounds. Eventually, after pressure from his colleagues, the college president informs Reverend Dave that they have decided that the church will have to leave campus.

Dave decides to fight this decision, which results in the university bringing a lawsuit against his church. This results in Reverend Dave once again entering the legal arena, this time as a defendant. Dave enlists the help of his estranged brother, Pearce, a lawyer in Chicago. Pearce agrees to help Dave, though he clarifies that he is helping because he believes the university is violating the law rather than as a result of Dave's emotional appeal. It is revealed that the church was previously pastored by Dave and Pearce's father, indicating they were raised there. However, when he went away to college, Pearce became an atheist, which caused a rift with his family. Dave later explains to Pearce how much this hurt their parents, who felt like they lost their son.

Initially, Dave tries to fight the school peacefully. However, a student walking by the church who harbored ill feelings towards Christianity throws a brick through the church's window. In a case of catastrophically bad luck, the brick sails through the window of the church's basement, subsequently hitting and breaking off the valve to a natural gas line. Reverend Jude goes to the basement before Dave to inspect the damage, at which point the gas ignites in a terrific explosion, mortally wounding Jude. Dave feels bitter from this experience and struggles to overcome these feelings for the rest of the film.

The church building sustains serious damage in the explosion and has to be barricaded off. Once these events happen, the university attempts to invoke eminent domain to seize the church and demolish it. Pearce and Dave manage to stop the demolition by appealing to a local judge's commitment as a Roman Catholic to convince her to sign a temporary order preventing the church's demolition. This appeal seems to send the implicit message that having people of faith in positions of power is important,

as that faith can be appealed to for legal purposes. This message echoes Craig Martin's contention that the result of the classed nature of society is that those with power will use it to reward members of their own class and punish outsiders (Martin 2017, 168). While the judge is not an evangelical Christian, she is still a Christian, which places her in a closely related class. Eventually, Reverend Dave and Pearce decide to drop the lawsuit and comply with the school's demand to leave campus. Dave announces this decision before a group of protestors and counter-protestors at the film's climax.

"I came here tonight to ask all of you for your forgiveness. The other night, I stood before this burnt altar, and I heard God's voice for the first time in a long time. Couldn't have been clearer. He said, 'This building is not my church'. Although St. James (the church) has meant everything to me, although it's been my whole life, I would gladly give all of that up for this, for you. So, I am withdrawing my lawsuit against the school...As for me, I'm gonna build a new church. And I don't know how, I don't know where yet. But I'm willing to bet that God can handle the details. And I'd love your help. All of you. We can build something new together. But for now please, put down those signs. Put 'em' down, please. Go ahead, lay them down, put 'em' down. Everyone. Let's stop shouting at each other and start listening. It's the only way that things will get better" (Mason)

This moment showcases the growth that Reverend Dave achieved both as a character and as a Christian in the film. Though, I suggest that what transpires at this moment is far more important than any personal growth that Dave has attained. As previously explained, the *God's Not Dead* films are an invitation to participate. The audience is invited to experience Dave's growth vicariously. Dave realizes that the church is not a building, echoing a common Protestant sentiment that a church is a community of believers (Bethel Worship Center n.d., 2). When Reverend Dave says he is going to build a new church, we can understand this statement to mean he will create a new community of believers. Given the importance of listening in the process of salvation, as described by Harding, Dave's call for the protestors to listen can be understood as the beginning of his

church-building efforts. By understanding the invitational nature of the film, we can also understand that the film is attempting to guide its audience into similar church-building actions.

God's Not Dead: We The People (2021) catches up with Reverend Dave after he has founded his new church, St. Jude's. Some of Dave's parishioners run a Christian homeschool cooperative when they get into trouble with their state because of its theologically based curriculum. This trouble begins with a visit from a social worker, Ms. Dowd, whom the film portrays as the embodiment of the progressive values of modernity through her dialogue.

Dowd: Good afternoon, children. I am Ms. Dowd.

Child: Is Ms. Short for Miss or Missus?

Dowd: It's not short for anything. It's complete by itself.

