

Evangelical Sexual Politics in Trump's America

Sarah Diefendorf

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Reading Committee:

Sarah Quinn, Chair

Julie Brines

Judy Howard

CJ Pascoe

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University of Washington

Abstract

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Sarah Diefendorf

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Sarah Quinn

Department of Sociology

Evangelicals seek to transform their collective community, especially when they feel as though their way of life is threatened. This desire for change is especially clear when we return to the issues that brought evangelicals into public and political life in the first place: questions of gender, sexuality, and the *white* family. I use two years of ethnographic fieldwork to argue that the church grapples with changes in understandings of gender and sexuality against the backdrop of what I call an *imagined secular* world. The *imagined secular* is a world full of non-religious individuals who push for access to abortion, trans rights, gay rights, deviant sex, and marriages void of God. As the evangelical church finds itself in flux, it is constructing its own identity in relation to a perceived outside identity: that of the non-religious, secular, outsider. This identity work occurs within a space that carries with it much larger meanings indicative of societal cultural debates and the institutional and political work that shapes a nation. This work highlights

how evangelicals grapple with the “messiness” that comes with questions of sexism and feminism, the ways in which evangelicals reconcile historical white nationalist tendencies with the need to now reach across racial lines, and how evangelicals retain a privileged position around reinforcements of a heterosexual Christian family while jettisoning some of its former associations with homophobia. The varied ways in which evangelicals debate their beliefs during these times of change lends insight their continued support for conservative politics. I argue that Donald Trump works as a symbol who will hold the *imagined secular* world at bay while evangelicals actively discuss and debate ways in which they can rework some of their beliefs and approaches to maintain cultural relevance during a period in time in which they feel as though they are quickly losing cultural sway.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“‘Evangelicalism’ has always been made up of shifting movements, temporary alliances, various factions in denominations, and the lengthened shadows of individuals. All discussions of ‘evangelicalism,’ therefore, are always both descriptions of the way things really are as well as efforts within our own minds to provide some order to a multifaceted, complex set of impulses, movements, and organizations” (Kellstedt et al 1996:244).

On the Sunday morning immediately following the inauguration of President Donald Trump, a pastor at a predominantly white evangelical megachurch that I call Lakeview looked out to his congregation with weary eyes. A close-up of his face was projected onto a large monitor behind him. The congregation of about 500 people looked back at him as the song played by the worship team¹ faded in the background. Individuals moved around in their seats, and a toddler cried out before his mother swiftly rushed him out of one of the many exit doors. The Pastor, who I call Pastor Dave, said, “In the midst of this broken world, I keep envisioning one thing: our church is on the operating table.” This pastor shares a vision that suggests that the church needs some sort of fix in the midst of the brokenness of the world. This vision also suggests a certain level of vulnerability in that process. In addition to that perceived vulnerability, Pastor Dave tells the church that “We are living in a broken world. Sometimes the corrupt is all we see. The election cycle did not help with that!” Some people laugh, and others nod. “Those presidential debates were messy...but the world is not divided into good and evil.” The pastor continues, and states that the world is broken, and, as a result, Christians are suffering. The pastor tells the audience that they need to work through this suffering, and learn to respond not with anger, bitterness, or madness, but “when we do suffer, we need to react in a

¹ The worship team is a band of individual musicians that ranges in size each week, and is in charge of leading the congregation in song at both the beginning and end of a Sunday Sermon.

godly way.” Pastor Dave smiles to the audience and bows his head slightly before exiting the stage.

An Associate Pastor², Pastor Amy, a 35-year-old white woman and mother whose young children would often accompany her on stage (but not today) walked to the front of the stage with two large green buckets. She was wearing a wireless headset and microphone, barely visible under her blonde bob. Pastor Amy raised a large yellow sponge in the air and asked the congregation to identify the object. When they responded accordingly, she then asked, “How do we find out what is inside the sponge?!” Before the crowd responded, Pastor Amy yelled “Squeeze it! This is you. We don’t like it.” Pastor Amy dunked the sponge in a bucket of dark colored water and then removed it, squeezing it over the bucket for everyone to see. There was a camera focused on Pastor Amy’s hands that projected this demonstration on a large screen behind her. Pastor Amy, holding the sponge dripping with black liquid, then said “This is what the world does when it is hurt or pressed. All the ugliness comes out. But here is our challenge.” Pastor Amy then dipped the sponge in clear water and held it up to the crowd before squeezing it. “When you’re pressed this is what happens. When you’re pressed it is rivers of living water that come forth...It’s not the suffering that gets us noticed, but how we react.” Pastor Amy then started stating the lyrics of the song that the worship team started to quietly play on stage behind her. She chanted, “I’m trading my sorrows. I’m trading my shame. I’m laying them down for the joy of the Lord...” as she vigorously squeezed all of the water out of the sponge for all in the room to see.

² An Associate Pastor assists the Lead Pastor in religious services and other daily operations of the church.

Pastor Dave returned to the stage to tell his congregation that they need to do two things to deal with this suffering appropriately, to be the sponges that, when squeezed, do not show any ugliness. First, the members of Lakeview Church need to turn to Jesus, and bring others in to personal relationships with Jesus Christ as well. The second thing Lakeview Church needs to do, according to Pastor Dave, is to “go after the Millennials³.” Pastor Dave quickly followed this statement with “But I don’t understand them!” Many individuals in the audience laughed and nodded their heads in agreement. Pastor Dave continued, and said that the church needs to talk about and work through the issues Millennials care about if they are going to accomplish their first goal, which is to bring others in to the church and then into relationship with Jesus.

In order to bring individuals, and individuals that evangelicals at Lakeview Church do not understand into their community takes time, especially in the midst of the perceived brokenness of the world. Further, such a task is, according to Pastor Dave, counter-cultural. His vision, along with Associate Pastor Amy’s demonstration on the Sunday morning after the presidential inauguration launched an eight-week sermon series titled “Against the Grain.” Evangelicals at Lakeview church feel vulnerable. They feel like they are suffering, and they need time to regroup and get organized. Evangelicals at Lakeview perceive themselves to be counter-cultural, losing sway and influence in a world that is rapidly changing around them. This Sunday morning underscores something very important in the midst of this vulnerability, suffering, and perception of status loss: evangelicals are learning how to react and move forward during times of change.

I entered this group, as a researcher, with the goal of understanding contemporary debates around gender and sexuality in the evangelical church. I was broadly interested in how

³ Lakeview wants to “go after the Millennials” for good reason: recent research finds that white evangelical Protestants are aging. Only 11% of white evangelical Protestants are under the age of 30 (Cox & Jones 2017; Schwadel 2011).

individuals in the United States navigate shifts in meanings related to gender and sexuality when larger cultural norms around gender and sexuality are in flux, too. The federal legalization of same-sex marriage in June of 2015, after years of debate and grappling within and outside of the church, seemed to symbolize many of these shifts.

