

I DOUBT THEREFORE I BELIEVE: LOCATING DOUBT
WITHIN EVANGELICAL CERTAINTY

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PREFACE

“Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost you are not alone.” – Father Brendan Flynn, the priest in the 2008 motion picture *Doubt*

“Enjoy your doubts. Our souls feed off mysteries.” – spiritual fiction author Paulo Coelho via Facebook status update on February 5, 2012

On the second Sunday morning that I walked into Cherry Oak Church,¹ sequestered away in the back of a Southern comfort bistro and bar located down a side street in the poshest part of Nashville, scripture seemed to come to life for a few people there. You would not know it from looking at the outside of the building except for a casual chalkboard sign on the sidewalk that usually lists the specials of the night that read "Come Worship with Cherry Oak Church" on the first line and the hours for worship on the second. Pastor Steve stood at the front greeting his congregants and new visitors. When he saw me, he smiled enthusiastically and shook my hand, welcoming me to his church. Then, as he had other church-goers to attend to, he called over two women who looked to be of college age and introduced us. "This is Ari," he began. "He's a Hebrew and a graduate student at Vanderbilt who will be studying our church." I was confused. A Hebrew? Hebrew is a language. That term to refer to Jewish people has not been colloquially used since Biblical times.

What kind of church exactly was this?

¹ All names of churches and individuals interviewed have been changed for the sake of confidentiality. For this reason, I cannot reference the church websites.

I plumed past the foyer, down the hall flanked by VIP booths on the left concealed by red velvet curtains, and proceeded into the back area. There were maybe enough seats for 30 people. For a church that started two years ago, conducts three back-to-back services every Sunday (up from two the week before), and does not have its own facility, that's not bad. I took my seat on the far right in the third or fourth row and pulled my notebook out to begin. The congregants were mostly on the younger side – few looked like they could be older than 30. I looked to my right to find rows of unopened beer bottles within grabbing distance. If they were part of the service, then this was definitely a religion I could get behind!

The service began with worship through song. Some raised their palms toward the front to receive the spirit – a prayer-response not uncommon among evangelicals – as the assistant pastor played guitar and led the congregation through a tender rendition of "Our God is Able" (a far cry from the triumphalist song I would have expected).² A projector in the back cast the lyrics onto a portable screen. For its catchiness, the tune could easily make it to the Top 10 if it was not a worship song. After maybe two more songs, Pastor Steve took to the front without a podium or stage to elevate himself and commenced the service. He began by welcoming everyone, which seamlessly transitioned into his sermon entitled "A Church for the Nations". This helpfully declared the mission of Cherry Oak Church and its cardinal value of "Call[ing] People back to God". He did not mention sin. He did not mention or imply anything to do with salvation or perdition. His message was uplifting and

² I later discovered in the pamphlet handed out that this song references 2 Corinthians 9:8 "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work."

practical. And with several housekeeping announcement at the end – a solicitation for my project and an upcoming baptism (that would take place in a river about 10 miles out) – the service ended. The whole thing lasted about 40 minutes; the next one would begin in 20 minutes. I have not attended too many church services, but this one – though it was inviting and not overtly rushed – felt fast, almost like fast food worship. In and out. Leave a tithe in the collection bowl on your way out if you want.

I retired to the back of the room with sign up sheets and answers to questions ready. A few people approached me for more information. I told them about the nature of my study, that I was looking to interview ten congregants from two different evangelical churches in the area to learn about how salvation is construed. Those who asked signed up, and when they saw that afterward I was uncomfortably standing around waiting for more people, they generously asked how many more people I needed and introduced me to their friends who tarried after the service to schmooze. They were very understanding and helpful; and in no time I had my ten names and email addresses.

Before I left, I approached Pastor Steve to thank him for letting me into his church and to say goodbye. "Thanks for worshipping with us," he replied. I corrected him that I was only observing, but I could tell that his word choice was deliberately subtle and subversive – as if I was supposed to reflect and tell myself: "If that was worship, that wasn't so bad. Maybe I should come back and do it again." Steve was charismatic yet soft-spoken – the son of an American Baptist missionary who raised him mostly in Colombia. I could tell he was the perfect kind of person to

start a church and attract new members.

He and I first met the week before. I attended his church, sat in the back, and approached him at the end somewhat timidly – briefly outlining my intended course of research and expressing the desire to learn more about his church. He suggested we meet for coffee down the street on Tuesday, so we did. It was there that we shared our spiritual stories. Mine was not offered so much as asked for; but not wanting to seem insincere, I complied. That was how he learned of my Jewish identity – as if my name alone did not betray it.

When I began to discuss my methodology – that I wanted to interview ten members of two evangelical churches – one from an established tradition and one emergent – and compare their answers to questions about salvation, Steve stopped me. Cherry Oak is *de facto* Baptist and not an emergent church, he asserted. He noted that what makes a Baptist church is its lack of authoritarian hierarchy, strong missionary wing, and shared beliefs [about Jesus], but that is it. Baptists believe Jesus is the messiah that the Jews are waiting for. The Emergent Church, he distinguished with a slight trace of scorn, thinks everyone will become a Christian [and] Jesus will come back in this world. He also added something about believing in ecology that I could not make sense of. This was interesting because the emergent church as I understood it is characterized by meeting in bars or coffee shops, lax dress code, “de-emphasiz[ing] political issues like abortion and gay marriage and seek[ing] to return to a more spiritual form of Christianity”³ rather than embedding itself in tradition, and is generally populated by hipsters – all of which could be seen

³ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), 255.

at Cherry Oak. Even so, the term “emergent,” like the very term “religion,” is a construct invented by academics to categorize new patterns of phenomena.

Whether those who practice religion or are members of an emergent church know of the terms and appropriate them or not makes no difference. I pressed Pastor Steve with this understanding and he responded that Cherry Oak is for all intents and purposes Southern Baptist, but is not a member of the Southern Baptist Convention and he runs it like a nondenominational church because [Cherry Oak] “doesn’t need to be judged.” If it walks like a duck... so the saying goes.

Before leaving, Steve told me that he would pray for me – that I would find spiritual comfort and that his words might help me along my path. It was a nice gesture.

River Park Baptist Church has been a staple in Nashville for generations. I had to call the pastor’s assistant and explain my intentions before she would book me an appointment with Pastor Jim. The church stood as a behemoth along the busiest street in Nashville. It had multiple entrances, though I followed the assistant’s instructions and entered via the one at which stone pillars supported a canopy under which I imagined a valet service might have come. I made my way inside and told the receptionist that I was there to see Pastor Jim. She directed me to a room down the hall, bid me enter, and closed the doors. The room clearly did not belong with the rest of the church – as if the user in the videogame *The Sims* decided

to fully upgrade one room in a house and left the others as is. The large burgundy leather couches complemented the cherry wood coffee table and the rest of the dark, richly wooden interior. If I was suddenly struck with amnesia and woke up there I might have thought myself in a study or vestibule in some old baron's château. I would interview most of my ten River Park congregants here, though one of them in passing would tell me how much he loathed this room because it does not align with or represent well what River Park is about.

When Pastor Jim, who holds a masters and doctorate in theology, entered the room through a rear entrance some minutes later, I greeted him by his title of Dr. He quickly instructed me to call him by his first name – a familiarity that I think makes him more approachable to congregants. He paid me the cordiality of asking about myself before getting straight to business. After briefing him on my course of study, Pastor Jim deemed my research interest acceptable enough and told me that he would provide my contact info to members at a discussion group he was leading later in the week (he did not think it appropriate to advertise my research during church announcements in front of hundreds of people). And with that, he wished me well.

When I attended a River Park service, it was more what I expected a traditional Baptist service might be like. The demographic ranged from children with their families to senior citizens – all Caucasian donning Sunday-wear except for one pocket of color sitting near me in the back dressed in what I took to be traditional African garb. I later found out that they are Congolese, though I have no idea how they came to River Park.

The service made use of the hymnals stationed in the back of each pew at the beginning and end – each accompanied with organ and piano. The content of the hymns sung focused on reconciliation and answering the call of Jesus. After several of them, a woman ascended the pulpit, which formed the centerpiece of the altar, and delivered the first of five what appeared to be impromptu prayers – that is, not read from a book or sheet of paper and not sounding formalized. These were followed by a message for the children on sin and reconciliation in which a minister summoned the children present to join him on the steps of the altar. The minister then asked them about the change of the seasons, a framework that allowed him to ask the kids what they need to change when preparing for a new season (“The trees shed their leaves every Fall; what kind of things do we need to shed for Jesus?”). One bright lad eventually responded sin. Yes, one thing that all people must shed who wish to model their behavior after Jesus is sin. The parents seemed charmed by the juvenile demonstration. Here the offering bowl was passed around. Usually this happens post-sermon, but after Pastor Jim’s announcement at the beginning of the service that the church was \$10k short of their monthly goal, perhaps this was a subtle way of suggesting the congregation pay in advance. After one more song, Pastor Jim assumed the podium to deliver his sermon on the good news – which, on the subject of sin and reconciliation, I found quite depressing. With the biblical event of Moses saving the Israelites from errantly worshipping the golden calf, the message of the sermon was that while the Israelites had Moses, Christians have someone better: Jesus. This is why it was good news for everyone in the audience except me. But despite the solemn tone of the service, the welcome message was

very inclusive. The church's bulletin touts itself as being "a family of faith," below which states its mission: "Connecting to God, to others, and to a greater world." This message was felt at the very end, when following the altar call in which members could rededicate themselves to Jesus, Pastor Jim bade us reach across the aisles to hold hands as the choir sang. It was very kumbaya.

From the differences in the lead pastor's actions from each church's service, I could infer a fair amount about the congregational foci. Pastor Steve's rhetoric was more aggressively evangelical so far as he was concerned with increasing the size of his church. He also offered to pray for me and bade me return to Cherry Oak, which I took to mean that if I attended services enough times and was exposed to the scripture in such a way, that I might come to see things as he did. Pastor Jim, on the other hand, had a vast church to oversee and was not as interested in witnessing to me. He did not exactly lord over his service, but more so seemed to be there to put it in perspective. Of note in his sermon was not the content, which I took to be normal, but his neglect to bring a Bible up to the pulpit with him. He preached from his notes, which were readily found on the podium. In other words, he brought nothing to the table, so to speak. In the Baptist tradition, which actively eschews ritual, creeds, orthodoxy, ceremony, and liturgy, the only things left that make it demonstrably Christian are the Bible and Jesus. And apparently the Bible can also be done without. I found this to be extremely telling later on in deconstructing the points of authority that congregants confessed in answering questions about their beliefs.

ROADMAP FOR THE TERRITORY

“It is the perception of incongruity that gives rise to thought.” – historian of religion Jonathon Z. Smith, paraphrasing philosopher Paul Ricoeur⁴

A common joke about the Christian milieu is that if you were to ask one person from several traditions who gets saved and who gets damned and combine the results, chances are that all of them will simultaneously end up in both heaven and hell. Such exclusivism has always fascinated me. Of the myriad traditions, how can each claim to be right – how do they know others are wrong? What informs their theological authority? It is one thing to espouse supersessionism – the belief that Christians inherited the Jewish covenants – but it is another to declare exclusive access through one’s tradition to the keys of heaven based on biblical authority.

Thus curious, I decided to explore what informs the authority of church members at two local evangelical churches – one nondenominational emergent, the other Baptist (though a bit left of center) – to discover what differences I could distill in the individually confessed beliefs of members.⁵ I asked questions germane to the topic of salvation, since given its intangibility and contentious nature I thought it would be the most likely to expose denominational and even individual differences. While my analysis of the interviews did indeed reveal differences in the

⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, University of Chicago Press ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 294.

⁵ Leo Tolstoy also shared the same suspicion, having observed the exclusivist theology in his own church, and sought to investigate its origin by separating the wheat of truth from the chaff of “lies.” The ensuing *Investigation into Dogmatic Theology* was never published in his lifetime.

content of belief between the two churches (and amongst members as well), of greater interest I thought was the stark polarity of strategic approaches in evoking authority when faced with certainty and doubt. Cherry Oak members tended to cite scripture before confessing doubt, whereas River Park members tended to rely on their own perspectives and answer more directly. My objective in this analysis is to explain the differences in the church members' approaches.

Of all the questions I asked, the answers to three of them revealed the most about how members respond to personal doubt. These dealt with 1) the perceived inerrancy of the Bible; 2) the possibility of salvation for those of other faiths; and 2) the content and locus of heaven and hell. In this thesis, I will systematically attend to the different approaches to each and by exploring their natures, seek to explain the general variation between the churches. In doing so, I hope to touch upon the broader epistemological question of what informs how members of a religious tradition respond to uncertainty concerning their faith.

The first chapter will situate the cases within the evangelical spectrum, problematizing the nature of variability between each church. I will then discuss the strategies for confessing doubt and explore what happens when one's strategy fails to provide an adequate answer. I will then introduce the primary premise of scriptural infallibility and how all subsequent theological views grow out of acceptance or denial of this idea. The second chapter will examine what each church believes about the possible salvation of Jews, those who lived before Jesus' time, and those who were never exposed to the gospel. I explore how each church attends to the imperative of Jesus being the only way, or if there might be others. The third

chapter explores what members from each church believe about the nature and location of heaven and hell. Lastly, the final section coats the preceding mortar of the analysis with the stucco of explanatory theory to tie it together. With such epistemological understanding, I am able to locate the nature, role and source of doubt in religious belief of these two churches, thereby allowing me to explain how their members accommodate doubt within a tradition that seemingly demands certainty.

CHAPTER I

AS THE GOOD BOOK SAYS...

Problematizing scriptural infallibility

“You may ask, how did this tradition get started? I'll tell you. I don't know.” – Tevye,
Fiddler on the Roof

As with any umbrella term, the evangelical label is a problematic one. To some people it refers to the practice of evangelizing, or spreading the gospel. Other people take it to signify the Christian Right that grew out of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority of the 1970s. Still others take it to mean a rejection of religious dogma and belief in the saving grace of Jesus Christ. I asked those I interviewed what the term meant to them and if by their understanding they considered themselves evangelical. I received a variety of answers, though most of my interviewees understood the term as someone who shares or spreads the gospel with others. Although both the churches I studied definitely fall under the evangelical label, only those from Cherry Oak identified with it almost entirely (9 out of 10). At River Park, only 4 identified as such. Part of the reason for this might be, as one member expressed, “I think the evangelical word itself has not necessarily the best connotation, because there are a lot of extreme evangelicals out there.” Even so, and in spite of the incongruous testimony, according to their websites, both churches

claim classical evangelical beliefs as part of their core values.⁶ Given such common ground, it is important to reach a common understanding about their common denominators. Thus, according to what is known as the Larsen Pentagon in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, an evangelical is

1. an orthodox Protestant
2. who stands in the tradition of the global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield;
3. who has preeminent place for the Bible in her or his Christian life as the divinely inspired, final authority in matters of faith and practice;
4. who stresses reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross;
5. and who stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual to bring about conversion and an ongoing life of fellowship with God and service to God and others, including the duty of all believers to participate in the task of proclaiming the gospel to all people.⁷

With such definitive similarities in conviction, assuming they should normatively be true for members of each church, how can we make sense of differences in the beliefs of individual members?

