RELENTLESS PURSUIT: THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY AMONG AMERICAN CHRISTIANS

By

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This one’s for me.

Acknowledgments

This project has been a long time in the works. Too long. And I am grateful for its completion. There are a great many people to thank, the first being my informants. Since beginning my research as an undergraduate in 2015, I have seen some of my informants fall in love, get married, and go on to have their first child. I've seen others go through deeply personal struggles — their careers upended, and their lives put on hold; and yet, they cling to and continue to grow in their faith. I've seen others come into their own as believers, stepping into leadership roles among their peers. Finally, I have witnessed some fall in and out of their faith as they battle with opiates, entering rehabilitation programs only to quit, victims of addiction. I have been fortunate to know these individuals as they go through life, and even more fortunate that they would be willing to trust me enough to share some of their deepest hurts, fears, failures, as well as their hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written of the desire for authenticity. That it is a return to the first, the original, to that which is the real. And it is no surprise that such a desire plays an important role among modern evangelical Christians. In a world that often seems topsy-turvy, where the potential for sin abounds, where fears of the unknown and other dominate, where the possibility of falling into a life of sin remains, it is those things that are deemed *really real* that provide respite. For those at The Experience Community Church, the pursuit of authenticity is essential to their Christian identity. It isevidenced in the founding of the community, their readings and interpretation of Scripture, their continuing stories of salvation, and their avid pursuit of the presence of God. These Christians strive to be, as their slogan says, authentic in their community, in their worship, and their community service.

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INTRODUCTION

"*The one word I couldn't stop repeating was authentic." – Pastor Korey*

I began this project in 2015 as part of an Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity Grant (URECA). At that time, I had intended to explore Christian perceptions of persecution in the Middle Tennessee area. While working between two local Christian communities, where I participated in regular church services, small groups, home groups, worship nights, and classes held for both new and prospective believers. I quickly found that such narratives of persecution, while making for excellent social media outrage by public figures and politicians, was not lived reality — at least, not among these Christians. In fact, my informants were adamant that persecution was *not* happening to them; this, despite both communities having been targeted by vandals. One robbed, the glass doors being broken through with a brick and instruments and other sound equipment stolen. At The Experience, an arsonist had set a fire outside the main sanctuary. Fortunately, the fire had not spread. But the wall and ceiling still bare the evidence of smoke damage; a lingering testimony, I was told, of God's protection. Interestingly, this wall would not be the last to tell a story during my fieldwork. With my research question thoroughly sunk, I began pursuing other avenues. It was while attending Worship Night at The Experience that I would encounter another wall, this time, one of the community's own making.

During this Worship Night, which is recounted in chapter three, I watched as members gathered at the wall and with markers in hand wrote of their struggles and sins,

their affirmation of faith, and most importantly each would write of their salvation experience. That these believers would record their fears and failures on this wall for anyone to read revealed a definitive feature of their faith — that it is real. That it is authentic. The veracity of their claims demonstrated through a life that has been transformed, perhaps radically. And this transformation is evident in both word and action – the story readily available to all who would listen, or, in this particular instance, read the multi-colored inscriptions on the wall. It was this second wall that would inspire my project for URECA and which would later become the foundation for this thesis.

In 2016 I began the Master of Liberal Arts (MALA) program at Middle Tennessee State University. This program is particularly notable in that it allows students to pursue their own interests in conjunction with a core curriculum that introduces students to a breadth of subjects in the liberal arts. I found the inherently interdisciplinary nature of this program is especially valuable in my own research as it encourages students to make use of various theoretical lenses. While I concentrated my studies in cultural anthropology, religious studies, and history; my primary interest was within the anthropology of Christianity. Also, at this time, aiming to expand on my previous URECA work I renewed attendance at The Experience, which I maintained through 2019.

While this work draws from a range of scholarship it is firmly rooted in the anthropology of Christianity. As a recently developed field, the anthropological study of Christianity is a comparative project which seeks to understand Christians and

Christianity on their own terms. However, this poses a set of difficulties for the anthropologist. Namely, that there is little that differentiates the researcher from his interlocutors. As anthropologist Joel Robbins states “Christians, almost wherever they are, appear at once too similar to anthropologists to be worthy of study and too meaningfully different to be easily made sense of by the use of standard anthropological tools” (2003, 192). Furthermore, Robbins indicates that the anthropology of Christianity is an inherently a comparative project as “anthropologists are not these days inclined to accept that there is a single thing called Christianity” and that

> when the number of different kinds is multiplied by the number of different situations and the number of different cultures to which people have adopted them, it is hard to escape the conclusion that at best we are dealing with Christianities rather than with Christianity and that at the worst these Christianities really have rather little in common with one another (2003, 193).

As a comparative project, the anthropology of Christianity must, as Robbins concludes,draw upon the strengths of anthropological literature as well as develop comparative conversations within the field itself. (2003, 198). So while this thesis does draw from historical and anthropological literature, I also make use of those works which emergefrom the anthropology of Christianity.

During my tenure at The Experience, I conducted several conversational interviews with church leaders and lay members. It will be noted that almost all my informants are men, and all are white and heterosexual. In some ways, this simply reflects those whom I had access to, but it also speaks to the demographics of the church. In addition to these informants, I also use non-traditional sources and engage in some

ethnographic experiments. These explorations follow the inspiration of anthropologists Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean, who speaking on the complexities and hindrances of ethnographic writing, say:

> we get caught up too often in ideas of origin and destination – where someone is coming from, where a text must go. The "how" of transportation is easily lost: the means of conveyance, the transformative potential of movement, the techniques our works rely on in taking their readers elsewhere. Writing is a transitive process of communication, a material practice no less participatory and dynamic than ethnographic fieldwork. (2017, 1).

Ethnographic writing and anthropology are often considered two sides of the same coin, and perhaps rightfully so. But it must be asked if the weight of scientific inquiry is enough to restrict literary explorations. Does poetic prose or novelization have a place within our genre? As Pandian and McLean explain, "it seems to us that certain more radical possibilities for experimentation with ethnographic writing remain unexplored, even in the wake of anthropology's "reflexive turn." Pandian and McLean implore their reader to:

> Imagine the novel possibilities for thought and action that might come with a deferral of critical distance, in pursuit of a less guarded, even reckless contamination by circumstance. Imagine ways of writing that might put ourselves more deeply at risk than what we have tried till now. What could such experiments look like, and what, if anything, might they achieve?" (2017, 3)

And so, in addition to theoretical analysis, I make use of primary sources, multiple interviews, and works of art. My aim is to explore the potentials that arise when treating these impersonal sources as interlocutors – capable of speaking towards the identity of

the community. It will be noted, I believe, that making use of these sources, interviews, and so on, will help provide a more definitive image of these Christians, in addition to providing a comparative project for further study.

In chapter one, I draw from primary sources and interviews with the lead pastor and founder of The Experience, James. Here, I frame the conversion of James with the founding and development of the community. I then move on to locate the community historically, a descendant of the Jesus Movement, demonstrating that The Experience Community is not unlike its peers, abandoning former ways of believing in pursuit of something real. Finally, I recount a conversation with James which helps identify the ways that the members of The Experience interact with the world around them. Then, in chapter two, I follow the conversion narratives of two of my informants; Liam and Matthew. These narratives echo the desire for authenticity, which return their authors repeatedly to their own former sinfulness and the salvation provide by Christ. But rather than a single moment of conversion, these narratives demonstrate how salvation becomes an everyday occurrence. But more than this, these narratives are constantly negotiated to illustrate God's direct intervention in the lives of the believers. Finally, in chapter three, I explore how members of The Experience Community, during nights dedicated to worship, *experience* God through absence. I explore how the physical environment is used to restructure interior states of being. I also demonstrate that works of art; created by those members in attendance, reflect and speak towards the workings of God in individual lives. I am particularly interested in how these works, once completed and then abandoned by their maker, become speakers themselves, material objects testifying to their experience of God.

CHAPTER ONE — MAJOR ON THE MAJORS

It's August 2018 and the Tennessee weather has finally given a welcome break from the summer heat. I have just attended Next Class at The Experience Community Church. Next Class is a once per month meeting for those considering making The Experience their church home. After a lengthy tour of the facilities, including a detailed description of various services and ministries available, everyone gathers in the main sanctuary. At this time, Pastor James tells his own conversion story and explains how The

Experience was founded, the vision for the church, and their mission to the Middle Tennessee area. At the conclusion, James rubs shoulders with those who have stayed behind. Prospective members line up to talk or pray with him or the other staff members present.

As I wait, intentional to be last in line, the couple in front of me tells James of their coming to the church after the young husband had been in a horrific accident; an accident in which he says a run-away semi-truck nearly decapitated him. Had it not been for God's miraculous intervention, the young husband assures us, myself having been drawn into the conversation, he would have certainly died. James listens with rapt attention and affirms his gratefulness that the couple had made The Experience their church home. After praying with the young couple, James turns his attention to me.

This is the first time I have spoken with him, my primary contacts over the years have been associate pastors and lay leaders. I introduce myself and tell him of my status

as a graduate student and about my research. He seems enthused to meet me and affirms his knowledge about my project. Our conversation turns lengthy as James and I discuss my own status as a former believer and gay man, both subjects in which James takes a particular interest. Our conversation eventually turns to the community itself. I tell James that, until recently, I had understood both he and the church as most similar to other evangelical communities, but that he had upended those assumptions in previous weeks when he addressed the creation narrative as allegorical rather than historical fact. When I questioned his comments, he replied, "I'm not a young-earth creationist. How could I be? My wife is a biologist." A response that further forced me to reconsider my own preconceived notions. Making our way outside, we joined two other church leaders. Our conversation turned to the recent election of Donald Trump and that his voting base was largely self-described evangelical Christians. Each of the men informed me that none of them had voted for Trump in the election. One had voted for Hillary Clinton, one for Gary Johnson, and the third, feeling that there were no "godly choices," abstained from voting altogether. Again, after two years of semi-regular attendance, I felt as though what I had understood about the community, their values, and their systems of belief had been upended.

As the four of us continued to talk outside the church, a nondescript SUV made its way through the parking lot. Appearing to have missed a turn, the vehicle pulled out of the church parking lot and then back onto the main road, coming to a stop in front of a ramshackle house adjacent to the church. None of us had really taken notice of the

vehicle. Moments later, shots rang out. We turned to see men running from the house and leaping into the SUV, which sped away, tires squealing against the pavement. Each of us stood, stunned. We looked at one another in both confusion and surprise, asking if those were gunshots that we had heard. James made his way towards the house to see if anyone was injured. One of the men went back inside the church to check the security cameras. I stayed in place with the third, who called the police. Within a few moments, James returned and told us that no one had been hurt and that he suspected it was a gun fired through the door, the assumption being a drug deal gone bad based on what appeared to be narcotics on a table. We watched as several Police officers arrived on the scene, with one patrol car soon speeding off in the direction that the SUV had taken. After the excitement dissipated, we all prepared to leave.

In a sort of conclusion to our conversation, James pointed out that the church's location was intentional that the church was located here --` that is, adjacent to low income and dilapidated housing -- to “reach those most in need of the gospel.” As I parted ways with James, I told him that I felt as though some of the things he had said to me, had they been heard by members of the congregation instead, those members would leave the church. He affirmed my sentiment and added that “it’s a process. There are some things that some people aren’t ready to hear yet.”

In the following chapter, I explore how The Experience Community is positioned historically and culturally within the context of American Christianity. I argue that this community is a result of the democratization of Christianity in the United States and

descended from the Jesus Movement and, like predecessors and peers, responds to the cultural tensions of modernity through an appeal to *the real*.

To fully explore the thesis of this chapter, I contrast field notes, interviews, and primary source material with historical contexts and theoretical frameworks. First, I turn to James's self-published book to discuss the role authenticity plays in this community. Then following a series of theoretical arguments, which reveal the desire for authenticity originating as a condition of modernity, I consider the Christian reform movements that emerged in response to the social and cultural tensions – focusing especially on the 1960s. By providing this historical context, I am able to position The Experience Community among these Christian movements.

After locating the community historically, I position them socially. Returning to James, I trace his conversion narrative, which leads to the founding of The Experience Community. The desire for authenticity remains an undercurrent theme and is here made actionable, including such things as coming to salvation and mopping floors, ministering to gay nudists, and starting a church. But modernity is tenuous and requires constant evaluation. How these evaluations are made is particularly interesting and concludes the chapter.

Building *The Experience Community*

In his self-published book *Authentic Pursuit: Building a Church from Nothing*,[1]

[1] To protect the anonymity of my informants I treat this book as a material source and do not provide citation information.

James writes that while working as a student pastor at a local Pentecostal church, "I took a few days off, went out of town and spent some time with my laptop and the persistent, God-sized ideas that had been churning in my head." These God-sized ideas that James wrestled with emerged from his background as both an unbeliever and an outsider to church. James goes on to recount that:

> The kind of crowd I was used to hanging out with were the kind of people who wouldn't darken the door of a church like the one I worked at. People like the ones I had led in Bible study […] artists, musicians, hipsters, loners, outsiders, and all of the "fringe" people who were never accepted by the rest of the world. They were deep-thinkers that asked hard questions. Where were the churches for those people? Who was going to take the gospel to a community so desperately different from what we were comfortable with inside our own culture?

James came to the conclusion that there needed to be a church for these people. And he committed his vision to a thirteen-page document detailing what would become The Experience Community, "a Biblically-based, brutally honest community open to believers and seekers."