Parent: Oh, she meant no disrespect. She's just asking if you're single or married, so she might address you properly.

Dowd: I identify as self-partnered.

After this interaction, Ms. Dowd, the social worker, observes the children's learning of the story of Noah from Genesis. She recaps what she observed with the parent in charge of the cooperative after:

Dowd: So the takeaway, their teachable moment from the Noah myth, is 'obey God or die?'

Parent: I mean, that's one way to look at it.

Dowd: "Uh huh. And the animals, what exactly was the sin that required their destruction?"

Parent: "..."

After the state reviews the observations of Ms. Dowd, the parents are told they will have to adjust their curriculum to conform to state standards or enroll their kids in a state-approved school. Failure to comply with the state's demands will result in major fines and possible jail time. The parents express their fears that a state-approved education will expose their kids to ideologies from which they would prefer to shield their children.

Dave: It all seems so extreme.

Parent 1: Dave, I want you to know that we will not be cooperating at all, okay?

Parent 2: Not giving in is more like it.

Dave: I've spoken to the board; we could certainly adjust the curriculum to be more accommodating.

Parent 2: Don't you mean compromise the curriculum? We already told them we're not conforming.

Parent 1: Religion has been removed from our schools. They're teaching kids that they don't need God. Their faith is irrelevant to their personal choices, Dave.

These fears are later reinforced in a parent meeting of the cooperative when one of the parents brings in an informational pamphlet for birth control that a friend's child was given in her public school classroom. It is emphasized that the child is in second grade and that this situation is an attempt at indoctrination. It is implied that this event is an attempt at the sexualization of children. Martin, a character who is from China, reinforces their fears when he tells the parents that homeschooling was made illegal in China because it deprived the state of the opportunity to indoctrinate children. Martin warns the parents that if this freedom is lost, it would be incredibly difficult to regain it. Martin's sentiments echo those of conservative icon Ronald Reagan in his 1967 gubernatorial inaugural address, where he said, "those in world history who have known freedom and then lost it have never known it again." The experiential nature of *God's Not Dead: We*

the People makes the imagined persecution of the film real to the viewer. It also appeals to evangelicals' existing concerns about conferring their values to their children. Further, Martin's confirmation of the parent's worries aligns them with existing anti-communist conservative rhetoric.

With the help of evangelical congressman Daryl Smith, Reverend Dave and a few parents from the homeschool cooperative receive an opportunity to testify in a congressional hearing regarding homeschooling. In this hearing, Smith argues with leaders from the United States Department of Education to suggest that they provide guidelines, such as Common Core, for school curriculums that violate the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The representative of the Department of Education is portrayed as a sinister figure. In his testimony, he says, "Well, once we determine what every child needs to know, it becomes imperative that every child know it. After all, the children belong to all of us." This notion challenges the dominion of parents over children in evangelical homes, potentially compromising the ability of parents to instill an evangelical habitus into their children. It also further aligns the film's protagonists against liberal notions of communal child-rearing, such as those described in Hillary Clinton's *It Takes a Village* (1995) or Michelle Obama's "Reach Higher" initiative.

In testifying about their concerns to the congressional committee, the parents argue that the Common Core education program teaches revisionist history that erases the biblical underpinnings of the ideas of the founding fathers. The parents make clear that they view the heritage of the United States as Christian, and they believe that the government is trying to erase it. Dave makes this case by using American Thanksgiving as an example. He rails against the notion that Thanksgiving was in any way a holiday

intended to celebrate diversity, a fair enough notion. However, he is most bothered by the fact that public schools supposedly do not teach that the primary reason for the pilgrim's feast was to thank God for the harvest. In doing so, Reverend Dave prepares the audience to be suspicious of any attempts at diversity and inclusivity, a recent concentration of conservative politicians, while simultaneously engaging in colonial revisionist history. Dave later ends his testimony before the committee with a powerfully delivered speech accompanied by somber yet triumphant music.