I focus my work specifically on the evangelical community for two reasons. All faith groups in the United States are experiencing rapid declines except for evangelicals (Pew 2015; Schnabel and Bock 2017). Second, evangelicals have set the stage for debates and questions related to gender, sexuality, and family life in the United States since the 1970s. Today, more individuals in the United States identify as evangelical than any other religious group. In a society that is experiencing a decline in religious life (Pew 2015), evangelicals seem to, in many cases, be thriving. When it comes to questions of political and cultural debates and differences, “the evangelical voice is now what many take as the public voice of American Christianity” (Wellman 2008:19; Domke and Coe 2007). Evangelicals are a substantial demographic portion of American life. They are also a very active portion of American life and culture.

Over the last 50 years, Evangelicals in the United States have established themselves as cultural and political influencers, especially when divides around questions of gender, sexuality, and family life are brought to the fore. Evangelicals, unlike their fundamentalist cousins, do not retreat from modern culture. Rather, evangelicals both engage with contemporary culture, and also seek to change and transform it in their image (Wellman 2008:19). How are evangelicals working to transform society in their image, when that very society seems to be rapidly changing, too?

The evangelical “public voice” became quite clear most recently with the election of Donald Trump in November of 2016. Donald Trump received the largest evangelical vote in

United States history. Many political pundits have questioned the religious and political motivations for this support. While those debates will be discussed in this work, what is clear is that evangelicals are, indeed, debating how, and what it means, to change and transform the United States in their image. Such a project is not a new one, but, in the wake of this presidential election, in a country that seems to be increasingly divided, understanding this evangelical project seems increasingly relevant and important. This research, then, is about evangelical's debates regarding gender and sexuality, but it is also about evangelical's larger relationship with United States in our contemporary political and cultural moment.

While some scholars assert that Trump works as a type of “secular protector” (see Gorski 2017) for evangelicals, I document the mechanisms and complicated negotiations around and for that support. I argue that evangelicals are not seeking protection to remain unchanged and frozen in the social world; rather, Trump bought them time while they reconcile core beliefs around gender and sexuality so that they can work to hold on to a cultural status they feel they are losing. I argue that evangelicals work to shift their formal and informal positions as both a church and as the individuals within the church as they relate to questions of gender, sexuality, and the white family. The church is experiencing what feels like rapid social change, culturally charged moments that are understood as threats to their cultural well-being. The church works to shift their beliefs and actions during these times of perceived change, but these shifts, and the perceived need for them, causes a good deal of confusion, anxiety, and defensiveness within the evangelical community that results in a doubling down, so to speak, around already privileged positions. Evangelicals are willing to change with the times in an effort to uphold their cultural relevance, but these changes also come with a reinforcement of already existent inequalities and beliefs.

Evangelicals are moving from explicit endorsements of inequality to the reproduction of inequality through more subtle means. More leftist social campaigns to individualize sexism, racism and homophobia has resulted in an incompatibility between cultural notions of deviance and individual understandings of what constitutes a “good” evangelical Christian. In this work, I document the ways in which the evangelical church, as an institution, is preserving and endorsing inequality while simultaneously preserving the goodness of the people in the church, by helping them steer clear of the labels of sexist, racist, and homophobe. I show how the institutional work around these questions varies depending on the issue at hand, and that, thus, the reproduction of these inequalities works in different ways as well. This work highlights how evangelicals grapple with the “messiness” that comes with questions of sexism and feminism, the ways in which evangelicals reconcile historical white nationalist tendencies with the need to now reach across racial lines, and how evangelicals retain a privileged status around reinforcements of a heterosexual Christian family while jettisoning some of its former associations with homophobia.

The varied ways in which evangelicals debate their beliefs during these times of change lends insight their continued support for conservative politics. We can establish a better understanding of the enduring relationship between evangelicalism and conservative politics if we look to the “brokenness” of which evangelicals speak and believe they are fighting against. In order to fully understand and contextualize our current political and cultural moment, though, we must first understand the initial emergence of evangelicals in the United States as a cultural and political force.

History and Emergence of the Culture Wars and Christian Alignment with the GOP

While white evangelical protestants are strongly aligned with the GOP today, this is a political alliance markedly different from evangelicals of the past. Over the last 50 years, we have seen two major religious and politic trends flip: first, while evangelicals used to be more likely to identify as Democrat, the opposite is now true. In 1960, 60% of evangelicals in the United States identified as Democrats. By 1988, only 40% of evangelicals identified as Democrats. Today, 28% of evangelicals identify as Democrats. During this 50-year period, evangelical Republican affiliation rose from 32%, to 48% in 1988, to 56% today (Kellstedt et al 1994, Pew 2016). Second, while evangelicals used to be less likely to engage in American political life compared to their non-evangelical peers, the opposite is now true. As of 1980, evangelicals are just as likely, if not more likely, to be politically engaged (Smidt and Kellstedt 1992). These political shifts are a result of the combination of economic, sociodemographic, and social and cultural issues that have solidified an evangelical movement distinct from secular groups and other religious groups in the United States.

The growing evangelical support for the GOP may be, in part, due to the socioeconomic model of political participation. Evangelicals, as a whole, grew increasingly more prosperous between 1970-2000 as measured by levels of income (Claasen and Povtak 2009). Evangelicals have also become more educated as a group, as measured by the highest level of education completed. By the year 2000, evangelicals were more likely to earn a four year college degree than Pentecostal and fundamentalist protestants, and as likely or more likely than all other religious groups (except for Jews) and nonreligious affiliates to be college educated (Beyerlein

2004).⁴ Because of these dual increases, we can expect increased political participation among evangelicals, even in the absence of both moral issues and religious candidates in an election (Claassen and Povtak 2009).

While increases in both socioeconomic status and educational levels no doubt help to drive political participation in the United States, they do not explain why evangelicals overwhelmingly support Republican candidates, the Republican party, and conservative ideals. Some suggest that the religiosity of political leaders helps drive an increase in evangelical support, such as the openly religious candidacy of George W. Bush, or that increased support is due to organized efforts to mobilize evangelicals by organizations affiliated with the Christian Right⁵ (Campbell 2007; Campbell and Monson 2007; Claassen and Povtak 2009; Monson and Oliphant 2007). But what spurred such mobilization?