> We'd be simple- very simple. Every week we'd do verse by verse chapter by chapter study of the Bible, we'd worship through song, we'd love and serve each other as a community, and we'd focus on meeting the needs of the poor and needy within our city. The one word I couldn't stop repeating was *authentic.*
>
> Something that is authentic is genuine, credible, and believable. I was done playing church. I wanted to create something that was real. If people were broken and hurting when they came to church, I wanted them to be comfortable admitting where they were. If we claimed to be a place of love, acceptance, forgiveness and grace, I wanted us to actually be that. I wanted us to be real. Authentic. Genuine. I wanted us to say what we meant and to mean what we said.

Anthropologist James Bielo demonstrates that the desire for the original, the true, *the real* is nothing new among Christians. The appeal to authenticity is the result of "religious subjects responding to the cultural conditions of modernity and late modernity" (Bielo 2011, 17). It is by examining the role of authenticity that researchers are able to understand the action-generating dispositions of subjects as they respond to these eras. Citing anthropologist Webb Keane, Bielo states that the grounding of authenticity in modernity recalls "the primary moral narrative of the modern era as 'a story of human liberation from a host of false beliefs and fetishisms that undermine freedom.'" And, Bielo continues, modernity is verified via the "relationship between economy, polity, society, and culture" and modern dispositions trace to the "urban industrial revolution, the spread of depersonalized bureaucratic structures, and the philosophical devotion to reason" (2011, 18). Furthermore, the *late* modern is marked by the shift in post-industrialism and is characterized by "political economies defined by fragmentation, rapid movement, and expendable labor forces, and emotional psychologies defined by anxieties, alienation, and dislocation" (Bielo 2011, 18). While there is disagreement on the specific origin of authenticity, be it rooted in the alienation and estrangement experienced during the rise of urban industrialism as a "condition of living among strangers" (Lindholm 2008), or that it arose as a consequence of "living among symbols" which have "no inherent connection to the self" and leave us to wonder what is "really real" (Parish 2009).

Such movements and their responses to the anxieties of modernity are a central theme within American Christianity. Christian reform movements, advertising a return to an original, authentic past, often appealed to those unchurched or on the fringes of organized Christianity. In what follows, I lightly trace the development of Jesus Movements of the sixties to New Paradigm Churches that have arguably taken on their mantle. In outlining these movements, I am able to position The Experience Community among them in their pursuit of authenticity.

The Jesus Movement and The Rise of New Paradigm Churches

As historian Nathan O. Hatch (1989) demonstrates, the years surrounding the American war of Independence were marked by rapid transformations resulting from an upturned social and political life, wherein new and emergent forms of Christianity sought to provide relief. These new movements, having freed themselves from ecclesiastical authority and oversight, empowered the layperson with individual and experiential access to the divine, granting them the ability to read and interpret scripture on their own and the power to act in accordance with what they believed God had called them to do. This democratization of Christianity resulted in an unprecedented flourishing in the postwar years. And, as historian Sam Haselby (2015) demonstrates, these movements appealed to both the illiterate and the highly educated, all the while laying the foundation for religious nationalist movements providing right and reason for projects such as removal of indigenous persons, violent occupation of their territories, as well as forced conversions and re-education.

The tensions of the American post-independence years are not dissimilar to the cultural instabilities of the 1960s, which left many, especially conservative Protestants, questioning the foundation on which American society was thought to be built. Young people of this era were likely to be more college-educated than their parents and, as historian Frances Fitzgerald explains, "their education alienated them from the world of their parents" (Fitzgerald 2017, 234). Not only were these Baby Boomers alienated from their parents in terms of education, but by their abandonment of social and cultural norms as well. "Calling for liberation, they broke major taboos — sex, drugs, and Rock 'n' Roll. In pursuit of transcendent experience and true community, they tuned in, dropped out, went on journeys with no destination, formed communes, and tried to live off the land" (Fitzgerald 2017, 234). Some of these young people took on new religious and spiritual ways of being, they confronted authority, marched for Civil Rights, protested the Vietnam War. Many women "called for liberation against male domination, and in 1969 gay men fought against a police raid on a bar, the Stonewall Inn in New York City" (Fitzgerald 2017, 234).

Additionally, the 1960s saw the terrain of American Christianity rapidly shifting. Pentecostalism, named after the day of Pentecost, began to flourish rapidly, first in 1901 at Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas, and then in 1906 at the Azusa Street Baptist church in Los Angeles. Popular first among marginalized people of color, over the following decades, Pentecostalism spread to the white working class. And, unlike their

fundamentalist counterparts, Pentecostals emphasized spiritual experience overdogma.

Because of their emphasis on ecstatic experiences, such as *glossolalia*,[2] Pentecostals were criticized by the larger evangelical world as "superstitious, fanatical, demon-possessed, and apostates" and by psychologists as "victims of mental illness or personality disorders." (Fitzgerald 2017, 211). Despite criticism, Pentecostal practices began to spread in Catholicism and mainline Protestantism throughout the 1960s. Rather than identify as Pentecostals, they adapted the beliefs and experiences to their own traditions. Calling themselves 'Charismatics,' they were taken by ecstatic spiritual practices and, like early Pentecostals, insisted on a spiritual democracy in which the layperson had access to the divine.

The transformations happening within mainline Protestantism and Catholicism were striking, not in their differences, but in their similarities to the counterculture movements. As Fitzgerald states:

> Queried by their puzzled elders, some spoke of a desire for authentic experience and authentic spirituality, some about the oppressiveness of institutions, and the need for liberation from empty hierarchical social conventions. Some railed against the rule of scientific and technological thinking that seemed to be turning people into mechanisms and called for individual autonomy and self-realization. They advocated peace, love, and genuine community, but unlike their more political contemporaries in the antiwar movement, they tended to turn their attention inward to see the future in apocalyptic terms. The difference was that the charismatics, like

[2] More commonly known as 'speaking in tongues' and refers to a language, both unintelligible and unspeakable to the unbeliever and only uttered or 'interpreted' by the believers being 'indwelt' by the Holy Spirit.

> so many other Protestant renewal movements, envisioned going not forward to a new age but back to primitive Christianity. They read the Bible as the inerrant word of God, and most became social and political conservatives (Fitzgerald 2017, 223).

While conservative Christians were largely dismayed by the counterculture movement, some ministers saw such movements as an opportunity to spread the gospel. These ministers began "preaching the countercultural stance of Jesus, they took to wearing blue jeans, adopted rock and folk music, and urged getting high on Jesus and Holy Spirit Baptism" (Fitzgerald 2017, 223). This campaign, dubbed the 'Jesus Movement,' gave rise to a variety of enigmatic leaders. They met in coffeehouses and local homes. The overarching theme was to reach the outcasts of society: the beach bums, the dope users, the homeless, and the transient. While some of these groups became authoritarian, others taught biblical literalism, eschatological expectations, and a strict moral code. While the Jesus Movement came to an end in the early 1980s, it left a lasting impression on American evangelicalism.

Sociologist Donald E. Miller in his book *Reinventing American Protestantism* (1997), argues that "while many mainline churches are losing membership, overall church membership is not declining. Instead, a new style of Christianity is being born in the United States, one that responds to fundamental cultural changes that began in the 1960s" (Miller 1997, 1). Miller calls these New Paradigm Churches, and they

> like upstart religious groups of the past, […] have discarded many of the attributes of establishment religion. Appropriating contemporary cultural forms, these churches are creating a new genre of worship music; they are restructuring the organizational

> character of institutional religion; and they are democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers (Miller 1997, 1).

Miller notes that these New Paradigm Churches often meet in non-traditional locations like school auditoriums, spaces in shopping centers, and converted warehouses. There is often an absence of overt religious symbols. The sanctuary is often dressed down. People come to church in casual clothing and the leaders of the church are often indistinguishable from the congregation (Miller 1997, 15).

Miller's description is uncanny in its accuracy. The Experience Community meets in a converted warehouse, which housed a parachute manufacturing plant during the Second World War and was later used as an event center. James, who regularly dons blue jeans, a t-shirt, and foregoes wearing shoes while he preaches, says that when he first visited the building that would eventually house the community that:

> It was really old, semi-dilapidated and only half of it was being used as an events center […] it hadn't really been taken care of (there was trash all around and the paint was peeling), but it had good bones. I distinctly remember how trashed The Experience was. We literally found used underwear from where people had used our now sanctuary as an event center.

As far as religious imagery, the brick walls are covered with art created by the community as well as a large mural painted by the production team for country music singer, Hunter Hayes.

That The Experience Community sits comfortably among its predecessors in the Jesus movement is no surprise. Nor is it a shock to discover that The Experience

Community, like other new paradigm churches, seeks to respond to the anxieties of modernity. But to understand how the community itself came to exist, and how it chooses to respond to the instabilities of the world around them, one must turn to its founding.

A Church from Nothing

When James tells the origins of The Experience Community, he begins by recounting his own conversion experience. Beginning with his own family, he discloses that he "wasn't really raised in a Christian home," having attended until he was eleven, but ceasing altogether after his parents divorced when he was twelve. James goes on to detail a life of self-indulgence: drug use and sexual indiscretions throughout his early teens and into his college years. Once in college, James started a band, which garnered some success throughout the Southeast. He also began to hawk stolen recording equipment on eBay. He says, "I went to college at 18 and failed miserably my first year. I cared more about playing music, smoking cigarettes, and watching Scooby Doo at 2 a.m. than going to class." At twenty-two, James passed out at work. Attributing it to the stress of college, a recent break-up with his long-time girlfriend, and his drinking and drug use, he brushed it off. But when he began to lose motor control and strength in his extremities, he visited several physicians and was diagnosed with the beginning stages of multiple sclerosis, which left him weak and often bound to a wheelchair.

In the midst of his suffering, James discloses that he attempted, on multiple occasions, to take his own life. In his first attempt, he recalls taking pills, the second time he ended up with a gun in his mouth, and the third time he says that he "purchased

hundreds of dollars of vodka from a local liquor store and locked myself in my room, hoping to just fall asleep and never wake up." "But," he says, "for some reason, I left my house to go visit a small church down the road." The church was a local Pentecostal community, pastored by Phil, a man who had connections to James's extended family and often visited him at the record store where he worked. After James had drunkenly stumbled into his office, Phil asked if James was ready for a change. James writes, "I remember telling him that I was tired. I was. I needed change in my life or I think I would have ended it that week."

> Sometime in that conversation in his office that day at the church I had the most dramatic conversion ever. I lay on the ground as people, to this day I am not sure who they were, prayed for me. I remember crying and "snotting" all over everyone I could get my hands on and telling God how sorry I was about a billion times. I was filled with His Spirit that Wednesday in August and I was never to be the same again.

The following Sunday morning I jumped headfirst into attending and then serving at that church. From here on, my life would never be the same. In the months that followed, James thrust himself into a life of service. Asking his now pastor what he could do to serve, James was given a mop and told, "well, the floors need cleaning."

In addition to his time at the church, James also worked at a coffee shop. Unlike the local Starbucks, this coffee shop was, in James's words, "kind of the epicenter of culture in our small city." Hosting bands on the weekends, it was also a favorite hang-out for (clothed) nudists from a nearby gay commune. And in addition to selling craft beer, coffee, and records, the shop also hosted body suspensions in a back room, where individuals will suspend themselves via a series of hooks and piercings throughout the

week. While some might find such a crowd offensive, James felt that it was an opportune place to host a Bible study. He was right. The studies quickly grew and had to be split between two other coffee shops because of their popularity. But, shortly after the studies began, the coffee shop closed. The work James had done was well-known by the congregation, and when a position opened in youth leadership, James, "the guy who teaches gay nudists," was asked to fill the vacancy, which in time turned to James assuming the role of student pastor.

It was in his time as a student pastor that James felt drawn to start a church. He had envisioned The Experience Community as an outgrowth of his home church. But this dream of a gradual emergence was quickly quashed, and he and his wife were labeled a threat to the established community. Shortly after resigning, James discovered that his "former pastor, employer, and spiritual advisor [had given] a public speech to the congregation condemning [James and his wife] and [their]actions." James recalls that they were labeled pawns of Satan sent to "divide and destroy the church body […] [and] were completely 'disfellowshipped.'" Despite this and a series of other setbacks, James pressed on with the vision of founding The Experience.

Unfortunately, without congregational oversight, James lacked the monetary and institutional support to carry out a traditional church plant. It was eventually suggested that James hold a monthly 'preview service.' This preview service would allow him to gauge interest, begin building a ministry team, and communicate the vision of the church: reaching those who were not likely to be welcomed in already established churches. In an

effort to make this vision a reality, James says that "we only promoted in areas and places that Christians typically don't hang out. We put stuff in bars, tattoo parlors, coffee shops, and in publications that mostly artsy people would read." Upon receiving permission to hold the preview services at the local Center for the Arts, which at the time also served as home to a local Unitarian community, James and his small team prepared for their first service.

James recalls that the preview services were a success. The first attracting forty-one people, three of whom James had never met and had come because they had seen an article in the local paper. With the success of the first service, James and those who shared his vision pressed on. The title of the sermon for the third preview service was *We Apologize for our Treatment Towards Homosexuals.* In this sermon, James identified the "un-Christlike and hateful way the church had treated homosexuals." And he "opened theBible and shared the truth about homosexuality being a sin." James notes that while the condemnation of homosexuality is not particularly popular, the new community continued to attract prospective members:

> We had over 50 people in attendance, including a gay friend of mine and a girl who worked at the adult bookstore down the street. God had blessed us with the real outcasts of society. Lots of people with tattoos, piercings, and close to no knowledge about Christ were flooding the church, and it was everything that I had prayed for.

While appealing to those most outside or on the fringes of Christianity, James did not falter in what he believed to be the theological and moral message of the Bible. And, as I

will show in seeking authenticity, theological perspectives are re-navigated or exchanged entirely for a focus on Christ and his sacrifice alone.