Dave: But they understand what's at stake here. And maybe in order to understand how precious and fragile freedom really is, maybe...maybe you have to lose it. But you already know that. I mean, all of this, it's... oh, it's just a distraction. And I made it easy for you, didn't I? I bet your face just lit up when you realized that there was a pastor on the witness list. You knew that if you challenged scriptures, I would rise to defend them. It's kind of in my job description. You figured you'd run out the clock while we debated how women wore their hair 2,000 years ago. All in hopes that no one would realize that it's really their freedoms that are on the line.

Chairman: Not at all, sir. The issue here today is homeschooling.

Dave: I wish it was Mr. Chairman. I truly do. No, today...today was about turning neighbor against neighbor. That's part of your plan, isn't it? Keep us all divided. So, bit by bit, we don't realize you're chipping away at our freedoms and liberties. You got us all talking about how Noah got all the animals on the ark. Meanwhile, you're crafting legislation that will allow the government to barge into our homes because it's all about power for you. The only way that you can get more power is by taking it from someone else. And that would be all well and good if it wasn't for that pesky thing called the Constitution that keeps getting in your way.

Chairman: Now, you hold on a second.

Dave: No, I'm done talking to you! I'm talking to the people who elected you. Because as inconvenient as it is, sir, this is where your power comes from!

Chairman: Order!

Dave: You see those statues and those monuments out there? They say, 'You work for us!

Chairman: You are out of order, Mr. Hill!

Dave: A government of the people, by the people, for the people.

Chairman: Order! You are out of order, Mr. Hill! Order! Bailiff.

Dave: So stay out of our homes and churches. And, yes, stay out of our children's education. Because what you call teaching, Mr. Chairman, is really social engineering.

Chairman: You are out of order, Mr. Hill!

Dave: Your history is being rewritten, biology is redefined, and right and wrong are erased. Our children don't belong to the government, and neither does our country. America belongs to its citizens, to each and all.

Once again, the script aligns evangelical theology with conservative political grievances.

These grievances will continue to shape the narrative going forward.

It is worth considering how the film constructs its antagonists. *God's Not Dead: A Light in Darkness* softens its anti-atheist rhetoric. Dave's Brother, Pearce, is revealed to be an atheist, and he still assists Dave in his efforts to save his church. Grace's lawyer in *God's Not Dead 2* is also an atheist, yet he helps Grace win her case against the ACLU. This choice in writing suggests that the audience is being led away from a view of atheists as their enemy and pointed towards the idea of a malevolent government apparatus as their enemy. This rhetoric echoes Bible verses that advocate for struggling with strongholds of demonic forces rather than mortal enemies (McAllister 2017, 71). *God's Not Dead: We the People* does the work of characterizing the federal government as the evil forces with which they are battling. While this government has representatives in the form of the chairperson of the committee, the members of the committee that side with their chairperson, and even the social worker from the initial visit, these people are not portrayed as the enemy. Rather, it is the government itself that is the enemy.

God's Not Dead: In God We Trust (2024) is the latest film in the franchise, released in September 2024. It centers around a congressional race that is thrown into turmoil when one of the candidates, Rick West, dies suddenly of a heart attack. West was the incumbent, and his opponent was Peter Kane, the ACLU lawyer and anti-theist from *God's Not Dead 2*. Kane's opinions on religion have not changed since the second film, and when talking to his campaign staff, he says of West's passing: "Gentlemen, the passing of Rick West may allow us to catch up with the rest of the modern world. I have always said that religious superstition has no place in influencing our laws and government." The intro replays part of Reverend Dave's speech from the end of the previous film before cutting to a clip of President John F. Kennedy giving a speech talking about the honor of being called to defend freedom in its hour of maximum danger. This editing leads the viewer to suppose that the current culture war is such an hour. They further splice in clips of Martin Luther King Jr. and Ronald Reagan. Along with these leaders, this opening includes images of the COVID-19 pandemic, protests where the American flag is burned, and images of statues toppled and spray-painted.

