

The reason for the season: A qualitative exploration of evangelical christians' perceptions of religious identity, social change, and holiday celebrations

by

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## **Abstract**

Evangelical Christianity is the largest Protestant religious body in the United States today (Pew, 2014) and is charged with a mission to spread the Gospel across the globe while also influencing transformative change in the sociopolitical sphere. To understand Evangelical Christians' desire to influence social change, it is essential for researchers and policy makers to discover what motivates their desire to instigate change by exploring their perceptions of social problems. This study qualitatively explores the experiences, attitudes, and opinions of 18 Evangelical Christians relating to religious identity, social change, and holiday celebrations, traditions, and rituals preceding from the theoretical framework of Smith's (1998) subcultural identity theory of religious strength and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory of impression management. An analysis of the interviews of the study participants revealed several subthemes that emerged from the main three themes of religious identity, social change, and holiday celebrations. These subthemes include: biblical scripture as a source of moral guidance, a calling to ministry, the perceived breakdown of the family, and the secularization of holiday celebrations. The findings of this study reveal that religious identity, perceptions of social change, and perspectives of holiday celebrations are interconnected and mutually informing, which provides additional insight into the motivations of Evangelical Christians and their strength as a community to remain steadfast in their belief in the midst of tension and conflict with a society they perceive as trying to silence their voices and erase Christian influence.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Evangelical Christianity as we know it today began in the United States began with a passionate 1947 plea by evangelists Harold Ockenga and the Reverend Billy Graham for Christians to release their fundamentalist militancy in exchange for the pursuit of worldwide evangelism (Marsden, 2006). This plea marked the birth of the new Evangelical: an archetypal figure who remains steadfast in their belief and knowledge of biblical truth while seeking to engage and negotiate with mainstream society<sup>1</sup> to spread the message of the Gospel. The new Evangelical was also called to reveal the sinful and fallen nature of the world through attempts to enact transformative political and social change (Marsden, 2006). This vision remains a guiding force in the lives of Evangelical Christians who have maintained their stronghold as the largest Protestant religious body in the United States (Pew, 2014). As its membership continues to steadily grow, the potential for Evangelical Christianity's influence in American society is undeniable.

Importantly, though Evangelical Christians view themselves and their interests as fundamentally different from those of mainstream society, they do not fully reject it. They have jobs, attend public schools, and interact daily with believers and non-believers. This engagement and negotiation with mainstream society despite their religious beliefs is what separates Evangelical Christians from their Fundamentalist counterparts (Smith, 1998). This does not mean, however, that Evangelical Christianity is entirely separated from its Fundamentalist roots.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of mainstream society remains hotly debated. For the purposes of this study, mainstream society is understood according to the study participants' perceptions of the social world that exists outside of their beliefs and worldview. When discussing mainstream society, participants indicated that they perceived it as being materialistic, greedy, and as lacking guidance in morality and values.

For Evangelical Christians, absolute truth can be found in biblical scripture and it is their mission to reveal this truth to others while seeking to influence societal change in accordance with this truth (Kelly, 2014). As a result, many Evangelical Christians are resistant to changes in society, such as changes in abortion rights and the acceptance of gay marriage, because they do not conform to biblical scripture. To remain silent on issues that are condemned by the bible is to reject God and deny biblical truth.

Previous research on Evangelical Christianity has established that Evangelical Christians perceive the world as irreparably fallen and view themselves as saved through their acceptance of the death of Jesus Christ as payment for their sins (Fletcher, 2007; Klemp, 2007 & Lynch, 2013) Relatedly, researchers have also explored the ways in which Evangelical Christians seek to minister and reach out to the unsaved through events like Promise Keepers rallies, the Creation Museum, and Halloween Hell Houses (Pelligrini, 2007; Harper, 2012; Lynch, 2013 & Fletcher, 2014 & Willenbrink, 2014) . What has been neglected in research is a closer exploration of the role of faith in everyday life, Evangelical Christian identity from the perspective of those who claim it, and how Evangelical Christians perceive social change. An exploration of these topics may provide insight into how Evangelical Christians view their faith and their purpose in mainstream society. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to examine Evangelical Christian identity from the perspectives of those who claim it while also seeking to understand how faith is acted out and maintained in everyday life.

To do this, I posed the following research questions: 1.) How do Evangelical Christians perceive their religious identity? 2.) What are Evangelical Christians' perceptions of social change? 3.) What are Evangelical Christian's perspectives of Halloween, Christmas, and Easter celebrations? I sought the answers to these questions through semi-structured interviews with 18



Evangelical Christians. These questions are important to answer because exploring the role of they may reveal previously unexplored commonalities and shared goals between Evangelical Christianity and mainstream society, two groups who appear to be fundamentally at odds with one another, that may instigate a movement towards peace and compromise. To explore these research questions, this study precedes from a unique theoretical framework that references Smith's (1998) subcultural identity theory of religious identity and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory of impression management. From this perspective, it is possible to explore how tension and conflict with mainstream society shapes Evangelical Christian identity and how Evangelical Christians are able to fulfill their calling to display kindness and love when faced with accusations of hate and intolerance by mainstream society.

I propose that an examination of Evangelical Christian identity through an exploration of their holiday celebrations, traditions, and rituals provides a crucial lens into how they perceive their celebrations as unique from those of mainstream society as a result of their faith. This approach provides me with a unique view of the conflict that arises when Evangelical Christians and mainstream society clash together in the public sphere during the holidays that they share. In addition, because many holiday celebrations occur in the home, an exploration of these celebrations may reveal how faith is preserved and expressed within the Evangelical Christian family.

In the following section I provide an overview of the literature that informs my research questions. In Chapter 4 of this thesis, I provide a detailed explanation of the methods of data collection and analysis that were used in this study. In Chapter 5, I present a report of the findings of this study followed by a discussion of the contributions of this study and an overview of its limitations in the sixth and final chapter of this thesis. I conclude this thesis with

recommendations for future research and an overview of the policy implications of the findings of this study.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Subcultural Identity Theory**

A cornerstone of Evangelical Christian identity is the calling to engage with believers and non-believers alike as a way to share the Gospel, to unite in fellowship, and to motivate change (Smith, 1998; Marsden, 2006; Lynch, 2013; Fletcher, 2014; Kelly, 2014; & Wellenbrink, 2014). Research suggests that Evangelical Christians view the current state of the world as oppositional to Christian values and seek to influence changes in society that are more favorable towards their traditional Christian values and lifestyles. They often strive for this through active engagement with individuals and communities through volunteer service, intellectual debate, physical and monetary political activism, and by setting a Christian example for others through their behavior in their daily lives (Smith, 1998; Wellman, 1999; Klemp, 2007; Lynch, 2013; & Fletcher, 2014). To illustrate this point, Smith (1998, p. 43) states, “the overall pattern here is that Evangelicalism is a tremendously activist tradition that is attempting to carry out in practice its mission of engaged orthodoxy.”

Essential to Evangelical Christian identity is the contention that Christianity is under threat from the pluralism and lifestyle diversity that mainstream society presents, which places Christians in a perceived cultural war with a secular society that they perceive as opposing them (Smith, 1998; Wellman, 1999; Miceli, 2005; Pelligrini, 2007; Fletcher, 2014 & Willenbrink, 2014). Despite being fundamentally at odds with secular society, in their quest to influence social change that is favorable to their Christian worldview, Evangelical Christians are not entirely detached from society and remain engaged in its major institutions through schools, jobs, law, etc. Using Cohen’s (1995) subcultural theory, it can be argued that Evangelical Christianity is a

subculture, because while it exists and functions within broader mainstream culture, its members simultaneously operate according to their own set of cultural values and norms that are unique from other those of mainstream society. For example, though many Evangelical Christians attend public schools and are subject to the same legislation and regulation as other members of society, they possess a unique set of norms and values, apart from those of mainstream society, that are based in biblical scripture.

Again, though Evangelical Christianity can be considered to be a subculture, this does not mean that they withdraw from society and retreat to its fringes when presented with perceived threat. Retreatism is reflective of the fundamentalist movement, that while foundational to Evangelicalism, does not define it (Horsfield, 2015). Instead, Evangelical Christians seek to confront and engage with mainstream society for the purposes of outreach. This is reflective of their belief in and commitment to their divine mission to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ, while maintaining distance from the threat and temptations of modernity. Smith (1998) furthers this argument by presenting his subcultural identity theory of religious strength that informs this study. In its most elemental form, Smith's (1998) theory contends that Evangelical Christianity, as a religious movement with its clear cultural and value distinction, is able to flourish and maintain strength through its conflict, negotiation, and engagement with mainstream culture and its cultural plurality and diversity that is foundational to Evangelical Christian identity. Smith (1998, p. 89) provides a rich and more complex explanation of his theory:

American evangelicalism, we contend, is strong not because it is shielded against, but because it is—or at least perceives itself to be—embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it. Indeed, evangelicalism, we suggest *thrives* on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat. Without these, evangelicalism would lose its

identity and purpose and grow languid and aimless. Thus, we will argue the evangelical movement's vitality is not a product of its protected isolation from, but of its vigorous engagement with pluralistic society.

Smith (1998) rests his subcultural identity theory of religious strength upon eight propositions. First, Smith (1998) provides support for the treatment of Evangelicalism as a subculture by arguing that a function of the movement is to provide its members with a meaningful collective identity through the provision of a set of morals, values, and norms from which identity is shaped and maintained. He explains that when provided with this set of morals, values, and norms, the lives of members and the world they exist in are given meaning. Essentially, membership in Evangelicalism, or any religious group, provides a moral orientation for life that provides members with meaning, purpose, and a sense of belonging. The second proposition Smith (1998) rests his theory upon argues that when providing members with a moral orientation for their lives, social groups like Evangelicals, construct and maintain identity by constructing and reinforcing in and out group boundaries.

He explains that for any group, collective identity depends heavily on the definition of boundaries that determine who belongs and who does not. This requires that members abide by the norms, values, and morals of a group to maintain their membership and to address and correct violations. Smith (1998) states that for a group to thrive, it is critical that they create and reinforce clear and distinct boundaries around themselves. This is especially true for Evangelicals who perceive themselves as being required to engage, confront, and negotiation with a pluralistic society. Without a strong group cultural distinction, it is likely that through constant engagement with out-group members of society, Evangelicalism would fall apart (Smith, 1998). This may help to explain the vast network of Christian-based alternatives to

mainstream radio, television, education, and social media that the Evangelical Christian community provides to its members to filter mainstream cultural through the lens of Christianity to maintain group insulation (Stevens, 2002 & Klemp, 2007).

The third proposition that is foundational to subcultural identity theory of religious strength is that religious group formation and tradition must not be viewed ahistorically. Smith (1998) states that throughout history, religious groups have always engaged in a process of the re-assessment of collective identity and have adjusted the ways in which they engage with the changing sociocultural environments that surround them at a given time in history. He argues that it is important to understand religious groups as existing within changing sociocultural environments and as capable of both change and reversion back to tradition. In other words, just because Evangelical Christians may adapt to new changes in technology and may employ them in their methods of outreach, this does not mean that they necessarily lose identity in the process, risk mainstream cultural assimilation, or that they are not capable of practicing ancient traditions and rituals. Evangelical Christianity must not be viewed as stagnant or as wholly fluid.

The fourth proposition that Smith (1998) rests his theory on is that even though American society is faced with increased cultural plurality, this does not mean that the selection of a religious identity among many is meaningless. He adds that it is important to understand religious identity as being socially constructed and states that modernity's vast array of lifestyle choices and focus on individualism has actually made adoption of, and commitment to, a particular religious lifestyle and identity even more meaningful. For a person to choose Evangelicalism over the multitude of available identities and lifestyles in modernity, Evangelicalism and what it stands for must provide significant meaning to the individual who

claims it as an identity. The influx of available religious identities has not lessened the meaning and significance of identity (Smith, 1998).

Smith's (1998) fifth proposition contends that a group's definitions of their values, morals, norms and their evaluation of their identity are relative to a dissimilar or perceptively antagonistic reference group. Regarding the function of reference groups for identity and boundary maintenance, Smith states:

Reference groups serve for people as sources of norms, values, and standards judgment, functioning as informal authorities in the process of self-evaluation. Thus, people know how to appraise themselves, their own identities, decisions, and actions, in large measure by seeing how their reference groups appraise them (p. 105).

He adds that groups will often construct negative reference groups that function as a model for people they are not like, things they do not believe, morals they do not agree with, things they do not want, and behavior they do not condone or want to act out. In other words, when asked to describe their group identity, members may do so by identifying a group that they perceive to be as the antithesis of their own based on beliefs, values, morals, and behaviors. For example, Evangelical collective identity is based largely on a rejection of Darwinism, Catholicism, liturgical practice, and a works-based attainment of salvation (Horsfield, 2015).

The sixth proposition Smith's (1998) states that the plurality of modernity fosters the creation and sustenance of strong subcultures. Smith (1998) argues that contrary to some scholars' assertions that modernism and its manifestations in routinization, rationalization, and independence have led the disintegration of communities and religious groups, modernism actually promotes religious subcultural group formation. He argues that when presented with a complex multitude of alternative lifestyles, people are more likely to attach strongly to the

community that they choose to maintain group boundaries and to provide meaning and purpose that makes sense of the world and its complexities. He adds that religious subcultures are actually in tune with modernization in that groups allow for certain ends to be achieved. This contention is supported by Kelly (2014) who argues that individuals view their group memberships as being consistent with their own self-interest and allow them to accomplish tasks, like influencing legislation or political activism, that they likely could not have achieved on their own.

Smith's seventh proposition, and the cornerstone of the subcultural identity theory of religious strength, states that "intergroup conflict in a pluralized society strengthens in-group identity, solidarity, resources, mobilization, and membership retention (1998, p. 113)." This challenges the contention of traditional secularization theorists who argue that engaging in conflict with other groups in a pluralistic society will result in the weakening of religious groups and their identities. Smith (1998) argues that when faced with a problem or a threat, in-group members will often band together to solve the problem or to confront the perceived threat, which often results in strengthening of in-group relationships. This may be a result of the need to clarify, agree upon, and defend group boundaries against an opposing threat. Smith (1998) explains that this applies to religious and non-religious groups alike and to real and imaginary threats. He states that some groups may construct imaginary threats to boost its members solidarity and commitment. For example, Evangelical Christian groups may present a secular Halloween haunted house event as a threat to their beliefs, values, and morals; they may band their members together physically, mentally, and financially to produce a competing Christian-based alternative event to challenge a secular one that they perceive to be threatening.



Smith's eighth and final proposition is that modernity provides people with autonomy and ample resources but fails to provide direction and purpose. He argues that this increases the appeal of religion because it provides people with moral orientation, purpose, and meaning. Religion satisfies individuals' needs to direction and a clear worldview. Essentially, Smith (1998) argues that while modernity can offer individuals a variety of means, it does not offer clear ends or purpose, and religion is able to address this need.

Overall, based on these eight propositions, Smith's (1998) subcultural identity theory of religious strength challenges prior assumptions that scholars have made about religion, subcultures, identity, and modernity. Though this theory was first created over two decades ago, contemporary researchers have applied it to more recent work on religious groups and identities that have yielded useful and consistent results. First, in his study of the multifaceted debate over homosexual ordination across various religious groups, Wellman (1999) utilizes subcultural identity theory to demonstrate that the marking of clear ideological boundaries, particularly as it relates to the condemnation of homosexuality, by religious groups fosters religious movement mobilization, resource achievement, and retention of group membership.

Kelly's (2002) study seeks to explain the paradox of the relative lack of success of the crisis pregnancy center movement and the high rates of evangelical support for the movement despite its shortcomings. This author builds upon Smith's subcultural identity theory and argues that while subcultural identity theory can explain why Evangelical religious groups continue to flourish, additional insight from about Evangelicalism's organizational structure must be gathered to provide an explanation for how the movement is sustained. Specifically, this author argues that understanding Evangelicalism's organizational structure provides key insight into group action, a key component of subcultural identity theory.

More recently, in his study of the emerging church movement, a progressive branch of traditional evangelicalism, Wollschleger (2015) uses subcultural identity theory to discern the distinctions between Evangelicalism and the emerging church movement in the movements' methods of secular engagement and disengagement. He concludes that though there are some similarities between the emergent church movement and Evangelicalism, this movement is distinct from its predecessor in that members of the emergent church movement seek not to transform or to conflict with the secular world, but to strive towards peaceful and neighborly co-existence. Importantly, despite this difference in level of secular engagement, this does not disqualify the emergent church movement from consideration as a subculture; rather, it requires a broader theoretical expansion of the subcultural identity theory.

An additional contemporary study that uses subcultural identity theory as a theoretical foundation is Pimentel and Melander's (2019) study of the role of stigma in the religious identity of members of the Westboro Baptist Church, a particularly combative and confrontational fundamentalist Christian religious group. These authors find support for subcultural identity theory in congruence with Goffman's stigma perspective and find that members of the Westboro Baptist Church find collective identity in the drawing of symbolic boundaries between them and the rest of the world. They state that, though they are fundamentalist in their beliefs, unlike members of the Fundamentalist Christian Movement and the Evangelical Christian Movement, members of the Westboro Baptist Church seek to neither retreat from society or to change it, rather they simply engage in confrontation as a way to reinforce their collective identity and symbolic boundaries.

Overall, though an exhaustive description of the use of subcultural identity theory in research is beyond the scope of this study, the examples provided indicate that subcultural

identity theory remains useful today, particularly as it relates to ongoing studies of Evangelicalism, and is in a continuous process of theoretical expansion based on new findings. As a result, this theory in combination with Goffman's theory of impression management form the theoretical framework that guides this study.

### **Impression Management**

In his foundational 1959 work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman argues that through everyday social interactions, people are constantly engaging in a process of impression management through which they attempt to control and influence how they are perceived by other individuals by putting on a "front" (p. 22). He further explains that there are two primary motivations for self-presentation. First, individuals are motivated to present themselves to others according to their own self-image. In other words, individuals want others to view them as they view themselves. A second motivation for self-presentation is that individuals seek to present themselves to others in accordance with what knowledge or supposition they have of their audience's expectations of them. This means that the way people behave in front of others depends on how they want their audience to view them, which may vary by audience.