Majors and Minors

A few weeks after attending the Next Class, James and I met for lunch. James had suggested that we ride together, and I agreed, looking forward to the extra time to talk with him – especially considering his busy schedule. Arriving at the church early, I waited near the secretaries' desk where an elderly gentleman wearing a red Marine Corp jacket bantered with the few staff members present. James arrived shortly afterward. At James's suggestion, he drove. Once on the road, we began discussing the protests for racial justice by NFL player Colin Kapernick and the ongoing struggles facing people of color in the United States. Once we arrived, and on making our way towards the entrance, we were stopped by two older men who were exiting. The hats the men wore identified them both as veterans, and James jostled with them as friends – later telling me that they were members of the congregation. Introducing me, James told the men that I "planned on kneeling during the anthem." A look of confusion and surprise must have been evident on my face as James quickly added, "I'm kidding, I'm kidding." "You better be," one of the men replied, and while I imagine it was intended to be jocular, his tone implied a certain seriousness. The men said their goodbyes and we parted ways.

I am not entirely sure what I expected to find when I walked into the diner: football helmets, military flags, sports jerseys, glossed and mounted newspaper articles of military feats, athletic achievements both local and nationally, covered every square foot

of the butter-shaded-yellow wall. Overhead, a large American flag hung from the ceiling,and in the middle of it all sat a table of no less than a dozen Tennessee Sheriff's officers.James and I ordered and then took a seat at a table at the furthest corner of the diner, andafter James blessed the food, I set my phone to record:[3]

> Keven: When we first talked at the Next Class, one of the things you said to me was '[I] support [a gay person's] right to get married.'
>
> James: Right.
>
> Keven: And we then we talked about creationism [and evolution] and that you['re] [not a creationist].
>
> James: Well, I don't believe in a literal seven days, I believe in an old earth.
>
> Keven: So, how do you navigate your understanding of the Bible? Is it literal truth, or is it metaphor in some places?
>
> James: I think there's a truth throughout the entire thing. I believe in the accounts of Genesis, I believe in the flood, I believe in Tower of Babel, I believe in all those things. […] the mistake that Christianity has made is we've argued so much if that's a literal twenty-four hours that we missed the main point. It is not that it was literal or figurative. The point is that one God created the heavens and the earth. You know, Moses was writing in a time when there was a multiplicity of beliefs and a bunch of different gods. So, the point wasn't twenty-four hours versus 4.3 billion years. The point Moses was making is that one God created everything. And so, we've kind of missed the forest for the trees on things that are minors. Your belief in a new earth versus an old earth doesn't change the theology of the Bible one stick; it doesn't change it at all. But that's where Christianity's greatest pitfalls becomes, we've taken minor issues, and we've blown them up making them hills to die on and it's hurt us. With the gay marriage issue, I don't have to morally agree with an action to say

[3] Note on Transcriptions: All Transcriptions have been edited for the privacy of the interlocutor. Names, events, and locations have been modified to that end. Transcriptions have been edited to maintain clarity and flow. All edits have been done in good faith and do not change or modify original statements.

> that it's your right in this country to do that. You talked about the Colin Kaepernick stuff [earlier]. Though I don't agree with, necessarily, the point he's trying to make; what makes our nation beautiful is that he has the right to believe in what he believes in. If we take that away from him, we all lose. And with the issue of gay marriage, whether I, whether one, morally, believes in same-sex people being together or not is beside the point. We live in a free society. And if you, as a man, want to put a ring on your finger, share a mortgage share health benefits, and leave your 401k to your partner, you should have every single right to do so. And I don't think it's the church's place to step into government and dictate morality by laws. It's just not our place.

In contrast to mainline evangelical Christians, New Paradigm Christians are considered doctrinal minimalists. That is, "their emphasis is on one's relationship with Jesus" (Miller 1997, 121). James points toward such doctrinal minimalism in his comments on creationism, noting that "your belief in a new earth versus an old earth doesn't change the theology of the Bible one stick; [it] doesn't change it at all." James writes that at The Experience, "we believe in majors and minors. Things that we consider minors are things that we do talk about and address when they come up within the context of Scripture, but we don't feel they necessarily affect salvation." That certain issues may be deemed minor does not infer an absence of significant moral or theological weight, especially individually, but when juxtaposed to the message of salvation, other matters simply fail to measure up. While the community emphasizes majors over minors, this is not to say that 'anything goes' or is simply a matter of individual interpretation, quite the opposite in fact.

> Keven: [The other night,] before we left the church, I said to you, 'James. Some of the things you've told me tonight, if some of your congregation heard you say [them], they would probably leave.' And what you said, and

this has stuck with me, so I hope I get it right, but you said: '*I know, but they're not ready to hear some of this yet*.' So, can you expand on that a little bit?

James: Sure. I think, you know, both Peter and Paul kind of talked about milk versus meat. And just like an infant, they're not ready for a sirloin steak yet. And not to say that, what I have to say is the sirloin steak of the theological world. But I don't even think some people want to entertain the idea that things that they believe in are not Biblical. Let's talk about the immigration issue. Some people don't want to even go into the Scripture about immigration because when you do get into the Scripture about immigration, Jesus Christ was very pro-immigrant. Even the idea in the Old Testament, that the nation of Israel were immigrants, they were they were sojourners, they were foreigners. I think the problem with Christianity is a lot of Christians don't even want to challenge what they have believed to be right. And, as a pastor, the anchor for me is always the Bible. So, we have to throw away what culture has told us, we have to throw away what we feel. I know that sounds crazy. But if we call ourselves followers of Jesus, we have to go back to the Word of God. And that has to be our definitive source. That's from a Christian perspective. But even now, we're teaching the book of Revelation in the church, and the idea of a rapture, which is nowhere Biblical, but if I say that, well, they've just heard rapture their whole life, that one day we're going to be sitting here and you'll be gone. And I'll be sitting here and 'Oh, crap, what's happened?' And none of that is Biblically supported. But some people don't even want to go there.

Keven: So how do you take them there?

James: Slow and methodical. And again, as a pastor, and this wouldn't just be at a Christian church, if you were a Muslim, you'd hopefully lean on the Quran. If you were a Mormon, you would lean on the Book of Mormon to support your belief. So, if I'm a Christian, and my anchor is the Bible, if you say, well, James, how can you be so liberal when it comes to immigration? I have to be able to sit back and say, Well, this is where I get my thinking from. Not from the Republican Party, [not] from the Democratic Party, not from my own experiences, [the Bible] is where I get it from. And you have to be slow, you have to be methodical, and from my vantage point, I have to show them in The Word where that is. If I can't do that, then it's just my opinion.

James opts for a 'chapter-by-chapter, verse-by-verse model of teaching, which he once jokingly told me he "totally ripped off from Calvary Chapel." This expository method ensures that The Experience Community is together encouraged in their success and reproached in their failings. Congregants are encouraged to read and study the text themselves, the assumption being that God speaks through the narratives in intimate ways, thereby transferring the locus of meaning from the community to the individual, from correct practice to a focus on "what this text means to me, an individual" (Miller 1992, 123). Miller shows that verse-by-verse exposition is a favorite of New Paradigm communities. It works to safeguard against doctrinal orthodoxies, democratizes access to the divine, and encourages a return to the texts from which the church was founded.

Much has been said of the ways that Christians read and study the Bible, as Bielo states succinctly, "there is no understanding of Christian culture to be had without an understanding of how the Bible is put to work" (Bielo 2009, 9). Miller notes that among New Paradigm Christians, "the truth of the Bible is revealed in one's encounter with the narrative, not in successive efforts to dig through the sedimentation of different retellings to see whether some kernel of truth exists" (Miller 1997, 124). Anthropologist Jon Bialecki shows that among his interlocutors at The Vineyard that,[4] "a passage, sentence, or even at times just a word or phrase from the Bible will resonate with someone, capturing his or her imagination" (Bialecki 2017, 89). Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann demonstrates that while some Christians hold the Bible to be a reliable record of human

[4] Miller considers The Vineyard among New Paradigm Churches.

history, that "they are explicitly invited to use their imaginations to fill the gaps in the text so that the Bible becomes their own private story" that, as one interlocutor said to her "'it's a love story […] and it's written for *me*'" (Luhrmann 2012, 89, *emphasis in original*). That the Bible is conceived of as *for* the reader presents a series of possible conflicts. For example, the discrepancy between the historical context in which a text was written and its current audience — a point which I raised with James regarding same-sex relationships.

> Keven: So, talking about gay marriage, again. What about cultural contexts? Leviticus, clearly a cultural context. Relationships men had with women, things like that, we're talking about, a very specific culture, a very specific time [which is then] being reinterpreted with our own culture.
>
> James: I think [that] there's two different sides of the gay issue and I think they have to be taken into two different parts. If you're talking about the 'legality' of two men getting married. To me, I see that as a completely different conversation, then, 'Do I morally think that that's okay?' And so, when it comes to if someone says, 'Cory, do you support gay marriage?' Well, I guess it's not necessarily that 'I support' or 'don't support' these two people getting together. But in our in our country, do you have the right? Absolutely you have the right. Now, if we're going to talk about spirituality, what do I think the implications of that is? Then yes, you have to go into The Word. You have to go into the context. Context is always important in The Word. I think there are six times: three in the Old, three in the New where it specifically talks about homosexuality or same-sex relationships. You have to look at that and study the context. And from what I've seen from that context and studying it, and you and I can just be straight with each other, I don't agree with it. But again, that's why I think you have to separate our freedoms in this nation, versus how we feel about something theologically. I have a huge fear of mixing theology and government. And again, most Christians would disagree with that. But we've seen what happens when we create a theocracy. We've seen what happens when we start to blend the two too much. I mean, even in the last thirty years here how much the church has gotten behind the Republican

> Party, and I… I don't know, not our church [laughs], but Christianity in the United States. And it hasn't helped the church, and I don't think it's helped the Republican Party. I think it's hurt both. I think those two have to remain separate. And I think, as Christians, we have to honor the rules and laws of our government while still holding to our principles and morals […] In 2015, When [same-sex marriage] passed, I asked a bunch of Christians, I said 'just because it's legal, do you think that two men weren't having sex before?' You know what I'm saying? Do you think laws are going to dictate our morality? Absolutely not. [If so,] we're fighting a losing battle.

Rather than respond with an exegesis of theological condemnations of homosexuality, James stresses his own hermeneutic, that is, homosexuality carries certain moral and spiritual implications. What these implications are, however, remains unspoken – though certainly alluded to. What is more interesting, however, is James's emphasis on the necessity of division between matters of state and theology. That James would reference what he sees as a Christian theocracy being asserted within American politics in conjunction with a conversation on queer rights and immigration hints towards the thesis of this chapter. That is, modernity produces social anxieties which can leave a person feeling unmoored, desiring something real.[5] For James and perhaps other new paradigm pastors, such concerns encourage a deeper study of the bible and a more intimate relationship with Jesus. For others, however, such anxieties leave a person longing for a return to an imagined past wherein the United States was built on Christian morals and precepts.

At the time I did not ask James to expand on his critique of the American

[5] For context, my interview with James was conducted in 2017 while this chapter was completed in 2021.

Christianity's association with the Republican party --a failure on my part. And while James agrees that he typically agrees with some of the moral assumptions put forth by 'Conservative' Christianity, he also holds other positions that would be considered 'liberal' by some of his Christian peers. But James does not see his position as either liberal or conservative, but instead a consequence of reading and studying scripture. As such, the Bible informs James how he should interact with the world around him, not just on queer or immigration issues, but also on an interpersonal level. For James, and perhaps for his congregation at large, that which is real can only be found within The Word.

> Keven: So how do you reach out to these communities who feel, not just gays; obviously, but those who have been ostracized by the church. I know in the book you say that one of your first sermons was, 'sorry, we've treated the homosexual community…'
>
> James: Treated gay people so bad…
>
> Keven: So how do you navigate that? How do you work with these communities? How do you reach out to them?
>
> James: You know, I don't know if this will answer the question well, but a judge here in town is a pretty good friend of mine, a lesbian woman. She's been in a relationship for about twenty-five years with a coach here in town. They've been coming to the church for years. And they know exactly where I stand when it comes to homosexuality. They know what I believe. How do I connect with them? I don't know if this story will shed light on it, but about a year ago, one of the women had a heart attack. I was the first person who showed up to the hospital. And that's not a boast on me. But I love her and I wasn't thinking of her as a sinner to proselytize, I wasn't thinking of her as a, you know, a 'lost soul that just needed…' She had a heart attack and she was hurting, and I care for her. And I showed up. And so… I think that my relationship with them kind of encapsulates how, I hope, our church connects with other groups of people

> that may not see eye to eye with us. We show them respect. We love them. We welcome them. And um, here is where a lot of churches would disagree with me, we let gay people serve in our church.
> Keven: I didn't know that.
>
> James: Yeah. I mean there are certain, I guess, boundaries to that, because we disagree with homosexuality theologically; like, they're not teachers and stuff, but hospitality and doing different stuff in the sanctuary before and after service. And that's kind of our way of saying, you know, even if we don't one hundred percent agree, we all need community, we all need a place to feel safe, and when the crap hits the fan in their lives, I hope that they'll trust me enough to call me
>
> Keven: So, the thinking is that, at the end of the day, If you're queer, you're still part of this community. You're welcome here. You're accepted here. And, it's kind of like, God will sort this the way God sorts it.
>
> James: Ultimately that's it. And that's not just with homosexuality, man. It's funny, homosexuality in the Christian world is such an easy target. And I often say in our church, like 'some of you guys are like, so anti-gay. But you've got to stack a playboy up in your attic.' So, if we're going to talk about sexual things, let's talk about sexual things. You know, those of you who are out, putting notches on your bed for how many chicks you banged, and you're looking at porn, and you're doing all this other stuff. Like, let's really get into the… let's really get into the meat of it.