The first step is to ask them. A good place to start would be tenet 3 of the Pentagon, for it is reasonable to infer that an evangelical's religious beliefs are all couched in the acceptance of an infallible and inerrant scripture. By these terms, I mean that the Bible is conceived to be the uncorrupted, absolute authority on all matters spiritual. Strangely, however, only half of all those interviewed affirmed this understanding: seven from Cherry Oak and three from River Park. This means that

⁶ Although the tenets are easily found on each website, neither one makes use of the term "evangelical". This is likely because, as many interviewees expressed, it has taken on a pejorative meaning in modern times.

⁷ Timothy Larsen, "Defining and Locating Evangelicalism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

half of those interviewed either doubt or do not believe in the Bible's inerrancy or infallibility. Unless the definition of evangelical has changed drastically to allow for an errant scripture, how could half the sampled population confess contrary beliefs?

The answer, I found, is latent within the language of their testimony. Alfredo, one of the older members I interviewed who works at LifeWay, a Christian publishing and media agency, responded thusly:

AS: Is everything in the Bible true?

Alfredo: From which perspective? Like, if it is the word of God and he inspired other people to write – then everything in there is true.

AS: From your perspective?

Alfredo: Yes, I believe the Bible is true... When that type of question is raised, people might think about miracles.... Those kinds of things are incredible for us as human beings. By faith I believe what the Bible says, that, when God says my ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8). So **in our limited understanding of everything, the most we can get is to the point of being skeptical about certain things, but that's where faith comes into play.** In those instances you have to say that if you believe the Bible and that the Bible is the word of God, then everything in the Bible is true, regardless of how incredulous it could be or how incredible it sounds.

His question of which perspective is an interesting one. Does he have more than one? Does he harbor another perspective other than the Bible being the word of God? His following statement would seem to deny my supposition though it reveals one of the more basic justifications of faith: the Bible is the word of God and it is not man's place to question. As a devout Christian, he must merely abide by the content of scripture. But what if scripture does not spell everything out – how does the devout Christian respond? We will attend to that predicament in the next section (heaven and hell).

Most of the members from Cherry Oak who assert that the Bible is infallible, however, do so by qualifying their statements with a condition that allows for their sacrosanct framework of infallibility to remain intact. This phenomenon is known as suspension of disbelief, or willfully overlooking the implausible elements of a narrative in favor of rendering it more credible.⁸ One of the Cherry Oak members illustrates this proclivity brilliantly in responding to the question of infallibility:

Brian: The Bible as properly understood is without error. And that doesn't mean that there aren't apparent contradictions, because I think that in interpreting scripture you can run across contradictions like looking to a historical account, and doesn't this contradict with this, but if that's not the manner by which it's to be perceived and understood, then we're the ones erring, and not the scripture. We're the ones who are erring in interpreting it as how it's meant to be interpreted.

AS: So if something is in the scripture that isn't applicable, relevant, or whatever – anything that's considered wrong – you would say it's interpreted incorrectly?

Brian: I think that maybe we interpret it wrong for this time period. Because, for example, to some Christians the Old Testament food laws... would be – like, how could God expect us to live up to these standards? It would be wrong for us to follow certain laws that would cause us to stone people. I would say that God didn't mean it for this time period. Or perhaps our understanding of the ethics of that day are wrong. So that way we see that even though we may perceive something as ethically wrong or perhaps historically wrong, the document could be interpreted in such a way so that it wouldn't necessarily err, if that makes sense.

It does make sense, but only if one suspends disbelief. Reverse engineering Brian's answer – that the Bible as properly understood is without error – we arrive at the primary premise *par excellence* from which all other premises and conclusions must soundly follow: if the Bible has ascribed inerrancy, then in order for such a plausibility structure to remain intact, a series of justifications will be required to

⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (London; New York: J. M. Dent; E. P. Dutton, 1975).

account for questionable passages. To this, Brian responds that humans err in interpreting scripture such that if historical accounts contradict one's view of the Bible, then perhaps one's view is wrong. The Bible, however, cannot be wrong.

He went on further to justify that our interpretation of the past must be off, claiming that the standards of that day are unreasonable by today's standards. This modernist view of selective interpretation, however, supersedes the marketplace of religion with an individually customizable ideology. As a sociologist it is not my place to evaluate what I study, yet I still wish to objectively draw attention to the phenomenon of saying that some ethics from biblical times (food laws, stoning, etc) are not meant for our time while other ethics (homosexuality, abortion, etc) are still applicable without pronounced rationale for the former category.

Since Brian is an undergraduate biology major, I thought I would press him for how he reconciles his religious views with those of science. Although he responded in the same vein as before, I was able to direct the conversation so that he revealed what it means for the Bible to be properly understood:

AS: Did the world start when the Bible said it did, or when science estimates it did?

Brian: I would say that the world started when God spoke it into existence and that could – that would align with what science has told us and scripture as properly interpreted could show us.

AS: So how do you know how to properly interpret scripture?

Brian: I'd say that it would be a combination of bringing scripture before Him in prayer, in seeking – regarding the Holy Spirit – and also taking the empirical observations that I made about the world – bring these also to [God] and then reasoning through – how to best interpret this. I think that you can't approach scripture without interpreting it to some extent, even if you come at it like 'I'm going to interpret this objectively,' then you're also saying that this is the best way to interpret it. So I think that I interpret

scripture differently based on the context I'm in. Like, if I'm analyzing it in ethics class I might take a very critical air to it. But in terms of personal growth, I just try to receive it as the Word.

This understanding of a hermeneutic, however, seems to allow for human error even if Brian ascribes the process to beseeching God. Would it follow then that scripture as properly understood naturally involves human error? This is tricky, because it at once affirms man's inability to properly understand the content of scripture while also affirming the infallible nature of scripture. It is an unfortunate paradox becoming of the nature of Christian justifications.⁹ I suspect though, that if that is not what Brian meant, then he merely does not know and sought to offer a reasonable response as I noticed he did elsewhere in the interview. In either case, deferring scriptural error to an improperly understood scripture is a clever legitimization that sublimates religious doubt into human fallacy.

Although some of the River Park members I interviewed also testified to the Bible's infallibility, they did so in far less absolute terms. One of the members, Phillip, who grew up in the Catholic Church and whose answers exhibited some vestigial Catholic elements¹⁰, responded thusly:

Phillip: I believe the original manuscripts are inerrant and infallible. Do I believe there are errors made over the years? Yeah... **probably**. But do I believe that God is able to keep his word pure? Yes.

AS: What do you mean by that?

Phillip: I think God wants to have His people know Him. And I think He has preserved that capacity to speak through His word.

⁹ Alastair Macintyre and doubtless other apologists and critics alike have written exploring and deconstructing such arguments.

¹⁰ Such as Augustinian metaphysics and traditional Catholic dogma

AS: So you would say that the Bible as it is today is not inerrant or infallible?

Phillip: **I don't know.** I believe that the original manuscripts are infallible. But how far removed [are we] from the original Old Testament manuscripts...?

Here we have a similar legitimation to that of Brian. The original manuscripts are said to be infallible, but once again, due to human error over the years, the texts can no longer be said to be infallible. Yet Phillip still holds that God is able to keep His word implicitly through the Holy Spirit despite humans corrupting the text. While this is no different than classical conceptions of the Holy Spirit functioning as an intermediary between God and the body of Christ, Phillip's view suggests that even should man distort the original texts, God will ensure that His pure word is communicated to those who want to know Him. Even so, he conceded that the current version of the Bible is likely not reliable so far it as conveys exactly what was originally written – as God intended.

This is a stark departure from Brian's perspective. While both profess scriptural infallibility, Brian does so absolutely – refusing to acknowledge the possibility of divine error – whereas Phillip affirms the Bible's historical infallibility but doubts its present form. In this way, Phillip can stay true to the doctrine of infallibility while also voicing reasoned textual criticism. Effectively, he discovered a loophole in the system that allows him to stay within the evangelical framework yet maintain a modernist twist to it.

Another River Park member, Luke, grew up in Switzerland in the Evangelical Free Church. He also believes in the infallibility of scripture yet offers his own less than absolute reservations about it:

AS: How do you think of the Bible's authority?

Luke: It's God's word. We know that it's written by people. So I have to believe that these people wrote it through His direction – the Spirit. [But] I do struggle with unexplainable passages.

AS: Such as what?

Luke: There [are] a lot of passages about severe fighting. There's passages about the whole issue of marriage and divorce that [are] not that straightforward. There's a whole lot of those things in there that I believe a number of issues have been left open. So I think God wants us to use the Bible as a tangible word we can read, but not only – I think that's why we have the Holy Spirit. That's why we have all the people to communicate [sic] and find the way. Because everything that is kind of written in stone is static. But we know that life is fluid. And that wouldn't quite match up, and He knows that too. So I believe that's why we know the Holy Spirit – to help us adjust that static to live in.

AS: So is the Bible itself infallible?

Luke: It is God's word, and as such, I would not want to be the one who picks passages out and says no, this cannot be God's word. I have to let it stay as God's word. But can I take everything that's in there literally – by the letter? I don't think so. Because the static component may not be at that point where we are as life has progressed.

AS: What exactly do you mean by static?

Luke: Certain words, certain verses, certain stories – [I don't know?] if they are really to be taken word by word. So in that sense, I would say I leave it as God's word, but I may... invite the Holy Spirit to interpret it or explain to me what it means in my time.

As with Phillip, Luke does not hold an absolutist view of the Bible's content, yet still maintains its divine pedestal as the textual Word. Though Luke circumvents the question of infallibility by saying that he would not want to be the one to challenge it, he clearly expresses doubt about the opaque language in parts of scripture and affirms – arguably contrary to his hinted profession of infallibility – that he does not take the Bible literally. Whereas Phillip finds the modern renditions of the Bible to

have questionable inerrancy due to human corruptions (which Luke also implies), Luke questions certain opaque passages as to their fallibility. Both of them draw from the Holy Spirit plausibility structure – a brilliant hermeneutic that allows for one to feel out what one thinks scripture means through the suggestive grace of God – in making sense of potential faults in scripture, though Luke seems to approach scripture as a source of information rather than directive dogma as Phillip does.

While Cherry Oak members tend to respond to the question of scriptural infallibility by conditionally explaining how it is valid in such a way, River Park members, in contrast, tend to attribute scriptural fallibility to human errors rather than explaining it away. *Mutatis mutandis*, while both churches acknowledge human error, Cherry Oak generally does so on the part of the interpreter to justify scriptural infallibility, whereas River Park does so on the part of the text to acknowledge its opposite. Put differently, Cherry Oak members confess human error in interpreting the unadulterated word of God, whereas River Park confess error to signify that they cannot singularly rely on the text. To the former, scripture cannot be flawed, or their whole plausibility structure crumbles. To the latter, their plausibility is not couched in the inerrancy of scripture, but on the sanctity of their traditions, community, and their individual relationship to Jesus.

I would be remiss, however, to skip over the first part of Luke's point about the Bible being God's word though written by people. Not all those I interviewed understood the difference between the word of God and the inspired word of God. The former is the idea that the Bible is in fact God's written word, often used to substantiate arguments for scriptural infallibility, and the latter is the idea that God

through the Holy Spirit inspired individuals to transcribe revelation as they received it. It is also the argument often cited to explain scriptural fallibility as resulting from errors in the transcription process. When I clarified this difference for Brian, he responded:

I think that in some parts it could be like God's word, like this is God speaking. And the other person transcribing exactly what he said. In other portions of scripture – I'd say more portions of scripture – it's the inspired word of God, in that God showed something to people and they interpreted it and they wrote it down. Though you could also say that God inspired their interpretations such that the way they interpreted was without error.

The last part is an interesting take on the inspired word, effectively rendering it inerrant. But recall that Brian has already expressed his belief that the Bible is infallible, so it makes sense that he would further construe the inspired word to signify that the Holy Spirit inspired interpretations to be "properly understood". I pushed him to clarify which parts of the text did he think were God's word, to which he replied the prophetic accounts. However, given that the prophets are all named individuals, I am not sure how that can be construed as God's word and not theirs.

A woman from River Park understood the inspired word in a very different manner:

Well, if you're talking about inerrancy as such that do I think that every single word that is in this text that I hold in my lap is the Word, I would say no. Because I do believe that it was all inspired, and I do believe that it was all written under the spirit that the Holy Spirit gave man what to write, but I also believe that over the generations or through historical context, you know, that it has been changed. It wasn't written in verses with chapters defining these kind of notations which we have put in the – I don't even know when that came to be – King James or whatever scripture. But I think that that has been a great way for people to wrap their minds around scripture and break it down that way. So I think that those things are. I'm not worried about a comma, or an 'and' being there in one translation and not in another. And also the things that I don't have an understanding because I'm not a Hebrew scholar or a Greek scholar. You know I don't know, and I have not

studied that. So I feel that I would definitely be ignorant to say that it is infallible or that every single mark or every single word in it is like what God told Moses to write (laughs) or Matthew or Luke or Paul.

Here Molly ironically interprets the question literally, as if I had asked, more specifically, if the English version of whichever Bible she was holding is in fact the verbatim word of God as inspired by the Holy Spirit through human scribes. Her doubt is interesting in that she more or less believes in the infallibility of scripture, but doubts the organizational structure, notations, and individual punctuation marks or conjunctions and possibly more seemingly minor corruptions, corrections, or modifications. It is hard to say if she qualifies the Bible's infallibility as a legitimation or as a mere caveat. It goes without saying that the Bible was not originally written in English, nor did Jesus know English. Most people who are concerned with corruptions over time worry more about substantial mistranslations, such as the Hebrew word for "young woman" (*almah*) in the prophetic account of Isaiah translated into the Greek as "virgin" (*parthenos*) as having implications for Mary's pre-Immaculate Conception status.¹¹ Suffice to say that whether one believes the Bible is the word of God, inspired word of God, or conflates the two together, such a framework directly influences how one approaches religious doubt through the perceived reliability of scripture. Or as Charlie, a member of Cherry Oak pithily stated, "I don't believe that the Bible has to be what we say it is... I believe it is God's word, but that doesn't mean that man can't screw it up."