For example, a person who smokes and cusses in front of their friends do so because they want their friends to perceive them as cool, while they act studious in front of their teachers, because their teachers expect them to show attention and respect. Goffman states that social interactions and the process of impression management can be understood dramaturgically, meaning that social interactions are performances that are only successful if the audience finds the actor's performance believable. He states that it is essential for an actor to minimize or hide

the effort required to perform as well as the benefit it provides them to ensure that their front is believable and accepted by the audience. Ultimately, it is the goal of a performer to convince their audience to accept their definition of the situation.

Goffman (1959) contends that actors' performances are often threatened by audience members who search for or anticipate flaws in their performances. He explains that the success of a performance also depends on if the performance is sincere, meaning the actor has genuine belief in the front they are putting forward, or contrived, meaning the actor does not believe in their performance and are engaging in it for show. Goffman argues that audience members will often seek to discern if a performance is sincere or contrived. This threat of revelation and critique requires that an actor remain in control over the setting of the social interaction, their physical appearance, and their manner, or emotional composure. For example, an audience member may begin to doubt the performance of a Christian who contends that they are called to love their neighbors but fail to maintain emotional control when launching into a charismatic and fiery diatribe about abortion rights as it challenges the validity of their initial performance of being loving. Importantly, Goffman contends that for most people, their performances are both partly sincere and partly contrived and prone to change.

Goffman (1959) explains that impression management performances become increasingly complicated when actors recognize that they are engaging with distinct audience groups that each require a different performance of them. For example, children may put forth a different front and performance for their parents and an entirely different one for their peers. Goffman contends that front-stage performances are for others who require an actor to put their best foot forward in a convincing and sincere performance, while back-stage performance are more relaxed and forgiving. For example, while a salesperson is required to put on a sincere and

convincing front-stage performance for patrons, the employee break room is a forgiving backstage where the sales team members are able to relax their performances, to joke and express frustration, and to prepare to return to the sales floor to once again put their best foot forward. Goffman argues that performances are not only conducted by individuals, but also by groups, or teams, that bond together with a shared goal and commitment to a performance. This may provide valuable insight into how religious groups, like the Evangelical Christian Movement work together to put up a front and preserve it.

### **Protestantism**

To understand American Evangelicalism requires an understanding of the religious movements that preceded it and fostered its rise. Though an extensive and exhaustive historical description of these movements is beyond the scope of this study, descriptions and explanations of these movements will be provided in a way that provides a sufficient framework for this study. For the purposes of this study, two of these movements will be described: Protestantism and Fundamentalism. First, American Evangelicalism can be considered to be a movement branching off of Protestantism and as being one Protestant denomination among many. According to McGrath and Marks (2004), the origins of the Protestant movement can be traced back to the events of Martin Luther's Reformation that protested the Roman Catholic Church's selling of indulgences in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Luther's movement instigated the print of a new version of the Bible that was vastly influential in the movement towards public literacy that was once only reserved for the religious elite.

Some theologians, inspired by Luther's expression of religious freedom and instigation, sought to provide and spread their own interpretations of the Bible. Early and influential theologian, John Calvin, presented his own interpretation of the Bible and instigated his own Protestant movement, called Calvinism, that was distinct from other forms of Protestantism in its emphasis on the role of predestination, or the belief that a specific group of people have been pre-selected to live eternally with God regardless of conversion or good works. Foundational sociologist, Max Weber (1958) argued in his influential book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that many traits and characteristics that are valued in capitalistic political economies are rooted in Calvinism. For example, he argues that according to Calvinism, God's people are predestined as such and are given a divine calling that requires them to pursue hard work and progress. Importantly, he adds that hard work and progress are to be achieved through frugal and efficient use of the resource provisions that God bestowed upon His chosen people.

Protestantism became more complicated when a group of Puritan dissenters, who were influenced by Calvinism, accepted their inability to reform the Church of England, fled to North America, and settled in Jamestown in 1607 (Balmer & Winner, 2002). Though the Puritans held much in common with Calvinism, they distanced themselves from it in their rejection of the belief in predestination in favor of belief in salvation through the process of spiritual conversion, which carries on today in many Protestant religious groups, particularly Evangelical Christianity (Balmer & Winner, 2002). This event is what is known as Protestantism's First Great Awakening and is argued to be the origins of Evangelical Christianity (McGrath & Marks, 2004).

Also influential in the development of the Evangelical Christian movement is Protestantism's Second Great Awakening that built upon the newfound belief in salvation through religious conversion by setting believers' sights on fellowship and evangelism to non-

believers through revival meetings hosted primarily by Baptists and Methodists. Importantly, this phase of American Protestantism was highly influential to the emergence of Historically Black Protestantism. African Americans were a predominant target of Protestant revival and evangelism but formed their own churches and congregations after white Protestants failed to support their rights in the abolition of slavery (Anderson, 1970). According to the findings of the 2014 Pew Institute's Religious Landscape Study, Black Americans are more likely than any other ethnic or racial group in the United States to identify as Protestant and are significantly less likely to identify as Catholic or as being religiously unaffiliated. Specifically, this study indicates that seven in ten Black Americans identify as Protestant compared to less than half of the overall United States population. This holds true for young Black individuals, as the study's findings indicate that approximately two-thirds of Black Millennials identify as being highly religious compared to 39% of non-Black Millennials, though Black Millennials are significantly less religious than older Black adults (Pew, 2014).

In addition to historically Black Protestantism, the Pew religious landscape study (2014) divides United States Protestants into two additional groups: Evangelical Protestants and Mainline Protestants. The researchers involved with the 2014 study indicate that because they received many vague responses to denominational identity questions, they identify all members of the Southern Baptist Convention as Evangelical Protestant, members of the American Baptist Churches USA as Mainline Protestant, and members of the National Baptist Convention as Historically Black Protestant. They further classified study respondents into one of the three Protestant denominations based on their racial identification and their agreement or disagreement to the question of if they would describe themselves as Evangelical Christian or born-again. Due to the complexity of the issue of religious and denominational identity, the present study will ask

similar denominational identification questions followed by questions regarding beliefs about conversion and salvation.

Upon learning of its complex history of denominational pluralism, it is not surprising that contemporary scholars continue to have difficulty in providing a clear and precise definition of Protestantism (McGrath & Marks, 2004). McGrath and Marks (2004, p. 4) state that “it will be clear that the term ‘Protestantism’ now designates a wide range of significantly different theological emphases and church structures.” These authors argue that one reason why Protestantism resists clear definition rests in the fact that Protestantism in its essence is a collection of diverse theologies rather than precise institutions. In other words, conceptually, Protestantism consists of a complex and fluid set of theologies that cannot be clearly assigned or reduced down to specific institutions. As a result of this complexity, for the purposes of this study Protestantism will be considered as a movement from which American Evangelicalism has emerged.

### **Fundamentalism**

According to Marsden (2006), Christian fundamentalism in the United States arose in the 1920s in response to profound changes in culture and spirituality that challenged the supremacy of Christianity and Christian values that was in place until that time. Fundamentalism as a movement emerged more vigorously in the United States during the 1970s in response to the perceivably liberal policies of President Jimmy Carter, who members of the Christian Fundamentalist movement believed falsely claimed to be a born-again Evangelical Christian (Ammerman, 1987). Fundamentalist movement members claim belief in the infallibility, inerrancy, and internal consistency of the Bible and are separatists who view the world as



irreparably fallen and reject negotiations with secular society that has turned away from God (Ammerman, 1987; Marsden, 2006 & Fletcher, 2007). This belief in biblical inerrancy and support of a literal interpretation of the Bible extends to topics of biology and geology. For fundamentalist Christians, a cornerstone of Christian belief rests in the rejection of Darwinism in support of a literal belief in and interpretation of the story of creation as described in the Bible (Ammerman, 1987; Horsfield, 2015; Harper, 2012; Lynch, 2013). This sentiment is demonstrated in a quote by fundamentalist Christian, Jerry Falwell, who is also credited with the initiation of Evangelical Hell House Halloween events that will be describe in subsequent sections:

The Bible is absolutely infallible, without error in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as well as in areas such as geography, science, history, etc. The disintegration of our social order can be easily explained. Men and women are disobeying the clear instructions that God gave in His Word (Harp, 2019, p. 215).

Importantly, while the belief in the inerrancy of the Bible may have been a sufficient understanding of Christian fundamentalism in the past, just as the secular world has become more complex with modernity, so has the fundamentalist movement's response to it. Marty and Appleby (1991), pioneers of the Fundamentalism Project that sought to provide new academic explorations of fundamentalism in modernity, argue that fundamentalism is more than just dedication to religious tradition. They argue that at the core of the fundamentalist movement is a rejection of modernization and secularization that is now expressed through political action meant to replace existing social structures with structures founded in traditional Christian principles. While some traditional religious groups, like the Amish, hold fundamentalist beliefs and values, the fundamentalist movement as a whole has changed over time in terms of its

engagement and influence in a perceptively threatening and pluralized sociopolitical sphere (Munson, 2006). Munson (2006) argues that this conceptualization of fundamentalism is an important contribution because it supports an expansion of scholastic understanding of Christian and non-Christian fundamentalist groups alike and their political engagement and influence. Though American Evangelical Christians may hold some beliefs and values in common with the fundamentalist movement and fundamentalists are increasingly more open to political engagement to instigate change, fundamentalists, unlike Evangelicals, continue to reject secular negotiation.

Munson (2006) argues that though many fundamentalist Christians have adopted Evangelical identity due to the negative connotations associated with fundamentalism, fundamentalists can be uniquely characterized by their prioritization of dogma and militancy over outreach and evangelism. The Christian fundamentalist movement experienced a significant split in the late 1940s when Harold Ockenga and the Reverend Billy Graham, both well-known evangelists whose work is still referenced by Evangelical Christians today, introduced to the Christian community the concept of the “new evangelical.” According to Graham, the “new evangelical” remains steadfast in their militancy, or vigorous push for sweeping conservative legislation, and belief in the inerrancy of the Bible while simultaneously exerting transformative political influence through engagement and negotiation with mainstream society (Marsden, 2006). To describe the sentiments of dissenting members of the Fundamentalist movement, Marsden states:

...In reaction to the new evangelicals, other heirs to the original fundamentalist movement moved in a strict separatist and more purely “fundamentalist” direction. These more rigorous fundamentalists did not differ from the new evangelicals in their implicit

political leanings or the dominance of pietist-conversionist social solutions, but they did object to the efforts of Graham and his associates to build alliances with sympathizers in mainstream Protestant denominations, which they regarded as hopelessly liberal in their theology. They...split with Graham and the new evangelicals, insisting that complete separation from any alliance with doctrinal impurity should be a test of true faith” (p. 233).

Overall, though Evangelical Christian doctrine indicates clear influence from that of the Fundamentalist Christian movement, fundamentalism in its separatist and purist form has failed thrive while Evangelicalism continues to grow. Smith (1998) argues from the theoretical framework of subcultural identity theory that though members of the fundamentalist movement are politically loud, their unwillingness to actively engage and negotiate with secular culture can explain the stifling of the movement. Regardless, Marsden (2006) argues that Evangelical Christians remain fundamentalist at heart and respond to threatening social changes in society with a “fundamentalist militancy that typically arises when proponents of a once dominant religious culture feel threatened by trends in the larger surrounding culture (p. 237).” A crucial component of the present study is regarding Evangelical Christians’ perceptions of social change that will add to the literature on the topic of militant response to threatening change and on the influence of the fundamentalist movement in Evangelical Christianity today.

### **Evangelical Christian Movement & Secular Engagement and Negotiation**

American Evangelical Christianity emerged from the fundamentalist Christian movement and parted ways with it upon the Reverend Billy Graham’s conceptualization of the “new Evangelical” in the 1950s (Smith, 1998 & Munson, 2006). While the basic doctrine of

Evangelical Christianity remains firmly rooted in the doctrine of the fundamentalist movement, what distinguishes Evangelical Christianity as a unique movement to itself is its members' belief in the necessity of a conversion experience to salvation and in the outreach of their message to non-believers (Wald, Owen, & Hill, 1989; Smith, 1998; Marsden, 2006; Fletcher, 2007; Munson, 2006; Kelly, 2014). To support this contention, Kelly (2014) states that Evangelical Christianity can be defined as being a trans-denomination, conservative Protestant body of people who believe in the infallibility of the Bible as the Word of God, the necessity of believers to undergo a religious conversion to receive the gift of salvation, and in the process of evangelism to non-believers. In addition to these core beliefs, Evangelical Christians share commonalities in their rejection of Darwinism, Catholicism, liturgy, liberal modernism, and the belief in the attainment of salvation through good works (Horsfield, 2015).

Importantly, research suggests that a unique feature of Evangelical Christianity is that its members are shielded from a challenging political and public sphere by exclusive dense social networks that provide alternatives to secular forms of entertainment through which secular culture is filtered through a Christian lens (Fletcher, 2007; Horsfield, 2015 & Kelly, 2014). For example, in their case study of Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family, an Evangelical Christian entertainment network, Klemp (2007) finds that Evangelical Christians situate themselves into an enclave formation that insulates the movement from contrasting secular values and filters out alternative ways of viewing the world. Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Ainsman (2010) argue that religion offers believers a system of guiding beliefs through which they interpret experiences and meaning. One way that Focus on the Family does this is to market Christian pop music and radio in a way that is contemporary and modern and provides Evangelical Christians with a competitive alternative to secular pop music. As discussed in

subsequent sections of this thesis, the Evangelical Christian movement, beginning in the 1970s, have provided Christian-based alternative to traditional secular haunted house Halloween attractions, called Hell Houses. Pellegrini (2007) describes Hell House events as “willfully hybrid” events that combine secular pop culture with Christianity for the purposes of extending a Christian message to non-believers and believers alike.

Harper’s (2012) study of Evangelical Promise Keepers rallies for men also demonstrates this Evangelical enclave formation and seeks to instill in Evangelical Christian men the message that faith and masculinity are integral to the success of one another and that becoming a man requires Christian belief, strong household leadership, and active fatherhood. Promise Keepers rallies may work to maintain the Evangelical Christian conception of masculinity against challenges to traditional conceptualizations of masculinity in a progressive secular world. Harper (2012) explains that the purpose of Promise Keepers is to remind men of their roles as leaders in their households, workplaces, and communities that they believe have been jeopardized by a deceitful society that leaves men feeling isolated and without the clear purpose that can only be found in Christian identity.

Lynch (2013) argues that the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, serves as a Christian alternative to other scientific museums and institutions that promote Darwinism. The Creation Museum claims to present a plausible challenge and alternative to Darwin’s Theory of Evolution through a literal interpretation of the Bible as a historical document and by proposing that proponents of the evolutionary narrative use the narrative as a weapon of power to oppress biblical truth in a fallen, confusing, and chaotic secular world (Butler, 2010 & Lynch, 2013). Lynch (2013) explains that one way the Creationist movement bolsters their argument and challenge to secular science is by engaging in a process of leveling, which occurs when

creationism proponents present their argument and that of secular science as equally valid and evidenced.

What is made clear from each of these examples is the perception of members of the Evangelical movement that they stand in opposition to a deceitful, fallen, and chaotic secular world and are caught between their evangelistic calling to engage with the secular world and their desire to preserve their traditional fundamentalist roots (Wald, Owen, & Hill, 1989; Smith, 1998; Marsden, 2006; Harper, 2012; & Kelly, 2012). Fletcher (2014) argues that Evangelical Christians engage in cultural proselytism through which they seek to define group boundaries while also remaining open to boundary redefinition dependent upon changes in secular culture. Importantly, Pellegrini (2007) concludes in her study of Hell House producers that Evangelical Christians believe in the existence of absolute truth that can be found in scripture and that when they present a challenge to the relativism of secular culture, they perceive themselves as revealing the truth in a way that is honest rather than hateful or intolerant.

Fletcher (2007) supports this conclusion and argues that members of the Evangelical Christian movement perceive honesty to be the best policy towards conversion and biblical truth. He states that Evangelical Christians claim that while a salvation may provide some inner peace, certainty in death, and moral guidance, they do not claim that conversion ensures a lack of suffering in life or changes the outcome of the world's end. This is revealing of the Evangelical Christian movement's foundation in fundamentalist doctrine that the world is irreparably fallen and doomed, and that not even those who are saved will be spared the suffering that results from the world's inevitable doom, though they will be spared suffering after death (Fletcher, 2007). This does not mean however that the movement simply accepts the fallen state of the world and

its results, rather, some members of the Evangelical Christian movement choose to engage in direct political confrontation.

### **The Christian Right Movement**

The Christian Right Movement (CRM) arose ironically to support the political interests of two primary religious groups, American Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism (Williams, 2010). Though the roots of the movement can be traced back to the 1970s, it gained substantial momentum during the 1990s when televangelist Jerry Falwell and his followers formed the ‘moral majority’ that quickly became one of the most powerful voices in American politics that continues to exert influence today (Klemp, 2007). Many scholars have sought to understand the mechanisms through which Evangelical Christianity continues and maintains strength. Williams (2010) argues that the formation of the CRM has bolstered the Evangelical movement’s success in exerting influence in American politics for the purposes of societal transformation because the CRM claims a direct link between Evangelical Christian interests and the Republican Party. He states that Evangelical engagement with American politics began with the split between the ‘new evangelical’ and Christian fundamentalist movements that was instigated by the Evangelical Reverend Billy Graham who also forged a close alliance with the Eisenhower Administration.

Through this partnership, the CRM was formed as Evangelicals and Catholics became allies in a perceived war against secularization and its consequences. The CRM waged a cultural war against secular culture through engagement in grassroots campaigns against sex education, the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, and gay rights (Miceli, 2005, Butler, 2006 & Williams, 2010). The power of the CRM surged again after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 when movement leaders like Jerry Falwell took to the political stage to declare that the terrorist attacks were a

result of God's displeasure with secular American society, particularly its acceptance of paganism, abortion rights, feminism, and gay rights (Klemp, 2007).

The way CRM has successfully infiltrated American politics is through clandestine persuasion, meaning that influence is exerted implicitly through quiet infiltration of public infrastructure such as education. Key to the success of the CRM is the care of its members to engage in a process of negotiation with secular culture by quieting down their Christian message in favor of putting forth a façade of reasonableness (Klemp, 2007). Members of the CRM, particularly Evangelical Christians, engage with the public through moral crusades with the intention of attracting to Christianity people who are dissatisfied with their social status and those who are seeking security, stability, and purpose (Wald, Owen, Hill, 1989). Members of the CRM claim to be responding to what they perceive of as fundamental changes in the social order that do not align with their interests and perceivably threaten their worldview and lifestyle (Wald, Owen, & Hill, 1989, Klemp, 2007, Williams, 2010).