Evangelicals have long been engaged in American political and cultural life, especially when questions of gender, sexuality, and the family are in debate. Modern day evangelism has its roots in a movement of people who did not want to retreat from the world, who did not want to appear backwards, too-counter cultural, or too removed from society. In order to understand the emergence of these actively-engaged evangelicals, I begin with the conclusion of the Scopes Trial (formally *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*), which legally questioned the teaching of the theory of evolution in schools and marked the separation between evangelicalism

⁴ Interestingly, while earning a four year college degree had a positive effect on disaffiliation for most cohorts of evangelical protestants born between 1920 and 1949, earning a four year college degree had a negative effect for the 1950s and 1970s cohorts. Evangelicals were becoming more educated during this time, and this increased education was less threatening to their religious affiliations and beliefs (Schwadel 2014).

⁵ I use Green, Guth, Smith and Kellstedt's definition of the Christian Right, as follows: "a social movement located principally among evangelicals, dedicated to restoring traditional values in public policy" (1996:2)

and fundamentalism. This trial, set in a small town in Tennessee, was broadcast via radio across the country. The trial became a symbol for the larger fundamentalist versus secular debates occurring nationwide. While, in the end, fundamentalist Christians lost this battle, their response is what is most important: they began to more adamantly separate⁶ from the world around them (Laats 2010). They retreated from the social world as they sought to solidify their solution for the protection of their beliefs (Harding 1991). During this shift and retreat, it appeared that this strand of conservative Protestantism had become a much more defensive and reclusive version of its previous iterations in the United States (Smith 1998). These Christians, in the wake of the Scopes Trial, were painted by the media as angry, withdrawn, paranoid, and anti-intellectual. As Christian Smith argues, “the conditions were ripe for a countermovement within” (1998:9). There were many among these young fundamentalists who felt that the negativity and isolation spurred by the Scopes Trial, as well as the mounting sense of disconnect from the larger American cultural collective, were pushing the group away from their goals of effective evangelism. Young Christian men began to vocally critique their group, and began to shift their opinions and followers to a more moderate form of evangelicalism focused on clear and direct engagement with the larger world.

The more conservative fundamentalists had “lost their national audience” and someone else needed to take over the direction of the church (Morone 2003). The Christians who reformulated evangelical life in the United States did so with the goal and purpose of cultural relevance and sway, excited to establish their place and space in the larger landscape of American life. As Smith argues, “...these young men wanted a true Christian faith that could

⁶ Who we now call the Fundamentalists had already started to clearly distinguish themselves, with the publication of the essays titled “The Fundamentals” published between 1910 and 1916.

hold its own in academic circles and thus provide a sound philosophical defense of the Christian world and life view” (1998:10).

The early leaders of this new evangelical movement found their voice, and their larger following, through the emergence of televangelism and the “electronic church.” The pioneers of televangelism, Oral Roberts, Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, brought evangelical tenets to millions beginning in the late 1940s. These three evangelical leaders differed in their beliefs on the civil rights movement, homosexuality, and education. Their collective entry into the public eye did not represent a unified front, but rather set the stage for what many call an “intense [evangelical] engagement” with the world (Wellman 2008)⁷.

Oral Roberts preached on the importance of saving sexual intercourse for the confines of marriage; Billy Graham spoke out against segregation and spoke for the racial integration of social institutions, showcasing these beliefs by inviting Martin Luther King, Jr. to the pulpit in front of an audience of 2.3 million people in New York City in 1955; Jerry Falwell openly questioned the tactics and motives of King, Jr. and spent a good deal of time instead focusing on the importance of the family unit, and his concerns over the secular education and values taught in public schools. Evangelicals, while growing in their membership during this period in US History, were not unified in their religious, political, or cultural beliefs.

Although the messages of these early prominent evangelical voices were not entirely unified, larger political and federal pushback to this electronic church and the social and political

⁷ Kruse argues that part of this engagement with the world was encouraged by those outside of the church. Specifically, Kruse argues that corporate leaders and wealthy Republican elites enlisted conservative clergymen to help them promote a free enterprise agenda under the phrase “Freedom under God”. For more on the role of religious leaders in helping shape this ideology, and the role of corporate elite in helping set the stage for the rise of the Christian Right, see *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (Kruse 2015).

issues of the 1960s and 1970s are key to understanding evangelicals' entrance into conservative politics (Guth 1996). The electronic church had millions of viewers by 1980 and a strong financial base (Guth 1996). Other Christian institutions, such as radio stations, television stations, schools, and businesses grew in numbers during this time. Evangelicals were building powerful social institutions with social influence, economic power, and a good deal of followers. However, these institutions were met with push-back from the federal government. Falwell and others received numerous inquiries from the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in regard to their fundraising efforts. Perhaps more seriously, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) threatened to ban more licenses for Christian television and radio stations in an effort to enforce provisions of "fairness"; for example, James Robinson's "fiery broadcast attack" on gay rights (Guth 1996:13) eluded these federal provisions. Evangelicals felt that their growing religious institutions were under attack, and under attack by the secular world. Guth reports that over three million loyal televangelism viewers wrote letters to the FCC in an outcry over their perceived "gag" order on the content of their shows (1996). Evangelicals started to come together in force. This era perhaps marked the beginning of the prominence of evangelical media, not just in its ability to present congruent messages "that draw logical boundaries around a family of behaviors, attitudes, and identities" (Martin 2003; Van Geest 2007), but also as an institution that "offer[s] political prompts that may translate into behavior that includes voting choices" (Newman and Smith 2007).

The 1950s-1970s were of course marked by great social upheaval and change in the United States. Evangelicals, especially *white* evangelicals, felt large-scale push back to their more traditional social beliefs. Their worldviews were no longer just threatened by the SEC and FCC, but by society at large. The Civil Rights Movement, the Gay Rights movement, and the

1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* marked a time of change for the white evangelical family. Further, segregation and the predominantly white circles in which many interacted were no longer *de jure*. As Marsden states, “the issues of family and sexuality proved the key to unlocking evangelical potential to become overtly political” (2006:242). Gender relations, sexuality, premarital sex, race relations and decisions around family formation all of a sudden seemed up for debate and question.