Throughout our conversation, James affirms his own dependence on the Bible as his source for both moral and theological grounding. While James holds the Bible as both authoritative and inerrant, he also makes strident efforts to differentiate between his own beliefs and the rights and privileges afforded by the state. James implicitly rejects Christian nationalism and highlights his concerns of tying the state to religious ideologies. While James takes positions on issues that he is sure other Christians would

disagree with, he sees his obligation to the message of salvation, requiring that he pursue the marginalized and outcasts. Miller demonstrates that among New Paradigm Churches, "the *practice* of people in these churches is an important way of understanding the *meaning* of what they teach" (Miller 1997, 110). As such, the practices that James describes acceptance and involvement of gay and lesbian persons in the congregation, his affirmation of their legal right to marriage, and his personal relationships with those individuals work together to provided avenues by which he, and the congregation at large, can demonstrate the love of Christ all the while adhering to their beliefs.

Conclusion

The Experience is not unique among Christian communities. But it is in their unremarkable status that they can be understood as participants in the larger narrative of American Christianity. As successors to the countercultural movements of the 1960s and descendants of the Jesus Movement, they contribute to lengthy traditions that democratized faith in pursuit of authenticity. In a world turned upside down, The Experience Community has opted to love in both belief and practice. For James and perhaps the community at large, authenticity seems less about returning to an idealized and imagined past in search of the real. Instead, what is really real is defined by those who both hear the message of salvation and respond to it as well as how they read, study. and apply biblical teachings to their daily lives.

CHAPTER TWO — TO BE SAVED, AGAIN.

I meet with Liam at a local restaurant. We decide to sit outside. It is sunny and there is a light breeze. Liam sits across from me, the sun shining directly on his face. I stand to move a nearby umbrella to provide some shade, but he stops me, saying, "I need it. I need the vitamin D." He laughs and stretches his arms out as if by doing so, he is able to absorb more of the sun's energy. He then goes on to tell me of his work at The Experience.

> So, Joy of Recovery, it's like the church and AA had a baby [laughs]. It's a Christ-based twelve-step program for anyone with hurts, habits, or addictions. It's not just drugs and alcohol: it's sexual addiction, it's guilt, it's remorse, it's codependency, it's a lot of things mixed into one. I've been serving in that ministry for six or seven years now."

Throughout my fieldwork, Liam and I have become friends, often catchingup at the gym or in passing at church. He has shared with me his personal struggles and over the years, I have confided in him as well. After chatting briefly, we talk about my research. I tell him that I have been primarily interested in worship practices and have found that interest converging with questions about the role of salvation and testimony. Christian conversion narratives are not new or novel, nor understudied by social scientists. James Bielo notes that such narratives are, in fact, "*the* typifying discursive act for this religious culture" (Bielo 2011, 28. *italics mine*). And believers like Liam, are more than willing to share, often sparing no detail.

Conversion among evangelical Christians is generally framed in a language of the experiential, of the radical and transformative power of Jesus. A transformation that is

only accessible through the admission of sins and belief in Jesus' bodily sacrifice on the cross. Among evangelicals, Jesus' death serves as the fulfillment of both promise and prophecy. But it is not in Jesus' death that the promise of God is complete; rather, it is through his resurrection that evangelicals find their hope. The following chapter will describe the process of conversion and how one frames their current self in relation to their past. I will demonstrate that conversion narratives, rather than operating along a linear trajectory, consists of ebbs and flows moving those caught in salvations current back and forth through time; and rather than a single moment of instantaneous change, conversion is an everyday process that reifies one's faith.

My argument will draw at length from the conversion narratives of two of my informants: Liam and Matthew. First, I will provide a transcription of Liam's conversion narrative. I provide this narrative in full, with no analytical breaks. My reason for doing so is to provide the reader a sense of the complexities of Liam's story – to make you party to his lived experience. Immediately following the first narrative, I juxtapose aspects of Matthew's story alongside and in conversation with recent scholarship. In using these two narratives I argue, vis-à-vis anthropologist Attiya Ahmed, for an understanding of conversion as an everyday experience as opposed to a straight line from disobedience to obedience. I then argue that testimony and conversion act as two distinct aspects of the salvation experience, each working to transcend one's present temporal trajectory.

Always moving the convert towards an imagined future, all the while reconfiguring their own past in relation to their known present – one in which the trials of the past are rewritten to reflect God's relentless pursuit of the convert. In the act of sharing ones' conversion narrative, the speaker oscillates between a pre-Christian/pre-salvation past, the present moment, and a distant future. Not only does the conversion narrative work to temporally oscillate the speaker to and fro' in time, but the temporal structure is configured in such a way as to write in the non-believer so that they too may adopt the narrative and become participants themselves. Before delving into the narratives, I briefly explore current scholarship on the topic.

On Conversion

Among evangelicals, one's conversion experience is often spoken of with a sense of awe and humility. Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann, recounting the conversion narrative of one of her informants, says that these stories often tell of "crisis, a sharp confrontation with humiliation or despair, and a turning point at which [the convert] consciously [chooses] Christ" (Luhrmann 2012, 7). These stories are then "told again and again in evangelical churches, and they often acquire a local sameness, so that any church seems dense with the same kind of personal struggles" (Luhrmann 2012, 7) The story of one's conversion is framed through their experience of God interjecting Himself into the affairs of a single human to change the trajectory of their life inexorably. However, it is not only about God making himself known to the potential convert. Rather, as Luhrmann shows, it is also about the convert deciding that it is "time to choose Christ" (Luhrmann

2012, 7). Choosing Christ is a pivotal moment for the convert because the promise of redemption is complete in so doing. The sharing of ones' salvific experience soon follows. As anthropologist Omri Elisha observes, Christian evangelism builds upon existing bonds, be they familial structures or cultural institutions, which "orient the faithful toward a lifestyle of immersion and implication in the lives of others" (Elisha 2011, 22). To share ones' experience is not only encouraged but expected so that those who hear the message will also have the opportunity to choose Christ.

The consensus among social scientists who have studied narratives of conversion is that these stories are "not just ways of telling, but ways of being. They do not simply inform about one's conception of self and experience, they are ways of enacting religious subjectivity" (Bielo 2011, 29). Anthropologist Susan Harding, in her discussion on the narrative structures inherent in the discourses of evangelicals, demonstrates how the conversion process among evangelicals includes the acquisition of a religious language; one that has the ability to "implicate their listeners in the narrated transformation" (See Harding, 1987; Bielo 2011, 29). Anthropologist Peter Stromberg shows how conversion narratives evoke emotional conflicts prior to conversion and reframe said conflicts into a born-again language (1993). Bielo notes that for both Harding and Stromberg, converts seem to maintain an "unwavering faith" and that the narratives are a "straight line of change from rebellion to obedience" (Bielo 2011, 29). However, such a well-defined trajectory is not the rule. As Bielo shows among his interlocutors, who, while not lacking a typical narrative of conversion, do distance themselves from the dominant evangelical

subculture through a process of *de*conversion. Here deconversion, instead of being understood as discarding of one's faith leads to the "self-consciously heightening of religious devotion" and is grounded in a desire for authenticity, that adherents want "something more" (Bielo 2011, 30). It is through deconversion that these Christians highlight their dissatisfactions within their faith.

Narratives of Conversion

Bielo also demonstrates that narratives of conversion typically follow a six-part chronology, no matter their length. These six parts consist of: one's lifestyle prior to Christ, an encounter with the gospel, a period of reflection, a second encounter, the conversion itself, and a retelling of the narrative in which the speaker contrasts their current self with the former (Bielo 2011, 28). While Bielo's chronology accounts for those who would become believers later in life, it does not account for those who are raised in and keep the tradition, those who go on to reject the faith completely, nor those who discard it only to take it up later in life. However, this is not to say that Bielo's chronology is absent from the lives of my informants. Rather, some aspects run concurrently while others repeat.

For both Liam and Matthew, encounters with the Gospel, periods of reflection, and sharing their story are present; in addition, the indwelling and operational aspects of the Christian identity are seen interspersed throughout each narrative. But to establish conversion as a single moment is problematic. Liam demonstrates the mailability of the conversion process through his movement both towards and away from a Christian

lifestyle, taking up the faith only to fall into the same habits and addictions. And, as my conversation with Matthew will demonstrate, conversion narratives are sometimes entirely absent as the language and identity of Christianity have always and already been present.

"I was raised Christian, but…"

Liam and I first met in 2015 at another Christian community he was attending at the time. His reason for moving to The Experience? It was not for lack of biblically sound teaching, as they are both "right on the money." What then?

> It's because they have the same vision [as I do], wonderful worship, they also have a lot of opportunities for volunteer work. […] When I moved into *The Experience,* I fit right in. I showed them who I was. I was very open - vulnerable. Since I had already been attending Joy of Recovery, I was already enmeshed.

Additionally, the move to The Experience coincided with his recent marriage, his wife being a full-time employee for the church at the time, and "It just made sense." Throughout my fieldwork, I have interviewed Liam multiple times -- both on and off the record. He has always spoken with me candidly, recounting a past riddled with drug and alcohol abuse, sexual indiscretions, and attempts to take his own life. He tells me that it is "only because of Christ" that he is alive, but to have this new life required "full surrender."

In what follows, I reconstruct Liam's conversion. This narrative is constructed from two separate interviews. This is not a fictionalization of our conversation; I am neither bold nor talented enough. Rather, and in the heart of exploring what is possible, I

treat these two conversations, conducted in 2015 and 2018 respectively, like a jigsaw puzzle with some information filling gaps, as well as opening new questions with the possibility of future exploration, all the while providing a more definitive image of Liam's life: his past, his salvation experiences, and his life in the midst of salvation. And, perhaps most importantly, providing Liam's narrative in this way makes you, the reader, a witness to his story.

Liam 2018: [6] **I'm a big believer that my faith and my relationship with Christ was something I had to experience that I could not learn. […] I say that because I've been surrounded by Christians— my entire life.**

Liam 2015: I grew up in a Baptist home.

I hated it. I hated it because, I believe, for most of my life, I projected my hurt onto other people. I wanted to hurt them before I got too close and they had a chance to hurt me. So, all throughout my life, I've been avoiding people.

I was told all the legalism about Christ and the church. I was told that confession was a big part of Christianity, but I was not shown. I did not see transparency in the church. I turned off the church.

I isolated [myself] and I've always thought of Christians as stupid, delusional, and just full of hypocrisy. […] I remember tagging my church at the age of sixteen because I was so full of hatred. And, you know, that [hatred] lasted for a long time.

I['ve also] struggled with addiction as far as I can remember. I've always been very impulsive, very emotional[ly] driven. My first addiction [was] self-harm. I developed a bad case of depression, and anxiety, and OCD as an adolescent, about twelve years old, and I self-medicated with self-harm. What that created for me was an escape, a rush of dopamine, and just a, basically, a distraction from my pain -- with pain, so to speak. Then it escalated to lust, and addiction to

[6] To differentiate the 2015 interview is in a regular font while 2018 is bold.

romance, and masturbation, and then it escalated to drugs and alcohol. And that's basically where I couldn't hide it anymore. It was a part of my life. It consumed me every single minute of the day.

I dove into hedonism and sought my flesh, [my] own pleasures and I basically did what I wanted to do. You could say I was satanic because I was pretty much my own god. [I was just out of high school when I got] my girlfriend pregnant. She had an abortion. […] I disapproved of the abortion wholeheartedly. [But] before it happened, I was totally for abortion. I thought, 'it's your choice.'[…] And it wasn't until I thought about the life of that unborn child that I realized the beauty of life and where that life comes from.

And for the first time I saw that: one, I could create a life; and two, I felt the utter shame and just nothing but regret for, you know, being a part of her aborting that kid. It wasn't my choice to abort it. But I did pay for half of it. So, I do take ownership. It was in that moment that I thought, 'you know, if I had that much love for a kid that I couldn't see and tangibly hold and now I've lost, I can somewhat feel the love of Christ for me.' It was devastating. I think that was the first time I tried to commit suicide and I just felt so raw and so distant from the love that that I was destined to feel.

Basically, that was the point in my life that I knew I needed to turn. Not just stop what I was doing. I needed to turn around. Away from hedonism. Away from the pleasures of the flesh and seek something bigger than myself.

[Despite all this, I fell into the same habits and addictions. When I] woke up, [I'd ask myself] 'where am I gonna get my pills and powder from?' [I'd] go to sleep worrying about the next day 'where am I gonna get my fix?' It was a party. I loved it. I loved every minute of it. I loved the obtaining of drugs. I loved the […] process of mixing it up, putting it in a syringe. I felt like, I felt like Kurt Cobain on steroids. I infatuated myself with it. I romanticized the whole thing. It was my god for a long time. It's all I wanted to do.

It wasn't until a couple of drastic, dramatic experiences that brought me to [a] realization of what I was doing to myself and others around me and the dependence I [needed to have] on Christ.

There was a point where the consequences got so bad, you know? I've had a couple of DUI's. I was in a really bad car wreck where I smashed my humorous into seven different pieces because my car crushed my arm up against a tree for a whole hour. I broke my C1 C4 vertebra in my neck[…]. I'm blessed not to be paralyzed. [I] Smashed my teeth out, punctured a lung. I had a lot of glass in my head. Had this big scar on the side of my head. that was all one wreck. And ya know? I went back and did it again. I went back drinking and drugging while driving. The consequences were adding up. My denial was pretty thick but started to wear thin after a while. And it finally got to a point where I needed help.