Members of the CRM seek to address the perceived undermining of core social institutions that they believe will have a negative impact on the future. The perceived threat to the family institution brought about by secularization is of particular concern to the CRM and is concentrated among the Evangelical Christian population (Brooks, 2002 & Dowland, 2009). Members of the CRM continue to argue that the traditional heterosexual and monogamous family structure is the foundation of the United States and that the only way to ensure the success of the nation is to reinstate traditional family values (Dowland, 2009). According to members of the CRM, the traditional family structure is threatened by aspects of secularization and modernity like abortion, gay rights, and feminism (Williams, 2010). On these points, to the dismay to members of the traditional fundamentalist Christian movement who value religious



separatism, the CRM gains strength through the alignment of the political interests of Evangelical Christians, Mormons, and pro-life Catholics (Butler, 2006 & Dowland, 2009).

Given the growing complexity of the CRM and though it has many Evangelical Christian supporters, it would be erroneous to conflate the CRM and the Evangelical Christian movement as synonymous. According to Regnerus, Sikkink, & Smith (1999), members of the CRM are diverse and come from a variety of competing religious types, such as Evangelicals, Catholics, Pentacostals, and Baptists. These authors argue that despite membership diversity, members of the CRM are linked by the belief that the United States is suffering in a state of moral poverty, a belief that extends across a complex sociodemographic spectrum. Butler (2006) argues that the CRM is also strengthened by the growing global revitalization of religion more generally. She maintains that members of the CRM maintain power by crafting their message in a way that is not overtly religious but that draws attention to issues that they present as posing a threat to reasonable human rights, dignity, and morality. Agreement on moral issues also does not mean that support for the CRM is gained in the same way for different social groups.

In her study of Black Christians and the CRM, Robinson (2006) found that social conservatism does not predict support for the CRM among Blacks as strongly as it does among Whites, though evangelical affiliation is a strong predictor of support for the CRM among both groups. Interestingly, she finds that Black women are more likely to support the CRM than are Black men, but that overall, Black support for the CRM is somewhat unpredictable in a way that white support for it is not. She adds that even though Blacks who share disagreement with issues like abortion and gay rights with the CRM, this does not strongly predict support for the movement. In other words, shared conservative values on social issues among Blacks and Whites does not guarantee shared support for the CRM.

These results indicate that scholars must look beyond conservatism to understand support for the CRM, particularly among Blacks and other minority communities. Robinson (2006) states that religiosity among Blacks, measured according to reading the scripture and church attendance, is a better predictor of support for the CRM among Blacks than is social conservatism. Hilbert's (2013) study also seeks to understand Black support for the Democratic Party despite social conservatism. This author finds that while White Christians are concerned primarily with issues rooted in the perceived disruption of family values, like gay rights and abortion, Black Christians are primarily concerned with issues of racial and economic injustice and are likely to vote in favor of political candidates that address these issues.

Essentially, the CRM has not had the same success with black Christians as it has enjoyed with white Christians, which is not due to disagreement on the issues but rather because the CRM's continued focus that most concern White voters while ignoring those that are prioritized by Black voters (Hilbert 2013). While many Black Christians may agree with the CRM's position on abortion, if the CRM does not address issues of disparate access to healthcare when a Democratic candidate does, they are unlikely to gain the support of Black Christians. Belief that shared social conservatism is enough to recruit both White and Black Christians on the part of the CRM may help to explain its failure to capture Black Christian voters in favor of Democratic candidates (Robinson 2006 & Hilbert, 2013).

Overall, though the Evangelical and Christian Right Movements are not synonymous, when united, both movements have the ability to exert considerable influence and power in American politics. Of particular concern to white Evangelical Christians are issues that threaten the traditional family structure and freedom of religious expression in the public sphere (Smith, 1998, Klemp, 2007; Williams, 2010; Harper, 2012; & Kelly, 2014). The present study seeks to

build upon this literature to examine qualitatively Evangelical Christians' perceptions of family, tradition, and current social problems and issues. Ideally, this will provide a clearer link between the Evangelical Christian movement and the CRM that may provide some essential policy implications.

### **Holiday Celebrations**

A critical area of theoretical neglect that the present study addresses is an examination of the relationship between holiday celebrations, rituals, and traditions, and Christian religious identity and expression. Examinations of holiday celebrations may provide essential insight into processes of socialization, changes in the family structure, and general social change (Harenstein, 1992; Restad, 1996; Etzioni & Bloom, 2004 & Costa, 2013). Essentially, holiday celebrations, rituals, and traditions are sociological indicators that are telling of the culture in which they are observed and of its development (Etzioni & Bloom, 2004). To support this contention, Harenstein (1992) argues that holiday rituals are a critical form of childhood socialization that teach children about the social world in which they live and about their position within it. Specifically, he states that holiday rituals act as “transmitters of social identity” (p, 993). This is particularly true for American holidays that are considered to be significant to Christianity, such as Christmas and Easter (Belk, 1990; Harenstein, 1992; Restad, 1996; & Etzioni & Bloom, 2004).

This may help to explain why the societal importance of Halloween, a holiday that takes children out of the family home and fosters the fluidity of identity, is not signaled with a day off from school, while the importance of the Christmas holiday is emphasized by an extended school break (Belk 1990 & Harenstein, 1992). Importantly, there is an element of power that must be considered in examinations of holiday celebrations. The purpose of holiday celebrations is to

strengthen social bonds and to reinforce the dominant ideology in a way that does not necessarily unite an entire society. In the United States, the group that is primarily united and strengthened is Christians (Etzioni & Bloom, 2004).

### **Family Socialization**

Research suggests that due to the socialization function that holiday celebrations, rituals, and traditions serve, they are of particular importance to children and their families who desire to raise them according to a specific set of values (Costa, 2013). As stated previously one way that American children gain information about the significance and importance of a certain holiday is through school breaks in observance of it (Harenstein, 1992 & Russo & Mawdsley, 2001). In another example, Restad (1996) contends that the iconic figure, Santa Claus, was put in place to act as an agent of socialization to teach children about good and bad behaviors based on Christian values. This author adds that the qualities of Jesus, like giving, kindness, and leadership, were bestowed upon Santa Claus as a way to insert religion into secular culture to secure Christianity as the root of American national identity. Importantly, in American society, the family institution is linked to moral and social order such that the perceived breakdown in family necessarily indicates a breakdown in moral and social order and vice versa (Etzioni & Bloom, 2004). Furthermore, some holidays are perceived as being key to national unity, which many believe is founded on Christianity, so the breakdown of holiday celebrations is perceived of as signaling general societal breakdown and insecurity (Restad, 1996). Holiday celebration as a foundation for American society is an area of theoretical neglect in sociology.

Though it has been argued that the family institution has weakened as a result of individualization and lack of interdependence, the prominence of holiday celebrations in

American society is a sign that the family institution is still present and strong despite its modernized fluidity (Costa, 2013). Costa (2013) argues that modern life has routinized family life and has made family rituals, like holiday celebrations, expedited and more simplified. This author contends that as a result of modernization, family life and rituals associated with family have changed but have not disappeared or lost their significance. In modernity, people are increasingly presented with plurality and diversity, and one goal of family holiday celebrations is to prioritize the family above all other alternatives (Etzioni & Bloom, 2004). Simultaneously, by presenting family holiday celebrations as the ideal way to spend the holidays, families also demonstrate their values as the predominant compared to other alternatives (Etzioni & Bloom, 2004). For example, if a person chooses to return home to their family for Christmas rather than joining their friends on a Caribbean vacation, they may also have Christian values reinforced by attending holiday church services with their family or engaging with them in prayer. Essentially, holiday celebrations are a way to re-make or reinforce the boundaries of family that may be challenged in daily life (Costa, 2013). How this process plays out specifically in Evangelical Christian families is an area of neglect that this study seeks to address.

Halloween as a holiday is often viewed as the antithesis of other family-based holidays, and has been considered “anti-home, anti-family, anti-nourishment, and anti-religion” (Belk, 1990, p. 509). Unlike holidays associated with Christianity, such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter, Halloween allows for children and adults to leave the comfort of their homes and families to explore their identity and sexuality. Halloween allows for the temporary and anonymous transcendence of the rules of Christian propriety through drinking, pranking, sexualized dress, and political protest (Belk, 1990 & Appelbaum, 2004). This does not mean, however, that Christians in general do not acknowledge or observe Halloween. Christians,

acknowledging the pagan roots of Halloween, continue to make attempts to take over the holiday because it is easier to do than to oppose it and attempt to influence its elimination (Belk, 1990; Harenstein, 1992 & Fletcher, 2007). This exertion of Christian influence into pagan holiday celebrations is also evident in the celebration of Easter, which began as an ancient pagan celebration of the Spring Equinox and new life that became associated with the resurrection of Christ and the gift of eternal life his death provided. The present study seeks to further build upon the knowledge about how Christians influence and negotiate with secular society by engaging in pagan holiday celebrations without rejecting them outright.

## **Gender**

In addition to serving a function for childhood socialization, research suggests that holiday celebrations, particularly those that take place in the home, also serve to shape and reinforce traditional gender norms. It is argued that the family home is a place where people can gain sanctuary from the influences of the outside modern world, and for Christian families in particular, it is a place to guard Christian values and traditions by allowing moral authority to remain a strong and dominant influence (Restad, 1996). For many Christians, the secular world is perceived as imposing upon institutions, like the family, that they perceive of as critical to the foundation of moral order (Klemp, 2007). In the Christian tradition, much of the responsibility of sustaining the sacredness of the home falls upon women who continue to hold dual duty in the home and in outside work (Di Leonardo, 1987; Restad 1996 & Etzioni & Bloom, 2004). One reason for this is that historically, Christian women have come to identify with the suffering of Christ and have adopted as norms his qualities of meekness, compassion, and gentleness (Restad, 1996.) American society in particular seeks to separate the home from the outside world, but for

women, this has yet to be achieved (Di Leonardo, 1987 & Vachhani & Pullen, 2011). As a result, women are responsible for housework, childcare, work duties outside of the home, and the maintenance of relationships, though they frequently minimize the amount and significance of the work they do (Di Leonardo, 1987 & Vachhani & Pullen, 2011).

Di Leonardo (1987) contends that women's relationships to holiday celebrations are complex and often contradictory. She states that for women, households are places of struggle in which they both conform to gender norms and command control over their homes and holiday celebrations by providing the necessary emotional labor and kinship relationship maintenance to make the celebrations meaningful. This leaves many women in a state of simultaneous self-interest and altruism (Di Leonardo, 1987). Di Leonardo (1987) explains that for women, holiday celebration labor provides them with a way to possess control over their household that are not given in larger society, and it allows them to prevent feelings of guilt for allowing kinship relationships to fall by the wayside while also allowing them to gain praise, appreciation, and recognition of their labor from their families that they do not receive throughout the rest of the year.

Kudak (2014) supports these findings in her qualitative study of women's holiday experiences. She concludes that though many women, particularly mothers, find holiday celebrations to be meaningful expressions of family connectedness, they simultaneously perceived holiday celebration times to be stressful due to the responsibility placed upon them to make the holiday celebrations meaningful for those around them. Importantly, women are frequently engaged in emotional labor that requires them to communicate with others to ensure that their efforts towards making a holiday celebration meaningful is successful (Kudak, 2014).

Bella (1994) suggests that while holiday celebrations are perceived to be family leisure time, they are work for the women upon whom the realization of the celebration rests.

Aside from getting the family together and preparation of meals, women are also predominantly responsible for giving and selecting gifts for family and friends (Sinardet & Mortelmans, 2009). In their study of 299 men and women, Fischer and Arnold (1990) argue that women are more likely to buy Christmas gifts for their symbolic value that demonstrates the qualities of generosity and caring that women are socialized to embody, while men buy gifts for instrumental purposes. As a result, they argue that men are more likely to give gifts to romantic partners as a way to secure the relationship while women are more likely to give gifts to many different people as a symbolic expression of caring and love. The results of their study also show that women are more likely to shop for more people, to begin Christmas shopping earlier, spend more time shopping, and to regard gift selection and giving as serious and important work while men may consider the process as play.

Sinardet and Mortelmans (2009) support this contention and finds that women continue to bear the brunt of the responsibility for maintaining relationships with family and friends and argues that giving gifts is an expression of this responsibility. Overall, research suggests that there continue to be gender differences in experiences of holiday celebrations, though additional literature on the topic as it relates to queer experiences is certainly needed. The present study seeks to build upon this literature by examining how Evangelical Christian men and women perceive their roles in family holiday celebrations.



## **Chapter 3 - Statement of the Problem**

As previous literature has indicated, American Evangelism is a subcultural movement that is both highly insulated and diverse in a way that leaves it resistant to precise definition (Kelly, 2014). Despite the complexity of its definition, Evangelical Christianity has arisen as distinct from its even more insulated and separatist predecessor, the Fundamentalist movement, and from the more diverse umbrella network of those who share in social conservatism, that includes Catholics and Mormons, the Christian Right Movement.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the Evangelical Christian movement (ECM) qualitatively to further discover its unique and distinct features that have allowed it to remain the largest religious body in the United States that remains steady in growth while other bodies have experienced significant decreases (Pew, 2014). Previous literature has also revealed the potential of scholastic examinations of holiday celebrations, traditions, and rituals as a form of examining everyday life and instances of social change (Costa, 2013). It has also indicated that holiday celebrations, traditions, and rituals may also be a way of expressing and experiencing group identity and may reveal how holiday celebrations function as a method of childhood socialization and the maintenance of traditional family values (Restad, 1996). The maintenance of tradition and family values is also of significant importance to Evangelical Christians. As such, the primary purpose of the present study is to draw upon literature regarding the ECM and holiday celebrations to examine the potential link between Evangelical Christians perceptions of holiday celebrations, their Evangelical identity, and their perceptions of social change that may disrupt traditional values.

To address this gap in the literature, I seek to answer the following three research questions: 1.) How do Evangelical Christians perceive their religious identity? 2.) What are

Evangelical Christians' perceptions of social change? 3.) What are Evangelical Christians' perspectives of Halloween, Christmas, and Easter celebrations? The theoretical framework from which this study proceeds is Smith's (1998) subcultural identity theory which in essence argues that Evangelical Christianity thrives through the movement's confrontation and negotiation with secular culture in addition to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory of impression management, which contends that people will try to influence the perception others have of them by seeking to regulate and control social interactions. Approaching this issue from this unique theoretical framework requires a careful methodological approach that can capture the nuances in attitudes, feelings, and values that can only be found in qualitative methodology.

## **Chapter 4 - Methods**

### **Introduction**

I chose to address my research questions from the approach of qualitative methodology in the form of fieldnotes, interviews, and participant observation. Providing thick descriptions of Evangelical Christians and their holiday celebrations and interaction is essential to gaining an accurate understanding of the complex relationship between faith, celebration, and perspectives of change (Geertz, 1973; Emerson et al., 2011). Furthermore, due to their perceived calling to engage and negotiate with a secularized world that rests in perceived fundamental opposition to their own beliefs, norms, and values, many Evangelical Christian participants in my study provided complex and sometimes contradictory responses that could have only been fully captured through qualitative methodology (Wellman, 1999, Marsden, 2006, Kelly, 2014).

Unique to qualitative methodology is its ability to capture feelings, attitudes, and values while allowing researchers to actively engage with participants to seek clarification, expansion, and explanation of statements (Anderson & Jack, 1991). By triangulating my data between field notes, participant observations, and interviews, I can ground my future analysis in the data in a way that links my theoretical explanation to my data while also accounting for discrepancies and contradictions in my participants' statements (Esterberg, 2002). The following section will provide a detailed description of the methods of data collection used in this study, a description of the study participants, research procedures, and data analysis.

## Interviews

### Participants

According to Katz (2012), the purpose of qualitative methodology is not to seek representativeness from the pursuit of a random sample; rather representativeness in a qualitative study is achieved through the pursuit of internal variation and diversity of experiences and situations of individuals experiencing a particular phenomenon. When I first began my study, I attempted to recruit participants by seeking out individuals who identified as an Evangelical or those who claimed an affiliation with an Evangelical Church. As I began to learn more about the complexity of Evangelical identity from previous research, I concluded that I was limiting my access to participant diversity of experiences and situations by attempting to place pre-imposed boundaries around Evangelical Christians as a group.

Desmond (2014) warns against the tendency of researchers to impose pre-supposed ideas of what group membership means or what boundaries exist and instead encourages researchers to allow research study participants to reveal their identity and boundaries to them in their own way. As argued by Kelly (2014), Evangelical Christianity is trans-denominational, meaning it cannot be pinned down to a specific denomination. This meant that just because a person did not claim affiliation with an Evangelical church does not mean that their beliefs and lifestyles do not fit the Evangelical criteria. As a result of this complexity, I chose to recruit participants following the guidance of the Pew Religious Landscape Study (2014) that defined Evangelical Christians as those who a.) identify as Evangelical Christians or b.) identify as 'born again,' or express belief in the necessity of a spiritual conversion to be saved. Additionally, I also sought individuals who, in conjunction with meeting the previously stated criteria, also indicate engaging in a personal relationship with God. Ultimately, I was able to gain in-depth interviews with 18 participants.

Of the 18 participants, all indicated belief in the necessity of a spiritual conversion to gain salvation and claimed to have undergone the conversion process themselves. Additionally, all of the participants claimed to have gained a personal relationship with God through salvation, and all participants indicated belief that salvation was a gift that is available to all people if they choose to accept it. Of the 18 participants, 11 identified themselves as women and 7 identified themselves as men. Two of the participants identify as queer. The mean age of the participants was 47. All of the participants identified themselves as White non-Hispanic, which is a limitation of this study. Though I did not achieve racial and ethnic diversity within this study, the participants come from diverse occupational backgrounds and ages and attend different churches (see Table 1.1 for sample descriptions). All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and to ensure the confidentiality of their responses.

Table 1.1 Description of Participants.