This introduction establishes Reverend Dave as an authoritative speaker by likening him to iconic conservative figures, though notably, Martin Luther King Jr. is not shown speaking in these clips. Instead, the intro appropriates his image. Dave already has the capital in the field of evangelicalism; however, he lacks enough capital to be an authoritative speaker in the field of politics. By editing his speech from the previous film into this compilation, Reverend Dave is signaled to be a speaker with authority similar to that of the other figures shown, giving him the capital he needs to speak authoritatively in the political field. Further, the images of the COVID-19 pandemic, riots, and statue

vandalism also establish the scale, relevancy, and urgency of the grievances that the film is leading its viewers to take up.

The use of these deceased political icons is an example of the utilization of appeals to absent authority figures. As Craig Martin points out, once an author or speaker is no longer able to contest interpretations of their words, they can be interpreted in ways with which the original author might have disagreed (Martin 2017, 122). Appeals to these figures lend authority to the applier while simultaneously making it difficult to discredit their interpretation. The introduction of *God's Not Dead: In God We Trust* is a textbook example of the exact type of appeal Martin describes.

In the film, Peter Kane makes issues of the separation of church and state his primary platform. Given his platform, Congressman Daryl Smith decides to convince Reverend Dave to run against Kane for the congressional seat. As Dave is making his decision, he has a pivotal conversation with Martin (the Chinese-American immigrant who warned the parents about government indoctrination in *God's Not Dead: We The People*). Martin tells Dave that he thinks an anti-faith revolution similar to one in his home country is brewing. He tells Dave that he fears Christians will be rounded up and put into camps. Following this discussion, Congressman Smith convinces Dave to run by telling him that he could better achieve the change he wants to make by working from the inside. In discussing how they want to tailor their opposition to Reverend Dave, Kane's campaign advisor tells him to "get ready to do the whole church and state dance." This quote implies that the notion of a separation of church and state is a cover for personally held anti-religious sentiment. Dave himself confirms this sentiment in an interview shortly after.

In their campaigning, Kane releases an ad accusing Reverend Dave of being xenophobic, misogynistic, and an intolerant extremist. Having played the villain in previous films and once again playing the villain in this film, Kane's use of these inflammatory terms has the effect of portraying them as tools used to assassinate the character of people like Reverend Dave, whom the audience already implicitly trusts as the protagonist of the series. In their first debate, Dave elucidates the position of many conservative-minded evangelicals, as of late, that the separation of church and state only functions to keep the government out of religion, but religion can enter the governmental sphere as much as it pleases. Kane responds by saying the country should be run by scholars and academics rather than people who believe in superstitions such as God. This line has the effect of aligning scholars and academics with militant atheists such as Kane, which makes them enemies of the evangelical audience by default.

Dave and Kane appear in a news segment together before their second debate, where Dave accuses Kane and supporters of a strong federal government of trying to make government their God. Dave makes it clear that he views a strong federal government as a bad thing, aligning him with American conservatism and, as the representative of evangelicalism, making this position the default for evangelicals. Once again, I think it is important to reiterate the way in which this series invites its viewers to participate and experience the events of the film vicariously through the characters. Applied here, Dave effectively invites the viewer to advocate for small government and conservative politics. Dave also rails against the label of Christian Nationalism in this debate, writing it off as a term used to dismiss any Christian who wants to be politically active. In this same panel, Dave aligns himself with the founding father figures he

admires by citing their Christian principles and accuses Kane of disregarding the founding principles of the United States. Again, this appeal to the founding fathers demonstrates an appeal to absent authority as a means of legitimization (Martin 2017, 122).

Before Dave debates Kane for the final time, they have a private conversation in which Kane attempts to persuade Dave to withdraw from the race. When Dave expresses concern that the voters will be hurt if he withdraws from the race, Kane tells him that he should put his values to work and “turn the other cheek.” During the final debate, Kane quotes several Bible verses to Dave, including words attributed to Jesus Christ, which seem to run contrary to Dave’s politics. However, Dave dismisses Kane’s verses as lacking context. Kane discusses how the founders of the United States were a group with supposedly diverse beliefs and that they generated the idea of universal human rights. During this portion of Kane’s speech, clips of characters from the film talking about oppression in other countries, such as China, are spliced in to imply that they are running through Dave’s mind while Kane is discussing universal human rights. Kane ends this section by quoting a portion of the Declaration of Independence, which allows Dave to interject that the signers wrote that they believed that the rights of people were given to them by their creator, which he takes to be God. Dave uses this moment to argue that God is part of the fabric holding the country together, and it would collapse without God. Dave then makes a call to action.