Two back-to-back landmark supreme court decisions in 1962 and 1963 established that prayer in public schools violated in the First Amendment, and, for similar reasons, so did school-sponsored Bible reading in public schools. The cultural shift that these decisions marked was heightened by the media attention to them, which focused on the inflammatory theme of “Kicking God out of the public school” (Waggoner 2012). Unlike the reaction to the legalization of abortion, and the ongoing and increasing push for gay rights and women’s rights, the response to the separation of bible reading and prayer in schools was mixed. While many decried the decision, others, and prominent groups like the National Association of Evangelicals and the prominent evangelical magazine, *Christianity Today*, applauded the Supreme Court for separating the affairs of the public school from the affairs of the church, as they believed such prayer was essentially “a *pro forma* practice that had become secularized” (Green 2012). This acceptance of these Supreme Court decisions, while surprising on the surface, occurred in tandem with a larger shift within the evangelical community and its reaction to changing times. For evangelicals, norms around the family and sexuality were changing, as the many social movements of the 1960s were morphing into “ground zero” for the culture wars (Morone 2003), and they needed to establish more institutions in which they could continue to preach their

values. If their children were no longer going to pray in public schools, so be it. They were moving to private schools by the thousands anyway (Guth 1996).

In the South, following *Brown vs. Board of education* in 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many more evangelical white southerners turned to the Republican party. While black evangelicals were among those at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement, white evangelicals retreated and regrouped. In response to these legal initiatives towards desegregation, many evangelicals invested some of their new-found prosperity in to Christian schools, expanding “to areas far removed from minority populations” (Guth 1996:14). These Christian Schools were all-white, and provided an institutional space in which evangelicals could ensure that the norms around gender, sexuality and the family were taught to their liking. Further, they provided a space in which they could bring God back in to their child’s education. However, these Christian schools, which, by 1980, had grown to over 16,000 elementary schools, received government opposition similar to what was experienced by their predecessor, the electronic church.

In 1978, the IRS stripped tax-exempt status from all-white private schools formed in the south. Falwell had established Liberty Christian Academy in Lynchburg, Virginia, which, as an all-white academy, failed to meet the IRS requirements for tax-exempt status. Although Falwell insisted that his school was a Christian academy, not a segregation academy, Falwell mobilized solidarity and political opposition against more liberal Christians and secular society at larger. Falwell was already in an uproar prior to this 1978 decision, due to a 1974 IRS decision that also removed tax-exempt status from Bob Jones University because it forbade interracial dating. Evangelical parents, teachers, congregations, and organizations alike had invested greatly in these organizations, and were distraught over yet another federal obstacle to their ways of life. As Guth argues “for such parents it appeared that secular elites had not only pushed religious and

traditional moral values out of public schools, but were trying to purge them from the private institutions where they had taken refuge” (1996:14).

This combination, of threats to traditional social values, and threats to the white Christian institutions in which those social values were embedded, taught, and celebrated, spurred the evangelical rise in conservative political life (Guth 1996). This political unification happened in tandem with the “restructuring of American religion” in the 1960s and 1970s. Evangelical Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, as the most prominent religious groups in the US at the time, were once separated by their religious doctrines. However, the rise of religious secularism in the US during the time also created commonalities among the more religious in the United States. During this time, there emerged an increasing divide between religious and secular communities over a variety of social issues. These divides also mapped on to political party identification and voting patterns, as the United States witnessed a growing relationship between religiosity and political conservatism. This linkage marked a turn where the public voice of Christian liberals became much more muted than it had been in the 1960s and 1970s; evangelicals began their upward class trajectory (Claasen and Povtak 2009), and the evangelical voice became and is still the voice that the majority understand as the public voice of Christianity in the United States (Domke and Coe 2007; Wellman 2008).

Many Christian organizations of prominence, such as the Moral Majority, the Roundtable, and the Christian Voice, emerged to provide a structure and somewhat unified voice to this growing political and social movement. In 1979, Falwell founded the Moral Majority, a political action committee, in response to both the IRS’s interventions and to protest legal abortion in the United States. Billy Graham refused to join the Moral Majority and stated that “...Evangelists cannot be closely identified with any particular party or person. We have to stand

in the middle in order to preach to all people, right or left.” (Horstman 2002). Billy Graham’s opposition fell to the minority as the voice of the Conservative Christian Right solidified. Falwell and his organization pushed for a pro-life, pro-American, pro-traditional family, and a moral agenda that positioned themselves against more liberal, secular Americans. Jenkins argues that these years of “containment” and “counterrevolution” of the 1970s and early 1980s shaped modern society at least as much as the decade of the 1960s did and calls them the “anti-sixties” (Jenkins 2008:4-5), a word choice that highlights the backlash that has become a central feature of evangelical and secular cultural engagement.

Around the 1980 congressional elections, Falwell urged ministers, “What can you do from the pulpit? You can register people to vote. You can explain the issues to them. And you can endorse candidates, right there in church on Sunday morning” (Guth 1996; Vecsey 1980). The Moral Majority became a massive political lobby group for evangelical Christians during the 1980s, and along with other organizations, began targeting prominent liberal and moderate legislators for defeat in the 1980 congressional election. The convergence of evangelical religious values and a conservative political agenda manifested in the 1980 election of President Ronald Reagan. On June 25, 1980, the Christian Science Monitor posited the following: “Twenty years ago the ‘religion question’ in the US presidential election was whether a Roman Catholic could be elected. This year the question is: Who will get the ‘born-again vote?’” (Harley 1980). Throughout the 1980s, the “invisible army” of conservative evangelicals grew (Green 1996). The group helped to establish the religious right as a political force in the United States before it was dismantled in 1989. Today, white evangelical protestants are often described as the “base” of the Republican Party (Brint and Abrutyn 2010). Wellman argues that it was during this time, and in the wake of these events, that “the public muscle of the evangelical

grassroots movement awakened” (2008:18). Conservative Christians entered political and cultural debates, largely to protect families—families they saw in dire threat due to the “moral corruption of the nation” (Katz 2011:20).

Shortly after the disbanding of the Moral Majority, a name was given to this seemingly growing political and cultural rift in the United States. In 1991, Hunter’s book *Culture Wars* gained traction, and in 1992, Patrick Buchanan used the Republican convention to declare a “war for the nation’s soul” (Williams 1997:1). Buchanan introduced “culture wars” to the American lexicon, and it is now used as a catchall phrase to describe this conflict between more conservative, traditional, and religious groups and more secular, liberal groups. This evangelical interest and presence in politics gained force in the 1992 presidential election, no longer an invisible army in the American political arena. White evangelicals solidified their support for the Republican party, which led Kellstedt et al (1994) to posit that “future party historians may label 1992 the year of the evangelical” (1994:309). The 1992 presidential election was marked by a growing division between religious and nonreligious voters from all religious traditions, but the increased pairing between evangelicals and GOP support led Kellstedt et al to suggest that “it seems as though evangelicals will only continue to grow in force” (1994:309). In the 2000 Presidential election, George W. Bush received 68% of the white evangelical protestant vote, and in 2004, 78% of the white evangelical protestant vote.⁸ Barack Obama, in contrast, received 24%

⁸ Here, a status politics model might be helpful to understand the marriage of evangelical and conservative religious beliefs. Status politics, derived from Weber’s distinction between status groups and social classes, is a dual approach to stratification that recognizes that societies are driven by both economic inequalities *and* competition for public respect (Wald, Owen and Hill 1989:2). These forms of stratification can result in different forms of public action. For example, social classes might pursue material interests through political competitions, such as elections. Status groups, on the other hand, might enroll in “symbolic cultural crusades” that tend to be more episodic and decentralized in their approach. With this framing in mind, we might think of

of the white evangelical vote in 2008 and 21% in 2012. Today, evangelicals continue to remain aligned with, and support, conservative politics in the United States.