¹¹ Elaine H. Pagels, *The Origin of Satan*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1995), 77.

So far I have discussed responses from each church that more or less affirm scriptural infallibility. Interestingly, even when members of each church confess to scriptural fallibility, they tend to espouse the same logic as those who consider it inerrant. That is, River Park members tend to reason through man's errors over the years, whereas Cherry Oak members tend to rationalize through faith. Put differently, Cherry Oak members tend to fill potential holes in their faith with more faith whereas River Park members bracket off errors more tangibly. As Clifford Geertz has observed, "people are simply quite able to plug the dikes of their most needed beliefs with whatever mud they can find."¹²

A middle-aged member of River Park named Andrew demonstrates this bracketing quite aptly:

As it comes to faith and practicing one's faith, I believe the Bible to be inspired by God and infallible. As it comes to the Bible itself, I don't think the Bible was intended to be a math textbook, a science textbook, or anything else and so to the extent that things are asserted in there that don't have anything to do with faith, then I think it reflects – there's a very significant influence of humanity in the Bible. And when you read the stories and the battles in the Old Testament, I've got to think that if the stories were being written by the people on the other side of the battle, then they would have an entirely different perspective on that same battle than what the writers of the Old Testament had, just as World War II history taught in Japan is probably very different than what the history of World War II is here in the US. So I think God intervenes enough to keep the important things from people getting that wrong. Like, I see contradictions, for example, in the Bible that many people try to explain away. And for me it's just as simple as to say this story was told here. 30 years later somebody else is writing the same story. Their memory is not quite as good. So the gist of the story is still the same, the message is still the same, but the details they didn't quite remember exactly the same way. And they're both writing at different times – in many cases decades after the event has happened. And so it doesn't trouble me at all to think they didn't get all the details right, as long as I believe that they got the message right. And I think the message is consistent.

¹² Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 80.

While Andrew ascribes infallibility to the text, the rest of his answer (though of course reflecting his understanding of the term so far as it is germane to faith) expresses the exact opposite. For the conflicting accounts of the gospels, for instance, Andrew would reason that they were written at different times and from different perspectives, so constructive memory may have taken its toll in nuancing the details between the four accounts. As long as the core message maintains its integrity, which he believes it does, such numerical or marginal details are inconsequential.

One elder member of River Park who was trained as a minister unpacked his multiple reasons for not believing the Bible to be inerrant:

Gregory: The Bible I consider to be the authoritative word of God. I do not look upon the Bible as completely infallible. I think the Bible is a book subject to interpretation. And I think the Bible was written by individuals who were victims of human error, and there are some things in the Bible **I don't understand why they're there**. One of the main reasons I feel this way is that some of what's there flies in the face of my own particular concept of who God is. I have a very difficult time with some of the stories in the Old Testament. For instance, when Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac, I have a real rough time understanding that. Once again, that flies in the face of what my concept of God is. For a loving God to ask somebody to do that I find very difficult to understand. I just confess a difficulty in understanding it – of understanding why it's there.

AS: How do you then reconcile the idea of the Bible being the word of God yet having parts that you don't agree with?

Gregory: I think from my point of view there is a basic thrust of scripture, and it culminates in the coming of Christ, but the very fact that I realize that the Bible – your theories of inspiration come into play here. I don't think God of course gave word for word what's in the Bible to the writers. It's a product of – a lot of it's oral tradition. **I don't know**. I have a hard time [reconciling] parts of scripture that, in all honesty if I come down to it, maybe that shouldn't be there, **I don't know**. I guess I've lived long enough – I'll be 85 in December – to be less than dogmatic about some of my ideas about scripture. That doesn't mean I don't reverence [sic] the Bible. It doesn't mean that I

don't find in it a pattern for my daily living. I think when I was much younger I accepted all of it without question, but I think maturity has caused me to wrestle with the fact that maybe I can't be quite as dogmatic with my own self, in my own mind. And some of the preachers I was exposed to and some of the Sunday school teachers I was exposed to – there were certain cut and dry positions that they'd take that I find difficult to take.

Similar to Andrew, Gregory believes the overall message of the Bible is what is important, and not the letter of the text, per se. He reads the text through a lens of the “basic thrust of scripture” that allows him to dismiss or hold in abeyance parts of it that he finds problematic, or going against what he views as the core message. This hermeneutic empowers him to navigate doubt by filtering it through what he considers the leitmotif of scripture, thereby resulting in a more secure faith. If such sober doubt comes with age, it certainly makes me wonder how much of one's faith is pure enculturation and socialization, and how much is actually choice.¹³ Before modernity, most people abided background institutions that laid out programs of behavior. But with the deinstitutionalization indicative of modernity, foreground behavior – that is, behavior that requires reflection on possibility rather than ideological autopilot – began to become more pronounced.

It may be worth noting here that over the course of my interviews, a number of evangelicals, especially at Cherry Oak, expressed antagonism toward the Catholic Church for its doctrine of infant baptism. Yet in almost every single interview, beginning with the open-ended question of how Jesus came into the interviewee's life and what Jesus means to him or her, many of them professed their volitional

¹³ German sociologist Helmut Schelsky called this modern phenomenon of constantly relocating oneself in personal normativity “permanent reflection.” Peter L. Berger and Anton C. Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions without Becoming a Fanatic*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne/HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 15.

commitment to Christ between the ages of 6 and 11. One need not be a legal expert to know that that age range is well under the cut-off for being considered a legal adult and thereby qualified to make life decisions in the absence of a parent or guardian. More bluntly, without being adequately (if at all) exposed to the plurality of modernity's religions, can one honestly say at such a young age that he or she "chose" Christ as the right path? Several interviewees jocularly professed how they could not have known better at that age, while others stated that even if they had been educated about other religious traditions, they probably still would have chosen Christ. Choice in this sense is not choosing one religious tradition from among a selection, but rather choosing to buy into the one presented or not at all. And given that all my interviewees attend church, they all fall under the former category. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to comment further on this sociological phenomenon, it suffices to say that growing up in an enclave comprised solely of other evangelicals, by the sheer norm of conformity, renders choice not just into black and white terms, but strongly encourages and rewards choosing Christ. As sociologist Peter Berger observed, "The emotional pull of early socialization in a particular tradition is strong, and it's usually reinforced by the continuing influence of family and friends."¹⁴ How can one doubt the authority and authenticity of a religion if one is not exposed to the cognitive dissonance of an alternative approach? As a response to modernity, however, limiting exposure to the group is a very effective means to ensure further socialization into the group.

¹⁴ Ibid., 43.

Thus in the face of doubt, Cherry Oak members are more unwilling to accept the possibility of error in their scripture, substantiating its infallibility in a myriad of creative ways. As Alfredo, remarked, "I decided by faith to believe what the Bible says." If the text is fallible, then everything and anything else can be called into question, thereby threatening the entire nomos to which the community ascribes. All doubt then must be located internally or bracketed off in other ways. For River Park members, on the other hand, if there is doubt, it is not the point. They tend to acknowledge imperfection but stress that if "it" was all about perfection, then Christianity would not be practical. By not couching their faith solely in the doctrine of scriptural infallibility, River Park members can respond more progressively and sensibly to the reality of a pluralist society. Yet for members of both churches, rationalizing through their faith is essential, otherwise it would hold no weight and be an inadequate nomos. How this is done makes all the difference in determining how church members respond to marginal situations that could undermine their beliefs.

CHAPTER II

WELCOME TO HEAVEN – POPULATION: WHOSOEVER IS CERTAIN

Problematizing the recipients of salvation

“When we admit the greatest tyranny we can impose upon ourselves is certainty then the conversation stands a chance of having continued value. “ – Hinduism Professor Douglas Brooks of the University of Rochester¹⁵

The whole point of being Christian is to be saved. That should go without saying. For a long time Catholicism pronounced this belief, sometimes in catechism, as *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – “Outside the church there is no salvation.” As it applies to the previous chapter’s end, Peter Berger renders the maxim into sociological terms: “No plausibility outside the appropriate plausibility structure.”¹⁶ Just as it would be very difficult to maintain religious certainty when one is surrounded by prolonged heresy, so too can it merely take exposure to a heterodox idea to plant the seed of doubt and instigate a complete upheaval of the accepted social order.¹⁷ We all know what happened when Siddhartha Gautama ventured for the first time beyond the protective walls of his father’s idyllic kingdom. Yet in the pluralist reality of

¹⁵ “Yoked,” *Rajanaka Sammelana Blog*, February 12, 2012, <http://rajanaka.blogspot.com/2012/02/yoked.html>.

¹⁶ Berger and Zijderveld, 35; Smith.

¹⁷ Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Andrew Robert MacAndrew, *Notes from Underground, White Nights, the Dream of a Ridiculous Man, and Selections from the House of the Dead* (New York: Signet Classics, 2004), 196-216.

modernity outside the confines of the nomos-affirming church, plausibility structures are challenged daily.

If salvation is the *raison d'être* for Christianity, and an evangelical is by definition certain of his or her salvation (tenet 4 of the Larsen Pentagon), then what happens when the corrupting influences of modernity assail the evangelical mind? Each church I studied responded differently, both in the form by which members came to their answers and in the content of said answers. Generally speaking, Cherry Oak members resorted to the Bible immediately when asked about the possibility of salvation for members of other faiths – whether they conceded its possibility in doubt or not – whereas River Park members tended to rely on their own individual views and seldom referenced scripture. But there's much more to it than that.

One of the members of Cherry Oak, Cindy, a graduate student, offers a standard evangelical answer to the question of how one is saved: "In order to be saved, in Romans... you have to confess with your mouth that Jesus is lord [and] believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead." Another mid-twenties Cherry Oak member, Thomas, complements this in saying, "Salvation is attained not through works, but it's just believing that there is a God, and that he sent his son Jesus Christ to the world to die for you." This clearly presents the belief that in order to be saved, one must confess belief in Jesus (whether this confession must be done publicly or can be done privately is another matter of inquiry). When I followed up asking the corollary if those who do not profess belief in Jesus go to Hell, Thomas responded: "It sucks to say and sounds so bad when you put it that way. But yeah, I

really do believe that. Jesus said himself: I am the way the truth and the life, nobody comes to the father but through me.”¹⁸ In both of these cases, which are typical of Cherry Oak members, both Cindy and Thomas couch their responses in scripture to lend them the authority to answer. As addressed in the previous chapter, the Bible is the framework that informs their conceptions of the world and their experiences, so quoting from the Bible illustrates how they came to adopt such views.

Alfredo offers another vector for understanding the evangelical context of choosing to believe in Christ:

And this is the hard part, because typically you listen to different faiths, different religions, and all religions go to heaven and the same God. But the faith I decided to follow doesn't say that. And even we are asked to talk to people in other religions, faiths, to expose [them] to what we believe is the way of truth. And, when the Bible says you will not make out of me different images or different idols or everything... and you analyze other religions and the way they portray faith and what is needed for those faiths to gain heaven or at least to gain God's favor, it is incompatible with what my faith – I believe. To concretely answer your question, yes, I think that people from other religions will have the opportunity to also be exposed to what Jesus would like and what God wants than to believe in through Jesus. They will also have the opportunity to make the decision. And if not, those are the consequences.

Alfredo at once says both yes and no. He says first that the views of other religions are incompatible with his beliefs, and therefore default to their adherents not being saved. But then he says that they will have the opportunity to have the gospel presented to them (through evangelists like himself) and decide if they want to be saved or not. Again, the binary rather than pluralist nature of the evangelical sense of choice gives it absolutist gravitas to the point at which the decision practically defaults to belief. As the French mathematician Pascal demonstrated long ago in

¹⁸ Gospel of John 14:6

what has become known as Pascal's Wager, "choosing" God is the rational thing to do when the alternative is possible eternal suffering. Put differently, if given the options of life or death, to the sensible person, death is not even an option. Such black and white thinking characterizes classical evangelicalism.

Brian introduces another creative legitimization for mitigating doubt, the concept of "irresistible grace," as indicative of the nature of salvation:

Brian: God gives you [grace]. It's not a matter of our working to attain His favor, but He grants it to us and we must receive it.

AS: So it's [salvation] through grace, as long as it's accepted?

Brian: Yes, and there are different ideas as to if grace can be resisted or not.

AS: Well I guess it would have to be resisted because if it wasn't, then everyone would be saved, right?

Brian: Not necessarily, because people may not see grace as it truly is. And once God reveals that grace as it truly is, can that be resisted?

AS: Can you elaborate on that?

Brian: So the idea of irresistible grace is that once people see Christ for who He is, for His redemption and His power— it's sort of like an epiphany — how can they then reject what they have just now discovered is the idea of irresistible grace. Whether I necessarily believe that is — I think that once people get who Christ is and the implications that He has for their lives and for humanity in general, that it will be very difficult to resist this notion in that if they try to resist, they will end up coming to an understanding that [they] will follow Christ or live in agony.

Brian avers that once one realizes what is being presented, one would be a fool not to accept it — similar to the implicit Pascal's Wager that Alfredo voiced.¹⁹ Yet the

¹⁹ The problem with what seems to be an inference from the Teleological argument for the existence of God is that it makes sense only to believers who already accept the existence of God as a foundational premise. From such a standpoint, constructs such as irresistible grace can be said to logically follow in order to flush out the first premise. But in presenting this to non-believers as an argument, believers fail to

concept of “irresistible grace” seems suggestive at best – otherwise it follows that everyone would be Christian. Therefore to answer Brian’s rhetorical question of how one can reject the discovery of who Christ is and account for the reality that not everyone is Christian, I offer one word: pluralism. It has the potential to render many such pre-modern arguments²⁰ invalid merely by acknowledging the existence of alternatives.

River Park members for the most part, however, have internalized pluralism effectively within their own frameworks. Jennifer, a young physician, expressed her progressive views thusly:

So salvation is offered to everybody. It’s not exclusive by any means. So since that’s a big picture question it helps me to start with the big picture. So I believe there is one God, which is the same God of many religious traditions... So they don’t have salvation through Jesus Christ, because they haven’t professed that. So what it means to be saved in a different sense is a little more nebulous. But if being saved means being in God’s favor, being in God’s presence, spending an eternity in heaven, wherever that may be – with God – then to me we believe in the same God and God has many paths to reach him. And so Christianity is one, and it’s the path for me. But I think that – and my dad and I talk about this too – there will be Jewish people in heaven, there will be Muslims in heaven, there will be great people of more than one faith tradition I’m sure – in heaven. But for Christians we believe that – at least I can say the way for me is salvation through Jesus Christ – and many Christians also believe that themselves.

consider that in any inductive proof, a first premise must be accepted before a second one. And in any deductive proof, the second premise is innate within the first one. The difference is that for the believer of God as an omniscient, omnipotent, omni-benevolent being, further attributions follow deductively. For the non-believer, such attributes are not implicit.