It was Christmas Eve and I blacked out on drugs and alcohol. Then, in the process of trying to obtain more alcohol and drugs, I attempted to run over my mother. I attempted to stab my father. I called my mom things that no son should ever mention to his mother in his lifetime. I blacked out on all this. So, when I woke up in the morning, it was like any other Christmas because I had no recollection of what I did. I went to my mother and father and said, *"hey, good morning, are you ready to open presents?"* And they looked at me and asked, *"do you know what you did last night?"* and they told me what I did. Then they kicked me out. And rightfully so!

That was the first time I attempted to get help. I went to a facility that was a non-profit and stayed there for six months. I didn't really do it for the right reason. I relapsed. I brought drugs and women into the sober living house. You know, was a knucklehead. And then came back but did the same old thing. Back to the drugs and alcohol and then the consequences got greater and greater. That, I couldn't deny. I decided to try to kill myself [again].

I've got this big ol' scar down my arm from where I buried a knife […] and I got halfway there and decided to stop because, I believe, I … that moment the Holy Spirit was giving me purpose. Because I know that God saved me for a reason. I bled quite a bit in my Honda outside of a Walgreens in Nashville. So, I called some people and they got me to another program. And I was serious about it this time. I really wanted long-lasting change.

I was in a year-long program. When I got out of there, I knew that I couldn't just go back to life the way I was before. I knew I had to have support. I had to have a community in my life.

I slowly started to pour into the church. I tiptoed. Man, I was so afraid of being hurt and so afraid of being indoctrinated into a thing that I didn't believe. I knew a lot about Christ. I knew a lot about the church, But I didn't experience any of the love. I didn't experience any of the relationship. Little by little, I had people pour into my life that had experienced that love of Christ and they brought me to a place of vulnerability and teachability. […]

So I was able to be poured into by other people I was able to find a true community that cares for me. I'm a believer that community isn't a community unless they're after your best interest. If, if, they're not after your best interests they're just associates […].

It was a slow process and I've always been a skeptic. Always been a skeptic and so I had to receive… I had to receive vulnerability and I was actually talking to a friend of mine last night about the first time I ever truly felt the Holy Spirit. Like, uninhibited unadulterated Holy Sprit. I was at this thing called 'Freedom Weekend' which is hosted by Christian Life Center and I came in there just full of doubt. Full of criticism. They were laying people out in the Holy Spirit and I thought it was goofy. I thought it was full of sham and full of uhhh … I honestly thought it was blasphemy. Ya know? I thought like, this is a hoax. They're doing this for show and I was talking to one of my friends [saying] ***'don't you dare let someone try to tell you that you can speak in tongues and then you will be laid out in the holy spirit because they're full of crap, ok?'*** **[…] We sang the song, I believe it is, You're A Good Good Father and you know, I truly believe that God is a good good father. He's after our best interests. and I got into that feeling of worship and I let my guard down and someone came up to me and they were like,** ***'I would like to pray or you in the Holy Spirit.'*** **and I said** ***'ok.'*** **I kid you not they were laying people out in the Holy Spirit and they would catch them, right? They did not catch me [laughs]. I!m not making any of this up. So, they lay me out in the Holy Spirit and all I remember is laughing uncontrollably. Giving up. And you know when you fall you try to catch yourself? I did not try to catch myself. [slams tables] I fell like a bag of brick and everybody heard a thud. My head hit hardwood without flinching and I did not feel a**

thing. Not a thing and again I had to emphasize, that's something that I had to experience and not learn. I could see a hundred people being laid out in the Holy Spirit and I thought [it was] full of crap. Well onceit happened to me, and I experienced it, it was a game-changer. Total game changer. So, from then on, I focused more on my relationship with Christ and I focused more on, what's his will over mine? Becausemy will has brought me to drugs, alcohol, debauchery full force.

Anything that felt good, I did it. And I thought you know, I'm done with my will. It's only gotten me pain, suffering, and devastation. I want what God wants. Because when I've experienced that I've never experienced more love and peace and joy in my life. Was there hardship? Absolutely. do I learn from it? You betcha.

I have learned that there is no better reminder of where I came from. I get to a place of complacency and callousness at a time where I just want people to get it. I just want my clients, because I'm a residential manager for a halfway house. I want clients to receive freedom. I want them to receive love and value. I want them to have, to want, what's best for them. But there is no better reminder of how I was. I came from aplace where no one could tell me anything. You could tell me I was valued, loved, and highly favored, and I would just think you're stupid for saying it because you don't know me. I'm worse than you. You don't know the things I've done — that victim mindset and that I'm set apart mindset. So, I have daily reminders from the church, and Joy of Recovery and my job, of how broken I was and how there were so many people planting seeds, and even though I didn't make a miraculous change first but those seeds were after a while cultivated and germinated and I received something little by little andI changed my life through the strength of Christ and people around me. It really helps to be in a church that's uhh [sighs] how do I say this? Full of brokenness and full of, I mean, there' addiction, there's tons of mental disorder, I mean, mental illness is apparent everywhereand it takes me out of my comfort zone, builds my tolerance and reminds me where I come from.

To Convert, Everyday

Conversion is most typically framed as an abrupt or immediate change. Such an understanding is, as Ahmed explains, broadly rooted in modern western Christian

thought. Continuing, Ahmed demonstrates that far from being a matter of relationships or reformations, conversion is grounded in everyday experiences. Ahmed's work specifically addresses the experiences of migrant domestic workers in Kuwait who convert to Islam. In considering the act, Ahmed says that "conversions develop through ongoing processes of transformation, a gradual reworking of their lives embedded in the every day where the outcomes are not clear at the outset" (Ahmed 2017, 19). The 'everyday' is, according to Ahmed, not "just a space of habit, routine, and continuity" but "a space of contingency, emergent possibility, and ongoing conversion" (Ahmed 2017, 20). As such, the converts' lives are best understood as continually transformed by their tradition -- that "everyday piety constitutes ongoing conversion" (Ahmed 2017, 21). As seen above, Liam's engagement with the gospel and his periods of reflection occurs in different epochs, only to reoccur time and again. Despite having multiple encounters with the gospel, an earnest desire for change, and even periods of transformation, Liam found himself repeatedly falling again into a life of 'hedonism.' Upon reflecting on his experiences, Liam also notes that, "If I didn't stay plugged in [to the church], then I would go right back to the same old thing because it has played out that way in the past." Were it not for his "everyday piety" and consistent engagement with his faith and community, the likelihood of sliding back into the same habits remains, however improbable, an ever-present specter of reality.

Matthew – Not Yet Saved Enough.

Matthew is a Tennessee native and a recent college graduate. My friendship with Matthew was fostered by meeting at the local gym and then through my attendance at The Experience, where Matthew is a member. During our interview, Matthew disclosed to me that his reason for attending The Experience was because "I wanted my faith to continue growing. [At my previous church] I heard the same message over and over, and over and over again. I felt the need to move on and The Experience was the first kind of place that I had really, no pun intended, *experienced* that." He chuckles.

Unlike Liam, Matthew has always adhered to a Christian lifestyle, which he attests to a childhood of church involvement, saying

> So basically, I grew up always in church. I mean, my brother and I were very blessed to have the parents [that we did and the] environment that [we] did. I was always in church. It was never forced down our throats or anything. It was just kind of commonplace […]. It was going through the motions, it became a checklist for everything, and it was just kinda what we had always done.

However, as a consequence of his persistent Christianity, Matthew faces a peculiar conflict:

> Something I struggled with growing up [was] hearing all these testimonies, when you get to high school, and everybody had these "come to Jesus moments." And it was this big change in their life. Well, when you've always gone to church, and you've always kind of lived that lifestyle, or something close to it, you feel like; *'I know what's right and wrong; what good moral values are*' then it's kind of like, *'when does that switch happen?'* […] I used to tell people that [my testimony] is one of the things that really helped me out, just to really know there was a higher power.

Matthew's sense that he lacks a testimony or, as he calls it, a 'come to Jesus moment,' is the source of consternation. In bemoaning his lack of testimony, Matthew distinguishes a testimony and a conversion narrative. Consider that Matthew does not forego his claim to salvation. Rather, his salvation was so embedded in his life that it never registered above the ordinary or mundane – and instead relegated to what he identifies as commonplace.

In both the narratives of Liam and Matthew, conversion is spoken of as a process. There is no *single* moment from which they walked away from a fundamentally different being. Instead, both men demonstrate that conversion is the process of restructuring and redirection. On the other hand, a testimony punctuates the conversion narrative with dramatic workings by the hand of God. Liam testifies of supernatural intervention, which ultimately helped to alter his path in his post-suicide attempt. "I've got this big ol' scar down my arm from where I buried a knife […] I believe that at that moment the Holy Spirit was giving me purpose. Because I know that God saved me for a reason." And then again, through his encounter with the Holy Spirit.

For Matthew, growing up and hearing testimonies like Liam's revealed that he lacked such a dramatic experience of his own. To lack what seems to be a central and defining moment positions Matthew in a sort of supernatural wilderness – saved, yet suspended in the limbo of not yet saved enough. To compensate for the lack of testimony, Matthew assigns meaning to a particularly difficult experience of his early teenage years.

> In my early sophomore year, maybe freshman year, there was a moment where my perfect world was about to not be so perfect. I remember coming home one day and my brother was talking to my parents and it was kind of a weird atmosphere.

It was later revealed to Matthew that his parents planned to divorce.

> I was crying. I slammed my door shut. I prayed and I said, *"God, whatever you want. Just be here one minute. I just don't want my parents to get a divorce."*

In his frustration, he turned to the Bible for solace:

> I went to the only place that everybody had said to go. I went to the Bible. To one of the first stories [in the New Testament]. It starts talking about the story of Jesus being conceived. How Joseph and Mary were together, and then when Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant, he didn't want to have to deal with that – to have the embarrassment of it. And then God sent Gabriel to talk to Joseph, and tell him, "*don't leave, don't divorce Mary, everything's gonna be alright."* And so, from that point on, I was like, *'this wasn't just a coincidence, this didn't just all line-up.'* I always kind of believed in a higher power. But it gave me a real-life example that I could hold on to.

Matthew sees this experience as a moment of supernatural intervention, one in which God comforts his distress by speaking directly through the Bible. Matthew tells me that "for a long time [this] was my testimony."

This experience fulfilled the need for a supernatural rupture and gave Matthew comfort in the midst of his trial. Because of this experience, he was then able to "relate his faith to real-life situations." However, despite this experience, Matthew concludes that "it wasn't a true testimony. It really didn't have a lot to do with me, it was a situation with my parents, and I was struggling through it, but it wasn't all about me." As Matthew attests here, testimonies are mailable, personal, and centered on one's self and their own experience.

The Native Tongue

To further distinguish between testimony and conversion, it is useful to consider what anthropologist Susan Harding identifies as the "Christian tongue." Hardingidentifies conversion "as a process of acquiring a specific religious language or dialect." Harding demonstrates that when an unbelieving person, identified as the 'listener,' beginsto hear the gospel, which is received from the 'speaker,' the listener begins to internalizethis language along with the accompanying worldview. As a result of this dialogic practice, there emerges a conflict within the listener that Harding identifies as a "divided self." The solution to this conflict is to accept salvation, at which point "the Christian tongue locks into some kind of central, controlling, dominate place; it has gone beyond the point of inhabiting the listener's mind to occupy the listener's identity" (Harding 2000, 34). It is expected that through conversion, the listener will replace their former secular language with their new religious language, the language of Christianity, thereby becoming a speaker themselves.

Harding demonstrates that the Christian tongue is acquired via interaction with, and in proximity to, the gospel. Through acts of witnessing and preaching, the would-be believer is most likely to come into contact with this language (Harding 1989, 168). As such, the acquisition of this Christian tongue can occur at any point in the believer's life. Since this language can be appropriated at any time, it is conceivable that it could develop in one's youth. The development of this language in one's youth has the potential then to supersede the creation of both a "secular language" or "divided self."

Seen this way, the Christian tongue and the acceptance of salvation in one's youth, rather than being indicative of internal conflict now resolved, is representative of an embedded identity, a native tongue.

Both Liam and Matthew attest to the functioning of such a language in their youth via being raised in and around the church. Liam's proximity to the gospel exposed him to this language and then even in the midst of unbelief, he adopts the linguistic tropes of the faith as a response to his former girlfriend's abortion. In Liam's juxtaposition of his "love for a kid" that was now beyond his reach and Christ's love for him, the language of faith he had heard and spoken throughout his youth had moved from occupying his mind on to occupying his identity. And then, as Harding shows, conversion as a process of interior change "quickens the supernatural imagination as it places new believers within the central storied sequence of the Christian Bible and enables them to approach the Bible as a living reality" (Harding 2000, 34). Liam's love for a child lost pales compared to Christ's love for Liam, who was lost but could still be found. While the Christian tongue was embedded within Liam as a youth, it remained dormant until early adulthood, only to be revived in what Liam sees as a moment of moral conflict, a moment in which Liam experiences the "love of Christ for me."

In contrast, Matthew's Christian tongue has been consistently active since his childhood. His identity is already subsumed by the language of faith. Matthew even attests to the workings of the supernatural imagination in the context of his parents' divorce – though he later renegotiates this experience as not about himself. It is a fact of a

the continued indwelling of the Christian tongue and absence of a testimony that gives rise toa predicament for Matthew:

> It's kind of bad to say, but me and my brother, we kind of wanted a testimony. I wouldn't say we envied people that had a testimony. But it was just one of those things that [when] you grow up and everybody knows you as the 'Christian guy' or whatever, this 'Jesus boy' whatever, and stuff like that and you're like, you do everything the right way. You don't drink. You don't smoke. You don't have sex, whatever. And everyone looks at you as this 'figure'[trails off].