Imagine if all Christians mobilized and voted. Do you know what would happen? Ask him [pointing at Kane]. He does, and it terrifies him. You have the power to change things. Not me, not him, you. So, send the message to Washington. Tell them that you’re not ready to give that power up. Don’t stay quiet. Don’t be silent. Don’t let them push you into the shadows. You are the salt. You are the light.

Fight the good fight. Fight the good fight. God gave you a voice! God gave you a vote! A vote. Use it. (Null)

The film ends with Dave winning the election in a moment of triumph that was somewhat foreseeable. Regardless of the outcome, I find Dave's closing argument to be the most interesting moment in the film.

Role Credits, Text Your Friends: Final Thoughts on *God's Not Dead*

I argue that this final speech by Reverend Dave in *God's Not Dead: In God, We Trust* represents nothing less than the culmination of a narrative that has been a decade in the making. I agree with Courtney Dreyer's contention that the *God's Not Dead* series invites its audiences to experience the characters' emotions as they go through transformational journeys in their faith (Dreyer 2023, 245-247). However, I think *God's Not Dead* is more complex. Earlier, I invoked the work of Susan Harding and Webb Keane to discuss the process of conversion in evangelicalism. The process involves a saved speaker speaking and an unsaved person listening (Harding 2000, 34-37). In this process, the speaker begins to unknowingly adapt the language of the speaker, which fundamentally transforms their worldview in terms that are more conducive to conversion (Harding 2000, 34-37). Conversion is complete when the unsaved listener transitions to a saved speaker (Harding 2000, 34-37; Keane 2002, 79). The saved person must necessarily speak due to the evangelical imperative to perform one's salvation to outwardly confirm one's saved inner state (Keane 2002, 79).

As already mentioned, I consider both Broock's book (*God's Not Dead: Evidence for God in an Age of Uncertainty*) and the first film, *God's Not Dead* to be doing the work of transforming the language and worldview of the unsaved listener. I further contend that

the subsequent films continue this same conversation. The subsequent films in the franchise invite the newly saved speaker to put their newly acquired worldview to work and rethink issues in evangelical terms. They invite the viewer to adopt the fears of evangelicals, experience their concerns, and oppose their enemies (Dreyer 2023, 245-247). Finally, *God's Not Dead: In God We Trust* invites viewers to act. If the role of the saved speaker is indeed to use their voice and speak, Dave embodies how to speak. These evangelicals are to speak by voting for conservative politicians.

I suggest that the *God's Not Dead* series is a process for recruiting unsaved listeners and teaching them how to fulfill their new roles as saved speakers. I propose that the participatory nature of the film sees them call on the audience to think, feel, and act in that order. The first film and the original book allow the audience the opportunity to think, specifically in evangelical terms. The second, third, and fourth films offer the audience an opportunity to feel. These opportunities take the form of instances of shame, fear, righteous indignation, anger, joy, and triumph (Dreyer 2023, 245-247). Finally, the audience is called on to act in the final film, to complete their transition to saved speaker by using their voting power as their voice.

I have attempted to elucidate what I feel are the most interesting aspects of the *God's Not Dead* series. The films are so content-rich that I have had to cut a significant amount of material simply due to the constraints of this project. One could easily view the plots and subplots of the *God's Not Dead* series through any number of scholarly lenses to glean new insights, and I encourage anyone so inclined to do so. Nevertheless, I hope that what I have contributed to the discussion might reveal further insights into how the series resonates with current academic analyses of evangelicalism.