²⁰ In Robert Bellah’s typology of religious evolution, he notes that modern religion is especially demarcated by the collapse of dualism and increasingly accepting that answers to religious questions can be sought outside of one’s tradition. This does not align with Brian’s convictions. Robert Neelly Bellah, "Religious Evolution," in *Beyond Belief; Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*(New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 39-44.

Her testimony demonstrably differs from Cherry Oak members in a number of ways. Firstly, she believes that Christianity does not hold a monopoly on God. She states that other traditions are equally valid, though Christianity is the (uncritically accepted?) path for her. Next, she does not couch her answer in the Bible's authority as Cherry Oak members did. This demonstrates subjectivist thinking²¹ – that is, transcending the exclusivist perspective of pre-modern institutions in favor of what she individually believes to be plausible. Lastly, she mentions that she talks about this belief with her father, possibly indicating a different locus of authority for informing her perspective, but definitely at the least that her views are informed by sources other than scripture.²²

Another woman, Molly, feels very similarly as Jennifer, though she comes from a more empathetic perspective:

You know, I am not God. And I don't believe we have all the understanding of that. And I say that because I believe God is at work throughout the world in all situations. And so I try to be maybe more open-minded than maybe many fundamentalist Christians because I think that if we so adamantly say this is the only way, then we are denying God's influence in other people's lives through other faiths, which I believe are as sincere as Christianity.

Here Molly believes both in the sincerity of other faiths and the unknowable influence of God. In other words, she thinks that God can work through other faiths and by that extent, it follows that other faiths can lead to God.

²¹ Mary Field Belenky, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 54-55.

²² Taken together, her testimony resembles the Methodist Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. She may not view it as such, but the similarities are uncanny.

One middle-aged man from River Park, Andrew, believes that one must believe in Christ to be saved. However, he offers a caveat that who is anyone to limit who God can save if God wants:

I believe the Bible teaches that [one must believe in Christ to be saved]. But I caveat it that ultimately God is sovereign, and if God is sovereign, He can do as He chooses. And if He chooses to save someone who isn't Christian, that's perfectly within His wherewithal to do that. I believe the Bible that was inspired by Him teaches that Christ is the only way to salvation, and I live my life as if that is the only way to salvation. It's just that I think it's arrogant to presume that God can't do whatever He wants to do. And if He wants to do it another way, then He can.

This idea of the sovereignty of God, though not always worded as such, is characteristic of many of the River Park members I interviewed. As another River Park member testified, "It's presumptuous to try to read the mind of God." This echoes Isaiah 40:13, "Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed Him as His counselor?" Yet this is what many evangelicals I interviewed effectively claimed to do – treating scripture as an open text to God's will. Faced with doubt, most Cherry Oak members scrutinize the text, attempting to read into it definitive answers to their religious questions.²³ River Park members, on the other hand, confess a more modern response²⁴ to pluralism by leaving open the possibility that others can be saved without accepting Jesus as savior.²⁵

²³ This falls in line with a tropological or figurative reading of scripture, which often means eisegetically reading Jesus into the Old Testament.

²⁴ In labeling River Park's response as modern, I do not intend to make an evaluative statement, but rather a categorical one.

²⁵ "Pluralism makes any quest for certainty more difficult; it encourages skepticism rather than faith, cognitive and normative openness rather than closure." Peter L. Berger, "From the Crisis of Religion to the Crisis of Secularity," in *Religion and America: Spiritual Life in a Secular Age*, ed. Mary Douglas and Steven M. Tipton (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 14-24.

The oldest person I interviewed, Gregory, expressed similar sentiments but grounded in vastly different reasoning:

I read what I'm supposed to believe about that... whatever heaven is the reward we get for living a complete life in Christ. I'm ambivalent in that I think it's presumptuous of me to know what God is going to do with people who haven't expressed a faith in him. I think He's a God of everybody, and I don't think He really wants anybody to not have everlasting life, but I **just don't know**. There's some answers that even with all my years of training and education and experience in the church, I still find myself ambivalent from the standpoint of whether people who have never heard about Christ at all – what's going to happen to them. And fortunately that isn't something I have to worry about.

Here is a man trained as a minister, who has been Baptist his whole life, and with great humility thinks it is not his place to try and know the will of God – despite what is included in scripture. Yet in the same breath, he states that he does not think God wants anyone not to have salvation. In reconciling this contradiction, I think Gregory, like Jennifer, demonstrates subjectivist thinking; and as a benevolent and sympathetic person, he does not like the idea of a good person being condemned just because he or she is not Christian. After nearly 85 years, he still does not know – but more importantly, he is content with not knowing.

Gregory's last point about those who have never heard of Christ can be a monkey wrench in the mechanics of salvation. After all, how can one be held accountable for what one does not know? The legal ramifications of trespassing one of the myriad federal, state and local laws aside, given the existential ultimacy of the matter, how could a loving God condemn an aborigine who has never been exposed to the good news? The corollary of this question is what about those who existed before Jesus' time? In the Old Testament, Abraham and others are depicted as being in heaven, so how does an evangelical framework account for that? Further, what

about Jews? Although historically Christians have persecuted Jews, recently many evangelicals have embraced the idea of Jews as God's chosen people. But does that mean they automatically get saved as heirs to the original Abrahamic covenant?²⁶

These are not easy questions to answer, so they force individuals to speculate creatively in search of one.

From Cherry Oak, Sean responds:

The Christian answer is no. Jesus says no one can come to the father but through me. Before Jesus how did people go to heaven? Clearly people went to heaven before Jesus – they sacrificed lambs or goats or ox to put their sins onto a sacrifice – a blood sacrifice – to atone for their sins, so their symbolism in that sacrifice between Jesus' sacrifice as our sin was put onto Him... **I don't know**. I would like to take the easy answer to say that what Jesus said was right, that no one can come to the Father but through Him, but at the same time people before Him went to heaven, and maybe some people in Muslim [sic] who believe in Allah, who could be the same God but in a different language, different culture... **I don't know**. I've been trying to explore different religions, specifically Muslim, and talk with Muslims. I have a couple guys from Iraq that I talk with. And unfortunately they're not very devout Muslims, so picking their brain is very difficult because they're like I don't know, I don't practice. And I've been wondering if Allah is God the Father as they claim...

In my understanding as a Christian and my belief as a Christian, Jesus is the only way. Again, trying to expand my beliefs, like before to be saved – is Jesus the only way to be saved – well I think some people went to heaven before Jesus was in time so I don't know if that way was closed and when Jesus came He closed that way, so the only way to go to heaven after He came was through Him. If that's true, then everybody but Christians and I guess Messianic Jews... go to hell. I think the perspective to say that if you don't believe in Jesus is wrong. I'll flip it and see if you understand what I'm trying to say. We're all going to hell, and Jesus saves us from it.

²⁶ This perception of Jews as God's chosen in its extreme form has led to Christian Zionism, in which evangelical groups and churches support the state of Israel in various ways to abide a repurposed role for Jews in their soteriology. Alan Mittleman, Byron Johnson, and Nancy Isserman, *Uneasy Allies?: Evangelical and Jewish Relations* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

Sean observes that through blood sacrifices, pre-Christians could be saved. Yet he seems to be ambivalent about exactly how that works. He knows what he is supposed to believe, yet the events of God saving non-Christians in the Old Testament makes him uncertain as to who exactly can be saved. He further rationalizes that perhaps there once were multiple ways into heaven, but since the coming of Jesus, the other ways may have been closed. Still, Sean is troubled by the negative idea that those who do not believe in Jesus are not saved, so he inverts his logic to make it more tenable in saying that no one is saved until they believe in Jesus. In this vein, to invoke a classroom model, he views every individual as beginning with an F and having to earn an A – except believing in Jesus is the only way to get the A. Everyone is equal before God the teacher – even the children of those who are already saved – thereby allowing for spiritual upward mobility. But just as with our socioeconomic sphere, if one is born into spiritual money vis-à-vis the church, one is better exposed to the means to salvation – Bible lessons as practical Kaplan test prep – than those born outside the church. The 144,000 are the 1%²⁷, except they want everyone else to be too. Although Sean seemed to offer his remark without much forethought as he struggled to avoid declaring outright that those who do not believe in Jesus are damned, the model's emphasis is telling both of his hesitancy and uneasiness with uncertainty.

Charlie, another Cherry Oak member, also expressed misgivings and confusion about the matter:

²⁷ In the book of Revelation in chapters 7 and 14, the author refers to the totality of people God will save as being 144,000.

AS: Do you have to confess belief in Christ to be saved no matter your religion?

Charlie: I would say the answer for me is yes on that. I think God knows the heart of man, our inner most desires, our inner most struggles. What I've seen laid out in the Bible is that passage that opens up between God and man. And so I think to have that salvation or eternal life you need to go through Christ, but I don't think that means that God can't honor other people. But I don't think it's something that he's like "oh yeah, everybody [come] straight on in" because I think he clearly laid out, you know, that Christ is that passageway. There's a passage in the Bible that talks about infants and people who have never heard the word of God or never had the opportunity in terms of them being unreachable in areas that man had not been able to go to. I think part of this for me comes from my Jewish background and the idea that I think that God honors belief, but I think that the standard he laid out in the Bible clearly states that you have to go through Christ, but that doesn't mean he can't make exceptions. But I'm not God, so I can't tell you that for sure, and I can't tell you that is fact, and I can't tell you that's what's right, but I do know that the Bible states that Christ is that.

AS: Just to make sure I understand this right: so if you're righteous, no matter you're faith, you can be saved no matter or not if you believe in Christ?

Charlie: I don't think it's in terms of righteousness.

AS: So what is it in terms of then, if people can be saved who aren't Christians without believing in Christ?

Charlie: I... see, that's something **I'm still figuring out.**"

Charlie, like other members, asserts that Christ is the only way to be saved, yet offers the caveat as we have seen before that God can save whomever God wants. Then he reiterates that Christ is the passageway to be saved – qualifying his previous statement to say that God honors whomever God wants though it has to be in the manner patterned by Jesus. Charlie's mention of a biblical passage pertaining to infants and those who never heard the word of God due to isolation, as far as I

could find, does not exist.²⁸ Otherwise it would not be such a contentious subject. After flip-flopping a number of times, it is clear that Charlie is uncommitted to a true non-negotiable theology – that is, he wants to abide by his theology but cannot deny the impact of pluralism on his views. At the last, Charlie concedes that he is not God and that he does not have it all figured out. As with most of Cherry Oak members I interviewed, in talking through his views supported by scripture (even if unnamed), he realized that he could not occlude his doubt from himself once it was out in the open.

When I asked Brad, a trained minister from Cherry Oak, he gave me an unclear answer:

Brad: A lot of churches say that it's only through Christ that we're saved, but when I think about grace, and I think about judgment, Christ is the one who administers judgment, and Christ is the source of grace. So I think it's up to Christ to decide who has done everything that they know to do to try and be who God created them to be. I think if someone has rejected Christ then probably, just like if I drive 90 in a 70, that I set myself up for judgment."

AS: Are Jews grandfathered in?

Brad: I don't really know but the Bible makes it seem that God's people are those who draw near to him. So I would guess that those people who drew near to God before Christ's sacrifice would be included among the faithful, just like people who draw near to God through Christ.

While Brad professes that salvation is God's to dispense and seems genuine in suggesting that anyone who draws close to God is God's people, he infers that only those who follow Christ will be saved. His choice rhetoric is such that it allows Jews to be saved before the coming of Jesus, but after the crucifixion, only people who follow Christ can be saved. Relative to other interviews, I felt that Brad was using

²⁸ Psalm 51:5 states that "Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." Nothing in the New Testament abrogates this.

this as an opportunity to witness to me, as he seemed careful to tip-toe around a potentially alienating belief and invited me to talk more at a later date off the record.²⁹ This suggests that his responses to my questions were not reflective of his thinking, per se, but would have been appealing to my own.³⁰ As such, though I think he meant much of what he said, the nature of our exchange means that I cannot rely on what I infer to be his view on the matter.

For River Park, there are members who believe that Jews must accept Jesus to be saved as well.

Phoebe: So salvation to me means getting to heaven. Believe in Jesus Christ and accept him as your lord and savior to get salvation. I would say that the Jewish people – **I'm not really sure**, because I know that the Jewish people are the chosen people. But I also know that Jesus said that I have come so that you may have life; the only way to get to heaven is by believing in me. I believe that you have to accept him into your heart, and not all Jewish people have done that, so...

AS: So for Jews to be saved they would have to accept Jesus into their heart?

Phoebe: Yes. **Although I do not know if God has a different plan** for them since they are the chosen people.

AS: Well, [the Gospel of] Matthew does say that salvation comes from the Jews.

²⁹ In 1997, the Southern Baptist Convention publicly declared its intention to target Jews for conversion. Across the Evangelical spectrum, however, the matter is hotly contested.

³⁰ While it is difficult to tell how many of my interviewees formed their responses differently based on perceiving that I am Jewish, one of the women from Cherry Park, Denise, was up front about it: "I want to be real careful when I talk about my faith because I don't want to, like, say this is how you should do it – not necessarily just with you because you're of a different faith, but really for anybody. Because I don't want to be somebody who pushes somebody away. And sometimes when people are so black and white, [as if] it has to be this way... so all I know is just to tell my story. And it works for me; it's important to me and has gotten me through some really tough times."

Phoebe: Agree, but it's still a personal relationship and you have to accept him into your heart. You can say that Christianity comes for your family if you grew up in it, but unless you accept him into your heart, you're not going to get to heaven [just] because your parents do.

AS: What about Islam?

Phoebe: I would say that they – they don't believe in Jesus as the savior, so no. They do not get salvation.

Here we have a conflict of scripture. On one hand, Phoebe recognizes the Jews are the chosen people. But then she cites Jesus in the Gospel of John, which in her view supersedes the Old Testament. She offers, however, that God might have a different plan for the Jews, affirming their status as a chosen people. When countered with a line from the Gospel of Matthew, she replies that one must still accept Jesus, demonstrating that as a non-negotiable part of her theology and not subject to doubt.

There are also those who maintain a hopeful uncertainty about the potential salvation of Jews or even others outside the Abrahamic traditions:

Luke: According to the Bible, yes. And if you believe in the Bible, yes. That does not mean that a Hindu or Muslim cannot be saved. Now, I would leave it open to whether he cannot be saved in his beliefs or whether he really has to be a Christian – and kind of go and change culture. **I don't know**. I leave that up to God to judge it. Because I think it may be a matter of name, and they may think the same thing. And then I wouldn't want to condemn them. There [are] a few things I believe they will realize – again because the Holy Spirit will talk to them. So I think some of the radicalism may diminish. Love may – even for a Muslim – love may become the more dominant factor, but he still could be a Muslim.