Evangelicals Today

Columnist Amy Sullivan wrote a controversial Op-Ed in the Sunday New York Times on April 1, 2018 that charges that “Decades of fearmongering about Democrats and religious liberals have worked. Eighty percent of white evangelicals would vote against Jesus Christ himself if he ran as a Democrat.” Sullivan’s point, here, is that the Moral Majority won. Their work and influence has resulted in a marriage between evangelicals and the Republican party that help explain a whole host of their behaviors in our contemporary cultural and political climate.

Political life and political participation—and specifically, participation in Republican politics—are now understood as a key component of an evangelical identity. Evangelicals increasingly see that voting is what members of their group “do on election day” (Gerber, Green and Shachar 2003; Smith and Walker 2013). Further, “Evangelicals have come to believe that engagement in public debate is part of what it means to be a faithful Christian” (Wellman 2008:18). Evangelicals are almost twice as likely as mainline protestants to say that their faith informs their politics, and by similar portions relative to mainline protestants, they are also more likely to say they are committed to transforming American society. Finally, an overwhelming majority, more than 90% of evangelicals, believe that religious people should “fight evil,”

evangelicals as operating as more of a status group leading up to the early 1990s, before seeming to converge politically into a status class, marking a drastic change in their trajectory.

leading Wellman to suggest that “the old notion of separation from the world has given way to intense engagement with the world” (Wellman 2008:18).

Evangelicals believe that one of the best ways to fight evil is through conservative political participation. Today, white evangelicals make up one fifth of all registered voters and about one third of all voters who identify with or lean toward the GOP (Pew 2016). Evangelical protestants continue to vote more Republican than mainline protestants (Green 2007; Layman 2001; Lockerbie 2013). This alignment has a reputation: research finds that voters stereotype evangelicals as more conservative than other candidates, as well as more competent and trustworthy (McDermott 2009).

The evangelical political force described in this chapter, and addressed in this work, is an overwhelmingly white evangelical political force. Evangelicals are not a wholly unified front, especially when looking at racial demographics. As such, in both exit polls and scholarly research, academics often clarify and distinguish between white and black evangelical protestants. White and black evangelicals disagree on many economic issues today. Black evangelicals see a much larger role for the national government in helping those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, for example (Lockerbie 2013; Steensland et al 2000). As we can locate the emergence of a good portion of the Christian Right in racist foundations of reactions to the Civil Rights Movement and IRS responses to white Christian academies, it is not surprising that the Christian Right is a predominately white faction and movement.

In 2016, Donald Trump received 81% of the white evangelical vote, which represented the largest share of the evangelical vote in US history (Smith and Martinez 2016). Unlike George W. Bush or Mitt Romney, Trump did not present himself as a highly religious candidate. Perhaps partially because of this, most did not predict such a strong evangelical voter turnout for Trump,

and instead assumed that their participation would wane when candidates like Cruz and Rubio dropped out of the race. Trumps' misquoting of biblical verses, tumultuous family and marital history, numerous allegations of sexual harassment and assault, and video and audio footage of him describing grabbing women by the "pussy" surely ran antithetical to the majority of evangelical Christian's views and values. To circle back to Sullivan's recent New York Times Op-Ed, her response to what many understand as a puzzle when it comes to evangelical support for Trump is simple: he ran as a Republican.

I suggest, however, that the story is more complicated, and that a better understanding might emerge if we turn to the "evils" of which evangelicals believe they are fighting. White evangelicals are less likely than they used to be to say that "strong religious beliefs" are "very important" in a presidential candidate. Further, evangelicals are less worried about morality in political leaders (Kurtzleben 2016). What are evangelicals worried about instead?

Mechanisms for Political Engagement: Economics, Culture, and Feeling

Over the last one hundred years in the United States, evangelicals have witnessed increasing economic gains, increasing political influence, and, in a country in which, by many measures, religiosity is on the decline, fairly steady attendance and membership in church. These status gains are especially evident in the Pacific Northwest⁹, where I conduct this research. Why do evangelicals continue to feel vulnerable, anxious, and unsure of their stance in the United States? Recent work indicates that evangelicals feel threatened today due to perceived loss in cultural status. For example, the more secular a community, the more likely white evangelical protestants are to vote Republican (Campbell 2006). Drawing on literature on racial threat,

⁹ Pew's Religious Landscape Survey finds that, in Washington State, evangelical protestants report higher educational attainment, and slightly more are categorized as upper-middle class compared to the nation as a whole (Pew 2015)

Campbell argues that we can similarly understand “religious threat” that evangelicals perceive in their communities. As those communities become more secular, evangelicals become more aligned with Republican politicians, who they view as best representative of their felt position in the social world. A recent study out of the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics finds that individuals, a good portion of whom we know to be evangelicals, voted for Donald Trump for president, due to a “symbolic threat that they feel” (Chokshi 2018). Diana C. Mutz, the author of the study, suggests that this symbolic threat is “not a threat to their own economic well-being; it’s a threat to their group’s dominance in our country over all” (Chokshi 2018). What drives this symbolic and religious threat, and what drives the evangelical understanding that the solution to this threat lay in support for conservative politics?

I investigate two empirical puzzles in this work. First, given what appears to be a story of continued success in the United States, especially for the evangelicals represented in this work, why do evangelicals, in our contemporary moment, feel disenfranchised and vulnerable? Second, why did this same group of evangelicals I spent two years studying vote Donald Trump—an areligious candidate on his third marriage, with a history of sexually harassing women, vulgarity and seemingly little concern for helping those in need—into office, along with the majority of evangelicals across the United States? I suggest, in the chapters to come, that we can find the answers to both questions in one. If we return to the matters that initially brought evangelicals to the fore: questions of family, gender, and sexuality, and, importantly, questions of the *white* family, and the gendered dynamics and views of sexuality within that institution of the family, we can lay bare the vulnerabilities and concerns with which evangelicals are grappling. The ways in which evangelicals are attending to cultural shifts in gender and sexuality provide insight into their feelings of vulnerability, and what they are willing to change and what they are not

provide insight into their continued conservative political engagement. Donald Trump, as a political candidate, provided evangelicals with time; he and his policies are going to stall, or even work to reverse the status gains of more marginalized groups in the United States (Cooper and Gibbens-Neff 2018; Davis 2018; Pear 2018), and while he does that, evangelicals can make sense of recent cultural changes related to gender, sexuality, family, and even race—and work to best position themselves as an institution that seeks to continue to grow and expand its membership in a moment in which they feel vulnerable and marginalized themselves.