Conclusion:

The Famous Final Scene: Some Closing Thoughts on the Functionality of the Evangelical Film Industry

In the previous chapters, I have attempted to give an overview of current themes and discourses in the evangelical film industry. While I have chosen to focus my efforts on the *God's Not Dead* series and the films of the Kendrick Brothers, I should note that evangelical film is not limited to these entities. Great American Pure Flix operates an entire streaming service that produces faith-based films and shows that never make a box office debut. These films are viewed by the evangelical subscribers of the service. Additionally, many evangelical films have been produced by independent and Hollywood-affiliated film studios and churches. Among these are *To Save a Life* (2009), *Letters to God* (2010), *I Can Only Imagine* (2018), and *Ordinary Angels* (2024). Although the Kendrick Brothers are not necessarily household names, their films, especially *Fireproof*, *Courageous*, and *War Room*, grossed tens of millions of dollars at the box office and spawned a popular line of companion materials regularly used as instructional material in church settings. Likewise, *God's Not Dead* proved so popular that it led to the success of the Great American Pure Flix streaming service. These films are among the most popular evangelical-produced films ever created. Their continued popularity speaks to their ability to resonate with their evangelical base. By way of conclusion, I would like to consider how a critical analysis of evangelical films offers a meaningful contribution to the discipline of religious studies.

Navigating and Negotiating: The Ever-Evolving Evangelical Identity

Religious studies scholar Teemu Taira discusses the efficacy of discourse analysis within the discipline. In formulating his argument, Taira suggests that religion acts as a floating signifier (Taira 2013, 26; 2022, 20-21). The term “floating signifier” indicates that religion does not have a meaning apart from the ways historically, societally, and culturally understood in various contexts. Taira applies this theory in the case of Wiccans attempting to gain official recognition as a religion in Finland (Taira 2013, 34; 50-51). In this case, Christianity, by virtue of its historical dominance, acted as a prototype for the Finnish government (Taira 2013, 34-35; 2022, 61). This prototype led the Finnish government to make certain assumptions about what a religion looks like, such as the use of sacred texts or a well-defined community of practitioners (Taira 2013, 34-35; 2022, 61-63). Taira suggests that the definitions of terms such as religion are always being negotiated through discourse (Taira 2013, 35; 2022, 50). He suggests that examining the discourse surrounding these definitions can provide insight into power dynamics and how terms can be used to promote the interests of certain parties and disenfranchise others (Taira 2013, 35; 2022, 50).

I propose that similar insights can be gleaned from examining evangelical film through discourse analysis. While many scholars have appealed to Bebbington’s quadrilateral to understand evangelicalism, its focus on belief tells us little about evangelical lived experiences and identity formation. Sociologist of religion, Isaac Sharp notes that the evangelical identity has historically proven hard to define (Sharp 2023, 254). He discusses how modern evangelicalism was largely a result of cultural influence and negotiation during the twentieth century (Sharp 2023, 255). In this negotiation,

agents with identities differing from those of the dominant evangelicals (i.e., progressives, liberals, racialized groups, 2SLGBT+ groups, etc.) attempted to create a place for themselves in evangelicalism but were met with ire by those of the dominant conservative majority (Sharp 2023, 254-256). Through the lens of discourse analysis, we might see “evangelical” as a floating signifier under negotiation.

Since the emergence of evangelicalism in the late eighteenth century, the identity and definition of the term “evangelical” have been under constant negotiation (Sharp 2023, 254-255). It would be a mistake to think that these negotiations have ceased simply because evangelicalism currently feels fairly homogeneous to the outsider. I suggest that the evangelical identity continues to be negotiated in current evangelical discourse. Further, I suggest that the films I have analyzed in this thesis and the countless others prevalent in evangelical popular culture negotiate the identity of “evangelical” by attempting to reinforce existing aspects of that identity and by painting progressive agents as a threat to that identity. The medium of film not only allows the producers to make the concerns of evangelical agents real, but it also allows them to model the appropriate action evangelical agents are to take to address these concerns. In doing so, these filmmakers construct their own discourse and their opposition. This construction not only reinforces the idea that the threats these oppositional agents and forces pose are genuine but also legitimizes the need for the existence of this discourse to the evangelical audience. As such, by constructing their opposition both in position and scale, these filmmakers justify the existence of the discourse. In other words, by their narrative, these films justify their own existence and imply the need for further films.