AS: What about Jews?

Luke: They believe in God. And God is basically part of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. I hope that He is merciful and leaves the door open. So I think ultimately we cannot answer this. He'll make the judgment. But it's entirely possible for me that the door remains open.

Luke expresses a deferential uncertainty, as opposed to ambivalence, about the salvation of other faith traditions. In his eyes, other religions may simply be calling God by a different name, though they believe more or less the same things as he does. If they do, then why should they not be saved? In such a case, Luke is unwilling to condemn them on such an unknowable basis. If other religious traditions do believe drastically different tenets than Christianity, than by omission I can infer that Luke likely would not offer that they could be saved in their beliefs. Such a strategy for mitigating doubt – projecting one’s image onto the categorical other – is an effective bracketing technique that does not render one’s worldview into an us-versus-them mentality characteristic of classical Christianity. As for the Jews, Luke seems hopeful, but still defers a definitive answer to God.

Another woman from the same church, Ellen, expressed her stance on Jews and those who never heard the Gospel – what happens to them?

AS: What about those of other faiths?

Ellen: Yes, absolutely they can be saved, but only if they accept Jesus Christ as their lord and savior.

AS: So Jews aren’t grandfathered in or anything like that?

Ellen: Um, see, **I don’t know**. I mean, according to the doctrine, Jews are God’s chosen people. However, being a just God, I don’t know – yeah, see that’s really tricky for me, because as a just and loving God I can’t see him condemning any of his children, regardless of their faith. Because you think about the prisoner on death row who killed 10 people or whatever and is remorseful and commits his life to Christ in his dying moments, he also would be in heaven [like the thieves on the cross adjacent to Jesus].

AS: How could He deny love to any of his children [of other faiths]?

Ellen: See, I often think about it that God is at the door knocking, and it’s your choice to open it, and it doesn’t matter who you are.

AS: Would it still have to be Christ, or whatever faith you're born into?

Ellen: No, I think it is Christ.

AS: So for those pockets of culture who still haven't been exposed to Christianity, what about them?

Ellen: See I think that also it is all dependent upon choice. If you have never heard about God's love, if you have never heard the word Jesus before, if you never knew who He was, and you're a pygmy or something like that in Australia or some isolated population in the world and you never knew who Christ was, I think that God doesn't hold that against you. But if you actively don't choose Christ as your Lord and Savior, that is I guess the loophole in that.

Here again we see conflict between theology and a non-negotiable ideal of God as loving and just. Ellen asserts her theological stance, that one must accept Christ in order to be saved, but then second-guesses herself in considering that her conception of God would not condemn anyone. She then presents an analogy similar to other transcripts I have covered in which God is clearly asking one to accept Him or face the penalty for not answering the door. Again, the metaphors offered for why one should accept Jesus make the decision seem intuitive and obvious (even impolite to not answer the door!), but such a framing is purposely reductive and fails to adequately resonate in a pluralist setting.

The last part she mentions about God not holding it against you if you never heard the gospel is an interesting qualification. With it, one might also throw in unbaptized (unborn?) infants and all people from before Jesus' time – though she does not specify either of these. Another member of her church, Phillip, succinctly phrased this perspective as “All men will be judged according to the light they have been given... God gives more light to those who already have light.” He adds, quoting 2 Peter, “It would be better for them not to know the way of righteousness, than

having known it and to turn away.” While this does not exactly say what happens to those who do not know the prescribed way of righteousness or who have not been given much light, such a theology of positive reinforcement – a psychological term for encouraging desirable behavior by rewarding it – serves the faithful well in reifying their existential position and bracketing off the problem of doubt about those who the gospel has not reached.

Phillip was unique among those I interviewed because he brought his laptop with him and offered me Powerpoint Bible studies as answers to some of my questions. On the aforementioned subject, he offered yet another metaphor to help me understand:

Phillip: That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready nor does not do what his master wants – he will be beaten by many blows. But the one who does not do and does not know... he will be beaten with few blows. So of those who much has been given, much will be demanded. So is God not righteous, is He not fair? I think absolutely fair. Now what does that mean? I don’t know what that means. But I think you have to put it all in fact – that God is the God of love. You know I don’t want to get too mushy in my theology, but I think God gets to judge.

AS: So can people of other faiths be saved without accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

Phillip: I don’t think so.

AS: Do Jews have a special place?

Phillip: **I honestly don’t know**, but I think of John 1: “Jesus came to his own, and his own received him not. But those who receive him, they will become children of God.” Now what does that mean? Again, I’m not sure. But to know that we become children of God as we receive Jesus as our savior – I think that’s what it means, as far as implications for me.

This tiered approach is a creative response to not knowing. As with Phillip’s light analogy, God punishes less those who do not know His will, but He punishes them

nonetheless! Such a negative theological approach – not to be confused with apophaticism, or knowledge of God obtained through negation – is terribly inadequate in mitigating doubt about the uninitiated. While the salvation of those who have never been exposed to the gospel may or may not be a top concern to evangelicals – depending on their mission focus – to frame their fate as “not as bad as those who have heard but chose otherwise” reduces God to vaguely vengeful, and not the compassionate God often claimed. Doubt about this matter, it would seem, is a gaping hole in an otherwise positively framed theology.

When asked about the salvation of Jews, as with many others we have reviewed, Phillip seems uncomfortable outright telling me that they are going to hell according to his beliefs. He rhetorically expresses doubt, and then cites scripture that signifies quite explicitly that Jews rejected Jesus and so only those who receive Jesus will be saved. Part of his hesitation and those of others may have simply been because they perceived me to be Jewish – a fact that I did not hide but also did not announce by any means unless asked directly. But with a name like mine, it is hard to conceal one’s religious background, so this fact may have muddied the waters of objectivity so far as my interviewees did not wish to offend me. Even so, none of those I interviewed said that Jews could definitely be saved. At the best, they cited doubt due to the unknowable nature of God’s grace and God’s sovereignty to save who God wills. The only question remaining is how much more direct they might have been with their answers were I not so clearly identifiable as Jewish? There is always the possibility that they formulated their response so as not to offend my

sensibilities, but I think, given the candid nature of our conversations, that their testimonies were more or less concordant with their actual views.

As we have seen, Cherry Oak members are more likely to reach directly to scripture for their answers – even in times of doubt – than River Park members. Cherry Oak members almost collectively believe that one must believe in Christ in order to be saved, while River Park members tend to have more liberal views on the possible salvation of other faiths. The latter are more likely to believe that God is sovereign and God’s plan unknowable, whereas Cherry Oak members generally approach the Bible as God’s written will and scrutinize it for what they believe to be God’s stance on religious issues. Thus Cherry Oak observes a much higher degree of biblical literalism (as well as biblical literacy), while River Park members tend to bracket off their doubts as inconsequential to their faith. When considering how both churches have accommodated the undeniable demands of modernity – namely, pluralism and various kinds of relativity – River Park members demonstrate a far more modernist theology than the exclusivist theologies of Cherry Oak members. In revisiting the vision statements of each church, however, this difference is hardly surprising. Cherry Oak seeks to “Call people back to God” – signifying a return to how things were; whereas River Park aims at “Connecting to God, to others, and to a greater world” – indicating participation in the pluralist reality outside the doors of church.

CHAPTER III

BIBLICAL MAP IS NOT BIBLICAL TERRITORY: “So I drew this map of heaven so we don’t get lost when we get there”³¹

Problematizing the landscapes of the afterlife

“There is something real in the illusion, more real than in the reality behind it. “ – Slavoj Zizek, *A Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*

While answers to the question of who gets saved clearly have their idiosyncrasies, they pale in comparison to how church members imagine the content and locations of heaven and hell. Of the topics covered thus far, the inerrancy of scripture and the status of salvation of non-Christians, church members confessed vastly different ideas of how heaven and hell are construed and what informs these perspectives.

As one might expect by now, Cherry Oak members tend to reach for descriptions of heaven and hell from scripture in formulating their responses, while River Park members tend to be content with not knowing. However, when I asked Cherry Oak members to clarify initial scripture-based assertions about heaven and hell, they eventually concede that they do not know. This affirms previous patterns of defaulting to scripture in answering questions even in times of doubt.

One of the questions I asked pertained to the metaphysical nature of heaven and hell. Are they physical places or astral realities – that is, spiritual or otherwise

³¹ Not an actual quote. I fabricated it for reasons that the chapter will illustrate by the end.

immaterial realms? Alfredo responded in an interesting way that conflates the two possibilities:

The Bible **suggests** that they are physical places, however, uh, we will not be physical bodies when we get to heaven. So we will be spirit and not physical bodies. And since we will not be physical bodies, that is kind of strange to associate. We will be spiritual beings living in a physical place. Uh, so for that matter, that is **something I personally don't entirely understand**. But I do believe, because of what I have read in the Bible, that they will be physical places – at least things that you can touch, things that you can feel. Whoever goes to hell – the Bible says that they will feel eternal pain and suffering and fire and everything. And, in heaven, you will be listening to peaceful music if you will, and we will be praising the lord for eternity. And, but it talks about streets of crystal and gems, and all those kind of descriptions.

It is important to note firstly that he references scripture, but acknowledges that it is not clear on how it presents heaven and hell. However, he asserts that those who go will do so in spiritual form. Yet he follows this assertion by revealing that he does not entirely understand how a spiritual body in a physical place works. This begs the question of why he would aver such a claim if he were unsure about its meaning, when he could have just as well admittedly speculated to the nature of man's presence in heaven and hell as he did with the first part of his response. Does the Bible not suggest anything about the form a person takes when arriving in heaven or hell?³² If not, then why respond with such groundless certainty? The answer, I think, is that doubt is existentially unsatisfactory. One can have a hunch that is founded on suggestion, as with the Bible suggesting heaven and hell to be physical places. But when it comes to spaces between the text – that is, information that is not there – one tends to legitimate content through imaginary speculation rendered into fact. Not knowing is not an option – not when salvation is at stake, at least.

³² In 1 Corinthians 42-50, it says that flesh and blood, which are perishable, cannot inherit the kingdom of God, which is imperishable.

Sean, similarly, drew from his reading of scripture to conceptualize heaven and hell:

Sean: Heaven is described as the ultimate place, the place where God is, where Jesus is building mansions for his brothers and sisters.

AS: Is it a physical place or spiritual?

Sean: I don't know. I haven't been there. It's supposed to be so glorious that even gold is a waste, that the streets are paved with it. You think of asphalt, it's like dirt here, and gold is the same up there. It's supposed to be a place where there is no suffering, where love is evident. If God is there and God is love, then you don't have to believe that you won't feel loved up there. You won't feel alone or uncomfortable – at least not in the sense of awkward. You'll just feel comfortable being there, you'll feel loved. You'll feel like you have a purpose or that you've fulfilled your purpose here on earth.

Without mentioning scripture explicitly, Sean alludes to descriptors from the Bible that signify what one might find in heaven and how it has traditionally been imagined. Such a conceptualization demonstrates not just an internalization of the Bible and his tradition, but also suggests a projection of solutions to his individual insecurities. When it comes to personal theodicy, one tends to gravitate toward the most tangible solutions to one's insecurities. That is the true potency behind vague descriptions of heaven and hell in the Bible: one can imagine one's ideal forms and come to believe such fantasies. In Sean's case, as informed by the breadth of the conversation we had, he experiences loneliness, existential discomfort, and lack of love and purpose. At the time of the interview, he had been unemployed for some time and been unsuccessful in his job search, thus dampening his spirits and likely informing his theodicy.

Yet Alastair MacIntyre cautions that attributing a cause to belief differs vastly from ascribing reason to it.³³ While causality here constitutes the efficient cause by which Sean came to have his beliefs, reason refers to the final cause. But it is reason and not causality that can be tied up in doubt, as one can come to believe by doubting in reason, as Tolstoy confessed,³⁴ or come to believe as a result of reasonable doubt, as did MacIntyre.³⁵ The former stated that rationality is inadequate to provide meaning in life and so turned to what he called the irrationality of faith, whereas the latter expounded the cosmological, ontological, and teleological arguments for God before proving them all unsound yet not deleterious to his belief. While it is premature to explain MacIntyre's case for belief at this juncture, it will suffice to say that few people come to belief through arguments, but rather by their individual experiences.

Though asserting knowledge about the afterlife was common among Cherry Oak members, doubt was just as common. As one woman, Margo, briefly stated, "I have **no idea** where [heaven] is. I would refer you to the book of Revelation to see what it's like, [of] which I haven't read a whole lot." While not all Cherry Oak members have the answer, at least in Margo's case, she knows where the answer might be found if it were a concern for her.

³³ "To give psychological explanation of the holding of a belief is to say what kind of past events in an individual's history or what kind of personality structure tend to lead on to the holding of a particular kind of belief; to explain why a particular individual holds the belief that he does is to identify him as being an example of this kind of history of temperament producing this kind of belief. It is to speak entirely of causes, and not at all of reasons." Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Difficulties in Christian Belief* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), 97.

³⁴ Leo Tolstoy, *Confession*, trans., David Patterson, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 64.

³⁵ MacIntyre, 83-87.

River Park members, on the other hand, tend to draw from extra-biblical sources in constructing their conceptions of heaven and hell. Jennifer, for instance, admits to influence from Dante's *Divine Comedy* and other literature in influencing her views:

I think that heaven and hell for me are more nebulous ideas than for many other Christians that I've met or maybe for other people that I've met. I took a semester-long course reading Dante and the *Inferno* – **a lot of my ideas honestly come from works** because I think that humans over the years have tried to understand these concepts in a lot of sacred texts and there's a lot of searching for what that actually means. So things that I'm pretty sure of are that there's an existence beyond this life that could probably be favorable in some way, or be unfavorable in some way. So to me a favorable existence would be heaven [in which] there's some sort of peace, and there's some sort of deep joy, and resolution of conflict kind of; and I think for those – **I don't know, I'm not the judger** – but for some, there might be a place where there's eternal unrest. But I don't have clear definition of "oh, I can tell by who you are that you're going to heaven, or I can tell by who you are that you'll be in purgatory or hell." I have no idea.

Though she states outright that her eschatological notions are by no means definitive – a prefaced doubt hardly volunteered, let alone found, among Cherry Oak members – Jennifer explains that she draws from the composite works of thinkers throughout history who have attempted to explore the matter in depth. Just as many people who do not have the answers to life's existential questions resort to the Bible, Jennifer goes a step further and consults secondary sources – effectively commentaries from multiple perspectives – to inform her synthesized account of what might happen post-mortem. Although offering no definitive answer, she expresses partial certainty in ambivalent language about possible after-lives and what they might be like. Her testimony at the end is incomplete, for in sum she merely offers how she came to her current understanding, but not in fact what that understanding is.