Feelings of resentment, loss, persecution, and discontent are key to understanding politics and political behavior. Evangelicals continue to see themselves in tension with the secular world, which, unsurprisingly, continues to affect their political behavior. While economic issues are very important when it comes to political support and beliefs, “the voters’ response to economic stress is best understood against the baseline of fundamental cultural cleavages” (Kellstedt et al 1994:308). For example, while capital may have helped the formation and growth of many Christian private schools across the US, those schools were created in response to mass cultural cleavages occurring during the time. This argument, that economic decision-making is often a reflection of cultural shifts and concerns, is perhaps a precursor to Hochschild’s 2016 work, which similarly suggests that to understand the great voting paradox at the “heart” of the American Right (defined as those who seem to need the most help from the federal government, but also seem to hate it) we must acknowledge and account for the emotion of politics. Hochschild moves beyond the often-delivered puzzle on the liberal left that suggests that those on the right are voting against their own interests. Instead, Hochschild argues for the importance of understanding feelings (1979)—“a full understanding of emotion in politics” (2016:15). As Dawne Moon finds in her work on evangelical debates around homosexuality, “Rather than

discuss politics, issues had to be discussed, and experienced, in the naturalizing language of feelings” (2004:24). Feelings are central to many components of political understandings and behaviors. There is evidence for the importance of both rational/cognitive and emotional messages when individuals debate social problems (Bail et al 2017) and other research finds that emotion, during these debates, is what activates collective identities (Banks 2016). Research on support for Trump as a “lying demagogue” finds that individuals support someone who they know to be a liar when they feel that the political system is flawed; the violator of social norms of truth-telling behavior is reworked and understood as a champion for the interests of a different system (Hahl 2018). Feelings are at the center of political engagement, investment, and behavior for both seculars and evangelicals alike, but what constitutes and spurs those feelings differs.

One way to discuss and understand the importance of feelings in political and religious life is through an investigation into social position and status (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1989). The Christian Right emerged in the United States out of concerns for, and protections for a specific value set and way of life, and came together to work to influence the larger cultural arena in the United States. Many scholars thus share a mutual understanding of the collective Christian Right as “social conservatives who share a style of life and who act out of interest to preserve or defend that style of life against declines in prestige and influence” (Wood and Hughes 1984:87; Wald, Owen and Hill 1989:2). As such, Wald, Owen, and Hill suggest that sociologists might best conceptualize and understand the Christian Right through an intellectual approach that frames assumptions of status and its discontents as something that is *felt*, rather than something measurable from an objective social position (1989). The authors state that “status discontent should be treated as an attitudinal property exhibited in varying degrees by persons at all levels

of the social structure” (1989:5).¹⁰ Evangelical entrance into political life is marked by concerns over gender, sexuality, the family, and protection of the *white* family. We can understand this continued political and cultural influence (and desire to influence) as a result of economic and cultural shifts, response to these social issues, and, importantly, the feelings of disenfranchisement and discontent evangelicals feel, even when these feelings are not reflected in other measures of status gain.

I begin with a more detailed introduction to my field site, and then provide an overview of methods before I briefly discuss each chapter to present the theoretical and empirical map that will shed light on evangelical feelings today, and specifically, feelings centered on perceived changes in gender, sexuality, and the family. Evangelicals are willing to work to change with the times in an effort to uphold their cultural relevance, especially around questions and beliefs related to gender, sexuality, and the family, but these changes also come with increased anxiety, feelings of confusion and resentment, and a reinforcement of already existent inequalities and beliefs.

Researching Lakeview Church

Twelve adults sat around an outdoor fire pit, notebooks in their laps as they took in their surroundings: it was a Thursday evening in July at a bustling pub, and the outdoor eating area was swarming with guests standing and sharing beers, wait staff zooming through these crowds as they balanced heavy trays or pulled carts loaded with firewood. There were multiple fire pits

¹⁰ Indeed, the authors find that individuals not only resented their own personal social prestige, but also that of other groups and categories of people, leading them to suggest that status resentment appears to be both “corporate and referential.” Respondents linked their own level of social respect with other churchgoers, hard-working people, ministers, and law-abiding people.

where guests clustered around in chairs, outdoor tables for more private dining parties, and a few walk-up bars. Music played from speakers mounted around the outdoor complex and white lights hung from the trees, their glimmer barely yet visible in the extended light of the long summer day.

In the midst of this chaos there was quiet, as these twelve adults closed their eyes in concentration, or scribbled notes on their pads of paper before looking up at their surroundings again. This group, Disciples Journey, was visiting this restaurant as part of a local missions trip. The group calls this outing an “experiential,” and their plan was to ask God for guidance about how to best pray for those in the restaurant they had not yet met. I was there to observe them doing this.

One of the group leaders, Carrie, a 39-year-old white woman, stood up and reminded the group that they were out in the world to be “open for business. We are going to serve them [the wait staff and patrons] just like they are serving us.” Another group member, Marjorie, chimed in with a smile and said, “Our being out in the community shows we are regular people with regular lives and enjoyments. We aren’t this strange group of people!” Another group leader, Pastor Jeff, nodded and told the group that “Our goal for tonight is to notice and pray for people around you...Avoid judgmental words, and don’t be too directional. That is not part of the exercise. Focus on the positives and be encouraging. What is the cry of their heart? It is impossible for us to know, but God knows and he might reveal if we are specific in our asking.” The group clutched their notebooks and looked around them. Pastor Jeff, a 52-year-old white man, smiled and said “How many of you are terrified?” Carrie interjects and says, “Well, missionaries that go far into the field have to deal with a lot more adversity than we will tonight.” There are some murmurs of agreement, but the group does look a bit uncomfortable. Eric, a 45-year-old white

man, says “People might think we are weird! Especially because there are so many of us [in this group] in relation to the people around us.” Pastor Jeff nods and says, “Right, yes. We don’t want to look like we are all taking notes on people.”