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Race	Marital	Education	Belief in Conversion
Nikki	27	Female	Aesthetician	White	Single	Trade	Yes
Diane	58	Female	Office Administrator	White	Married	High School Diploma	Yes
Eric	58	Male	Radio Station DJ	White	Married	Bachelor's	Yes
Jane	61	Female	Landlord/Ministry	White	Widowed	Bachelor's	Yes
Candi	58	Female	Non-Profit Manager	White	Married	Master's	Yes
Jill	44	Female	Child & Family Services Worker	White	Married	Master's	Yes
Sarah	61	Female	Retired	White	Married	Associate's	Yes
Michael	61	Male	Registered Nurse	White	Married	Bachelor's	Yes
Clint	58	Male	Engineer	White	Single	Bachelor's	Yes
Megan	27	Female	Doctoral Candidate	White	Married	Master's	Yes
Jake	27	Male	Doctoral Candidate	White	Married	Master's	Yes
Allan	63	Male	Medical Doctor	White	Married	M.D.	Yes
Elizabeth	63	Female	Homemaker	White	Married	Bachelor's	Yes
Jayden	44	Male	Landscaper	White	Married	Bachelor's	Yes
Briana	34	Female	Non-Profit Manager	White	Married	Associate's	Yes
Sawyer	29	Male	Farmer	White	Married	High School Diploma	Yes
Jessica	27	Female	Teacher	White	Married	Bachelor's	Yes
Michelle	34	Female	Adult Support Services	White	Married	Associate's	Yes

## **Procedures**

Recruitment of the participants in this study was likely aided by my prior association and established rapport with the majority of respondents due to my previous involvement with the ECM during my early adolescence. I knew all of the study respondents prior to the interviews in some capacity and recruited each of them myself. The interviews were semi-structured and guiding questions were asked according to an interview guide (see Appendix A. for detailed interview guide). I chose to conduct interviews with participants due to my desire to capture their attitudes, feelings, and perceptions about the particularly complex topic of religious identity (Berg & Lune, 2012). Prior to the interview, all participants provided informed consent and were informed that their interview would be recorded and of the steps that would be taken towards the security of their identity and the association with their responses. I informed them that only I would have access to the interview recording and that my advisor and I would have access to full transcripts that would be stored digitally on an encrypted flashdrive. For the one interview that was conducted in written form, all email correspondence was encrypted and deleted upon storage to the encrypted flashdrive.

I also informed the study participants that to prevent association of their responses with them, I would assign them a pseudonym that I would use to refer to their descriptions and statements in my fieldnotes and in my final report. The interviews lasted approximately 85 minutes on average and were conducted over the course of three months during the Spring of 2019. To ensure the comfort of my participants, I allowed them to choose the location of the interview, most of which occurred in the participant's home or at their workplace. Interviews that took place in the participants' homes were private, while those that took place at the participants' workplaces were semi-private and doors were shut at the discretion of the participants. To increase the comfort of my participants, I encouraged them to inform me if a break was needed, and I checked on their

desire to continue or pause when another individual entered the room or the interview had exceeded one hour.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is a process of generating meaning from and making sense of data that should begin during data collection so that a research can tailor interview questions based on surprising themes that may begin to emerge (Esterberg, 2002). Throughout the research process, I ensured that my data analysis remained grounded in the actual data that I found by engaging in the process of analytic induction. I relied on the triangulation of my data and frequently checked for consistency between my observations, interviews, and field notes. By doing this, I essentially allowed the data that I found to be a “rival hypothesis” (Katz, 2001, p. 134). As recommended by Katz (2012) and Timmermans and Tavory (2012), I sought out negative cases that did not fit with the findings and conclusions of other researchers as a way to broaden my theoretical understanding of Evangelical Christianity. For example, instead of assuming that all of those who identify with Evangelical Christianity or adhere to it on certain points, I sought out individuals who were politically progressive or those who did not agree with the literal interpretation of biblical scripture. By doing this, I was able to expand on my analysis and theoretical conclusions.

I transcribed all interviews from my audio recording device into Microsoft Word using ExpressScribe software. My transcriptions were conducted verbatim without dialect (Gibbs, 2018). This means that while I transcribed my interviews mostly word-for-word and strived to capture the true nature of my participants’ statements, I did not include in my transcriptions vocal stammers or terms like “um” that did not add to the essence of their statements. I used my

transcriptions to conduct data-driven coding free from hunches and pre-existing codes (Gibbs, 2018). I analyzed and coded the data using ATLAS.ti. software (Esterberg, 2002).

### **Participant Observations**

Participant observation was also a critical aspect of this study that allowed me to confirm the accuracy of my participants' descriptions of events and my own descriptions and experiences of events as detailed in my fieldnotes. Participant observation can be understood as the ecological and physical penetration of a social world as a way to obtain data (Goffman, 1989). It is the core of fieldwork and allows a researcher to immerse themselves in the social world that they are studying as a way to gain insight, to experience first-hand constraints of phenomena, and to establish trust and rapport with potential respondents (Emerson, et al., 2011). Throughout the research process, I was careful to suspend my own assumptions and inferences in exchange for direct observations (Becker, 2011). When observing the Christmas Eve service, Good Friday service, and Hell House event, I took note of my own feelings while also paying attention to the facial expressions, vocal tones, emotional expressions, gestures and movements of others in attendance (Emerson et al., 2011). To further protect the identity of the study participants, I will assign pseudonyms to the churches from where I recruited and observed events.

I began my participant observations by attending a Hell House event called *Judgment House* at Westend Evangelical Church in a Midwestern city of approximately 390,000 people. I attended this event twice, once on October 20, 2018 and again on October 27, 2019 and walk-through four three times in those two days. Due to the structure of the event as being a continuous walk-through drama, I do not have an estimate of the number of attendees, however,



each time I did the walk-through tour, I did so with a group of 20 other individuals. I attended a Christmas Eve candlelight service at Midtown Evangelical Church which is located in a small Midwestern town with a population of approximately 25,000 people. This service took place on Christmas Eve night in December 2018 at 6 p.m. This service had approximately 100 people in attendance. I attended a Good Friday candlelight service at the same location on April 19, 2019 at 6 p.m. The attendance for this service was slightly less with approximately 75 people in attendance.

### **Fieldnotes**

I took careful and extensive fieldnotes during my participant observations and interviews. Taking fieldnotes allowed me to translate my experiences, interactions with people, and observations into data (Emerson, 2001). This process enabled me to ensure that I as the researcher was not lost in the world I was studying and allowed to reflect critically on my positionality and on how my presence affected my participants. Reactivity is a critical source of data that can reveal how participants view the researcher and their relationship to them and can reveal marked changes in the researcher-participant relationship over time (Katz, 2012). Importantly, though qualitative fieldnotes are critiqued for being messy and incoherent, they are meant to be partial and incomplete perceptions of experiences and observations not factual accounts (Emerson, 2011). Furthermore, fieldnotes acted as a way for me to increase the reliability of my study by ensuring the link between my data, such as interviews and observations, and theory and to confirm the accuracy of observations (Emerson et al., 2011). I was able to increase the replicability of my study by providing rich descriptions in my fieldnotes that cannot be easily contested and ensure that other scholars can come to the same or similar

conclusions as I. (Emerson et al., 2011). Throughout the keeping of my fieldnotes, I kept in mind Weiss's (1995) visibility test that required me to abstract myself from my fieldnotes and to approach reading them as though they were strange to me. By doing this, I was able to determine whether or not I was providing adequately rich and thick detail that showed the reader what I was experiencing rather than telling them what I was experiencing.

### **Positionality**

Throughout the research process, I remained critically reflective on my positionality, or my sociopolitical positioning and worldview in relation to that of the study participants, and its effect on the entire research process from conception, data collection, and data analysis (Emerson et al., 2011; McCorkel & Myers, 2003; Mendoza-Denton, 2008 & Katz, 2012). Though I have known and engaged with many of my participants for many years through Midtown Evangelical Church and continue to maintain active relationships with some today, I acknowledge that I am unique from them in ways that may have impacted the way I interacted with them and analyzed their responses during the research process. Though I was raised a member of the ECM through my early teenage years and continue to have relationships with the members of Midtown Evangelical Christian Church, I have not considered myself to be a member of the movement for many years. That I no longer consider myself an Evangelical Christian or a member of the Evangelical Christian Movement is a fact that I did not readily share with my study participants, and I remain uncertain of their knowledge of my severed membership. I chose not to disclose that I no longer consider myself a member of the ECM, which may have privileged me to information that I may not have been granted had I disclosed

my new status. I received no indication from my participants whether or not their knowledge of my severance of church membership would have impacted their interactions with me; however, it is important to disclose this factor in my final report.

As indicated by the research of Bozzoli (1998) and Burton (1998), familiarity with my participants likely prompted them to open up to me in some instances while likely simultaneously prompted them to close themselves from my questioning in others. I noted that several participants thanked me for asking them to share their thoughts as they felt they could not express them openly with others. The study participants' conversations with me, due to their familiarity and comfortability with me, may have affected the answers that I received as some participants appeared to view me as a vehicle for their message of truth. Additionally, due to my familiarity with my participants and the ECM, it is possible that I neglected to take note of statements or topics that were significant or may have been noticed by a researcher with less familiarity. One way that I attempted to address this limitation of positionality was to cross-check the data collected from my interviews with those conducted through my fieldnotes and participant observation. For example, instead of assuming the accuracy of my participants' descriptions of their church's Christmas Eve service, I compared my participant's descriptions with my own experiences of the service that I recorded in my fieldnotes to confirm accuracy.

I also remained cognizant of the fact that many of my participant's likely assumed some knowledge on my part of their church, its structure, its members, and their own personal faith journeys, so I made sure to ask them to provide detailed narratives of their experiences, feelings, and perceptions. For example, I asked respondents to describe to me how they would explain the process of salvation to a non-believer rather than to explain it to me, a person who they may assume had prior knowledge of salvation and their personal beliefs about it. Similarly, to gain a

rich description that may have been hindered by their potential belief that I had prior knowledge on the topic, I asked participants to describe what it means to them to be a Christian or affiliated with a certain denomination. My positionality likely affected how I approached data analysis. Though I reported and analyzed the findings of this study as openly and honestly as I could, I was admittedly troubled by some of my findings and conclusions because they revealed some of the participants' intolerant and judgmental attitudes towards other groups of people despite their best attempts to save face. As Falcone (2018) states despite their fondness of study participants and their past loyalties to them, researchers cannot write their work to please them and must accept that the final report of their findings will likely disappoint study participants in some way. I know that I am not a neutral party and could not hide or neglect to report instances of judgment and intolerance of other groups, due to its crucial policy implications. This may be disappointing to some of my study participants, however, these instances must be included if I am to report honestly and to produce meaningful research.

## **Chapter 5 - Findings**

The present study seeks to answer the following three research questions: 1.) How do Evangelical Christians perceive their religious identity? 2.) What are Evangelical Christians' perceptions of social change? 3.) What are Evangelical Christians perspectives of Halloween, Christmas, and Easter celebrations? To address these questions, I explored the topic from three main themes: Evangelical Christian identity, perceptions of social change, and perspectives of holiday celebrations. From these three themes emerged several subthemes, including the use of biblical scripture as a source of moral guidance, changes in the family structure, and holiday celebrations as a way to preserve traditional Christian values. Through a deeper exploration of these subthemes, the relationship between the three overarching themes will be revealed throughout the results section as many of the participants' perspectives of one issue informed their perception of others. First, I will begin with the results regarding the theme of Evangelical Christian identity.

### **Evangelical Christian Identity**

When I first began this study, I sought out to find a clear definition of Evangelical Christianity. This proved to be difficult and convoluted. Instead, I chose to view the issue through the lens of 'doing religion,' as suggested by Kelly (2014) and set out to discover what it meant to my participants to be an Evangelical Christian. Instead of seeking a precise definition of Evangelical Christianity, I approached my study with the idea that Evangelical Christianity is an identity that could only be discovered by finding out how Evangelical Christians understand themselves and how their faith influences the way they live and experience their lives and also shapes their worldview. Four subthemes emerged: drawing boundaries, biblical scripture as a source of moral guidance, salvation as transformative, and a call to ministry. Through a deep

analysis of each of these subthemes, I was able to conceptualize how Evangelical Christians in this study perceive their own religious identity.

### **Drawing Boundaries**

An interesting trend that appeared in several of my interviews was that the participants often described their core religious beliefs as being distinct from those of other forms of Christianity. When asked to describe these beliefs, the participants seemed to delineate boundaries around their specific belief system as Evangelicals by contrasting their beliefs to those held by those of other faiths. Nikki, a 27-year-old aesthetician, explained that she does “not follow the Lutheran or Catholic Church in any way...I view both of them as cults because they require a formal conversion.” Nikki went on to explain that she is monotheistic and believes that she can pray directly to God. Five other study participants expressed similar views and indicated that they perceive Evangelical Christianity as different from other forms of Christianity in its stance on issues such as baptism, liturgy, and pathways to salvation. To illustrate this point, Michael, a 63-year-old nurse, explained:

I consider myself to be an Evangelical Protestant as opposed to the old traditional churches like the Lutherans, the Methodists, the Episcopalians, and whatever else...I don't think that God cares if you get up and say the liturgy or whatever it is that the Lutherans get up there and say on Sunday. I don't think being a believer is about that. I think it's about just having faith in God and showing your faith through what you think, do, and say.

Overall, it was interesting to me that the study participants considered their religious identity in relation to the religious identities of others. This may indicate a process of boundary drawing and boundary maintenance that ensures that while Evangelical Christians are willing to

engage and negotiate with others outside of their religious group, boundaries are still important to their group identity (Goffman, 1959). Expressing clarity on their core theological beliefs while also remaining clear on those that they do not accept, it is possible for Evangelical Christians to carve out a distinct identity for themselves. This supports the second of Smith's (1998) propositions of subcultural identity theory of religious strength that states that social groups gain strength and maintain identity by drawing symbolic boundaries that create a distinction between their group and other outgroups. Of additional significance in the core beliefs of the study participants was their knowledge, memorization, and application of biblical scripture in their daily lives.

### **Biblical Scripture As A Source of Moral Guidance**

Throughout the course of the entire interview, the majority of the study participants referenced biblical scripture to illustrate points or to provide explanations or examples. Though I was not entirely surprised by this, I was taken slightly aback by the sheer amount of knowledge the participants had about biblical scripture and was struck by their memorization of it and their ability to call upon it without reference. Their connection to biblical scripture soon became more understandable when they began to explain and describe how it inspires and influences them in their daily lives. This also became evident when observing the reference to scripture that was visible in décor of their homes where several of the interviews took place. For example, several participants had wall hangings on their walls that included inspirational quotes from biblical scripture. One couple had a wall hanging that listed the ten commandments, while one woman left sticky notes attached to her mirror with inspirational quotes from scripture.

When asked to explain or expand upon their reasoning for certain lifestyle choices or actions, the participants frequently turned to biblical scripture as a resource. This indicates that Evangelical Christians turn to biblical scripture as a foundation for their beliefs, actions, and daily lives. Jake, a 27-year-old doctoral student explained:

My decision-making in my words, actions, beliefs is based upon my knowledge of what scripture defines as right and wrong. As best as I am able I strive to live according to scripture when I am alone and around others. Whether I am relating to Christians or non-Christians, the greatest commandment in scripture is to ‘Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and to love your neighbor as yourself.’ Loving your neighbor is to care for them. I don’t have to agree with them or have the same belief set, but I am called to love and treat everyone with respect.

The majority of participants expressed similar attitudes towards biblical scripture and indicated that it influenced their everyday decision and interactions with other people. They further explained that in their view, biblical scripture calls upon them to be, as Eric, a 58-year old Christian radio host, describes, “kind...and patient” with others. In addition to providing guidance in interaction, several participants, like Jill stated that biblical scripture was a comforting to them during times of hardship and doubt. Jill, a 44-year-old child and family services worker explained that for her, biblical scripture that is “unchanging” and dependable as a source of comfort for her in her life when she is experiencing family, work, and other societal changes.

In addition to the steadfastness of biblical scripture, 13 of the participants argued that the bible is the infallible and inerrant Word of God. Michael explained that he favored a literal interpretation of the Bible and expressed concern that societal changes, like the acceptance of gay marriage and gender diversity, were happening against biblical teaching. He went on the



explain that for him, the reading, recitation, and memorization of scripture is a way that God communicates with His people and argued that abiding by scripture and accepting it as true is a way of indicating to God that His message is heard and accepted.

A literal interpretation of biblical scripture was not favored by all participants. Though in the minority, five participants indicated that they did not agree that biblical scripture should be interpreted literally. Briana explained that while she agreed that it should be used as “a guide,” she also believed that readers consider biblical scripture in relation to the “cultural context at the time it was written.” This indicates that while there is variation in opinion on the interpretation of biblical scripture among Evangelical Christians in this sample, what remains consistent is the consideration of biblical scripture as a “guide” in everyday life that influences their thoughts, opinions, and actions.

### **Salvation as Transformative**

Throughout the course of my interviews, I was privileged to hear the salvation stories of the 16 of the study participants. Though there were differences in how participants came to salvation, a consistent theme that emerged from the stories was that salvation was transformative in each of their lives. Of the 18 participants who spoke on the topic of salvation, 15 agreed firmly that salvation is achieved when a person accepts Jesus Christ as their Savior and places their faith in Him. When describing their lives before salvation, participants indicated that they sensed that something was missing in their lives and that there was, as Diane described, “a void...and a need” that material things could not fill. Jane expressed a similar sentiment:

They weren't telling me anything about Jesus that I didn't already know, but I knew they something that I didn't have. Right there on the school bus, I just told God the same thing I'm telling you, I don't know what they have, but I know they have something special

and I want it, so this morning I am giving you my life to see what you can do with my life that makes me more like them. That was the beginning of my relationship with Jesus.

Interestingly, 17 participants indicated that they were “raised in a Christian home” but emphasized that they “accepted Christ” of their own accord. When describing their stories of salvation, several participants described the transformation as going from general knowledge of the scriptures to acceptance and internalization of them as “truth,” which they described as “a transition from head-knowledge to heart-knowledge.” Diane echoed Jane’s description of a salvation as a change from head knowledge to heart knowledge when telling her own story of salvation. She explained:

I studied all the lessons that are typical bible lessons that you learn as you grow up and I went through all the catechism classes and the confirmation classes, but even though the classes meant a lot to me, I didn’t take them to heart like I should have. It was just head-knowledge...I figured out that even though I knew a lot, I was not a believer. I had the head-knowledge, but had not made the change to heart-knowledge, and that’s when I chose to receive Christ.