Another woman, Cynthia, who was the most biblically reliant and traditionally Baptist out of all those I interviewed, also reinforces her view of the afterlife by secondary sources:

I think when you die, if you have Jesus as your savior, according to the Bible, that immediately your spirit – your soul – goes to be with Jesus in heavenly places. But I also believe that at the second coming, when Christ returns, according to the Bible, that our earthly bodies that decayed will be transformed into a new physical kind of body. Our spirit is already there with him in heavenly places, but at the second coming, the Bible says that he will resurrect our bodies to have a new kind of body – not the kind that we're used to.

I think that it is a physical place, but that you are in spirit only at that time. Because the Bible tells us that there will be a new heaven and a new earth at the second coming. But I think while just your soul is there... you know and the Bible tells us that there are different levels of heavens, like outer space, there are different levels. And to me based on what I glean from the Bible is that just like what he told the thief that was crucified: that today thou shall be with me in paradise. I think you immediately go there – your soul – and I don't know if that means there are rolling hills or trickling streams, but I do **know that from all the accounts that I have read of people** that have died and come back and had an out of death experience that so many of them have said yes, it is a very real place, you know. There have been too many of those to think that it's spiritual only.

Although she couches almost all of her testimony in the Bible, she also mentions compelling accounts of Near Death Experiences as reinforcing her biblically grounded views. In particular, she mentions one book, *Heaven is for Real*, in which a young boy clinically died, went to heaven, and was resuscitated. While he was in heaven, he saw Jesus on a horse and a number of other animals, as well a younger incarnation of his deceased grandfather, whom he never met but later recognized from photographs. Such secondary texts, as with those of Jennifer, augment her beliefs. However, being set in her beliefs, they reify them; as opposed to Jennifer, who, unset in her beliefs, uses them to inform thoughtful possibilities of afterlife.

A third member of River Park, Phillip, a former Catholic, likewise confessed utilizing secondary sources to inform his beliefs:

AS: Is heaven physical?

Phillip: **I don't have any idea.** It seems like it is. I mean, Paul went there. Paul saw something. But he himself said [whether] it's in the body or out of the body – I don't know. When John saw the vision of heaven, was it in his flesh? I don't know.

AS: What is heaven like?

Phillip: Well I heard a preacher say this and I think it's amazing. Heaven is all the omnipotent God could create.

AS: What about hell?

Phillip: (pause) **I don't know. I don't know.** I've read Rob Bell's book on Hell. I don't know. Ok, when Jesus was talking about folks in Tyre and Sidon, he said, if they had heard the words [that] you had heard, they would have repented. I don't have any idea what that means. But I think it's a comfort to me to know not only that God knows who turned to him. [But h]e [also] knows who would have turned to him had they heard. So what is hell like? I don't know. But from what I understand, unless you have Jesus as your Savior, your name is not written in the Lamb's Book of Life. And you are going to hell. That's a tough pickle to swallow.

Though he begins by drawing from the experiences of the writers of scripture, he quickly realizes or at least expresses that they are inadequate in providing definitive answers. He then turns to a phrase he once heard a pastor say that pithily (though still prevaricating) covers the scope of the nature of heaven. When it comes to hell, he refers to a recently published book called *Love Wins* that argues that hell is not real and, as Brad observed, that Jesus was “just trying to give them an example of the worst possible place you could be.” Even so, Phillip remains unconvinced, but at least he sought recourse in an extra-textual source.

River Park members responding in this fashion, that is, admitting and accepting their doubt about the afterlife, contrasts starkly with Cherry Oak members, who tended to offer sometimes-fantastic accounts of heaven and hell. This plays into an aforementioned trope – that for a theodicy to remain plausible, doubt must be attended to effectively or else the whole framework risks disintegration. For Cherry Oak members, that tends to result in a Hard Theodicy, or one that requires certainty, whereas River Park members confessed a Soft Theodicy, or one that accommodates doubt.

One of the Cherry Oak members, Thomas, presented me with an extremely intricate conception of heaven and hell. He clearly has spent time ruminating over their mechanics in piecing together an elaborate series of legitimations. Because the content of this discourse is so rich, I am reproducing it here in full. Thomas uses a lot of pronouns, however, in reference to a diagram that he drew that I do not possess, so we must imagine as he did the best we can in following along:

AS: Where is heaven?

Thomas: I don't care. I do know that heaven is not here on earth. I think there are more important things to worry about than where heaven is located. It's just not something I worry about. I do believe though that there will be an end of the world and Jesus will come back and save the world. And at that time a new heaven will be made and there will be free interchange between where heaven currently is and earth. And it will be this earth – it will be us walking around.

AS: What about hell?

Thomas: I do believe that hell is a place of eternal torment. I don't believe that hell is going to be a big kegger, with strippers and bikers and tattoos and all that.

Me: Whose hell is that?

Thomas: Well, I've run into a lot of people that actually believe that – that believe that “oh well, I wasn't a good boy, so I'm going to go to hell. But it's going to be a big party because everybody down there is going to be like me.” And that's not really the case. Hell was never meant for people. Hell was meant for Satan... to torture him eternally. But everything Hell is for him, hell is also to people today – as turned into that. I don't know if I'm answering your questions fully.

AS: No, this is still good. So people go to hell who don't believe in Jesus or accept him as Lord and Savior... What happened before Jesus? Did people go to hell then?

Thomas: I've tried studying this as much as I can, **and it's really hard to say.** But I believe that when everybody died, they all basically went to hell. Hell was not the same place then though. There were different parts of it, if that makes any sense.

AS: In a Dante-esque kind of way?

Thomas: Uhhhh, no, sort of.... So like there is an island over here (he draws a picture on an adjacent whiteboard), and then there's water, and then there's an island over here. And this is the bad hell full of fire, and this is just the hanging out way-place. Because... because Jesus said I am the way the truth and the life, *no one* gets to the father but through me. Well what does that mean for Abraham, what does that mean for Noah, what does that mean for all of those people? They went here. And they were just hanging out. And then when Jesus died he actually went here as well... And that's when he broke [the bridge] so there is no more [island hopping?]. And he took everyone here up in the clouds or wherever he went.

AS: Isn't there a story though in the New Testament in which Abraham was in heaven and someone speaks to him – some dead guy him who wants a drop of water... the slave and property... isn't there a stratification of heaven and hell there already?

Thomas: Yes, and this is where I get **kind of confused.** Because some people think that this was like water, and you could travel between them. Not necessarily in the way that we think of boats, but there was still a way to get from one to the other. And then this broke when Jesus came, and then this was just a big pit – there's no way to get from one to the other. Even though it's like United States and Canada, you could see [the other] but you can't get to it.

AS: Well why would you want to go from not so bad hell to really terrible hell?

Thomas: Well, it doesn't really work – I mean, you're right, but it mostly goes this way.

AS: Wait, isn't that one the good one though?

Thomas: Yeah, this is the good one.

AS: Ok so... I'm confused.

Thomas: Me too.

AS: Hmm. Ok.

Thomas: See that's why **I don't really understand** that because Jesus came down to hell, which was the big name, you know, it didn't have this piece and that piece and littler names. And he took the people who were God-fearing, Old Testament people up to heaven with him and created this all bad [hell], so there's no more good. Does that make sense?

AS: Not totally. But it's ok, I accept the idea that I won't get this all.

Thomas: Yeah, I mean I'm going to be honest, **I don't totally get all this either**. And I don't think to be a Christian you need to. I think there are things that in my lifetime I will never ever in a million years understand.³⁶

AS: How does that make you feel – in terms of being Christian?

Thomas: It makes me feel kind of crappy, because it's like, you know – Noah's ark for example: how did they build such a huge boat, how did all the animals get there, how did just one dude do this? How does a worldwide flood actually happen? **I don't know**. Do I think it happened in some sort? Absolutely. But, do I think it makes me any less of a Christian to go "I don't understand how that happened?" No. On the other hand though, **it makes me feel better. Because I know that if God can handle all of that – well if God is big enough to create everything**, I know God is big enough to flood the earth. I mean, scientists have proven that since the beginning of time, however it happened, the universe is constantly expanding. I mean, that's pretty crazy. I mean there are how many billions of stars? If God can create that, he can make it flood.

³⁶ "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." 1 Corinthians 13:12

Where to begin with all this? Thomas opens up not with unknowing, but with indifference. While there may indeed be more important things to worry about, given the intangible nature of all of this, I am not sure how he weighs one intangibility less pertinent than another. What follows, however, is an extremely imaginative rendering of the dynamics of heaven and more so hell – not just what they are, but also what they are not.

Thomas introduces a new heaven³⁷ that will manifest concomitantly with the apocalypse and a kind of interchange between the current heaven – the location of which he does not care about – and this new heaven. Hell was originally a prison designed to cage Satan, but at some point became the default destination for those who did not accept Jesus as savior. This afflictive hell was somehow one of two hell-islands – the other being a Limbo – connected by a bridge that Jesus severed in the Harrowing of Hell. I am not recapitulating Thomas’s fantastic world to make it easier to understand, as even he professes not to understand it fully, but rather illustrate to what extent the incredible need to be known as a common sensibility trumps the anomic condition that doubt engenders.

Although Thomas believes that one does not need to understand it all to be a Christian, by the sheer depth and scope of his musings, we can infer that one does well at least to try. Perhaps inappropriately I asked him that, given such a thorough attempt at piecing it all together, how his incomplete apprehension made him feel. His response, however, was profound. While he does not claim to understand the mysteries of the universe and the logistics of biblical history, this does not dampen

³⁷ “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” Revelation 21:1

his faith. On the contrary, it electrifies it. He re-ascribes his inadequacy as glorifying God's supremacy. Drawing from one of his non-negotiable premises that God created the world, it logically follows for him that God can do any of the things recorded in the Bible – even if he himself does not understand how they work.

From a psychological standpoint, Thomas's decision not to lose faith when he fails to sufficiently decipher how all these events transpired mirrors that of new religious movements that must adjust how they frame their beliefs when an espoused prophecy fails to materialize. In these scenarios, from the Millerites, to the Branch Davidians, to the followers of Harold Camping this past year – in which followers donated their life savings, moved into communes, and other pre-apocalyptic activities – when the shared belief remains unrealized, followers either lose their faith or, more commonly, find an alternative way to make sense of faulty predictions.³⁸ Doubt is anomic, but even more anomic is an accepted truth proven wrong. Because the human psyche cannot handle such a blow, it legitimates the disproven belief into a newly feasible form. Although less apocalyptic in scale, the psychology of re-negotiating beliefs in terms of a non-negotiable premise is the same. For millennialist movements, this means modifying the prophecy in a way to still make it viable to their faith. For Thomas, this means bracketing out his doubt by asserting God's omnipotence whereby all things are possible.

This kind of defense mechanism – adjusting one's story to re-legitimate its plausibility – is a common human proclivity when faced with what Peter Berger calls a marginal situation, or "situations in which [a person] is driven close to or

³⁸ Leon Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis,: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

beyond the boundaries of the order that determines his routine, everyday existence.”³⁹ As meaning-making beings, “narrative is [the] primary scheme by means of which hermeneutical meaningfulness is manifested.”⁴⁰ Without locating oneself in a narrative (and narrative in oneself), one’s life would be a discursive series of meaningless events. As evangelicalism demands adherents locate themselves within a cosmic framework pitting forces of heaven against hell, locating oneself in the meta-narrative is vital.⁴¹ Thus when it comes to constructing one’s personal narrative that orders and informs one’s life, one locates oneself within an intelligible, convincing (often meta-)narrative to inscribe one’s life with meaning. This functions in two ways: the narrative renders the past meaningful by way of the present (“Now I see why that happened”), and causality likewise appears superimposed by one’s subscribed scheme (“It says right here that this would happen”).⁴² In other words, the actual facts of one’s experience become secondary to the meaning attributed to them. In the case of heaven and hell, each functions as a possible, action-orienting outcome for one to yoke toward and against, respectively, within the parameters of the evangelical meta-narrative.

³⁹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 23.

⁴⁰ Donald Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, Suny Series in Philosophy of the Social Sciences (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 125.

⁴¹ “According to social identity theory, human beings actively seek to render experience in the world subjectively meaningful, to identify features of the world relevant to their action in specific contexts, and to achieve and maintain individual self-esteem.” Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 93-94.

⁴² Polkinghorne, 121.

Such potency in narrative takes on greater significance when considering that evangelicalism, which places a high value on personal experience, implicitly encourages its adherents to locate themselves in the narrative of scripture. As one Cherry Oak member, Charlie described:

I believe that the Gospel is your personal story. Scriptures have the Gospel, the story of Jesus Christ and what he did, but I believe... the Gospel in terms of what has shaped my belief, and what I think is a more poignant force to open up conversation and just talking to people about why I believe what I believe is my story. And I think that that is the Gospel – it's the story of what God has done to my life and how I've seen him move in my life and how he has blessed me and just shown up whenever I've needed him. Just how I thought it was gonna go, and how my life went. And what I thought I was gonna do, and what I did. And looking at that, and seeing the whole general picture, and juxtaposing myself with what happened, and juxtaposing myself with what I wanted to happen, to with what happened. And looking at that, and looking at all the instances where things happened where they shouldn't have, and ended up making me the better for it.

For Charlie, as well as others I interviewed, the traditional “good news” of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus becomes appropriated as his personal story. Charlie does not just locate himself within a set narrative in which “revelation is closed,” *per se*, but rather locates himself in a living text – as a participant in a cosmic story – in which he is the protagonist.⁴³ Such is the individualistic imperative ascribed to evangelical theology. Not only is Jesus the example *par excellence* to emulate for living life, but every believer figuratively is Jesus so far as they locate themselves in His story. Likewise, for an evangelical, one's perception of heaven and hell is best approximated by the details and suggestions distilled from Jesus' experience and words. As Charlie explains toward the end, he informs his experience based on his fulfilled and failed hopes and expectations within his (micro)cosmic biblical

⁴³ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative*, Ancient-Future Series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2008).

framework. He continues after this quote telling a story of an experience that at first seemed unfortunate but then he realized was a blessing after locating God's purpose in his affair. As previously mentioned, the psychological keystone of subscribing to a narrative framework is ascribing past events with new meaning by assimilating new information into one's story. This process of constantly (re-)locating oneself in a narrative eschews the possibility of doubt, for it becomes eclipsed in a kind of ongoing redaction.