At this moment, I felt the group’s collective gaze turn to look at me, as I took notes on these interactions from the corner. The group started making jokes such as “Yes, we don’t want to look like Sarah!” Two other women laughed and said, “Oh but we do want to be like Sarah!” There was lots of laughter as they continued to joke about the fact that I was doing an “experiential” on their experiential—what they came to call my “experiential on experiential.” We continued to joke, and then their work began.

Gaining Access and Establishing Geographic Context

On a rainy, dark January evening in the Winter of 2016, I walked through the doors of Lakeview Church and met Pastor Jeff and many others for the first time, as I attended my first night of Disciples Journey. This is not a support group for a specific problem, a concern or issue that needs to be talked through and fixed, which is what one might expect a support group to be. Rather, Disciples Journey is a support group for being an evangelical Christian. The presence of such a group is symbolic of how evangelicals feel about their place in the world: that it is one that requires support and space for negotiation and debate. Disciples Journey meets every Thursday evening to discuss something about which many in the United States are curious: what does it mean to be an evangelical Christian today?

The Pacific Northwest, often understood as a geographic region that is home to coastal elites, atheists and hipsters, is an interesting place to study evangelical life. Lakeview Church is in close proximity to the fairly progressive, a-religious city of Seattle, located in the state of Washington, a state in which 47% of its residents say they are not religious (Gallup 2017).

Washington state, by this measure, is the least religious it has ever been, a fact that perhaps makes this a great place to study evangelicals. If evangelicals, at least in part, thrive on distinction (Smith 1998), the state of Washington, and the Pacific Northwest, provide a space in which there is a heightened need to articulate difference and differentiation from the areligious (almost) majority. We can expect more interactional, identity, institutional and signaling work needs to be done here than in other communities and areas in which everyone is assumed to be religious. Washington State, and Seattle in particular, as the closest major urban center to Lakeview Church, might provide a type of “religious threat” off of which the church can respond and mold itself (Campbell 2006).

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my home institution took 9 months to approve my research, and I underwent “full review” twice; an unusual event for sociologists, but perhaps less unusual for those who study sexuality, and study sexuality qualitatively (Schilt, Meadow and Compton 2018). During the time I was waiting for final human subjects approval for this work, I made a spreadsheet of churches within reasonable driving or bus distance that had the following characteristics: 1) classification as a mega church¹¹, with over 1000 members, and 2) evidence of

¹¹ Mega-churches are variable in definition. In the United States, most understand mega-churches as those that report weekly attendance between 1000-2000 on the lower end; in South Korea, however, a mega church is one that has a weekly attendance of 10,000 or more members. (Connell 2005:316; Goh 2008). Mega-churches in the United States represent a hallmark of the contemporary evangelical movement, and often distinguish themselves from older and smaller churches through dynamic speakers, contemporary worship styles that include the addition of media, live bands with electronic instruments, international networks and missions, and informality and a casual approach to the overall atmosphere and people in it, as seen, for example, through norms about church clothing attire (Goh 2008). Often times, mega churches in the United States are known for attracting younger demographics and more highly educated parishioners (Goh 2008). An important component of the modern mega-church is the presence of small groups and church curricula. In mega churches, small groups provide an arena through which church members can develop a sense of community (Dougherty and Whitehead 2011; Smidt 2003). Frequently, these small groups are organized around a curriculum that is produced by the group, church, or a national organization.

use of a national curricula focused on sexuality, relationships, and sexual addiction. I had purchased one of these national curricula, one of the most popular of its type, via a research grant from my university. At the start of my dissertation work, I was especially interested in doing field work at a church that used this curricula because it is so widely used, and seemed to be one of the more common ways in which the church was talking about married relationships. I was interested in the church's approach to married life, as my previous research in this area generated more questions for evangelical marital support, especially around issues related to sexuality, than it did answers (Diefendorf 2015).

I came up with a list of 7 churches that fit the above criteria, qualifying as a mega-church, and including the presence of small groups and the national curricula I was originally interested in studying. I added two other local mega-churches to the list, as I wanted to visit a broad range of churches in the area before my field site was secured. This was important so that, by the time I had established a field site, I would have a sense of how the church compared to others in the area, based upon the content and topics of the Sunday sermons. The Pacific Northwest, and the city I live in, is known for its extremes when it comes to evangelical churches (Dias 2015; Paulson 2014). The now defunct Mars Hill, for example, represented an extreme for its beliefs about gendered hierarchies and its focus on promoting a somewhat violent and patriarchal masculinity, and gained national attention for such, while another evangelical church in the area made national news for its progressive stance on gay marriage and its work to welcome the LGBTQ community into their church. I wanted to locate my research in more of the ideological center of these other churches in the area. Evangelical churches encapsulate churches with a large range of beliefs in the Pacific Northwest and in the nation (Wellman 2008), so this exercise

is important to help locate this work within the vast landscape of evangelism in the United States.

I attended 7 of these 9 churches between September and December of 2015. I alternated which church I attended each Sunday, and at each, I took field notes at the Sunday sermons to help locate the church within the range of evangelical ideological beliefs in the Pacific Northwest so that I could make an informed and contextualized decision for my field site selection. When I obtained IRB approval, I sent messages to each of the 9 churches with research requests. My IRB required research approval from a church leader, broadly defined as a lead, associate, or small groups pastor. I obtained email addresses that were publically available on the church websites, and I then sent emails to church leaders, their executive assistants, associate pastors, and leaders of small groups that were promoted online. Often times, this meant I was sending research requests to multiple people within the same church at the same time.

The first email template I used is included in the text below. As a researcher and non-religious outsider to the evangelical community, I included links to press on my previous research from both secular and religious news sources. The religious news sources, such as *Christianity Today*, were most important, as they provided a review of my work and interviewed pastors who agreed with my findings. These articles helped signal that, although an outsider to the community, I have a track record of conducting respectful research on the evangelical church.

Dear _____,

My name is Sarah Diefendorf, and I am working on my PhD in Sociology at the University of Washington. I've spent the past 7 years researching men within the evangelical church, with a specific interest in how men navigate sexual temptations before marriage. This work has been published, and gotten quite a bit of media attention.

But, in the wake of that press, I've had something interesting happen. I have a lot of men, men probably very similar to those who attend your congregation, who are emailing me, asking my advice about how to navigate issues of sexuality in married life. These questions have, in part, inspired my next research project on how Evangelical couples manage sexual desires and temptations.

This research involves interviews with Evangelical leaders and experts. As part of that, I was hoping to hear your thoughts and opinions on Evangelical relationships. Given the work being done in your congregation, and your position overseeing _____, _____, and _____ at the church, I feel that my research would benefit tremendously from your insights. Interviews typically last an hour. I know you are extremely busy, and would be grateful for any time you could spare.