This indicates that for some Evangelical Christians, salvation marks a transformation that results from acceptance and internalization of scripture. Candi explained that for her, salvation has allowed for “God to work in my life.” Clint stated that for him, his faith gave him a sense of “absolute truth and certainty,” Sawyer explained that through salvation, he gained a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” One way that several participants indicated that they engage in this relationship is through prayer. Jane indicated that through prayer, she can “speak directly to God without a go-between.” Additionally, prayer appeared to be a way for participants to have fellowship together and to support one another through difficult times.

The participants shared that for them, undergoing the process of salvation and engaging in a personal relationship with God through prayer was a cornerstone of Evangelical Christianity and indicated a transformation in their lives. They believe in having a personal relationship with God and shared how they engage in the relationship. Also of importance to the study participants was their desire to fulfill their calling to witness and minister to others through their words, actions, and service to others.

### **A Call to Ministry**

The participants indicated that in addition to gaining a transformative personal relationship with God through salvation, they also received a calling to share their faith and the opportunity to accept the gift of salvation with others. Twelve of the study participants expressed that it was important they share their faith and the opportunity for salvation with others. For Eric, ministry was particularly important when addressing the needs of people who are hurting. He explained that he knew many few believers who conducted ministries in jails and hospitals where people are “facing difficult situations.” When describing why ministry and service to others was so important to him, Eric stated:

I think working in hospitals, volunteering in hospitals where people are in very difficult situations is a good thing to do. I know there are many Christians that are involved in ministries in jails. You know life is tough and there’s a lot of bad out there. I think that’s where Jesus would want us to be, is where people are hurting so that we can be a witness to them... I hope that when people are around me, well they’ll see a lot of things, but I hope that that’ll see a little bit of Jesus.

Jane and Jill both echoed Eric's expression of the importance of ministry and service. Nine of the 11 female participants explained that they felt particularly called to ministries involving children and families. Jill and Elizabeth (61-year-old "homemaker") both indicated that they were specifically involved with "women's ministries." Elizabeth stated that she was also primarily involved in "teaching opportunities for children and other women's ministries while also serving in the kitchen to help with funeral dinners." It appears that women's involvement and work in church activities were still largely unpaid labor that is reflective of similar work in the home. Jane explained her role in children's ministry in the following way:

Getting kids into the Kingdom is my passion, and my church gives the opportunity to do that... When God made me, he made me with a desire to help. I just want to help, and I feel like I can do it there. I had so many Awana<sup>2</sup> kids come up to me last week and hug me and thank me. I had some kids do that at my other church, but not like the other night. Friday night, I had parents and grandparents come up to me and tell me how much their child or grandchild loved our children's program.

While several men, including Eric, indicated that they also assisted with children's programs, they also most often stated that they were involved in some form of church leadership role. Eric stated that in addition to assisting with his church's children's program, he also assisted with "serving communion." Allan, a 61-year-old retired medical doctor also explained that though he was involved with children's ministries, he also served on the "elder board" at

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<sup>2</sup> According to the official website, Awana (Approved Workmen Are Not Ashamed) is an international Evangelical non-profit organization that provides Evangelical Christian education and leadership opportunities for children and youth within their own church communities (Awana, 2019).

church, while Clint, a 58-year-old engineer was involved with children's ministry and was the "sound technician" for Sunday morning worship service.

Though I was somewhat surprised to learn of men's involvement with children's ministries, I was not surprised that the men in my study were involved in more general church leadership roles than the women I interviewed who, though they may hold leadership roles within women's and children's ministries—for example, Elizabeth described herself as being "in charge of women's ministries"—were overwhelmingly confined to them.

These discussions revealed a gendered component to the unpaid labor that Evangelical Christians engage in to support their churches. While men are given opportunities for church leadership and oversight, women are largely confined to traditional roles of childcare, meal preparation, and nurturing. Regardless of the gendered responses, it was clear that for my Evangelical Christian interviewees, service and ministry were not necessarily required but were perceived of, as Jill describes, a "natural outpouring" of faith. The study participants also indicated that their calling to what Jill referred to as speaking "the truth" has become of particular importance in a society that is experiencing rapid and unprecedented changes in opportunity, diversity, and plurality.

### **Perceptions of Social Change**

Previous literature suggests that Evangelical Christians often view themselves and their lifestyle as under threat and are willing to invest their time and money into efforts to preserve their rights and to shield themselves from a society they perceive as attempting to silence them (cite). To expand upon this research, I asked participants to reflect on changes in society that they found to be the most positive, negative, noticeable, and concerning. From my analysis of their responses, I was able to identify four subthemes: technological advancement, family

breakdown, tolerance and diversity, and changes in perceptions of safety and security. By examining these topics, I was able to gain insight into how the study participants view themselves in relation to these perceived social problems and how they believe society should respond to these issues.

### **Technological Advancement**

Sixteen of the 18 respondents spoke on the topic of technology and indicated that changes in technology and technological advancements were a were neither fully positive or wholly negative. This means that while many participants viewed the ability to stay connected with others, and increased convenience and access to information as positive, they also indicated that technological advancements have left people without critical thinking skills and have lessened their ability to have real world interactions. When discussing the negative effects of technology, Diane stated that she had noticed “lack of face-to-face communication” and expressed “concern” for young people who, she argued, “no longer know how” to interact intimately with others in person. Candi reflected on an experience she had in which she observed a group of young adults who were engaged with their phones rather than with each other. She described the scene in the following way:

My husband and I were sitting at a restaurant across from four college age men who were sitting at a booth together and every single one of them were on their phones instead of engaging with one another. It's such a shame that they are so busy on their phone that they're not even really enjoying the company that is in front of them. I don't even know if young people know how to be intimate with one another anymore. To sit down to have a one-on-one face to face conversation with somebody is hard for this generation, because they don't know how to do it.

Several other participants expressed the same sentiment, and some explained that they had noticed an increasing reliance on technology to connect with others even among their own family members. Jill explained that she was concerned and frustrated with the influence of technology on her teenage children and indicated that she had taken measures to limit their technology usage to preserve their ability to have and value real world interactions and relationships. Sarah, a 61-year-old retiree expressed frustration at her family's use of technology during their family Christmas celebration:

Even the adults were playing on their phones and texting and stuff like that. I was really angry about it. I said I'm not going to do this again. If you can't come to our house and visit with family, why do we even get together at all, when you can do what you're doing at home. I was really upset. They're taking everything about what Christmas and what family get-togethers are supposed to be.

In addition to expressing frustration with the influence of technology on peoples' ability to engage in face-to-face interaction, of the 16 participants who spoke on the topic of technology, 9 indicated that they felt technology and its provision of constant access and interconnectedness had negative effects on work-life balance. Some reflected back to their childhood nostalgically. Eric explained that he remembered that as a child, his parents' work was "done at the end of the workday." He added that in his perception, there is added "stress" that is a result of "work being only a click away." Briana, a 34-year-old non-profit manager expressed similar concern about the influence of technology on work-life balance and explained that she did not feel that she could take time off from work because people from work would try to contact her anyway and demand her time. In addition to concern with technology allowing constant access to work, several participants noted that technology also gives, as Candi explains, "predators constant and

easy access to kids” and “bullies constant access to their victims.” Nikki expressed concern for the safety and wellness of her nieces and nephews who are “exposed to things that I never was.” She also added that the internet has “made it easier and more pleasurable to sin” and pointed out ease of access to pornography. Candi, echoed this concern and argued that technology has made it more “difficult to resist temptation,” while Sarah added that it has given kids access to “a lot of bad things at a young age.”

Several participants, particularly those who work with children and youth, explained that they had noticed what they perceived to be a decrease of critical thinking skills among both children and adults. They argued that constant access to information provides people with no encouragement to research or seek out information themselves. In their view, because information and answers to questions are just a click away, people are more likely to accept the first answer that comes up as the correct answer or to assume that the first news article they read as presenting the story accurately without doing additional research or seeking out other sources. Jessica, a 27-year-old Christian elementary school teacher explained that she has noticed a lack of critical thinking among her students who were quick to defer to Google or Siri to answer questions. Michael argued that even though we have access to an unprecedented amount of information, he was not convinced that it has “made us any happier.”

Importantly, the majority of those who spoke on the topic of technology indicated that while there are negative effects of technology, advancements have also, as Eric stated, “done a lot of good.” Jayden, a 44-year-old landscaper stated that technology has also made it possible for “one person to reach millions of people with the Gospel.” In addition to providing unprecedented connection to others, many participants stated that technology has improved



peoples' lives through advancements in medicine and science. Jayden also spoke on this topic and explained:

We live in an age that would've been science fiction to people even just 50 years ago with all of the things they can treat now. Diseases that used to be fatal are now treatable. Even AIDS, which was a dreaded plague when I was a kid, is now survivable. More forms of cancer are now treatable. People who used to be deaf can sometimes get cochlear implants and hear again. Glaucoma is no longer guaranteed to blind you as it can sometimes be cured. People born without, or who have lost limbs can get artificial ones that are almost as good as the real thing. Just about every organ can be transplanted now.

Overall, it was clear that for the study participants, changes in technological advancements have yielded positive advancements in medicine, access to information, and connection. At the same time, these innovations have resulted in a de-valuing of real-world interactions and relationships and have decreased the incentive to do research and to seek out information independently. In the following section, study participants also noted that the devaluing of relationships that result from technological advancements is only a symptom of the larger issue of family breakdown and the de-valuing of marriage and commitment.

### **Family Breakdown**

A key theme that emerged from the interviews was the topic of changes in the family structure and function. Seventeen participants perceived that a negative change in society has been the breakdown of the family. When asked to reflect on what factors they believed may contribute to the breakdown of the family, many listed factors such as over-involvement in work and extracurricular activities, the devaluing of marriage, increasing individualism, and lack of external family support.

Several people indicated that they believed the family structure to be the “foundation” of society and that its breakdown is indicative of what Jayden described as the “fraying of the moral fabric of society.” Eric explained that for him, a “strong marriage and family” was the cornerstone of a “strong faith.” Jayden even expressed that he believed that the breakdown of the family would spell “destruction” of the United States. He explained:

It’s one of the things that will bring about the destruction of the country since American law and culture were built on the foundation of a family with a husband, a wife, and kids. Everything else hinges on those families staying together and living according to Biblical principles. The Constitution was written under the assumption that these law abiding and productive families would be the majority of the citizenry.

To gain deeper insight into their perceptions of the breakdown of the family, I asked follow-up questions to gauge what they believed the consequences of the breakdown of the family would be. For Jake, the breakdown of the family results in children living without a “supportive adult” in their lives and with a decrease in feelings of “connectedness” and “belonging.” The topic of marriage often came up during discussions of commitment. Nine of the 17 respondents who discussed the topic of family breakdown also indicated that they believed that the way society views and perceives marriage has changed. Eric stated that people are “less willing to commit than before.” Jessica explained that she had noticed that couples were more “quick to call it quits” rather than to “work it out and compromise.” Eric, Diane, Elizabeth, Allan, and Jayden all expressed a similar opinion, and Jill argued that the breakdown of the family has been a “huge” societal change.

In addition to the division of families, several participants, like Clint and Jayden, indicated that they had noticed changes in the how the family is defined. Clint stated he found to

the “changes in the definition of marriage” to be “disturbing,” while Jayden described the changing definition as going “against God’s will.” For them, deviation from the traditional family structure and marriage that Jayden described as “union between one man and one woman” has been a detrimental change in society that marks what Sawyer described as “ a move away from God.” Eric expressed a similar opinion and reflected on the “increase in cohabitation of unmarried couples” which he perceived to be reflective of people being “less committed,” which to him, decreases “the strength” of a relationship. Similarly, the participants indicated some concern about society’s willingness to tolerate behaviors and lifestyles that they perceived as sinful.

### **Tolerance & Diversity**

Another topic that proved to be contentious and complicated for many of the participants was the topic of tolerance and diversity. Ten of the 18 participants who spoke on the topic during discussions of societal change stated that they had recognized an increase in diversity and pluralism and societal acceptance for it. While none wished ill will upon those whom they disagreed with, many perceived an increase in hostility towards Christians and their attempts to preserve traditional Christian values as being a consequence of pluralism and diversity. In other words, many who spoke on this topic expressed that tolerance of others was expected of them, they did not feel that they, as Christians, were given the same treatment and have instead been what Allan described as “branded and made to live in fear” due to their dissent. He explained:

I don’t like the idea of anymore leaving in fear on account of their lifestyle. On the other hand, I don’t like to see it go so far in the other direction that anyone who expresses disagreement or political dissent is also branded and is made to live in fear. I think that’s what the current Equality Act is proposing. Why can’t we all just get along? There’s a

good side to respect for diversity and a bad side to it. In principle it's a good idea. I'm not sure how it's working out in practice. We have to look for a balance.

Jill indicated that she believed that while Christians are expected to be tolerant of others, “everything else is allowed to remain.” She argued that while diversity is not necessarily negative, Christianity is less tolerated than it used to be, particularly in public spaces. When asked to expand on this, she explained that she had noticed a decrease in the acceptance of prayer in schools and in the acceptance of Christian-based holiday imagery, such as crosses and manger scenes, in public spaces. From these statements, it seems that for participants like Allan and Jill, while they are expected to be tolerant and inclusive of others, they do not feel that the same courtesy is extended to them by a society that, to them, has rejected Christianity and is attempting to silence their voice and minimize Christian influence.

In addition to perceiving an increasing tolerance for pluralism and decreasing tolerance for Christianity, five participants also noted the changes in the diversity of gender and sexual orientation and expressed discomfort with the changes and society's acceptance of the changes. Nikki described the concept of transgender as “weird,” and Clint stated that people's inability to “know what gender they are is disturbing.” Michael indicated belief that those who are gender non-binary are suffering from a “mental illness” or “gender identity dysphoria” and that it should not “be accepted as normal.” Jayden expressed similar sentiment and argued that gender inclusivity and the acceptance of gay marriage is an “abomination” and a “corruption of God's plan.”

Importantly, not all participants expressed negative attitudes towards the increasing diversity and pluralism in society. Of the 10 participants that spoke on the topic there were 4 that indicated that they believed diversity was a positive change in society. Megan, a 27-year-old

doctoral student expressed happiness that “people are living as their true selves” and expressed disdain that “people are becoming seemingly crueler” than before despite movements towards diversity and acceptance. Michelle, a 34-year-old queer woman and adult services provider expressed a similar opinion and stated that she did not believe the “God I believe in” would accept her and not “shame me or send me to hell for loving someone.” Though these opinions were not the majority, it is important to note that even within the Evangelical Christian community, there is contention and disagreement.

A similarly contentious topic that arose during discussions of diversity and tolerance was the topic of abortion rights. This was a topic that most often arose when participants were asked to describe negative changes that they have noticed in society. Of the 12 participants who spoke on the topic of abortion, 10 expressed an adamant objection to it. Interestingly, though a few of the participants indicated that they believed women’s advancement was a positive change in society, they seemed to separate abortion rights as an entirely separate topic on which they had a more negative opinion. For example, when asked to describe positive changes that she had noticed taking place in society, Jane stated that “the advancement of women in society” was a positive change while also stating that she is “pro-life and against abortion and assisted suicide.” Clint also contended that “women’s involvement in the workforce has been a positive thing,” but described the provision of abortion rights as “horrible” and stated that he was “concerned to hear that in some states, it’s permissible up to nine months.” Jayden also concurred and added that in his perspective, “They are murdering babies in the name of women’s rights.” Allan, who was involved in the Right to Life political movement also indicated that “women do have a right to their body,” but added that “she can choose not to have sex or if she does, she can have appropriate birth control or call time out with four seconds left.”

Several participants indicated that their stance on abortion affects how they vote politically. Elizabeth explained that for her, “abortion is a grave sin” and that as a Christian, she is “to speak against it.” Jayden also explained that he gets “in trouble for standing up for the rights of unborn babies” and describes acceptance of it, “even among Christians” as “abominable.” Sawyer, a 29-year-old farmer and expectant father expressed disapproval of abortion and questioned the legal definition of life:

I’m going to throw the big one out there, abortion. Countless babies are getting killed everyday and people think it’s OK. That baby is a living breathing human being. If somebody commits a murder and kills a pregnant woman, it’s a double homicide, but a woman can go in for an abortion and it’s not murder. In some states it’s legal all the way up to 9 months. Why is the first person convicted of a double homicide if it’s not wrong to kill a baby. That’s one of my big questions, and I have a big problem with that. It’s a double standard. One of the main arguments from the pro-choice side is that ‘it’s my body and my choice.’ Well, what about the baby’s body and the baby’s choice? He didn’t get one. That speaks to me, especially with us having a little one on the way. We see the ultrasounds and hear the heartbeat. I don’t know how people can do it. I don’t.

Like changes in the diversity of gender and sexuality, not all participants who spoke on the topic adamantly opposed abortion rights. Two of the ten participants who spoke on the topic indicated that while they did not necessary consider themselves to be supportive of abortion in any case, the situational context must be considered before making a judgment. An interesting perspective on the topic came from Candi, who in addition to being a non-profit director for an agency that serves children and youth, she is also a “proud foster mom,” which she explains gives her a “different perspective.” While she was not in favor of “babies being killed just to be killed,” and identified as “somewhat pro-life,” she argued that her fellow pro-life church members “shut

down communication” when they don’t “listen to the whole story.” In her line of work, she indicated that she has heard “heartbreaking” stories of many women who “wish they would’ve had other choices.” This indicated to me that for Candi, it is possible to still place value on life while also considering the context of the situation and being willing to listen to the whole story before passing judgment. Three other participants agreed with Candi and indicated that they either supported abortion rights or believed that the issues must be considered topically with consideration of situational context.

The discussions of changes in tolerance and diversity led to some passionate and at times fiery responses from the study participants. It is clear that the participants viewed themselves as existing in a society that their values, attitudes, and opinions are not welcomed in yet expects them to exercise tolerance to and inclusiveness of others who do not share their worldview. In the next section, it becomes clear that Evangelical Christians perceive their right to practice, express, and share their faith as coming under threat, which affects their feelings of personal safety and security. They indicated that in their perception, increases in violence and unrest are a direct result of society’s decision to turn away from God and to reject biblical truth, as evidenced by the increased acceptance of non-traditional marriage, abortion rights, and gender diversity.