Returning to River Park, in contrast to the last few accounts, members tend to be far less imaginative, less certain, and more sobering than Cherry Oak in narrating their conceptions of heaven and hell. As Molly testified:

Well I believe [heaven] begins on earth, but on death – of course we know [that] we physically die and our bodies decay, but I do believe that the spirit lives. And so [heaven] is a spiritual dimension [in which] our spirit lives on. Now I get sometimes **confused** when I look at what characteristics that spirit might have... I look forward to one day understanding that – will [it] be a presence like an angel or just singing all day, you know? It will be interesting.

I think [hell] is a spiritual place. I believe that it is almost a state. As I said heaven and being in the presence of God is something you gain as the salvation or Holy Spirit abides in you. I believe we can taste heaven, we can see heaven, we can feel that presence. But I also... believe that if you don't have that, then you're kind of in hell anyway.

I think you're in hell if you don't have a belief system. And honestly I say that because – I mean, I have a hard time condemning all people who believe differently than I do. But I believe what I believe **because I embrace the scripture as my teaching**. And I also believe that God hears the prayers of those who cry out to him, and so I don't know exactly what – **I don't know** if hell is different for different people, or even belief systems for different faiths. I don't know exactly what their interpretation of that is. And so I just think if you don't have any belief in God, then I believe you are [already] in hell. And you'll stay there (laughs)!

Nowhere in her language did Molly express any certainty about what happens after she dies. Molly explores imagery she has heard such as singing and being in the

presence of angels, yet does not assert such imagery to be definite or within her realm of knowing. At most, she expresses a vague, playful optimism about what she could possibly expect.

Luke likewise expresses uncertainty as to what heaven and hell are like and where they are, but he does so in very different terms:

Luke: I do believe in [heaven and hell]. **How it looks like, I don't know.** But I believe in the positive and the negative force. And I have **hope** to spend eternity with God in whatever that looks like. And he talks about hell – or Jesus talks about hell. And that picture certainly is not very good. And I believe it's **true because I see it here on earth.** I see it in myself. I see it in everybody. There is the positive and there is the negative. It's maybe not to the extreme. But I think it's part of being – our being.

AS: Do heaven and hell exist on this earth, or are they somewhere else?

Luke: I don't think it's location; the same way I do not think eternity is a materialistic issue. I don't think we'll be existing materially forever. I think it's more of a spiritual component. But I see the forces of the good and the bad on this earth – how it materializes.

Luke, the scientist, conceives of heaven and hell as pertaining to positive and negative forces. He does not venture a guess as to how these forces might materialize or assume astral form, though he does acknowledge biblical descriptions of them. From such descriptions and understanding of positive and negative forces, Luke finds biblical resonance in his own life and his perceptions of the world around him. As such, coalescing his religious upbringing with his scientific training, Luke grounds his eschatological beliefs in his observable experience.

I will draw from one more River Park member to illustrate the contrast between perspectives that confess uncertainty and those that aver certainty characteristic of Cherry Oak members. Ellen, who I mentioned previously was formerly Catholic, presented her views thusly:

Ellen: I'm **not really sure** [about heaven]. I think that heaven is another world, something that we cannot understand, perceive or find. It's another state of being. For example, when you die, your soul goes to heaven, right? So your soul is this invisible entity inside your body, so it in itself is likely to be invisible, but then with awareness.

AS: So is it a physical place or more of a spiritual realm?

Ellen: I would say it's more of a spiritual realm; and we've kind of fantasized about it being a physical place.

AS: To make it more tangible?

Ellen: Yes, absolutely. Because there's no physical concept of time or space.

AS: What about hell?

Ellen: **I don't know, there's some debate.** I personally feel like hell is awful. I always think about *What Dreams May Come* with Robin Williams. Like that is hell – that is awful. It's this, you know, place of impending doom, but there's some debate whether hell has been opened or not at this point.

AS: Tell me about that.

Ellen: Well, it gets confusing in Revelation because we don't really know distinctively whether hell exists yet or whether hell is cast into existence because Revelation is written in such a hodgepodge way. So I know that some people believe that hell will only be opened after Christ's second coming. However, where do all those people, souls go before then – are they kind of just in that purgatory state, are they roaming the earth haunting houses? **I don't know.** But I mean it's just not a pleasant place.

AS: Is it a physical place of spiritual?

Ellen: **I don't know** because although heaven would be happy and worry-free, hell would be the opposite. And why would there be burning sulfur and smells and all that stuff if there wasn't some tangibility to it.

AS: So it's a fiery place?

Ellen: **Perhaps.** I mean that's how it's described. It's fiery, it's burning, it's pain, it's suffering. It's a horrible way to spend eternity.

Most notable of all this is that Ellen offers the caveat from the beginning that she is unsure and that she does not think we can understand (which, conceptually

speaking, is just another way of mitigating doubt by bracketing it off into the realm of impossibility). Yet when conceptualizing heaven, she does so *prima facie* from the imagery of the soul (being invisible). In this way, she justifies the historically patterned construction that heaven is a non-physical place, for how could a physical place be inhabited by non-physical entities?

As for hell, she adduces a film that depicts how miserable hell could be imagined – similar to Brad who offered that the Bible likely describes hell as simply the worst place imaginable. In this vein, Ellen does what many others of her church have done in drawing from popular conceptions of the afterlife to help her imagine the intangible. Even so, coupled with her implicit admission that the Bible is not entirely reliable, she presents a thoughtful account of what heaven and hell could be like and her rationale for how they could be that way; yet she does not claim her views are anything more than synthesized speculation.

In all of these accounts, one final stark difference stands out as worthy of commentary: the recurring conceptualization of heaven as eternity spent with God among Cherry Oak members, whereas River Park members tended to regard heaven broadly as a nice place to go after death. This is a curious contrast between the two churches that might not be so easy to deconstruct. Yet in approaching this idiosyncrasy between the churches from a sociological perspective, I noticed a confluence of factors shared by most Cherry Oak members and not by River Park

members that point to why the former may conceive of heaven as eternity with God while the latter do not.⁴⁴

While I did not collect formal demographic data during my interviews, I observed that many of the Cherry Oak members tended to be single, whereas River Park members tended to be married or at least pronounce family as very important in their lives. This difference, as does the previous one, speaks to the insecurity of companionship throughout one's life. River Park members, being secure in their family, do not outwardly desire the same kind of unification that Cherry Oak members voice. As such, their perfect projection of heaven tends not to conceive of heaven as a shared eternity so much as an idyllic place.

The churches also differ drastically in what each offers. River Park church, which has existed for many generations, offers members a community of memory⁴⁵ that grounds members in passed-on traditions and inter-familial connections that span generations. To this effect, it boasts what phenomenologist Alfred Schutz called "the world-taken-for-granted", in which members seldom doubt or question their reality because their continued experience aligns with their cultural memory.⁴⁶ As such, before the individualization movement characteristic of Protestantism and modernity reached its apotheosis with the culture of narcissism in religious post-

⁴⁴ I recognize that while what follows is post hoc speculation, without a hypothesis directly testing the forthcoming factors, all I can do is observe correlations and offer possible explanations for them.

⁴⁵ I recognize that this phrase is generally reserved for Holocaust literature, however, I was unable to invent a similarly fitting phrase to encompass much the same concept.

⁴⁶ Berger and Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions without Becoming a Fanatic*, 27.

modernity,⁴⁷ River Park's espoused soteriology was already in place and still remains unchanged. River Park, like many other historic churches, thus fosters a culture of what philosopher Arnold Gehlen called "benign certainty," which is generational transference of often-institutional knowledge through tradition.⁴⁸ In contrast, members of Cherry Oak, which was founded several years ago, lack that kind of generational, biblical tradition and instead have much room to advance Christianity as they see it. In other words, as applied to our cases, the culture that informs Cherry Oak members differs drastically from the culture that one century earlier informed the foundation of River Park Church. As such, while it makes sense that the eschatological views of the founders of each church would be adopted by subsequent generations of congregants, it also follows that those River Park members who did in fact confess a belief in eternity with God demonstrate the impact of denominational and cultural pluralism on taken-for-granted views.

Lastly, I noticed that compared to their counterparts at River Park, Cherry Oak members tended to be much younger and seemed to be worse off socioeconomically. Some were still students (both graduate and undergrad), some were unemployed and looking for a job, while others worked at fast food restaurants biding their time for their big break. A subculture of such individuals⁴⁹ who face much uncertainty and who have yet to establish themselves deeply desires

⁴⁷ Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, 1st Free Press trade pbk. ed. (New York: Free Press, 2010), 244-255.

⁴⁸ Berger and Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions without Becoming a Fanatic*, 93.

⁴⁹ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 28-36.

to be accepted: to be secure financially, professionally, and spiritually.⁵⁰ When many of them talked about hell as being cut off from God, they used language that equated God with hope, whereas River Park members did not. As Sean said, “[Hell is] separation from God, you know, cut off from hope.” This suggests that they view God as hope of relief from their worldly plights – a hope of being relocated into God’s presence.⁵¹ Given their general socioeconomic status, I would guess that Cherry Oak members take respite in the belief that through their devotion they will eventually be united with God.⁵²

In contrast, River Park members tended to be reasonably affluent. More than half of those I interviewed from River Park happened to have the title of “doctor” in its various capacities. As such, for them, life on earth is good so far as they can provide for themselves and their families and not have to worry about putting food on the table. Successful as they are, the Southern Baptists of River Park seem to be ambitiously driven in their pursuits with Christ in mind at all times.⁵³ As one dentist, Phillip, put it, “Every time I do a filling I imagine I’m doing it on Jesus himself.”

⁵⁰ Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 33-87.

⁵¹ “Expressed in a traditional religious form, one could say that he who does not have God within himself needs God outside himself.” Georg Simmel, Horst Jürgen Helle, and Ludwig Nieder, *Essays on Religion*, Monograph Series / Society for the Scientific Study of Religion; (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 18.

⁵² “Religion is only the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 54.

⁵³ This ambition for the glory of God is typical of the Protestant work ethic in its early form. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 3rd Roxbury ed. (Los Angeles, Calif.: Roxbury Pub. Co., 2002).

Though I have no stake in the matter and so will not cast judgment, suffice it to say that one of the cardinal tenets of evangelical revivalism is the belief in its own superiority over other faiths⁵⁴ through the universal character of the Christian metanarrative.⁵⁵ As is becoming of the nature of the myriad religious traditions across the world, each was created so as to best serve the interests and needs of its constituency.⁵⁶ At the risk of sounding too modernist, I will simply reiterate that the outlook of each church fits their membership and is probably what drew such membership to them in the first place among such a marketplace of religions.⁵⁷

I would be remiss not to point out, however, that the soteriological proclivity of most Cherry Oak members and some River Park members to locate heaven in eternity with God and hell in separation from God signifies a de-geographying of the afterlife that starkly departs from any traditional approach to either. It follows that given the intimidating role hell has often played in Christian theologies, separation from God has become far scarier than burning in eternal flames or any of the other

⁵⁴ "American evangelicals believe not only that an unchanging and universal Truth exists, but... that they are the ones who know it because God has revealed it to them." Smith and Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 126.

⁵⁵ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 104.

⁵⁶ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 122.

⁵⁷ Of those I interviewed, only one from each church mentioned that he or she had thought about switching churches but something kept them from doing so. From River Park, Luke said that he would like to attend a church more like the one he grew up in but would not leave because his children had made many friends at River Park. From Cherry Oak, a woman named Denise said that she felt judged by members of her church because she had gotten divorced. While she said that it made her consider joining another church, she also said that she keeps coming back for the fellowship and how church makes her feel.

variant moralistic conceptions of hell throughout the ages.⁵⁸ Put differently to frame the matter in terms of this paper, many of those I interviewed doubt the traditional renderings of heaven and hell in favor of the aforementioned abstract, relational versions. This transition suggests a broad paradigm shift in religio-cultural values symptomatic of what Alexis de Tocqueville in the early nineteenth century⁵⁹ called American individualism⁶⁰ and what in as recent as 1979 has been labeled the culture of narcissism.⁶¹ In his essay on religious evolution, sociologist Robert Bellah observes that modern religion differs from its historic forms mainly through the collapse of religious dualism.⁶² This is to say that religious hierarchy and its monopoly on faith dissipated with the Protestant Reformation and became exacerbated by globalization. Locating America's roots in the newly weak restraints of the republican and biblical traditions in the wake of the Reformation,⁶³ Bellah traces the development of what he calls ontological individualism, or "a belief that the individual has a primary reality whereas society is a second-order, derived or artificial construct"⁶⁴ as the quintessential quality of American religion.⁶⁵ This concept encapsulates the American propensity toward disregarding authority and

⁵⁸ Alice K. Turner, *The History of Hell*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993).

⁵⁹ Robert Neelly Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 1st Calif. pbk. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 147.

⁶⁰ The more pejorative name of this phenomenon, the cult of narcissism, was ironically coined or at least popularized by Nikita Khrushchev in 1956 in a speech by the same name inveighing against Stalin to preclude the circumstances that could lead to another apotheosis of a man into a Nietzschean uber-mensch.

⁶¹ Twenge and Campbell, 3.

⁶² Bellah, "Religious Evolution," 40.

⁶³ Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 118.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 334.

⁶⁵ Though Christians in Europe may well share such a soteriology, I am unfamiliar with any European tradition that by and large espouses such a perspective.

locating truth in one's own experience. Thus when God's "love" becomes the source of self-worth⁶⁶ and one's relations with God become the source of salvation rather than the church's intercession,⁶⁷ we can imagine how such a unifying soteriology organically developed and became appealing.

To take this further, it behooves us to examine the role narcissism has played in forming such a theology. As psychologist Jean Twenge writes in her book *The Narcissism Epidemic*,

Originally, religions could enforce narcissism-reducing practices because they didn't have to compete for adherents... Now, however, people can select the religion that works for them – often the one that offers the most benefits with the least pain. To compete, religions have to give people what they want. Because reducing narcissism is not always pleasant, most people are not going to attend churches that demand humility.⁶⁸

Twenge notes that given a marketplace of religion, consumers will make use of Rational Choice Theory – deciding what is best for them that involves minimal sacrifice. In a consumer market, the argument goes, producers are left with little choice but to pander to consumer interests in order to remain competitive. As a result, the product becomes a kind of fast food religion without many of the nutritional (moral) benefits that traditional religion provides. "By adapting to today's self-oriented culture," Twenge continues, a church is "able to bring people back to religion."⁶⁹ Ironically, as mentioned in the introduction to this paper, "Bringing people back to God" is the motto of Cherry Oak church – the same church whose members confess a unification soteriology. This combination of implicitly

⁶⁶ Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 231.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁶⁸ Twenge and Campbell, 246.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 247-248.

pandering to narcissism's grip on American culture while professing inclusion is quite a telling commentary in itself of the nature of religious sects today.⁷⁰

As we can see, eternity with God is a potent soteriology for modern times even as believers conceive of heaven and hell in a variety of forms. For members of more conservative churches who are content with their fellowship and accept the idea of mansions of many rooms and other biblical imagery in locating heaven, they can continue to abide traditional views that suit their needs. After all, variable needs and values are the reason why various denominations and sects exist. As Alasdair MacIntyre wrote while exploring the difficulties of Christian belief: "[T]he only apology that I can offer for writing so incompletely and inconclusively is that it is preferable to writing conclusively and mistakenly."⁷¹ So too might it be said about faith and doubt. Better to believe and not know, as Pascal rationalized centuries ago, than to claim to know and have no one else believe. The next chapter will better illustrate why this is the case.