'Christian guy,' 'Jesus boy,' Matthew attests to walking the walk of his faith, so much so that he was given these monikers. While the impression is that they were intended as an insult, they confirm a deeply embedded Christian identity—an identity expressed by sobriety and chastity. Matthew's walk of faith was so demonstrative that he was admired for and held up as an example, a 'figure' of the Christian walk. But this presents a predicament

> I never really had anything relatable with a lot of other people. […] I can't relate to a dude that's an alcoholic. I can't relate to my friend that smokes weed, or my friend that's, you know, having problems with his girlfriend cause he's sleeping [around] all the time. I didn't really have that relatability and because of that, I never judge people for what they're doing. Because I knew most my sins were the same. I don't look at their sin like mine's any worse or theirs is. But the thing was, it's it is hard to relate to people you know and share your faith, or share overcoming something if you don't have that common ground. You know? I think that's why I like groups like A[lcoholics] A[nonymous] or S[exaholics] A[nonomous] really helps them out because they get to go through that experience with people that have overcome that, or that are going through that same struggles, and they can relate. I've never had an alcoholism problem, but if I go to help out my friend who's an alcoholic, it wouldn't matter. He's not going to listen to me because it's not a similar struggle and stuff.

To have a testimony is to speak of a radical or supernatural experience that has dramatically reshaped a person's present trajectory and to have the ability to relate both one's life experiences as well as the powerful and personal workings of God. While Matthew may exude a Christian identity, having been saved and a participant in the Christian lifestyle, his lack of what he perceives to be an especially sinful past, coupled with a dramatic change, leaves him unable to relate with and, perhaps most importantly, ill-equipped to witness to his peers. It is this lack of relatability that drives Matthew's desire for a testimony.

To Break with and [Re]write the Past

In the narratives of both Liam and Matthew, there is an imperative to demarcate a past-self from the present-self as evidence of a changed life. The past self is, for Liam, a drug user, a heathen, and someone who was "full of hate." Liam is able to make this assessment via his present self, who peers into the past and sees the hand of God working in his life. But as Matthew demonstrates, to lack such a definitive experience of meaning is to be left to wandering, to peer into the past, finding nothing, and then assigning value to various life experiences, only to wonder if and when one moment will become *the* moment.

In her studies of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) in Ghana, anthropologist Birgit Meyer explores how conversion works to make a 'complete break with the past.' Such a break is of vital importance, especially among Pentecostals as it establishes boundaries between "'us' and 'them,' and 'now' and 'then,' 'modern' and

'traditional,' and of course 'God' and the 'Devil'" (Meyer 1998, 317). Such demarcations allow believers to conceptualize "conversion in terms of a rupture with the past and modernity's self-definition in terms of progress and continuous renewal" (Meyer 1998, 317). Meyer demonstrates that modern subjects are fixated on the present. One which must be "renewed constantly by breaking with the past" in attempts to normalize the present (Meyer 1998, 137; Habermas 1986). This temporal rhetoric works to address those who would 'backslide' into their life before conversion. Such backsliding would, among other things, consist of a convert making use of local practices or worshiping familial deities. In creating temporal rhetoric, 'tradition' and 'culture' are located in the past. To break with the past is to be born again. However, it is not enough to simply be born again; rather, one must verbally position their present self in opposition to their Past self. While the implication is that conversion is a single act, the crossing of the boundary between sinner and saved and that there is "no need for the Christian to look back;" it is at this boundary that the believer dwells. As such, it would not be sufficient to say that salvation is instantaneous. Rather, it is a long-term process; a process that requires the believer to return time and again to the past, not only to relive it but to rewrite it.

Such an imperative to return to the past is also witnessed in the annual offering made by the Christian peasants of Northern Petosí. Anthropologist Olivia Harris observes that among the Petosí, ritual animal sacrifice and libations are offered to local spirits. Upon completion of the rituals, the people run away, leaving the spirits to manifest and

partake. Harris notes that "as a conversion religion, Christianity creates an absolute break between a pre-Christian past and the present, with its hope of salvation" (Harris 2006, 53). In a Christian temporality, where the past is perceived as being negated, the conversion narrative displays a transformative process wherein the sins of the past are overcome. But more than simply overcoming, one's past is rewritten to demonstrate God's active involvement in their life. Harris argues that through the continued practice of ancestral worship, the Petosí can be understood as returning to the moment of conversion, the boundaries between the past and the present erased. While pre-Christian practices may have been discontinued in some cultures, "the threat of sin, of backsliding, means that the drama of conversion is constantly reenacted, whether through baptism, the confession of sins, or reconversion" (Harris 2006, 72). Rather than an instance of religious failure or backsliding, ongoing ritual sacrifices allow the Potosi, as well as my informants, to confront the break and resolve any existential dilemmas. Both Meyer and Harris reveal that the past is not subsumed in one's becoming Christian. Rather, the past takes an active and reoccurring role in the process of salvation. Instead of being a single moment of divine rupture, salvation is a reoccurring moment "renewed in ecstatic confession" (Harris 2006, 72). The believer stands at a junction where they return to the past, where they reconcile their past sin in relation to present belief. One's past with all its quandaries must be resolved with present belief and this negotiation must occur as their hope of eternity is at stake.

Liam's work with faith-based rehabilitation allows him to dwell at the border between his pre-Christian past and his present self. From this space, he can verbally reinhabit his former self while maintaining his position in the present. In verbally positioning himself in the past, Liam is able to renegotiate his former self as it is overcome by his conversion narrative and testimony of God's intervention. From this place, in the past, Liam is then able to return to the present, where his past is re-told in light of salvation. The past is re-conceptualized from a path leading to certain death and eternal condemnation into a story of God's relentless pursuit – the sinner always and already loved by God. The temporal structure of returning to and rewriting the past allows for Liam's narrative to be turned into a tool of inspiration and salvation. When others hear Liam's story, they become witness to his life, his failures, and the workings of God; and they too may experience conviction and come to salvation. His story becomes a part of their story. Liam's narrative reveals that salvation is not a single moment in the past, nor does it result in a single testimony. Instead, salvation is continuously renewed in his actions and solidified in his words, all the while expressions of his former self are subsumed in the transformative power of the Christian tongue while he moves continually towards eternity.

Conversely, Matthew who insists that he does not have a 'true testimony,' exists within a liminal space. His temporal trajectory takes a different shape — fully saved, yet still uncertain. Such ambivalence forces Matthew to continually search his past for moments of rupture – moments which he can identify as *the* moment. And, as discussed

earlier, he does find these moments; his parents' divorce taking a preeminent position for some time. Consider his words:

> I always had a good relationship with God. I had experiences and things that I wouldn't consider coincidences that I felt like, "*this was definitely a God moment*."

These "God moments," while enough to assure Matthew of his own relationship with the divine, may not be enough to convince others and are therefore renegotiated as part-and-parcel of the everyday. Matthew, when he looks to the past, sees a relationship with God, but he fails to see a life of egregious sin and, therefore, no need to rewrite the past. There is no need to reside at the border of the present and the past. There is no story in which God radically intervened because Matthew never needed such a moment. Matthew has no testimony. But Matthew anticipates the day when he will, "maybe what I am going through now will change that."

> So, anyway, I get into a legal thing this year. And so that testimony that I always wanted, I kind of got, and I don't condone my actions. I messed up. I'm technically facing jail time.

Matthew locates a potential testimony through his 'legal thing' and the possibility of facing jail time. Perhaps more importantly, Matthew has found the possible solidification of his salvation.

Conclusion

It is not surprising that conversion narratives are framed in experiential terms. For Liam, a cycle of sin and salvation is interrupted by the direct acts of God. For Matthew, anticipation of a future moment where he too can tell of God's direct intervention in his

life. For both men, conversion is not a single moment of instantaneous change but a process of the everyday. Such a structure does not forego the possibility of backsliding. Instead, such occurrences are expected, desired even, and demonstrate the relentless pursuit of God.

CHAPTER THREE — Upon The Wall

It is Friday the 13th and the parking lot of the church is filled to capacity, forcing many to park along the road, in the grass areas surrounding the church, or at nearby businesses. As I enter the building, I am greeted by soft worship melodies being played over the sound system. This evening is one of several services held throughout the year set aside for the specific purpose of worship. Each of these Worship Nights bears a particular theme and tonight is titled "This Is My Story."

As I make my way through the entry and down the hall, I am given two options. Turn left into the sanctuary of The Experience Community or continue straight away to an arched doorway and into the brewery that shares the same building as the church. Here for fieldwork, I opt for the former. But I have, at other times, abandoned my fieldwork to join friends and colleagues at the brewery for events like *The Vagina Monologues*. At the entrance to the sanctuary, I am greeted by an usher. He is a short man with a broad smile and a firm handshake. He gives me a small orange marker from a basket full of other colors and directs my attention into the dimly lit sanctuary, which is now absent chairs save for some along the perimeter. Towards the furthest northern wall supported by the buildings aged support beams stands a newly erected plywood wall. This wall runs nearly the width of the sanctuary and across the top quarter is a thick red line broken by words that read: This is My Story; This is My Song. The usher then explains that I can "write my story" on the wall if I feel so inclined.

As I make my way into the sanctuary, I pass by small groups and individuals. Some people sit on the floor while others stand. Some are chatting quietly, others are already in mindful meditation, and some sway back and forth to the music. At the wall, some people are intently writing while others browse the stories already written. The stories are spread across the walls smooth wooden surface and are of various colors and lengths. Some authors have signed their full name, others only their initials and others still are left anonymous. Each story reveals intimate details about its author, their fears and failures, and about coming to know Jesus as both savior and friend.

At about five past seven, the sanctuary lights dim to a faint glow and colored stage lights brighten. The first song breaks through hushed conversations with a fast-paced tempo and lights that alternate between blue, purple, green, and white. The words to the song are displayed on flat-screen televisions mounted throughout the sanctuary. The band sings with the congregation joining in:

'Cause You are, You are, You are my freedom/

we lift You higher, lift You higher/

Your love, Your love, Your love is never-ending/[7]

As the first song comes to a close, James takes the stage. He is shoeless, as usual, and wearing his regular blue jeans and a black t-shirt. This evening he seems to be both excited and somber.

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[7] *Young and Free*. Hillsong.

Speaking to the congregation, he says, "It's so important to go back to people; to tell your story. Go back, after tonight, to your community, to your sphere of influence, and testify of what Jesus has done." He pauses briefly and then continues in a subdued tone, "Maybe tonight you came, and you don't yet know your story. And that's okay. Perhaps tonight that will change." Then, bowing his head, he begins to pray. He asks God to help the congregation "drop the baggage that people may have come in with. And to help them recognize that, "Despite how chaotic the world is, let us find solace in who you are. And finally, we ask God, that you dance with us." As James finishes his prayer, the band picks up another fast tempo. Elliot, the worship pastor, calls on people to "feel free to dance," and some do with enthusiasm. Others do so with a hesitant side-to-side step; the majority, however, remains standing where they clap and sing. Some return to writing their stories on the wall (figure 1)[8].

Figure 1. Writing on the wall

In this chapter, I examine how words, material objects, space, and time are constructed or transformed, bringing about experiences of the manifest presenceof God. I bring my experiences and notes from a series of worship nights into

[8] All images, unless otherwise indicated were taken by and are the property of the author.

conversation with anthropological and religious studies theories regarding the creation, maintenance, and experience of the sacred. My primary interest is in exploring how members of The Experience Community address what anthropologist Matthew Engelke identifies as the problem of presence, which, simply put, "is how a religious subject defines and claims to construct a relationship with the divine through the investment of authority and meaning in certain words, actions, and objects." (Engelke 2007, 9). Specifically, this chapter addresses how physical space, material creations, and words, as they are spoken, sung, or written, transport believers, individually and communally, to and fro!$in time, oscillating them between worlds both physical and spiritual. While I draw largely from field notes and interviews, I also observe how artistic productions of the community become imbued with a sort of agency themselves. This newly imbued agency works to remake again and again those who already believe as well as those who will come to salvation. And so, in the interest of pushing the boundaries of ethnographic writing, I treat the material creations as an interlocutor, capable of providing insight about those who have interacted with it and those who will.

Immersive Experiences

Throughout my attendance at The Experience, Natalie worked as a community coordinator and secretary at the church. She is an exceptionally kind woman who tells me that she came to Christ despite having been raised by anti-religious, atheist parents. Throughout the week, in addition to secretarial duties, Natalie, who holds a degree in social work, is often tasked with allocating assistance to community members in need

and volunteering with various projects and ministries throughout the church. While attending Next Class, having just missed the main tour group, Natalie offered to take me on a tour of my own. The church had recently completed its expansion, having outgrown its previous space. At one time, The Experience Community only occupied one-half of the building, which they shared with the brewery separated only by a brick wall. It was not uncommon to hear rock n' roll while James would preach, a point about which he would often joke. Now the church held the majority of the facility, more than doubling their square footage. The new sanctuary space is at least two times larger than the one used previously, in addition to the former sanctuary, now allocated to the youth group and other smaller gatherings. The church also added a secondary child-care center, offices forcounseling services, and a large room for community outreach, which has served as a shelter on cold evenings for those experiencing homelessness, a space for women's Zumba classes, and more. There are also study rooms for the many Life Groups, small study groups that meet throughout the week, like the men's and women's classes, couple's meetings, singles, youth, etc.; additionally, there is a small chapel which is used for weddings, Joy of Recovery meetings, and finally a recording studio.