### **Safety and Security**

In addition to expressing concerns about society’s acceptance of gender diversity, religious pluralism, and abortion rights, 16 of the 18 respondents indicated that they noticed an increase in violence over the years that had left them feeling fearful for themselves and their loved ones and more suspicious and less trusting of others. The topics of crime and violence most often came up during conversations of negative changes that had taken place in society.

Five participants brought up the topic of mass killings that they perceived as amplifying recently in ways that decreased their feelings of safety. Candi spoke on this topic specifically:

...Now, part of their schooling involves prepping for a school shooting in addition to tornado drills. We never had school shooting back in my day. We had tornado drills were you would single file walk into the bathroom, but we didn't prepare to get shot. The sad thing is, like the Boston Marathon, you could just be sitting and enjoying an activity and you're dead. You could be grocery shopping, and a shooter comes in and kills his wife who's working behind the counter. You could be in Las Vegas enjoying a concert and some sniper kills you. You can't even get your head around that. To know that this is the world my children and grandchildren are going to inherit is really sad. So, no our nation isn't safe. You can't even go to church now without the threat of getting shot. No, you don't feel safe here anymore.

Jane also indicated that she perceived an increase in violent crime like "rape" and "murder," and argued that she believed the increase to be a symptom of "a society that has chosen sin." Sawyer expressed similar sentiment and stated that he also perceived the increase in violence to be a result of society's "lack of God." In addition to the general sinfulness of mainstream society, Michael implicated the news as the reason that "everyone is suspect" and that people must consider if "my next door neighbor could be that sicko!" Candi also placed blame on the "media hounds" for the increase in mass killings, while Sarah also blamed the media for "giving sickos attention" that in their perception has led to the increase in fear of violence and suspicion of others. Once I began to notice that more participants were implicating the news media as a source of stress particularly in its reporting of news that Sarah described as "just so negative all the time," When the topic of the news media came up in discussion, particularly when talking about negative changes in society, I found that many participants also



believed the media was biased, deceptive, and untrustworthy. Jane explained that in her perception, the news media is “full of lies” and has largely contributed to the increase in fear in society generally. Michael echoed this sentiment and explained that the news media and its reports of crime influenced his decision to get a concealed carry permit and to install security cameras around his home.

Michael was not the only one to discuss to the topic of home and personal defense. Sawyer expressed a similar attitude and indicated that while he feels “pretty safe in general,” his sense of safety changes when he is with his wife and is “likely to change” upon the arrival of his child, because he perceived women and child as more likely targets of violent acts like trafficking and kidnapping than adult men. He stated that he is considering getting a concealed carry permit that will “guarantee protection” of his family. Jessica also expressed particular concern for her safety in her future travel to a “big city” and said that she wanted to “carry a pocket knife and pepper spray, just in case.” Jane provided an interesting perspective on the topic of personal and national defense when she linked it back to biblical scripture that she perceived as supporting it.

I believe that the Bible also talks about, though God gives us our blessings, he expects us to defend what he has given us. You know, if we are going to protect our homes with our children and our loved ones, in the bible it was always from generation to generation, then I believe that’s what our country should be doing. They should be helping the individuals of the United States protect themselves.

Male and female respondents spoke of their feelings of personal safety in different ways. Though some men indicated that they had noticed an increase in violence and were more careful than they had been in the past, most men echoed Clint’s perception that he felt “pretty safe.”

Sawyer, Allan, Clint, John, and Eric expressed similar feelings of safety. Jake explained that while he feels “pretty safe here,” he would probably feel “less safe in a big city where there is more crime.” Interestingly, Jake also indicated concern that “being a white male, there is a certain level of disdain that may be held by non-white individuals which could lead to unprovoked verbal confrontations.” It is interesting that Jake included “verbal confrontation” in a discussion of safety and security. The difference in feelings of safety from a physical attack and verbal confrontation may be an important topic for future research to explore more deeply.

In contrast to men’s experiences, all eleven women expressed more negative views of their personal safety. Jill explained that “as a woman” she felt “less safe” in society, particularly when she was alone in public. Several women, like Jessica and Jane indicated that they specifically noticed an increase in sex-based crimes like rape and sex trafficking. Jane stated that an “overall de-valuing of human life” has led to violence that “disgraces and humiliates women and mentally and physically scars them.” Candi echoed similar concerns for women’s safety in particular and argued that “as a woman, you have to always be vigilant because there are creeps out there.” Megan provided an interesting perspective as she considered her feelings of safety in relation to those of women of color:

As a woman, not really. I carry myself with a hefty dose of confidence, so if something ever happened to me, I wouldn’t go willingly, but I also have to look over my shoulder quite a bit because I’m a woman and I’m a target. I’m White, so societally, that would be viewed as a tragedy, so I also know I’m safer than my people-of-color sisters, which isn’t right!

Despite their differences in perceptions of their degree of safety and of what the threats to safety were, what is important is that all female participants considered the world to be an unsafe

place to live. I was saddened when the women would express concern for their loved ones. Some became quite emotional about the topic which required me to pause the interview. It was clear that even though their faith provided them with some sense of safety and security, the perceived increase in violence and unrest was topic that was at the forefront of the participants' minds when discussing social change. They expressed that they had noticed changes in their ability to trust others, including their own neighbors, and indicated that this suspicion was aided by the news media that they perceived as focusing primarily on negative topics. Though negative feelings of personal safety may not be unique to Evangelical Christians, what is unique is the way their faith influences those feelings by providing them with a sense of hope and security in this life and the next. Holiday celebrations that bring family and friends together seemed to be a happier topic that allowed study participants to reflect on the positive aspects of life.

### **Holiday Celebrations**

The topic of holiday celebrations was mostly positive for study participants, and many of them smiled when asked to describe what they enjoy about the holidays and about their family traditions. Through the analysis process, I was able to determine that for the Evangelical Christians in my study, holiday celebrations are multifunctional and are a way to preserve tradition. I identified four subthemes that emerged during discussions of holiday celebrations: a time for ministry, gendered labor, preservation of Christian values, and a manifestation of secularization. From these themes, I was able to gain further insight into how my participants interact with and negotiate with secular culture during shared holidays and how family celebrations work to preserve traditional Christian values and gender roles.

## **A Time For Ministry**

When discussing their perspectives of holiday celebrations, several participants indicated that for them, holidays were a time that they could engage in service projects with others outside their church. Jill explained that a Christmas tradition for her family is to “do some kind of service project together, because service is something we value and want our kids to be learning and doing.” Jane, Eric, Briana, Diane, Michelle, and Candi expressed similar interest in serving others during the holidays. Clint explained that during the Christmas season, his adult Sunday School class “donated so that families in need can afford food and gifts for their kids,” and Jane explained that during Thanksgiving and Christmas the adults in her church “visit shut-ins,” and “pack meals for needy families.”

Importantly, the participants emphasized that service of others is not a requirement of their faith and does not earn them anything. Jill explained that she does not “help others because I have to.” She also expressed that in many of her church’s service projects, they do not necessarily engage with people or host events with the intent to overtly share the Gospel, rather they engage with others in the hopes that their kindness, charity, and patience will reveal the character of Jesus Christ to those they serve. Michelle contended that she does not serve others because she has to, but because it “fills my heart.” Jane, Candi, and Eric gave a similar perspective. This is an interesting finding, because sheds light on how Evangelical Christians view ministry and outreach and often engage in it in less overt ways. I found that of the Halloween, Christmas, and Easter holidays I explored in this study, most of the discussions and descriptions of outreach and ministry came when participants talked about Halloween and Christmas. While outreach and ministry efforts during the Christmas season were described by Eric to be a way “to show Christ’s work and love,” 10 participants described outreach methods during Halloween as providing as providing a safe alternative to other Halloween activities.

## **Halloween As a Time for Outreach**

I learned from the study participants that even though religious holidays are viewed as a time for charity, service, and outreach, secular holidays like Halloween also serve as a time to engage and negotiate with mainstream society for the purposes of engagement and outreach. Research suggests that Halloween, a secular holiday than many Evangelical Christians, like Clint, describe as having “dark and questionable roots” is a time for churches to provide alternatives that provide them a platform on which to share the Gospel (Belk, 1990; Pelligrini, 2007; Fletcher, 2014; & Willenbrink, 2014). The observance of Halloween was a contentious topic of discussion and yielded a diverse set of perspectives. Jill stated that while she was somewhat familiar of the pagan roots of Halloween and contended that it was a “hotbed” issue in the Christian community, her family participated in the holiday and did not celebrate the “dark” aspects of the holiday, like death, horror, and the “demonic.” Of the 14 participants who spoke on the topic of Halloween, 10 indicated that while they rejected the same dark aspects of the holiday and recognized its pagan roots, they also believed the holiday could be fun. Others, like Jane, viewed Halloween as representing the “satanic and demonic” and indicated that they choose not to observe the holiday due to their religious beliefs.

Of the 14 participants who spoke on the topic of Halloween, 10 described outreach methods used during Halloween as providing a safe alternative to other Halloween activities, like haunted houses, that focus on the darker aspects of the holiday. Candi, indicated that in her opinion, Halloween is a holiday that is celebrated by many children and families who venture out into the community together, providing a unique opportunity to engage with and minister to them. To further explore the ways in which churches utilize Halloween as a vehicle for outreach and ministry and to supplement my qualitative interviews on the topic, I observed a

Christian-based Halloween alternative called ‘Judgment House: Tour Your Final Destination.’ This event can be understood as belonging to the ‘Hell House’ classification as provided by previous literature that are similar in structure to traditional secular haunted house events but that put forth a Christian message (Pelligrini, 2007; Fletcher, 2014; & Willenbrink, 2014).

The event webpage describes Judgment House as “a walk-through drama that presents the truth of people’s choices versus the consequences of those decisions both in this life and the next”<sup>3</sup> (“What is Judgment House?,” 2018). Upon entering the church I was greeted by an older man who had short white hair and thick black rimmed glasses who escorted me to a large room that looked as if, on a typical day, it was a children’s play area as it had a large jungle gym and was painted in a variety of bright reds, blues, yellows, and greens. I approached the registration desk where I was asked to provide a five dollar donation and to tell them how many people I had with me and to provide my name. I used a different name for each of the three times I walked through because I wanted to ensure my ability to continue my observations. After registering, I was given a number and awaited them to call my number to join a group. After joining a group, I quickly noticed that many of the attendees in each of the three groups I joined were young and appeared to be from large church groups as they wore matching shirts with a church’s name on them. Some around me expressed that they were “nervous” and “excited,” and stated that they had “heard this is scary.”

The drama this year told the story of a boy and a girl who lost their mother to cancer. The first scene we were shown depicted their mother’s funeral where the boy indicated that “he needed prayer to get through this,” while the girl stormed out and questioned “why would God

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<sup>3</sup> My initial intent was to interview *Judgment House* attendees about their experiences, however, my attempts were rebuffed by the staff, who indicated that they did not want their attendees to be approached for research purposes.

let this happen if he really loves us?” The next scene showed the boy surrounded by six other people, who appear to be youth, assumed by presence of trendy clothing and skateboards, who were engaging in a bible study together. In the same scene, the girl was also surrounded by other young people in a messy apartment with trash and beer bottles strewn about it, indicating that the two siblings took different paths. The next scene depicted the two siblings many years later on their deathbeds. The boy was surrounded by his family and asked them to “pray for him,” while the girl, who the narrator explained had “filled her life with drinking and work” was alone while nurses whispered about her lack of family.

In the next scene, we were brought into a room and were told to stand in front of a black curtain that when pulled back revealed a judge who was depicted by older man with white hair dressed in a white robe sitting behind a podium with a large book in front of him, which the narrator explained was the “Book of Life.” The judge called out the names of the man who had died in the previous scene surrounded by his family and told him that he had “done well” and demonstrated “faith” and permitted him to enter Heaven. The woman who died alone approached the podium next and was told that because she had “rejected God” and “abandoned her family,” she would not be permitted into heaven. She begged for “another chance,” was rebuked, and was dragged by demons who were covered head-to-toe in black robes to what I presumed was hell. The judge then proceeded to call out each of our names and told us that “you can make a different choice. Your time has not yet run out.”

The next two scenes revealed to us the fate of the man and woman. Prior to entering the next scene, the narrator told the participants to “use your best judgment” to decide if they wanted their young children to enter as the next scene was “quite frightening.” No one objected and all children were entered the next scene with us. We were lead into a dark room and were told to

stand in a line. Soon, we heard a voice of a man who stated that he was “Satan” and were then shown bruised and bloodied people in chains writhing on the floor lamenting their state. The figures who were in the black robes from the previous scene scaled the chain link fence that separated us from them and stared eerily and hissed at us. At the end of the scene, “Satan” stated that “I hope you’ll be back” and called out some of the names of those in our groups. After he finished the lights started flashing and the figures in the black robes began to bang on the chain link fence and told us we would “be back soon.” After exiting the room, I noticed one child who was visibly upset with red rimmed eyes who clung tightly to an older woman’s leg who told her not to “worry, this isn’t the end.”

The next scene we entered, we were told to file down a hallway single file and were greeted by people in bright white robes who said “welcome” and “I’m so glad to see you” and draped white towels over our shoulders like robes. We then entered a room where a figure, who introduced himself as “Jesus” sat atop a golden throne surrounded primarily by women and children in bright white robes who sang the Christian song “I Can Only Imagine.” After the song, we found out the fate of the man who the judge had permitted to enter Heaven and watched as he hugged Jesus and his parents who had preceded him in death. He made no mention of his sister who we had seen writhing on the floor of Hell. Another song began to play, and Jesus approached our group and hugged each one of us and whispered in my ear “Thank you for choosing me. I’m glad you are here.” Looking around after this interaction, I noted that several people were quite emotional and were holding tissues to their faces. As we exited the room, our robes were taken from us and we were offered a tissue.

In the final step of the event, we were lead to a room where a man who introduced himself as a “pastor” shared the Gospel with us and asked us to bow our heads and close our



eyes to reflect on our experience while also giving those “who have chosen to give their life to Christ today” to raise their hands so that “we can give you a Bible.” Those who raised their hands were lead to a room where they were given a bible and were offered the opportunity to “sit down with one of our Christian counselors” to “ask questions about God and about your new relationship with Him.” To gain the full experience, I raised my hand and engaged in conversation with a woman who told me about her spiritual journey and about what her faith had done for her in her life and asked if I had any questions for him about God. Those who did not raise their hands were dismissed from the event and were given the opportunity to purchase merchandise like t-shirts and were offered the chance to take a group picture in front of a Judgment House backdrop before they left.

This is just one example of a way that Evangelical Christians engage in outreach during the holidays. Twelve of the 16 who spoke on the topic of Halloween explained that while they recognize the pagan roots of Halloween, many, like Jill, “choose not to focus on that aspect” and support the movement of churches to provide what Jessica described as “safe alternatives to going door-to-door.” I was privileged to speak with Candi who is the event coordinator for her church’s Fall Festival alternative Halloween event. Candi explained that as a non-profit manager she had noticed in the past that “special needs kids are often cast off to the side during Halloween,” so she has organized “the Special Needs Fall Festival” at her church in addition to a traditional “Fall Festival” that takes place on Halloween. She explained:

“I am the one in charge of organizing the fall festival for the church, and I start that process in about July usually with writing grants for it and things like that. We do the special needs Fall Festival as an alternative, because we know that there are some people who are cast out and off to the side during Halloween and I felt called to reach out to that community.”

Through my discussions with interviewees about outreach and ministry during the holidays, I found that the absence of tracks or overt messages of the Gospel does not necessarily mean that outreach and ministry is not happening or is not at the forefront of Evangelical Christians minds. I learned from my participants that to them, service to others and being what Eric referred to as a “witness of Christ’s work” in their lives, words, and actions is what Jill called a “natural outpouring” of their faith. To me, this indicates that ministry and outreach of Evangelical Christians is not always readily observable in the form of events like Judgment House, handing out information pamphlets, or revivals, rather to understand their actions, it is important to learn from them what they believe their words and actions reflect. Also revealed in my discussions of service and ministry in holiday celebrations was a component of gendered labor that revealed key differences in women’s and men’s experiences of holiday celebrations, particularly during the Christmas season.

### **Religious Holiday Celebrations and the Preservation of Christian Values**

Fifteen of the 18 respondents indicated concern that what Allan called “the meaning of the season” is being lost in society and expressed that preserving the faith-based meaning of holidays, like Christmas and Easter, was important to them that during family celebrations. Jill stated that for her family, it is important that they remember to reflect on “Christ and what he’s done for us.” When speaking on the topic of Easter celebration, Eric stated that he believed Easter is often less celebrated than Christmas because of its “heavy” subject matter and lessened focus on gifts and parties though to him, remembrance of its events is the “cornerstone” of Christianity. Sawyer also contended that in his perception, the Easter holiday has not been fully secularized, because of its lessened emphasis on gift giving and parties. Elizabeth also indicated that she actively strives to keep Christ at the center of her Christmas celebrations amidst the

holiday chaos of “decorations, gifts, and parties.” She explained that “the challenge is to remember the reason for the season in our materialistic culture.” Jill, Allan, Jessica, Sawyer, and Clint expressed a similar perspective. Clint stated that even though to him Easter represents “Christ’s crucifixion, death, and triumphant resurrection, and defeat over death,” for many people it is just a time to celebrate the return of spring. He adds that though “it’s okay to have fun,” it is also important to maintain the Christian basis of the holidays. Allan reflected on a past Christmas where he was reminded of the meaning of the Christmas holiday:

Christmas is a holiday for honoring Jesus and remembering his birth and sacrifice. There’s a lot of baggage that’s been attached to it, like gift giving. Some of that is ok as long as it doesn’t become all consuming. I remember one Christmas I was rushing around trying to finish my college finals, then I came home and rushed around trying to buy presents at the last minute. My mom had worked herself too hard and had gotten sick on Christmas Eve when we were supposed to have our family celebration, so everything just kind of deflated. I just realized that the chaos is not what it’s all about. I always try to just remember the meaning of the season.