⁷⁰ It may be interesting to note that Cherry Oak squarely fits Bellah's (as well as other prominent theorists') understanding of a sect, whereas River Park aligns with their archetypes for a church. For more information, see *Habits of the Heart* page 244.

⁷¹ MacIntyre, 50.

CONCLUSION

KNOWING THE UNKNOWN

“The cloud of unknowing will perhaps leave you with a feeling that you are far from God. But I assure you, if it is authentic, only the absence of a cloud of forgetting between you and all creatures keeps you from God.” – *Cloud of Unknowing*, Chapter 5, Lines 424-427

A teacher of mine once said that you do not know what you know until you discover what you do not know. This apophatic framing of knowledge in terms of ignorance⁷² – like an image rendered intelligible only by the negative space that gives it form – captures the crux of evangelical epistemology. It is not that evangelicals do not have doubt, but rather that they have faith that functions as a default surrogate for knowledge.⁷³ To continue with the picture metaphor, evangelicals may not see themselves concretely in the big picture, but they have faith that God will frame their lives with the negative space that is God’s will.

Despite this characterization, Cherry Oak and River Park members differed greatly both in their inclinations to confess doubt and the strategies employed in doing so. Cherry Oak members were more likely to confess scriptural inerrancy or infallibility – the theological premise that informs much certainty – than River Park members. Yet sociologist Christian Smith observed in his 1998 study,

⁷² Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 196.

⁷³ “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.” Romans 1:19

71% of evangelicals report never having doubts about their religious beliefs... [they are] least likely to struggle sometimes or often with doubts about their faith... [They] appear simply to enjoy a faith that is relatively nonproblematic, for the most part immune from undermining uncertainty, apprehensions, and skepticism.⁷⁴

While 71% is staggering, it actually aligns with 7 out of the 10 interviewed members of Cherry Oak who confessed the Bible to be inerrant or infallible, as opposed to 2 out of 10 from River Park. If the River Park sample is at all indicative of the rest of the church membership, then one would think that such a high percentage of doubters would not survive in the pluralistic milieu of modernity. But Smith explains how religion can survive in modernity⁷⁵ in offering and defending his subcultural identity theory of religious persistence: “Religion survives and can thrive in pluralistic, modern society by embedding itself in subcultures that offer satisfying morally orienting collective identities which provide adherents meaning and belonging.”⁷⁶ This suggests so far as religious doubt is concerned that “knowing” either takes on secondary importance, or that it is overshadowed by “morally orienting collective identities” – a vague enough designation to account for some form of dynamic communal activity.

If religious certainty then is deemed inessential for a religious tradition to survive in modernity, then the fact that 70% of Cherry Oak members believe in scriptural infallibility given the reality of pluralism would seem to deny modernity’s implications. Smith seeks to explain this as well in his subcultural identity theory of

⁷⁴ Smith and Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 29.

⁷⁵ In contradistinction to the Secularization Thesis that predicted the end of religion and building off of Stephen Warner’s New Paradigm that pluralism is good for religion. R. Stephen Warner, *A Church of Our Own: Disestablishment and Diversity in American Religion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

⁷⁶ Smith and Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 118.

religious strength: “In a pluralistic society, those religious groups will be relatively stronger which better possess and employ the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant outgroups, short of becoming genuinely countercultural.”⁷⁷ In emphasizing subcultural identity construction over belief plausibility, Smith effectively brackets out beliefs (and therefore de-emphasizing the biggest potential source of doubt) in modern religion. It makes sense then that River Park at the time of this writing is undergoing a church-wide re-assessment of its outreach since it has mostly older members and has stopped growing (hence applying Smith’s theory of persistence rather than strength), whereas Cherry Oak on the day I visited was preparing for its first Sunday with three back-to-back services.

This would imply that Cherry Oak possesses more effective “cultural tools” (including those that garner or invite religious certainty) than River Park – but what are they? Unfortunately the secret recipe for what makes a church thrive as opposed to merely survive is not so obvious and beyond my purview. Even so, what makes a church survive in the modern era and to what extent certainty is involved is worth exploring so as to possibly arrive at the secret to thriving.

As mentioned previously, evangelicals stand in continuity with the classical Christian claim for the universality⁷⁸ of the Christian narrative.⁷⁹ As such, pluralism – understood as recognition of other possibly valid metanarratives – is incompatible with evangelicalism, thereby fortifying identity construction informed by negative

⁷⁷ Ibid., 118-119.

⁷⁸ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.” John 3:16

⁷⁹ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*, 95.

reference groups.⁸⁰ Such subculture shaped by boundaries promotes group cohesion and engagement by polarizing an implicit cosmic “us” versus “them” mentality that shapes their consciousness and discourse.⁸¹ Even though faith is a prerequisite,⁸² occasions for doubt are minimized through focus on identity construction through boundary maintenance.⁸³ Thus “The forms of any tradition function as occasions for faith not in themselves, but insofar as persons are actively involved with them.”⁸⁴

The potency of emphasizing identity formation and maintenance is accentuated when considering the theological minimalism characteristic of evangelicalism and the American culture of individualism. Given that the Protestant Reformation renounced not just Catholic dogma but also the authority of the catholic apostolic tradition summarized in second century creeds,⁸⁵ the lack of institutional standardization of the content of belief that promoted a relocation of hermeneutic authority from the Church to the individual⁸⁶ has resulted in a kind of

⁸⁰ It is not surprise then that evangelicalism’s growth in America corresponds with that of pluralism as made possible by the First Amendment. Iain Hamish Murray and Banner of Truth Trust, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 14-23.

⁸¹ Smith and Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 124.

⁸² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), 5.

⁸³ Man “needs to know that he has a right to his good fortune. He wants t be convinced that he deserves it in comparison with others... Good fortune thus wants to legitimize fortune.” Max Weber, “The Social Psychology of the World Religions,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills(London: Routledge, 1991), 271.

⁸⁴ Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 18.

⁸⁵ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*, 186-190.

⁸⁶ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, “In Search of Certainties: The Paradoxes of Religiosity in Societies of High Modernity,” in *Secularization: The Comparative Sociology of De-*

“minimum creed” summed up as “God loves you, Jesus saves, and you can be healed.”⁸⁷ In other words, the content of evangelical belief has become a kind of lowest common denominator. As most of those I interviewed said, all one need to do to be saved is confess belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

While this barebones approach allows for much disagreement and therefore doubt over other details, the details have tertiary importance. So long as evangelicals abide by the minimum creed, they regard their theological conversations as “a ‘sharing of certainties,’ which does not challenge the individualization of the belief process – quite the contrary, in fact.”⁸⁸ In this way, individuals mutually authenticate their own productions of meaning by “following the pattern of ‘we are all saying and seeking the same thing,’ ‘we are expressing the different aspects of a common truth in a variety of forms,’ etc.” toward authenticating a common core belief.⁸⁹

Christian Smith identifies this modern proclivity as forming sacred umbrellas. Playing on Peter Berger’s concept of a sacred canopy, Smith means “small, portable, accessible relational worlds—religious reference groups—‘under’ which their beliefs can make sense.”⁹⁰ In other words, so long as they affirm each other’s beliefs and experiences through collective worship and other religious

Secularization ed. Bryan S. Turner, Sage Key Debates in Sociology (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), 260.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 264.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 267.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 265.

⁹⁰ Smith and Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 106.

interaction, they disabuse possible doubt and validate their individual worldviews.⁹¹

In remarking on such a potent emphasis on subjective experiences, Smith explains

how

First-hand spiritual experiences that ‘work’ for people can provide for them stronger epistemological foundations for personal religious faith than can the narrative elegance or intellectual defensibility of theological systems... People do not generally adhere to their religious faiths because as cognitive frameworks they are intellectually nonproblematic. They adhere to them because they provide identity, solidarity, meaning, order, and purpose—very fundamental human requisites. Whatever cognitive quandaries modernity imposes on ordinary religious believers, most seem capable of disregarding, defusing, or somehow resolving them in a way that does not seriously undermine their faith.⁹²

With an internal locus of authority and a focus on personal experience, evangelicals are themselves the source of knowledge (grounded in scripture) over against external theological formulations.

Yet Smith errs in bracketing out the significance of “cognitive quandaries” in favor of first-hand spiritual experiences. My research indicates that in spite of his efforts to explain how evangelicalism thrives through social cohesion over the symptoms of modernity, evangelicals nevertheless demonstrate a number of cognitive strategies for mitigating doubt that are integral to maintaining their faith. Cherry Oak members tend to cite scripture automatically when their faith is questioned. Some offer creative devices for accommodating scriptural inerrancy

⁹¹ This sacred umbrella contrasts with Robert Bellah’s secular counterpart called a lifestyle enclave. This consists of individuals who express identity through “shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities, which often serve to differentiate them sharply from those with other lifestyles.” With lifestyle enclaves, there is no interdependence that substantiates members’ worldviews, let alone an implied theological undercurrent. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 335.

⁹² Smith and Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 177.

such as God not intending a passage for this time period, that we have misunderstood the Bible's content, or that humans have corrupted the text over the years. River Park members tend to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in aiding their interpretations as well as overlook troublesome passages that do not align with what they perceive as the main thrust of scripture. Though members from each church differ on whether they accept scripture as inerrant or not, each employs cognitive strategies to accommodate incongruences between their theological views and perceived reality.

In terms of heaven and hell, members from each church also demonstrated much forethought. Some River Park members presented the idea of God's sovereignty whereby God can save whomever God wants, while Cherry Oak members tended to reason through the ambiguities of scripture. Many from each church expressed hope that God would save non-Christians through God's grace grounded in the non-negotiable premise that God is loving and just. River Park members often drew from extra-biblical sources in constructing their ideas of the afterlife, while Cherry Oak members usually drew their ideas from scripture and in some cases filled in the gaps with imaginative details. Many favored abstract conceptions of the afterlife in favor of traditional, material models. Throughout my interviews, members demonstrated that despite having a strong socially cohesive and identity-shaping component, as Smith argues, evangelicals also think about their faith and adopt strategies to maintain their plausibility structures in the face of doubt.

Indeed, people do not keep their faith because they find its framework intellectually sound. Returning to MacIntyre, who earlier I mentioned had debunked every Enlightenment argument for the existence of God yet still asserts belief in God, he reveals the paramount answer to how this can be the case: “There is then no way of acquiring knowledge of God except by trusting in what are taken to be the signs of his being in the world. And where we are unwilling to trust, no argument will take the place of trust.”⁹³ Trust is the key factor in belief; that is why arguments are not only inadequate, but are superlatively unnecessary. Cherry Oak members do not immediately confess doubt because they trust in God, while River Park members, some of whom do readily confess doubt, nevertheless trust in God and so find their doubt unproblematic.

Ipsa facto, when it comes to knowledge about the afterlife and its various details, MacIntyre⁹⁴ again succinctly professes what had proven to be such an epistemological conundrum:

We know that we have a life beyond death only because we are told so by Christ and his apostles whose authority we take. And we know that the images which they use in speaking of that life will apply, even though in our present life we have no way at all of seeing how they apply. We cannot offer evidence for our belief; it is as well or as badly grounded as our belief in those whose authority we take on these questions.⁹⁵

Little did I know that the answer to this great question laid in the first premise that I thought to establish: the infallibility of scripture. If one subscribes to scriptural infallibility, then of course it logically follows that knowledge of life after death

⁹³ MacIntyre, 116.

⁹⁴ Full disclosure: MacIntyre converted to Catholicism. So while his profession of accepting apostolic authority might not resonate with evangelicals, his profession of accepting Jesus’ authority indubitably would.

⁹⁵ MacIntyre, 113.

derives from what scripture describes. Anything more than that comes from tradition and dogma – both of which evangelicals eschew and Tolstoy noted as being the source of corruption of biblical truth.⁹⁶ And if one does not subscribe to scriptural infallibility, then one is confined to the doubt that ensues from not having an authoritative source of validation lest one abide the practice of mutual affirmation as previously described with Cherry Oak members.

For those evangelicals and other Christians in the latter category – and even some in the former – doubt is something one learns to live with in the context of one’s faith journey, as Alfredo offered. Here I agree with Christian Smith in observing that “doubts more likely reflect a strong and confident faith rather than a weakness of faith.”⁹⁷ Yet in investigating how evangelicals accommodate doubt into a theology that more or less demands certainty, evangelical theologian Robert Webber illuminates the reason for its pervasiveness. In tracing the evolution of spirituality throughout the paradigms of history, he locates postmodern spirituality – no doubt fatigued by modernity’s spirituality of knowledge⁹⁸ – in returning to the mystery of God as was common in ancient times.⁹⁹ In this way, while doubt can indeed be anomic to one’s worldview, evangelicalism has discovered a strategy for sublimating doubt into sanctioned mystery.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Tolstoy, 90.

⁹⁷ Smith and Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 162.

⁹⁸ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*, 20-24.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁰⁰ Webber does, however, lament the Protestant rejection of the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds since they (apophatically) summarize the apostolic tradition in a way that affirms the integrity of the early church that evangelicals outwardly desire to restore. He argues that were evangelicals actually to return to their

Returning to our two churches, despite Cherry Oak members confessing a high degree of certainty and River Park members confessing the opposite, neither are better nor worse prepared than the other to attend to religious doubt symptomatic of modernity. Even though Cherry Oak is growing and River Park is not, both manage to retain members and serve the needs of their congregations. As individual needs differ as do the religious milieu into which one is born – among other pluralist factors – so too will the supply and demand of the marketplace of religion adapt accordingly. When one cannot have certainty, one must at least have faith. So while one may not know, one may come to know – as “a belief introduces the believer to something beyond itself.”¹⁰¹ In this way, uncertainty can become certain, as faith can become knowledge.

religious roots in embracing the apostolic tradition and abandoning the practice of locating religious authority internally, then they would have less religious doubt and the potential for radical, self-realized fundamentalists would greatly diminish. *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *Faith and Belief*, 18.

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