Knowing my interests, Natalie made several stops along the tour to point out things that she thought would be helpful in my research. At one point, we stopped in the main sanctuary, where she directed my attention to the stage and then the stage lights. She then pointed out that these lights were not directed at the stage only, but also placed through the whole sanctuary. Because worship, she says, is "not about one person or one

teacher.” Whereas a concert or performance is about those on the stage, at The Experience, it is "about the body of Christ coming together.” While the placement of the lights emphasizes community activities, it also speaks to the importance of coming together as a body of believers, denoting a desire for immersive experiences that transfers the locus of meaning from those on the stage! $to the community as a whole.

That worship nights function as an alternative to concerts or other events demonstrates what Bielo describes as a desire for faith-based alternatives to secular activities. Such alternatives are the result of an "ideological and political work of modern fundamentalism” which invented a "durable cultural antagonist, secular humanism’” (Bielo 2018, 22). Among religious conservatives, the term secular is used as shorthand for anything that was deemed oppositional to faith, and ‘faith-based alternatives' can be found in nearly everything from politics, counseling, media, education, and theme parks. It is by occupying spaces that are both public and private that fundamentalist ambitions gain legitimacy as socio-economic rivals in nearly every arena, particularly in entertainment.

Entertainment, however, is not shorthand for leisure or pleasure. Rather, echoing anthropologist Peter Stromberg, Bielo explains entertainment is "an activity that allows consumers to become physically, emotionally, and/or cognitively caught up in a frame of role-playing that transports them away from the frame of everyday reality.” It is in a modern consumer-driven society that we "prioritize and gravitate towards forms of leisure, gaming, and education that are interactive, participatory, and experientially

compelling, not passively consumptive" – what some have termed the "Disneyization of society." It is a world in which consumers become immersed in imaginary worlds where surrounding architecture and landscapes "establish a focused, integrated experience" (Bielo 2018, 23). Bielo also observes that immersion generates "affective attachments to the past," which makes and remakes culture. These choreographed spaces "testify to the power of affect, as material and sensory channels register effects on and through the bodies of visitors." This sensory experience reenacts a form of what historian Vanessa Agnew terms, affective history wherein "the past is imagined through the "physical and psychological experience" of individuals" (Bielo 2018, 25). These immersive worlds vary in their extremes and include theme parks, historic sites, museums, and gardens. The immensity of their detail limited only by imaginations and budgets.

Presence Through Absence

Elliot, whom I introduced previously as the Worship Pastor, speaks towards both the immersive nature of these environments as well as the affective experiences that are carried out, on, and thorough the bodies of the participants during worship nights. While the physical environment plays a role in the communities' experience, the success of worship nights is not a matter of how elaborate the event is, much the opposite in fact. Elliot tells me:

> It's not about the people that are on stage, it's not about the videos, or the lights, or the band. It's just about creating a space for God to move. Freely. And for us not to be in the way of that. And if we ever are, I always say

> that, '*if*,' you know, *'we're missing the boat, pull us out of the way, God, whatever that looks like.'* And so, even in this next Worship Night, I'm gonna be, we're gonna be, opening this up completely different than anything else we've ever done. We're not doing the big video, we're not doing the big opening song, it's just gonna be really stripped down, really simple. And I'm just trying to find different ways to connect with the different demographics that we have. And knowing that people are coming in with all kinds of different situations and circumstances in their lives. Whether they're on the mountaintop or sitting down in a valley. I want to find as many different ways as we can for them to ultimately connect with, with God and allow Him to speak to them during that three-plus hours that we're there. At the end of the day, I'm just trying to find away to allow people to connect.

Here, an ideal worship environment is one that is 'stripped down,' having done away with those things that could distract or potentially prevent altogether the presence of God, a presence which is, here, located through absence. While participants arrive under different physical and emotional circumstances (i.e., 'on the mountain top or sitting down in the valley'), the objective in every worship night is to create a space that renegotiates internal concerns through a physical restructuring of the external world, an emptying out, a doing away with, which is then mirrored within one's interior being. Returning to Elliot:

> It's not us. I mean, we pray before we get on stage and ask that *'God empty us of ourselves. So that your Holy Spirit takes over and the focus isn't on anyone person on that on that stage.'* One of the reasons that I, and I do the same thing on both weekends and worship nights, but I split everything up on the team, and I'm only leading like one song, and everything is very balanced, so that there's not too much attention going to any one person on stage. A win for me is when someone comes up and asks who the worship pastor is, because I feel like in doing that, if that's the case, then then no one person on that stage is drawing attention to themselves. And when that happens, I feel like glory goes back to God and not anyone on the platform. And so, I just want to make sure that we create an atmosphere, we create an environment -- knowing that God's

> already there, right? Nothing we're doing is going to bring more of the Holy Spirit into the room, right? He's there -- But what are we doing to set an atmosphere for people to connect with Him without distraction? that's simple? that's authentic? I know, we use that word a lot. But it's true. And it's not, it's not forced. And that's really what we're trying to do. From there, we just, we tell God just to take over. And if He has other plans, obviously, we scrap ours. At the end of the day, what we're doing is our offering as a team. And so, we're going to give the very best that we have, when we're going to play, when we're going to rehearse, when we're going to arrange [music], because we want to give God the best possible gift that we have to offer. But at the end of the day if He has other plans, thenthen, you know, we asked him to take over, we asked Him to lead. We asked Him at all times to say, say *'yea'* or *'nay'* or *'let's, let's, hang out here for a while because someone else needs to sit in this moment for, for a second longer,'* or *'you need to stay, stay on the song and I want you to jump on the scripture'*-- because there's no better way for people to connect with worship than to jump back into His Word. And so, we do that I use that a lot. It's so important -- but there's, He'll ask us *to 'sit here and hey, speak, speak these words. As someone who needs to hear this tonight, somebody who's struggling with, with depression or anxiety or just loss of identity, I need you to speak these words.'* So, I, we, are very adamant about making sure that if, if God has plans, we scrap ours. I never want to get in the way of what, what the Holy Spirit wants to do in the service.

Elliot describes an awareness of God's involvement and direction during worship nights and the responsibility that he and his team bear in recognizing this presence. The linguistic tropes that Elliot adopts in describing these experiences demonstrate Vanessa Agnew's affective histories. By identifying the team's collective self and efforts as offerings or gifts, Elliot stirs up images of sacrificial practices carried out in the biblical narrative. Narratives that, especially within the Hebrew Bible, describe the giving of sacrifice or offerings as precedent to experiencing the presence of God. It is not only the stripping down or the rhetoric of sacrifice that reveals the presence of God, but corporate

worship works to create an affective experience, one which moves participants from the present moment to the past and then the distant imagined future.

Scholar of religion Thomas Tweed identifies these spatial and temporal schemas as crossings or movements. Tweed, following the arguments made by philosopher Bruno Latour, asserts that "religions don't transfer information, […] they transport persons" (Tweed 2006, 157). It is religious speech acts that produce new states that make the distant close. It is not those things *beyond*; rather, it is those things *near* with which religion is concerned. Religion, Latour states, "does not even attempt to race to know the beyond, but attempts at breaking all habits of thoughts that direct our attention to the far away, to the absent, to the overworld, in order to bring attention back to the incarnate, the renewed presence of what was before misunderstood" (Tweed 2006, 157). For those at The Experience*,* it is those things which draw one's attention outwards, far away, that must first be addressed. And it is through speech-acts, which Tweed states, "aim at jumping, dancing, towards the present and the close, to redirect attention away from indifference and habituation, to prepare oneself to be seized again by this presence that breaks the usual, habituated passage of time" (Tweed 2006, 157). These speech-acts flow, one into another, generating a "cascade of mediators that transform persons as they bring close what was imagined as distant" (Tweed 2006, 158). With one's attention drawn back towards the now, they are reoriented towards that which is misunderstood -- the always already present presence of God.

Elliot alludes to this schema in his comments on fostering an atmosphere for worship, "[…] God's already there, right? Nothing we're doing is going to bring more of the Holy Spirit into the room, right? He's there." It is not that worship leads to the manifestation of the presence of God. Rather, it is through the renegotiation of exterior and interior worlds, a turn towards absence, which reveals the presence of God as always and already present. But, Tweed says, religions "don't only dwell in presence and bring the distant near,' but also operate as flows which "propel adherents back and forth between the close and the distant" (Tweed 2006, 158). And according to Tweed, religions:

> move between what is imagined as the most distant horizon and what is imagined as the most intimate domain […] they travel vertically back and forth between transcendence and immanence. They bring gods to earth and transport the faithful to the heavens. And they move horizontally, back and forth in social space. The religious also are propelled through time, allowing travel among imagined pasts, presents, and futures. (2006, 158).

In their travels, these itinerants cannot remain in any one place for long, and thus Tweed suggests that "religions are flows, translocative and transtemporal crossings" (2007, 158). Tweed demonstrates the to and fro' nature of these currents in examining the painting by Fra Angelico depicting the *Resurrection of Christ and the Woman at the Tomb* (Image 2). While the women stare at an empty tomb, an angel having appeared to them, they remain unaware and inattentive to Christ ascending above them. Tweed notes that it is the ascending Christ, "misread as absence" by the women at the tomb, that "brings the divine close" thereby transporting pious viewers to the "here and now" where the Christ is to be

sought “not among the dead but among the living” (2007,160). More than simply evoking an emotional response, however, Tweed says that

Figure 2. Fra Angelico Resurrection of Christ and Women at The Tomb

> The image directs the viewers out from the empty tomb to find the sacred among the living, in Galilee and everywhere else, but viewers also cross back and forth, as their attention shifts – to the hovering Christ, to the alarmed women below, to the angel’s finger pointing upward, back to the Christ again, and then to the apparent absence that surrounds the viewers themselves. There in the cavernous emptiness, the image invites them to ask: where can I find the risen Christ? It transports them across social space to see him among others outside the tomb, and – with Christ’s apparition chastising them for their inattention – the fresco brings the viewers back to the here and now to seek presence in absence. (2007, 161).

But these crossings are only temporary. The religious "not only need to be propelled to imagined pasts and desired futures, they need to be called back, summoned to the present” (2007, 162). The travelers eventually slip from the *here* and back to *there* the experience fading away. But they will return once again. Following the argument presented by Tweed, I would argue that these translocative and transtemporal crossings are observed at The Experience Community in both the creation of art and acts of worship.

On Art

The production of art is not unusual for this community. I had once been told that the first project had been spontaneous: during one of the first worship nights, a member had just begun painting, and from that night forward, there had always been some sort of project. That there was always a new project was true throughout my fieldwork, though the size and participatory nature of the projects varied. While some projects were designed for all those in attendance, some were done by a single person. Each of the completed pieces would eventually become semi-permanent fixtures within the church, adding to its already post-structuralist design.

In the following, I examine two projects. While each serves as art, I argue that thisis not their primary purpose. Rather, the materiality of the objects and the way the community interacts with them long after their creation serves to answer what Matthew Engelke terms the “problem of presence” (2007). Engelke notes that "Christians always seek to interact with God, but they are apt to pose different solutions to this problem across cultural contexts” (Engelke 2007, 74). And despite perceptions that evangelicals are "a-, non-, or anti-material in their religious life,” material objects are commonly incorporated into the everyday lives of Christians as a means to experience the presence of God (Engelke 2007, 75). At The Experience, the creation of art helps to display a believer’s relationship with God through a physical materialization of an internal occurrence. Through the act of creation, individuals are propelled through time, oscillating from the present, both the near and distant past, and towards an imagined and

eagerly anticipated future. But it is not only the original creator who is affected. Rather it is all those who would encounter or interact with the work afterward. While the evidence of the event is left behind, the works are hung throughout the church, their author unknown and absent, the experience remains available indefinitely for others.