Twelve of the 18 participants indicated that one way they take time to reflect on the Christian basis of the holiday is to attend services provided by their churches. I attended a Christmas Eve service and a Good Friday service at Midtown Evangelical Christian Church located in the Midwestern United States, and both observances had similar qualities of both celebration and somberness. Both services were candlelight services meaning at the end of each, every attendee was given a small white candle encased in a plastic holder to prevent burns that was passed down from the center aisle by ushers dressed in suits and ties, further signaling the formality of the event.

Once attendees were given candles, the usher at each end of the row lit the candle of the attendee closest to the aisle who subsequently began a lighting chain down the row as each attendee gently touched their candle wick to that of their neighbor to light their candle. Once the candles were lit, the pastor indicated to us that “now is a time for quiet reflection and prayer” while quiet music played and a video depicting the biblical stories of Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection played. These portions of the services were quiet and somber as no one spoke to their neighbor or looked at their phones and most kept their heads bowed, hands clasped, and eyes closed in prayer or reflection. Juxtaposed next to the somber atmosphere were occurrences of celebration where attendees would smile, nod their head emphatically in response to the pastor, and raise their hands above their heads during songs as if sending their songs of praise above.

In addition to attending these services, several participants indicated that a reading of the biblical Christmas story was an important family tradition. Jill maintained that, for her family, reading it was a way of “reflecting on Jesus’ birth as a gift to us.” Jessica explained that one way in addition to reading the Christmas bible story, she also “found a Christian alternative to Elf of a Shelf called Shepherd on Search that I hope to use in my family tradition with my child.” This is evidence that there are Christian-based alternatives to secular forms of entertainment that are available to Evangelical Christians that allow the holiday celebrations to remain faith-based and entertaining.

When discussing the Christmas and Easter holidays, 14 respondents spoke on the topic of the inclusions of secular holiday icons like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny into their Christian family holiday celebrations. Of the 14, 12 indicated that while they do not encompass what Candi referred to as “the true meaning of the holiday,” the major secular holiday icons, Santa

Claus and the Easter Bunny, have a place in their family holiday celebrations. Candi, Jill, and Eric also expressed that though they did not believe the secular holiday icons should be the focus of Christian family holiday celebrations, they chose to include them in their own family celebrations as what Jill referred to as “part of the magic of childhood.” Eric also added that one way he negotiates this inclusion of Santa Claus in particular into his family Christmas traditions was to point out to their children Santa’s “Christ-like characteristics” and viewed it as a “valuable teaching opportunity for parents” to encourage “the spirit of giving” and “kindness.” He added that he did not “like” the Easter Bunny because it does not add anything to the holiday in the same way Santa Claus does. Despite their acceptance of these secular holiday icons, participants did not perceive the secularization of religious holidays to be a positive change.

### **The Secularization of Religious Holidays**

For 12 of the study participants, society has increasingly distanced itself from religion in a process of secularization that manifests itself in the treatment of holiday celebrations in the public sphere. Of the 12, 7 argued that the Christmas and Easter holidays in particular are no longer readily associated with Christianity and indicated belief that Christianity is becoming, as Jill stated, “minimized.” They provided several unique explanations and perspective on this issue. Jill stated that one change she had noticed was that, in her perception, belief and adherence to the Christian roots of Christmas is “discouraged.” She explained:

I think that there are a lot of people who don’t respect if somebody really believes in the Christian roots of Christmas. I think it’s discouraged. So, you’re starting to see manger scenes coming down that were maybe out in communities before that are now discouraged. I think that there should be a place for people to celebrate that in public. I think there’s more of a negative view of Christians during Christmas time. Maybe that’s

just what I'm being exposed to or what I've been reading about, but I think that the true meaning of Christmas is being swept away altogether by commercialism. I see more and more of that...I think of things I've read about happening in schools, like not wanting a manger scene or a Christmas tree in the school, but yet other things for other holidays are allowed to stay. To me, that's an indication that Christianity is being minimized or pushed away.

Sarah also expressed concern about the secularization of Christian-based holidays. She stated: "It's always going to be Merry Christmas for me no matter what...changing Merry Christmas to Happy Holidays...it's not right to me." Allan also argued that modern society has moved away from Christian influence in a way that he perceived as being "hostile" and argued that in his perception, "changes in holiday celebrations have run parallel to the secularization of society," which he felt was "concerning." Nikki added that she also believed the Christmas and Easter holidays have become secularized and was of the opinion that people are concerned with being "less offensive" and more concerned with making holiday celebrations "pretty" and "fun." Clint added his perspective that holidays had "totally lost connection with their Christian basis, because there are less people who are Christians."

In addition to discussions of secularization 14 of the 18 respondents also indicated a perceived increase of greed in society and the desire for things that Sarah described as "bigger and better." Eleven of the 14 respondents who spoke on the topic of commercialism, said that its entrance into society and holiday celebrations is not welcomed and is a manifestation of peoples' desire to, as Diane stated, "fill a void." Eric agreed and argued that people "buy things to fill the emptiness in their lives that can only be filled by Christ." Jane and Allan stated that their rejection of materialism extends beyond holiday celebrations. Jane stated: "Well, the Bible says where your treasure is, there your heart will be. So, I don't believe in luxury or extravagance. I

believe in living a comfortable, yet simple life.” Similarly, Allan explained that because of his faith, he does not have the “status symbols a lot of doctors have.”

Though some participants spoke of the role of frugality in their daily lives, all 14 participants spoke of commercialism and greed within the context of holiday celebrations. Nikki argued that “holidays have been taken away from the faith that they came from, and it’s become all about buying and having things.” Michael expressed a similar perspective and contended that: “holidays are all about making money.” Candi added that holiday celebrations have become “all about doing and buying” as a way for people to “try to fill up the void in their life.” Sarah explained for her, the focus on materialism “takes the love right out of it.” Michael echoed this sentiment and explained:

Gift giving is not about showing kindness anymore. It’s about how much money you can spend. It’s about quantity instead of quality. The reason for giving doesn’t matter anymore. It seems like the only way society can experience a holiday is if they go out and buy something. We have to do it because of things and we have to give things. The impression I get is that if we aren’t doing that, then we aren’t showing love...The bible says that the love of money is the root of all evil. There’s nothing wrong with money, it’s the greed that comes with it. That’s where Christmas has gone down the tubes, because it’s about greed. So are Easter and Halloween.

In addition to the to the perception that the Christian basis for holiday celebrations has been lost in society, 6 participants indicated that the secularization of holidays and the resulting greed and materialism have had negative effects on people who they perceived as being, as Sarah described, “stressed” and “willing to go into unnecessary debt.” Eric reflected this perspective and stated that he believed people are weighted with expectations and “pressure” to spend money

during the “unreal” “hype” of the holidays. He argued that technology and that accessibility of stores from the comfort of home has “a lot to do” with the expectations.

Jane agreed that holiday celebrations have become more commercialized and noted that not only are people expected to give “bigger and better” gifts, they are also supposed to give “more gifts to more people.” She argued that these changes, particularly at Christmas, have made the holidays more “complicated.” Four study participants identified busyness as an additional symptom of society’s increased materialism and secularization. As a beauty industry professional specializing in aesthetics and skincare, Nikki stated: “during the holidays, I can see the stress in my clients. Jill argued that people have become so “busy with our own things” and “isolated” that they have forgotten to support and help others in need. Candi indicated that over the years, she had noticed an increase in stress during holiday celebrations and described it as a “slow kind of infection into society.”

From the discussions I had with the study participants on the topic of secularization, I came to realize that in their perspective, what separates them from others in society is their rejection of material things that Allan describes as “the stuff you can’t take with you when your time here is over.” Eric explained that for him, “Christ has already filled that void.” I reflected back on an earlier statement made by Jane that was also echoed by Candi and Nikki that “Satan counterfeits everything that is good.” Perhaps this can help to explain the participants’ attitudes towards secularization of the holidays. It is clear that for them, holidays are a time of celebration but should also be, what Elizabeth referred to as a “time for quiet reflection and preparation.” I got the impression from the study participants that they perceived society as being what Nikki described as “blinded” by the “pretty” and “fun” aspects of the holidays. Jill provided further insight and argued that for Easter in particular, given the juxtaposition of sorrow and celebration,



it is “difficult for people to understand” In other words, my participants indicated that to them, society has been misguided in its celebration of holidays.

### **Holiday Celebrations and Gendered Labor**

I sought to explore the gendered labor that is involved in holiday celebration preparation to see if it is reflective of everyday, traditional gendered division of labor in the home by asking the interviewees to describe their role in making their family holiday celebrations happen.

Women and men describe their roles quite differently. I began to notice that many of the men described their role in their family’s holiday celebration as to be present and help their female partners when they request it. Sawyer explained that his role is to “show up” while Michael described his role as to “do what I’m told.” Allan explained that while he helps with travel arrangements, on the day of holiday celebrations, his role is to help his wife to “get everything ready.”

I noted that the men in the study who stated that their role in family holiday celebrations was to simply attend did so unapologetically. They did not indicate that they perceived there to be an unequal division of labor, or at least did not perceive it to be problematic. While some of the men, like Allan who indicated that he is willing to “help with travel arrangements” and Sawyer who is willing to “cook sometimes,” their overall descriptions of their roles were far less detailed than those provided by women and revealed more of a helping role for men.

In contrast to the role descriptions provided by the men in this study, 8 of the 10 of women who spoke on the topic indicated that they were responsible for tasks such as meal preparation, gift selection, Christmas cards, and travel arrangement. Candi explained that her family’s holiday celebrations would not be possible without her labor:

Every mom you ask would say, 'it wouldn't happen without me.' Moms are usually the center point and the navigator and the ones that everybody communicates with and those kinds of things. So, I'm the one going out and buying everything, fixing the meals, and texting everybody saying what time church is and those types of things. Then I prepare as much as I can before we go to church so that when we come home the chili has already been warming in the slow cooker, the kool-aid has been made, the cinnamon rolls are ready, and stuff like that. So, it would not be pulled off without me. It would not.

Several other women, including Jane, Sarah, Diane, Megan, and Elizabeth, described their roles in family holiday celebrations in ways similar to Candi. During discussions of unpaid holiday labor in the home, Sarah indicated that despite the feelings of "stress" and "chaos" that come from her holiday labor, she enjoys being able to guide the work of others and to have some control over holiday celebrations in the home. Research suggests that perhaps in a world where women lack power and control in society taking control of holiday celebrations within their home may be a source of power and gratification (Di Leonardo, 1987). Jill explained that for her, preparation of family holiday celebrations speaks to her "natural bend" towards service and her desire "to help others."

Candi indicated that during the stress of the holidays, she takes time to "pause" and remember how "blessed" she is to have her children home with her when "there are moms out there that would give anything in the world to be in my shoes and to have what I have. There are moms that had to bury their children or don't know where their kid is and here I am whining that my house is overflowing." This statement was reflective of the perspectives of several women, including Sarah, Jill, and Diane who indicated that they should not complain about their work as it is worth it to have their family together. To me, this indicates that perhaps because Christian women feel that they are called to serve, they suppress feelings of guilt and minimize their

feelings of stress that arise from the unequal division of labor in holiday celebrations. Diane stated that despite the chaos her family's holiday celebrations bring, her labor is worth it and is something that she enjoys.

I truly enjoy having my family together here, even though it's complete chaos and stress, but I really do love cooking for my family...I guess that just one way I can show love to them. The dog even gets a treat once in a while. I think I mentioned it before, but getting together with extended family is so important to us anymore, because...We've all lost loved ones, and we never know if that's going to be the last holiday with them. It's just vital that if we can get together for a holiday, I just think that's so important. It's sad for those families whose relationships are strained and they can't be with their family or their grandchildren. That just makes me really sad, because I don't have that problem, so I can't even imagine that.

The women's rich descriptions of their roles in family holiday celebrations indicated to me that their role was important and significant to them and that it was perhaps something that they took pride in. It could also be that the women are aware of societal expectations and wanted to demonstrate their fulfillment of those expectations (Di Leonardo, 1987; Bella, 1991; Vachhani & Pullen, 2011 & Kudak, 2014). It is possible that their motivations for sharing are quite possibly a combination of both. That being said, I do not believe their feelings of that arose from their holiday labor were disingenuous because when the many of the women described their roles to me, their faces would light up and a smile would come to their face along with a brightening of their eyes. Both men and women indicated that they found happiness in celebrating with family, found importance in continuing family traditions, and reflected on the family members who are no longer living. Both also expressed interest and commitment to preserving the

Christian basis of holiday and were intent on what Jill describes as “keeping Christ at the center” of their celebrations.

### **Summary of Results**

The results of this study revealed the complexity of Evangelical Christian faith and its influence in the daily lives of believers. The participants indicated that biblical scripture provides them with moral guidance as well as with a sense of comfort in a society that they perceive as challenging and threatening. They expressed that they had noticed negative changes in society, such as violence, distrust, and deceitfulness, that to them, is indicative of society’s rejection of biblical truth and its desire to suppress Christian influence. Holidays, like Halloween, Christmas, and Easter, are times when Evangelical Christians and those outside of it converge together in public space. The participants indicate that this convergence presents a series of challenges and advantages. They perceived the Christmas and Easter holidays as undergoing a process of secularization and indicated that this is a manifestation of society’s desire to challenge Christianity and its influence. For many of the participants, the family home was a safe place to openly practice their faith and to preserve their Christian values. The participants in this study viewed the convergence of the two worlds during the holidays also acts as an opportunity for engagement and outreach. What the link between religious identity, perceptions of social change, and perspectives of holiday celebrations can reveal about Evangelical Christianity will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

## Chapter 6 - Discussion

### Introduction

As a movement, Evangelical Christianity resists precise definitional boundaries and encompasses a wide variety of opinions, attitudes, and perspectives. Consistent with previous research, the results of this study highlight the fundamentalist roots of Evangelical Christianity, particularly in the participants' beliefs in the fallen nature of the secular world, the belief in the literal events of Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection, and the belief in Jesus' second coming (Marsden, 2006 & Sweetnam, 2010). Furthermore, for all of the study participants, salvation is a gift open to all to accept it, which is also something that has been established in the literature (Pelligrini, 2007). While these are qualities of Evangelical Christianity that previous research had already established, the present study seeks to provide insight into how Evangelical Christians perceive their religious identity, how they perceive social change, and their perspectives of Halloween, Christmas, and Easter.

As I learned from the stories and perspectives of the participants in this study, what it means to be an Evangelical Christian is highly personal and subjective. From these stories, I was able to glean important information about how Evangelical Christians perceive themselves in relation to mainstream society and about their desire to transform it. This is essential to finding common ground and shared interests that may allow a powerful collaborative effort between policy makers and the members of the Evangelical Christian movement (ECM) to instigate change in society while also de-mystifying the motivations and interests of each group in exchange for transparency and understanding. As I will explain in greater detail in the research and policy implications section of this paper, despite differences in opinion on many political

issues, progressive policy makers and members of the ECM likely share the perception that the world, as it is, is fundamentally flawed and in need of transformation.

### **Theoretical Connection**

The purpose of the present study was to examine Evangelical Christianity from the perspective of those who claim it as a religious identity, to explore their perspectives of changes that have taken place in society, while also discovering how their perceptions of religious identity and changes in society are manifested in their perspectives of holiday celebrations, traditions, and rituals. To investigate the link between religious identity, perceptions of social change, and perspectives of holiday celebrations, I employed Smith's 1998 subcultural identity theory and Goffman's dramaturgical theories of impression management and face-work (1959), a unique combination that allowed me to explore the complex intricacies of Evangelical Christians' interactions with one another and non-believers while also observing the nuances in their behaviors and speech they exhibited when interacting with me in discussions that were personal, moving, and at times, controversial.

As claimed by Smith's subcultural identity theory (1998), the Evangelical Christians interviewed in this study understood themselves as living a lifestyle distinct from others in society that is motivated and sustained through their Christian faith and belief. They argued that their faith uniquely influenced their interactions with others, sense of morality, sense of purpose, and everyday decision-making. For them, their faith and biblical scripture provides them with a sense of purpose, hope, and certainty in opposition to a secular world that is chaotic and confusing and seeks to fill human emptiness with material and temporary things and relationships (Kelly, 2014). In support of Ysseldyk et al. (2010), the findings suggest that biblical

scripture provides Evangelical Christians a system of guiding beliefs and a lens through which they interpret experiences and create meaning. They express that their faith provides fulfillment that those without Christ do not have and described their salvation experiences as transformative in a way that draws a symbolic boundary line between those who are saved and those who are not. This finding supports Fletcher's (2014) assertion that Evangelical Christians seek to reinforce boundaries between themselves and non-believers by asserting that their faith and what it provides has changed them.

Confirming the findings of previous studies (Marsden, 2006, Fletcher, 2014, & Willenbrink, 2014), Evangelical Christians in this study explained that though they are different from the unsaved, it is their calling to cross the symbolic boundary line to engage with them and negotiate with secular culture to reach them by attending nonreligious events, participating in secular holidays like Halloween, and hosting public events at their churches. They also argue that they are called to demonstrate commitment to their faith through political engagement and public displays of what they perceive of as promoting the biblical truth amidst the beliefs of a deeply flawed, fallen, and misguided secular society. This confrontation with secular society as resulting from their perceived calling to outreach and revelation of truth is also supportive of subcultural identity theory. As suggested by subcultural identity theory (Smith, 1998) and previous research on Evangelical Christian Hell House performances (Fletcher, 2014; Pelligrini, 2007), Evangelical Christians believe that due to their calling to reach out and reveal the truth of the fallen secular world, their confrontation and calling out of society's deviation from biblical truth is justified.

For many of the participants, it was clear that they wanted to be perceived as kind and committed to the teachings of the Bible without being perceived as hateful, intolerant, or

judgmental. They expressed that as Christians, they are called to engage with others and to be loving of them while being simultaneously called to be honest and truthful without accepting sin. These findings align with Pelligrini's (2007) assertion that Evangelical Christians view a distinction between being hateful and being painfully honest. The desire to engage with secular society for the purposes of ministry and service to its members without accepting its faults requires a delicate performance of impression management. It was clear that the participants in this study wanted to put forth a front of being loving and tolerant of others with whom they disagree because it is what the scripture calls them to do. These findings support those of Horsfield (2011) and Fletcher (2014) who contend that to be successful in their mission to spread the Gospel, Evangelical Christians must present themselves and their message as welcoming, life-changing, and relevant. This requires that Evangelical Christians exhibit kindness and patience towards those whose beliefs or lifestyles contradict their own.