Ties that Bind: The Functionality of Evangelical Belief

I want to close with a few words about belief. Belief itself is difficult to define, and some religious studies scholars choose not to emphasize the role of belief, as it perpetuates colonial notions of prioritizing belief over ritual (King 2022b, 114). However, I think, in this case, belief plays an important role in evangelical film, especially in the case of those mentioned. I invoked the work of Courtney Dreyer and Brian Carwana earlier to note that the concept of marginalization is important to the evangelical identity. Like other scholars studying evangelicalism, I have attempted to investigate the origins of these feelings of marginalization and how I see these films serve as reinforcement mechanisms for those feelings. Like other scholars, I have attempted to trouble these notions somewhat. I do not suggest that evangelicals do not genuinely feel as oppressed as films such as the *God's Not Dead* series portray them to be. Rather, I have done my best to show that the construction of oppressive and marginalizing agents in these films is a way of manifesting the evangelical perception of the culture wars as spiritual warfare in a tangible way that is not feasible outside the cinema.

Naturally, evangelicals do not spend all their time in the cinema, and even if they did, there is no reason that they could not maintain the understanding that film is a simulation of circumstances and ideas rather than a representation of reality. In many cases, the cinema attendee must be able to distinguish between film and reality. However, evangelical films ask the opposite of their viewers. Rather than asking their audience to suspend their disbelief, evangelical films ask their audiences to believe. Though she died before composing a comprehensive theory, critical religious studies scholar Catherine Bell proposed that belief primarily functioned to maintain contradictions and overcome

cognitive dissonance (O'Neill 2018, 70). Anthropologist Rebecca Bartel built on Bell's theory in her work about charismatic Christians in Columbia (Bartel 2016, 1009; cf. Bell 2008, 88). Bartel uses Bell's notion of belief to explain the seemingly inexplicable simultaneous existence of aspirations for a strong economy in Columbia and the dependence of much of its population on credit (Bartel 2016, 1009). Through belief, these two seemingly opposing conditions can be reconciled in the minds of the community that Bartel observes (Bartel 2016, 1014).

I contend that belief performs a similar function for evangelicals. In the *God's Not Dead* series, moments in which antagonists champion ideas such as diversity, the separation of church and state, and a standardized education curriculum for children are presented in a way that paints them as a trojan horse for evil, unseen forces. Yet, the daily lives of evangelicals and the contents of real-world progressive policies would seem to run contrary to this messaging. These films ask their viewers to believe in their worldview. This belief allows the viewer to maintain the cognitive dissonance between the supposed spiritual warfare and the much less exciting reality in which most live. It allows them to claim marginalization while simultaneously being the most frequent recipients of privilege. It allows them to fear that an army of atheists and secularists is preparing to attack them and their children to force them to give up their beliefs, even though most atheists do not share their interest in evangelizing (Pérez and Vallières 2019, 10; Schnell and Keenan 2011, 73-74). Scholarly research suggests that a lack of reinforcement of religious belief and practice can be a deciding factor concerning deconversion to atheism rather than atheist proselytization (Pérez and Vallières 2019, 10). Additionally, as we have seen, atheists lack the requisite group cohesiveness and

commitment to attempt mass-scale conversion efforts (Schnell and Keenan 2011, 73-74). Belief connects the unseen cosmic forces of spiritual warfare to the realities of everyday life for evangelicals. I contend that the films I have discussed assist in facilitating and reinforcing these beliefs.

With these final thoughts, I bring my argument to an end. Throughout this thesis, I have examined the works of the most prolific contemporary evangelical filmmakers through an academic lens and attempted to put them in conversation with current discourse in Religious Studies scholarship. In doing so, I have revealed what I consider to be some of the implicit beliefs and functions at work in these films. Specifically, I hope I have shown some of the ways in which evangelical attitudes about the culture wars are shaped by their theologies concerning domestic life and salvation. These theological attitudes and notions of belief help demystify evangelical notions of marginalization and secularization, of which they position themselves on the receiving end. These theological commitments shape the form that the culture wars take for evangelicals and reveal these films to be a battle tactic for one front in the landscape of these wars.

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