This is my Story, This is my Song – November 2015

In the opening vignette, I described the large plywood wall on which members recorded their stories. This wall, after renovations, was permanently fastened within the new sanctuary, the stories readily available to all who would take the time to read them. While the stories on the wall function much like a spoken testimony (which I discussed at length in chapter two), these stories tell us very little about the individual's faith in God. Instead, they hinge on the personal experiences of their authors. Anthropologist Omri Elisha notes that belief among evangelicals is most frequently characterized in such experiential terms rather than doctrinal ones. Statements of belief consist of "individualized testimonies about the experience of being 'born again,' complete with intimate details of sins committed and lives redeemed through 'surrendering' of oneself to God" (Elisha 2008, 56). Here, the individual's salvific experience finds its completion in the act of relating their story. To show how this happens, I turn to some of the stories as they are recorded on the wall:

> Chance (Image 3):
>
> > Born raised Christian (*sic*), told
> > that it's the way it is because that's the way it is.
> > Started to doubt fell into temptation then let God take
> > control and free me from my burden He took it all
> > now I am a firm believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

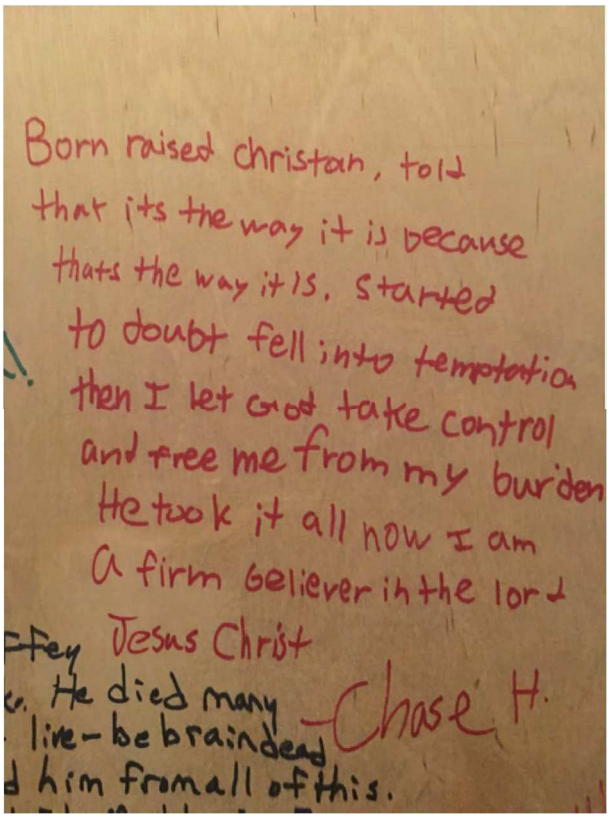

Figure 3. Chase

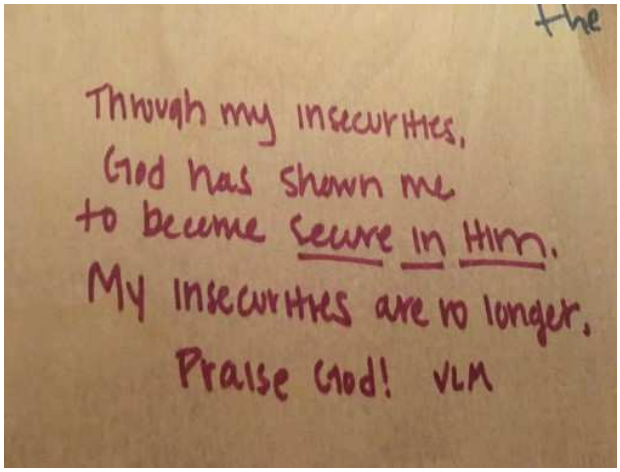

Figure 4. VLM

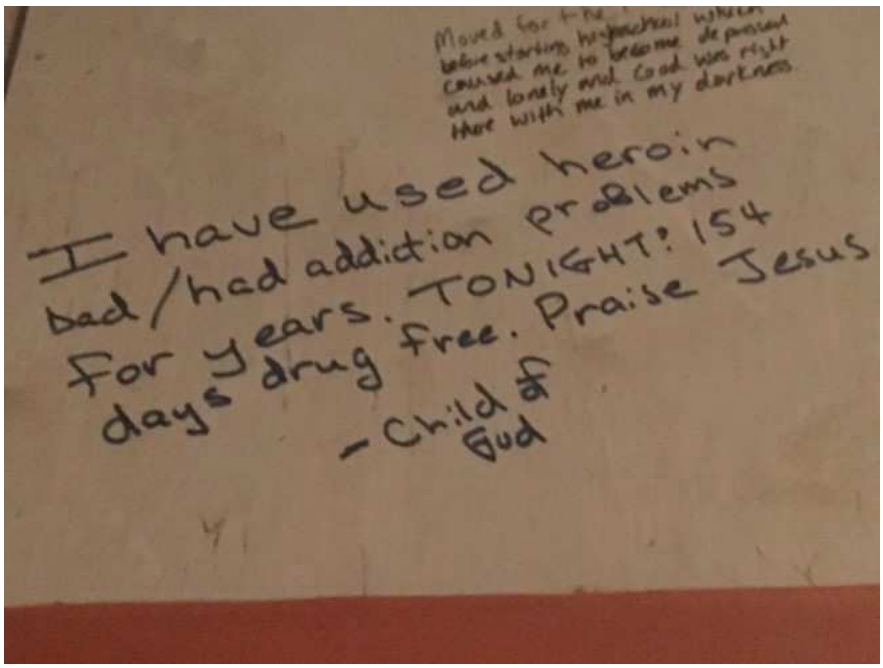

Figure 4. Child of God

VLM (image 4):

Through my insecurities,
God has shown me to
become Secure in Him.
My insecurities are no longer.
Praise God!

Another author who identifies themselves as "Child of God," writes:

I have used heroin Bad/had
addiction problems For
years. Tonight: 154
Days drug-free. Praise Jesus (figure 5),

The act of testifying is dependent upon Christian conceptions of sincerity, which anthropologist Webb Keane argues rely upon a speaker's self-knowledge (Keane 2002,75). As spoken (or, as I am suggesting, written), words encompass an external manifestation of "an abstract and internal state of being" (Keane 2002,74). Their production and capacity to be gauged sincere rely upon the assumption on the part of the speaker and the listener that a sincere representation of words is both possible and desirable (Keane 2002, 75).

Upon the Cross – February 2017

Another project that follows a similar schema is a large cross (image 6). During the night that this project was created, the cross had been laid horizontally across several sawhorses. Members were encouraged to use highlighters to write in one word, "something that you've

Figure 6. The Cross

struggled with that you're leaving in God's hands tonight" or "something that God has already saved you from." The dimly lit sanctuary contrasted with the hues of the highlighters made it difficult for members to see where things had already been written. Once the cross was mounted on the wall and black lights were directed towards it, words like fear, hatred, abuse, alcoholism, among others, were revealed; the words and phrases often intersect at conflicting angles, sometimes one upon another (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Words on the Cross

In each of the examples provided above, we see that the past serves as a dangerous experience from which the author has since departed and the practice of remembering it only affirms the believer's current separation from their former self. Furthermore, as performative acts, these stories and words act as a site of meaning production, which, as noted by Joel Robbins, indicate a "rupture of personal life narratives, but also the break with the world" (Robbins 2006, 216). It is noteworthy that the stories and words, like spoken testimonies, reveal much about the past and previously committed sins. Anthropologist Birgit Meyers indicates that a concern with the past is the result of a temporalizing strategy wherein the past is constructed, and congregants seek a

"rupture from it" by "engaging in a dialectics of remembering and forgetting" (Meyers 1998, 318). The past is a "source of personal disturbance," which prevents progress (Meyers 1998, 328). The only way to break from it is "through a practice of remembrance" (Meyers 1998, 329). In addition to the temporal nature of spoken testimonies that I described in chapter two, the production of a physical object also allows those at The Experience to transgresses temporal norms and become, for an instant, a former self at the cusp of an ontological change. However, in the act of writing one's story or the disclosure of one's burdens upon a cross, the author does more than simply *tell* a story of salvation; instead, they *manifest* a story of salvation by recreating the experience. While it may be assumed that the purpose of the wall or the cross, or any number of other projects, is to enhance the religious commitment or spiritual identity of their creator, I argue that at The Experience, the author is secondary because these stories and these words are inherently for an externalized *you*. The author, who knows that their experience exists in a tangible form elsewhere, walks away, their identity less important than the words they have left behind. The wall and the words inscribed upon it are then directed outwards toward an imagined and amalgamated audience comprised of the community of believers, estranged Christians, and unbelievers so that they too, by gazing upon the words and stories as they are recorded, may also transgress temporality and experience salvation.

Of primary importance to anthropological investigations of Christianity, this observation suggests that the words themselves might serve as interlocutors beyond or apart from their human authors or animators and serve as a secondary ethnographic informant. This speculation is made possible because even when they are detached from their original author and adopted by a secondary animator, they continue to hold power based partly on their individuality and materiality. While acts of testimony, spoken or written, transgress temporality by oscillating the Christian between the past and the present, something similar occurs through acts of worship wherein the believer's body plays a role similar to that of the wall as participants, that is, the words sung in worship take on an embodied form. The embodiment of worship songs is observed through the singing of lyrics, adopting certain postures, and outward displays of emotion.

"What a Wonderful Savior"

It is growing late, and I've considered leaving on multiple occasions. At one point wandering outside to stretch my legs. I make my way back inside, the music has softened and Elliot is speaking, giving direction to those who wish to participate in communion. After collecting a wafer and grape juice from small tables scattered throughout the sanctuary, the congregants return to where they had been standing. With friends and family, they sit on the floor to pray and take communion together. The keyboard continues to play. And a shift seems to have occurred. As the music continues, the congregation rises to their feet, some raising their hands towards the ceiling, some with tears in their eyes, singing:

I am guilty/
Ashamed of what I've done, what I've become/
These hands are dirty/
I dare not lift them up to the Holy One/[9]

Here, those with their hands raised lower them, some holding them close to their chest, heads sink, eyes closed. The next song starts slow, with the keyboard leading in:

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine/
O what a foretaste of glory divine/
[…]
this is my story, this is my song/
Praising my Savior all the day long/
Oh what a Savior, wonderful Jesus/
[…]

The band begins playing quieter, decreasing their volume until only the voices of the congregation are heard

Oh, what a Savior, wonderful Jesus.

As they continue to sing this one phrase for several minutes, soft sobs can be heard through the crowd.

Worship as individual and Communal

Like art, acts of worship seek to rectify the 'problem of presence' and provide the believer with an experience of God. But, unlike art, worship is made up of immaterial words.[10] For evangelical Christians, worship enhances their relationship with God. As Tanya Luhrmann points out, God appears "intensely human" through worship. In this context, "the singer wants him so badly that the lyrics sound like a teenage fan's crazed

[9] *Blessed Assurance*. Elevation Worship.
[10] While the lyrics to songs are projected on screens throughout the sanctuary, this is seen as a courtesy to visitors as most believers know the words by heart.

longing for a teen idol she can touch." This is a God "who is asked to walk into church." In worship, "you do not sing *about* God but *to* God, directly to him […] with unbridled yearning." This is a God who is "in you," but "apart from you;" he is "someone you love and who loves and cuddles you;" he is a God who is "a part of you" yet "somehow also missing, something you really, really want but do not quite yet have" (2012, 5). While worship time is "understood to be private, personal, [and] a time to commune with God alone," it can also be done "in the presence of others" (2012, 4). The notion that one can be 'alone' with God while being 'with' others is both paradoxical and productive because, as anthropologist Ingie Hoveland notes, "an evangelical becomes an evangelical alone before God" and simultaneously "an evangelical becomes an evangelical through other evangelicals" (Hoveland 2016, 343). Through being alone together, believers are socialized into "communal patterns of bodily action" (Hoveland 2016, 341), which cannot be learned apart from the community; because it is within the community that "learning takes place" (Hoveland 2016, 342). It is then, through others, that believers gain the tools with which to experience God.

Anthropologist Michael McNally, in his work on Ojibwa hymn singing, notes that "during special moments, culturally specific rhythms and forms of movement are not merely semiotic expressions of community and identity […] they become their actual realization" (McNally 1997, 142). Furthermore, according to McNally, "singing helps to remember a powerful past" (McNally 1997, 144). "The hymns accomplish this not so much through *what* they remember as through *how* they remember, for hymns do not

function in experience as ordinary texts" (McNally 1997, 145). Here, the words of the Ojibwa hymns, much like the words sung in worship, serve as a reminder of the past. While many of the singers may not understand them because they do not know the language, as McNally indicates, it does not matter *what* they remember, rather *how* they remember it; because it is in the words and sound that the believer can "integrate different ways of imagining identity in the common experience of singing, listening, and remembering" (McNally 1997, 145).

It is through the singing of songs that the words and sounds, which assist in the creation of affective histories, now, no longer disembodied, are sonically inscribed upon the singer. But it is not only the past that is remembered. The future also becomes a site of memory-making. In her study of Progressive Christians in Canada, scholar of religion Rebekka King observes the use of temporal adverbs, which "take on an eschatological nature by directing attention away from the present to an inaccessible future" (King 2014, 4). The language act itself allows Christians to position themselves "on a specific temporally-oriented theological trajectory" (King 2014, 9). At The Experience*,* such a trajectory orients the believer from the past, where they are no longer present, towards a moment where God can become present because the believer *expects* that they too will be present. It is through worship that believers are, as stated previously, propelled "back and forth between the close and the distant" moving between "what is imagined as the most distant horizon and […] the most intimate domain" both "bringing the gods to earth and transporting the faithful to the heavens" (Tweed 2006,158). Ultimately, I suggest that

worship, as an essentially collective practice, is done alone, within one's mind and through one's body. The words of the songs, while they do not originate from the believer, become their own and are directed towards God, whose presence is realized through absence. Further, through worship, one bypasses space and time and exists in the distant past where they once shed their former selves, as well as in an imagined future where they are with God.

Conclusion

Immersive experiences in worship and other activities work to move evangelical Christians simultaneously away from the present towards the past and an imagined future. My interest has been in the ways that the presence of God is recognized through absence and how works of art and song lyrics might be displaced from their original creator and then embodied by others in a way that almost appears to lend them agency or the capacity to operate without human enactment. In doing so, these words, songs, and experiences act upon the reader, pushing them towards salvation. Finally, while I suggest that while examining Christian worship and communicative practices can and should occur through standard ethnographic research, the possibility of making use of nontraditional sources as interlocutors provides an additional layer of intrigue.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have explored how the desire for authenticity is a definitive feature of faith for those who attend The Experience. While I have argued that the desire for authenticity is seen in the founding of the church, through narratives of conversion, and in how the problem of presences is mediated, it is clear that for these Christians those things that are *really real* are exemplified through a life that is surrendered to the transformative power of Jesus.

This new life is not absent present difficulties, nor does it ignore the past. The failures of the past are an essential, indeed vital, component of belief. Because it is only through the juxtaposition of one's sinful past with their present transformed self that these believers can exemplify authenticity. Furthermore, by returning to the past, through testimony, worship, and so on, one's personal failings and sins are magnified demonstrating the veracity of their claims. And this is not a one-time event. Rather, it is repeated again and again through a return to the past wherein these believers recount their failings for you, the listener, in hopes that you too might recognizehow real they are. But more importantly, these stories and practices are done by believersfor believers to demonstrate that they have indeed found something real. Something so real that it has forever altered who they are, and they will never be the same.

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