Evangelical Christians are faced with a unique challenge to put forth a front of tolerance and love in order to fulfill their calling towards outreach while also maintaining boundaries around their own beliefs, values, and sense of truth that allow them to fulfill a successful performance of their religious identity. They cannot retreat from society if they are to help others become saved; instead, they must tread the line of speaking the truth in a world they perceive as being deceitful and fallen while also making their Christian lifestyle appear attractive and welcoming in a diverse and pluralistic society. Goffman's dramaturgical theory of impression management (1959), when considered in conjunction with Smith's subcultural identity theory (1998) provides a helpful theoretical lens through which researchers can understand how Evangelical Christians are able to successfully engage and negotiate with a secular world that they perceive as being in fundamental opposition to them and even intolerant of their lifestyle



while simultaneously maintaining their own boundaries. This is important, because it can provide a clearer understanding of how Evangelical Christians can engage in subtle ministry and outreach, like Midtown Evangelical Church's Fall Festival, with non-believers in ways that are entertaining and welcoming and do not result in explosive confrontation.

### **Connection to Previous Literature**

Supported by previous literature is Evangelical Christians' perception of the secular world and its alternatives as chaotic and superficial while a Christian lifestyle stands as its antithesis with salvation being a transformative experience that provides hope, certainty, and purpose (Wald, Owen, & Hill, 1989; Smith, 1998; Marsden, 2006; Harper, 2012; & Kelly, 2012). The results of this study confirm the findings of previous studies that Evangelical Christianity, though unique in its call to outreach, is fundamentalist at its core. This was made clear by the majority of the study participants' belief in the virgin birth, resurrection, creation science, the eventual second coming of Christ to Earth, and in the reality of miracles (Marsden, 2006; Fletcher, 2007; Horsfield, 2011). Interestingly, the findings of this study deviated somewhat from the findings of previous literature that as part of their fundamentalist roots, Evangelical Christians view the bible as inerrant, infallible, and internally consistent and favor a literal interpretation of it. While this was true for many of the study participants, several participants indicated that while they believed that the bible was divinely inspired and believed in the basic truths of the bible and viewed it as a source of moral guidance, they argued that the bible should be interpreted in terms of the cultural and situational context in which it was written. This indicates that there may be more variation and diversity in perspectives on biblical interpretation

among Evangelical Christians though previously thought that adds complexity to the problem of defining and understanding biblical truth that may warrant further investigation.

This research also confirms the finding of previous literature that even though Evangelical Christians perceive the world as being irreparably fallen, they also engage in activities such as volunteer service, intellectual debate, and fiscal and physical political activism in an attempt to transform society and change the fate of non-believers, even if they do not believe the fate of the world can be changed (Smith, 1998; Wellman, 1999; Klemp, 2007; Lynch, 2013; Stevenson, 2013 & Fletcher, 2014). Several indicated that voting and showing fiscal support for political candidates and movements that are congruent with their beliefs is a way of fulfilling their calling to speak the truth to a fallen secular world.

In accordance with previous research, the participants in this study expressed belief that the core social institutions that they hold sacred, particularly the family and education, have been infiltrated by secular society and politics in an attempt to further stifle Christian influence that they perceive as being the basis for law and order in the United States (Miceli, 2005 & Klemp, 2007). Many were of the opinion that negative changes that have taken place in society, such as divorce, child abuse, gender diversity, and acceptance of abortion rights, are a direct result of society's movement away from God and argue that the only way to correct these problems is to reunite the church and state. This supports the claims of previously literature that Evangelical Christians, though somewhat willing to negotiate and engage with secular culture for the purposes of fulfilling their calling to outreach, desire to maintain traditional Christian values (Restad, 1996). I propose that one way Evangelical Christians seek to preserve tradition is through holiday celebrations, traditions, and rituals. Importantly, though in the minority, some participants expressed more progressive political views and indicated support for diversity and

pluralism rather than a desire to preserve strict traditional Christian values. The progressive voice in Evangelical Christianity is a topic that warrants further investigation

The findings of this study suggest that how Evangelical Christians perceive, observe, and celebrate holidays can be linked to their religious identity and the desire to preserve traditional Christian values in family celebrations in resistance to the secularization of society. As expected, many participants indicated that they perceived society as rejecting the Christian foundation of holidays in favor of religious inclusivity and commercialism. Several commented specifically on the *Merry Christmas* versus *Happy Holidays* controversy while others commented on the silencing of Christian voices by secular society by not allowing public manger scenes or displays of prayer in schools during holidays. Participants made clear their rejection of commercialism and lamented about the increase in greed and ostentatiousness during holiday celebrations that they viewed as a manifestation of society's misguidedness. This supports the findings of previous studies that for Evangelical Christians, scripture calls them to reject worldly possessions, commercialism, and greed in favor of frugality and charity (Restad, 1996; Harenstein, 1992; & Baer, 2007).

The findings of this study also support previous findings that holiday celebrations serve to preserve traditional gender roles within the home as the women in my study indicated that they bear the primary responsibility for selecting gifts, meal preparation, travel arrangements, and kinship maintenance, despite the fact that the majority of them were also responsible for full time jobs (Di Leonardo, 1987; Sinardet, 2009; Vachhani & Pullen, 2011; Kudak, 2014). In accordance with Harenstein (1992), the results of this study suggest that family holiday celebrations act as a method of childhood socialization that, for Christian families, are a way to instill and re-affirm Christian values and the faith-based meaning of holidays in opposition to a

secularized society. For many of the study participants, family holiday celebrations involved the reading and recitation of biblical scripture, attendance of church services, participation in service projects, family gathering, and limited exchanges of gifts. This indicates that holiday celebrations serve as a way to reinforce the sacredness of the family institution, the importance of faith, the call to outreach, and the rejection of greed and materialism.

Importantly, the majority of participants in this study revealed that they did not anticipate the problems that they perceived society as facing to improve and instead stated that they expected social problems to worsen. Many expressed feelings that society has begun to demand tolerance and diversity, which they perceive as an intentional movement to silence them and their mission to speak the truth that they believe can be found in biblical scripture. Many revealed that even though they feel that their faith and physical safety are threatened in society, they have hope in security in their faith and in knowing that as believers, they have certainty in where they will spend the next life. This supports the finding of previous literature that suggests that Evangelical Christians believe that they are displaced in a postmodern society that possesses antithetical values to their own that they believe will lead to persecution and suffering, ushering in the second coming of Christ (Baer, 2007 & Sweetnam, 2010). The role of faith in perceptions of safety, fear of crime, and hope prompts further research.

## **Contributions**

This research contributes to the existing literature by providing a qualitative examination of the relationship between Evangelical Christian's identity, perceptions of social change, and perspectives of holiday celebrations through a unique theoretical lens that combines subcultural identity theory and Goffman's dramaturgical theories of impression management and face-work

(1959) By approaching the problem from these theoretical frameworks, I was able to discover that Evangelical Christians' religious identity and values are represented in the way that they celebrate holidays and that family holiday celebrations are a way to socialize and reinforce traditional Christian values in a secularized society that has rejected them. I also conclude that a cornerstone of Evangelical Christianity is the call to remain steadfast in their faith, to share the Gospel, and to reveal and speak against the sinful and deceitful nature of secular society while also revealing and standing up for biblical truth. I argue that they do this through political engagement and activism, community service, and through their everyday acts of kindness and patience. Importantly, this study revealed that many participants expressed that they wish their words and actions to be perceived as honest and revelatory rather than judgmental, intolerant, and hateful. They wish to show through their words and actions the certainty and hope that a Christian lifestyle can provide in the midst of chaos, confusion, and hopelessness.

These conclusions are important because it may help to explain how Evangelical Christians can claim to support charity, kindness, and patience while also supporting neoliberal policies and conservative politics. It may also provide insight into why Evangelical Christianity's messages, which may be perceived by wider society to be hateful and intolerant, are conceived by its members to be honest and revelatory. These findings also help to explain how Evangelical Christians' beliefs, values, and attitudes are linked to their actions and position in the sociopolitical sphere.

## **Limitations**

Despite these contributions, this study poses some limitations. A primary limitation to this study is the small sample size. Though I was able to interview Evangelical Christians who

came from a diverse range of experiences and situations, it likely does not capture the full diversity and richness of experiences of this religious group. Unfortunately, I was unable to capture the views of those who belong to Historically Black churches and other racial minorities, which research suggests is an integral voice in the movement that must be included to gain a more complete picture. An additional limitation of this study is that it was conducted in the Midwest United States in primarily rural locations. It is possible that Evangelical Christians in different regions of the United States may have different experiences, attitudes, and opinions. It is clear that even from this sample that is limited geographically and in size, there is wide variation in attitudes, opinions, and values that a larger sample size could reveal more fully. Importantly, it was the intention of this study to allow participants' voices to stand on their own, so it was my choice not to fact check their perceptions by going to the literature. This decision may pose some limitations as the truthfulness of participants' statements were not confirmed.

### **Research and Policy Implications**

This research likely only scratches the surface of the relationship between Evangelical Christian identity, perceptions of social change, and perspectives of holiday celebration. It is likely that this relationship can also be explored in the context of other faiths and religious groups which may provide a more complete understanding of social conflict that emerges when different religious and secular groups meet in a common sphere. Another topic for future research that may yield important insight into the engagement of Evangelical Christians in the political sphere is a more in-depth exploration of their perceptions of the future of society and the events that they believe must be in place to fulfill biblical end times prophecy. Also, of importance for future research is a deeper exploration of the beliefs and motivations of political progressives and minorities who are associated with the Evangelical Christian Movement.

As the largest religious body in the United States that has experienced the least membership decline of all other religious groups (, 2014), Evangelical Christianity and the actions of its members have the potential to exert and sustain significant influence in the United States. Since they view the root of social problems to be society's rejection of Christianity, they have expressed a willingness to invest their time, voices, and finances in the movement to return the United States to its Christian heritage that will restore the moral predominance of Christian values. It is also important to note that for many of the Evangelical Christians in this study, there is a perceived threat to their right to practice and share their faith by a society that they view as being intolerant to their lifestyle and as trying to silence them.

Several participants referenced the Antichrist and voiced their belief that due to the increasing unrest and perceived persecution of Christians, the end times may be approaching, which they explained only served to increase the urgency of their Christian message and intensity with which they share it. It is likely that as inter-group conflict increases along with changes in diversity, religious pluralism, and tolerance, the perceived threat against Evangelical Christians and their lifestyle is likely to increase. Future researchers may further explore the role of age in Evangelical Christians' perceptions of social change, which may provide insight into the current state of the ECM and its future trajectory.

The findings of this study suggest several policy implications. First, many of the Evangelical Christians in this study indicated that they perceived law and policy-makers who recommend progressive policies as deliberately ignoring them and acting against their interest in accordance with the larger scheme to silence the Christian voice and influence in society. To address this, policy makers may consider seeking endorsement from leaders in the Christian community with whom they can agree upon at least some political issues while remaining open

to engaging in discussions about topics upon there is disagreement rather than taking an all or nothing approach to agreement. This may help to demonstrate reception and tolerance for the Christian perspective that many of the Evangelical Christians perceived as being ignored or rejected.

Importantly, many of the participants also indicated that they recognize positioning on issues as subjective and varied, even among those within the community. This indicates that the Evangelical Christian community may be more open to conversation and compromise than it may appear. This calls upon law and policy-makers and political candidates to attempt to engage with this community on topics that they can find mutual agreement rather than assuming polarization on issues and that there is no common ground. Attempts by progressive policy makers to seek compromise and common group may also encourage the voice of the progressive Evangelical Christian community to come through and exert potential influence on those who hold more conservative viewpoints. For many participants in this study, fellowship with other believers was essential to their religious identity and spiritual growth and expressed genuine concern for the resolution of issues that were divisive in their church community. This may motivate Evangelical Christians to seek compromise in exchange for group unity and fellowship.

Second, many of the Evangelical Christians in this study expressed genuine concern for the well-being of vulnerable populations like children, women, the homeless, and the imprisoned. They also expressed a desire to engage with and recruit young adults who are lost or have fallen away from the church to provide them with a renewed sense of hope and purpose. Members of Midtown Evangelical Church indicated that they share their building with the Spanish-speaking community to provide them with a space to worship and engage in fellowship with other believers from their community. These goals are not so different from those of



progressive policy makers who seek a more just and peaceful world for society's most marginalized and vulnerable communities. Perhaps a common ground on which the seeds of compromise and peace can be sowed is a shared desire to serve. If policy-makers are willing to approach the Evangelical Christian community with a proposition to join forces to provide for the community they share mutual concern for, this may help Evangelical Christians' to feel as though their efforts of service that are seen and appreciated as reflections of their faith's calling towards kindness, charity, and patience.

This does not necessarily mean that public service projects should be endorsed by the church, jeopardizing the separation of church and state, however, policy makers may make progress with the community by acknowledging their efforts and involvement in the pursuit of safe and healthy communities. For example, if churches and civil servants could reach a compromise on how much direct outreach is done at Halloween alternative events like Trunk-or-Treat or Midtown Evangelical Free Church's Fall Festival, these events could simultaneously serve the interests of public safety and fulfill the church's desire to serve the community and to play a role in community change and progress.

A third area in which Evangelical Christians appear to share similar perceptions and opinions with many progressives and others in mainstream society is in their concern with technological dependence. Participants in this study indicated that they believed that which technology has yielded positive changes in medicine, connection, and outreach opportunities, it has also led to issues in child development of face-to-face communication skills and critical thinking skills. Perhaps policy makers and other interest groups, like educators, physicians, and parents could unite with Evangelical Christians to provide activities that limit children's and adult's screen time in a way that facilitates safe family time and learning.

A fourth area in which progressive policymakers and members of the Evangelical Christian Movement may share common concern and desire for a solution is regarding the issue of family breakdown. While there may be little room for compromise on the topic of what a family should look like, there may be hope for compromise in the shared concern for families be strong and healthy in whatever form they take. Several participants indicated concern that due to economic hardships, children often lack adult guidance and safe fellowship with other children. Perhaps one way that public servants and members of the Evangelical Christian community can work jointly to address this issue is to once again recognize the efforts of churches that seek to provide families with the financial means to provide an enjoyable Christmas for their children and to provide fun and safe ways to participate in Halloween. Perhaps, to lessen the chances for unwanted ministry or outreach, public servants could consult with churches to learn about how they conduct their successful events and invite them to serve on leadership boards and to volunteer their time in joint community efforts to provide these services to families while acknowledging Evangelical Christians' dedication and commitment to community service and improvements.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Evangelical Christians view mainstream society as launching a deliberate attack on their efforts to share the Gospel as part of a larger scheme to silence their Christian voice and influence in society. Many participants in this study indicated that they perceive the sociopolitical sphere as being polarized and unwilling to seek compromise or peace. Importantly, it is against the calling of Evangelical Christians to simply retreat from society, rather, they are called to reveal the truth of biblical scripture and the fallen world in direct and

painfully honest ways. While they are unlikely to loosen their stance on issues like abortion and gay marriage, this does not mean that their interests are fundamentally at odds with those of progressive policy makers. As stated above, I argue that common ground can be found in both groups' desire to address the needs of marginalized communities and to be a part of community change and progression towards increased safety and health. This may help to ease tensions between the two groups, by welcoming Evangelical Christians' participation and input into efforts towards improvement of the social institutions that they hold sacred. Though they believe the world is irreparably fallen and are certain of its fiery fate, the Evangelical Christian community remains situated within larger mainstream society that it is called to serve and has yet to leave behind.

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## **Appendix A - Interview Guide**

### **INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS**

First of all, can you start off by telling me a little bit about yourself?

### **RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION/BELIEFS**

How would you describe your religious affiliation? What does such an affiliation mean for you?

For example, if you are a Methodist or Evangelical, can you tell me what it means to be one?

How would you describe your core beliefs?

How would you describe the process of salvation from your perspective?

If you feel comfortable with doing so, can you tell me about your story of becoming a believer?

At what age did you accept Christ? Was there an event or person that lead you to Christ?

How does your faith affect the way you live your life?

How would you describe Christian values?

What church related activities are you involved in currently?

What are some things that you like about your church?

### **HALLOWEEN**

What does the Halloween holiday represent to you? How did it come to represent this for you?

From your knowledge, what do you perceive the origins of Halloween to be?

How do you celebrate Halloween? With whom do you celebrate it?

From your perspective, what do you think the Halloween holiday represents to general society?

What are some ways, if any, that you celebrate Halloween with your church family?

If your church does not celebrate or observe Halloween, do you have insight into why that might be?

How does your faith influence how you celebrate Halloween?

## **CHRISTMAS**

What does the Christmas holiday represent to you?

From your perspective, what do you think the Christmas holiday represents to general society?

How do you celebrate Christmas?

What is your role in making your family's Christmas celebration happen?

What are some ways, if any, in which you celebrate the Christmas holiday with your church family?

How does your faith influence how you celebrate Christmas?

How do you feel personally about the inclusion of the Christmas holiday icon, Santa Claus into Christmas celebration? Why do you feel this way?

## **EASTER**

What does the Easter holiday represent to you?

From your perspective, what do you think the Easter holiday represents to general society?

How do you celebrate Easter?

What are some ways, if any, in which you celebrate the Easter holiday with your church family?

How does your faith influence how you celebrate Easter?

Others have argued that for many in society, including Christians, the Easter holiday is overshadowed by the Christmas holiday. Do you think this is true? Why or why not?

## **SOCIAL CHANGE**

How have your personal holiday celebrations changed over time? Examples?

How do you think holiday celebrations have changed over time in the U.S. generally? What examples come to mind?

How do you think the values of the people in the U.S. have changed over time?

What are some of the most positive changes you've noticed in society?

What are some of the most negative changes that you've noticed in society?

What are some things that concern you about the future of the United States? Examples?

If you have not stated so above already, many other interviewees have indicated that they believe there society is facing a breakdown of the family. Do you think this is true? Why or why not?

How would you describe your feelings of personal safety in society today?

Can you describe your feelings about the national security of the United States from your perception?

Is there anything else you would like to share about your faith, your perspectives on holiday celebrations in the United States, or about your beliefs about the future of society?

## **DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS**

What is your age? In what year were you born?

How would you classify your gender?

How would you classify your marital status?

How would you describe your education level?