I've attached some of my recent press to give you a sense of my work. All of my research is confidential, and has undergone rigorous review (and approval) through our Human Subjects Department here at the University.

If you'd be willing to meet with me to talk more, I can come to _____ at a time convenient for you. I look forward to hopefully learning more from you. If the phone is easier, you can reach me at ###-###-####.

*Thank you for your time,
Sarah*

(links to press on some of my work included here)

I sent out a total of 40 initial interview requests, and received six rejections and the rest were non-responses. A bit dismayed, especially after such a long human subjects review period, I reflected on my recruitment letter. I wondered if the language I used, which included a specific focus on sex and sexuality, might be part of the problem I was experiencing in obtaining a field site. I decided to make a simple change to my recruitment letter:

Dear _____,

My name is Sarah Diefendorf, and I am working on my PhD in Sociology at the University of Washington. I've spent the past 7 years researching men within the evangelical church, with a specific interest in how men navigate temptations before marriage. This work has been published, and gotten quite a bit of media attention.

But, in the wake of that press, I've had something interesting happen. I have a lot of men, men probably very similar to those who attend your congregation, who are emailing me, asking my

advice about how to navigate married life. These questions have, in part, inspired my next research project on how Evangelical couples manage desires and temptations.

This research involves interviews with church leaders and experts. As part of that, I was hoping to hear your thoughts and opinions on how the church helps individuals and couples navigate relationships. Given the work being done in your congregation at _____, and especially in the small groups that you oversee and lead, I feel that my research would benefit tremendously from your insights. Interviews typically last an hour. I know you are extremely busy, and would be grateful for any time you could spare.

I've attached some of my recent press to give you a sense of my work. All of my research is confidential, and has undergone rigorous review (and approval) through our Human Subjects Department here at the University.

If you'd be willing to meet with me to talk more, I can come over to _____ at a time convenient for you. I look forward to hopefully learning more from you. If the phone is easier, you can reach me at ###-###-####.

*Thank you for your time,
Sarah*

(links to press on some of my work included here)

There are a couple of details worthy of additional reflection in this initial recruitment process. First, evangelicals may not respond to emails asking to research and question the church about its stance on sexuality, because, as we will see in the chapters to come, that stance is evolving and changing, and that process is not an easy one for the church. For academics, sexuality is a broad category that covers a whole set of social arrangements around it, well beyond specific types of sexual acts. I imagine that, for those who read my initial recruitment letter, sexuality signaled its most common meaning and association of sexual acts. I was, perhaps, accidentally signaling something that I did not mean to in these initial recruitment letters. Second, although I was initially worried about the need to change the wording on this email template, this project quickly turned into a project much larger than one focused specifically on questions of sexuality within the church, so the later template ended up being a more accurate reflection of my research than the first.

I sent out 13 revised interview requests and heard back from four individuals—three men and one woman—once I changed the wording of my recruitment letter by removing the words sex and sexuality. I followed up with all four individuals and conducted a couple’s interview with an associate pastor and his wife at a church the following weekend. I was especially interested, however, in the church that yielded responses from both a male and female associate pastor¹². This church, Lakeview, ended up becoming my field site.

Pastor Jeff, one of the male Associate Pastors at Lakeview Church, left me a voice mail after he emailed me in response to my interview request. Pastor Jeff told me that a few people in the church had come up to him and told him about my email, and he wanted to speak with me on the phone before he instructed them on how to respond. Interestingly, the woman associate pastor from Lakeview who reached out to me over email did not go through Pastor Jeff first, which also made me excited about the possibility of this church as a field site. I wanted to conduct research in a place where there were signs that both men and women would be open to talking to me. I also wanted to conduct fieldwork in a space where women would feel comfortable talking to me independently of the men in the church, a problem I have faced in previous work on evangelicals (see methods discussion in Diefendorf 2015), where I experienced great difficulty in interviewing women. In my previous work, men sat in on my interviews with women (their wives), and it was therefore not fully clear to me how women experienced their gendered and religious lives independent from the men in the church. I wanted to make sure that I could speak with everyone, independently, in this research.

¹² I am not very worried about a self-selection issue here. I believe this strong response was due to the number of available email addresses Lakeview provided on their website, which meant I was able to email many people involved in some capacity with the church. Part of this better response rate, too, might be due to the change in wording in my template.

When I returned Pastor Jeff's call, I included some deference on my part in the phone conversation. I apologized for sending so many emails that had generated questions among the leadership. After about 15 minutes of conversation, Pastor Jeff warmed to me, and he somewhat enthusiastically invited me to attend a small group meeting two weeks later. I made sure to explain to Pastor Jeff that I was also interested in questions of sexuality within the church, as this information was no longer explicit in my recruitment letter. Pastor Jeff responded and said the small group he was thinking of was going through a self-developed curriculum series on marriage and relationships, which "might be of interest to me." This response signaled to me that Pastor Jeff understood, or was at least open, to my research aims. Pastor Jeff was the leader of this small group and told me that he would talk to the group and make sure that all members were comfortable with the idea of my attendance. Pastor Jeff said that, if and when he obtained verbal consent from the group, I could join their meeting the following week, and that we could then "take it from there." I explained over the phone that I would also need to obtain consent from everyone in the room when I attended the first meeting in person.

I obtained written consent from group members on my first visit to this small group, Disciples Journey. Pastor Jeff had introduced me and my work the week before, so that no one attended the group that night caught off guard or surprised by my presence, and so that individuals had time to think, individually, without the presence of the rest of the group, if they felt comfortable with the idea of my attendance there as a researcher. Members of Disciples Journey were asked to reach out to Pastor Jeff if they were concerned about my presence or had any questions. They did not.

Disciples Journey

I felt very welcomed on my first night at Disciples Journey. Group members shook my hand and smiled, and over the course of the evening I engaged in many individual conversations as people approached me to formally introduce themselves and, in many cases, to ask me about my work. A few people asked me about my project specifically. One woman member asked about the requirements for my degree and how much work I had left to do. One man about the traffic and if the drive was okay, and one woman asked me where I got my shoes, and I wrote down the website for her. I introduced my project, the goals of my research, and talked about what my presence would look like in the group. I explained that I would not be asking them any questions during their group meetings, but that I would be taking notes on the events and conversations that occurred during the group meetings, and that all of this data would remain confidential. I told the group that I would not be participating in their group activities but would observe them instead. There were many moments over my two years at Lakeview that I had to remind individuals and groups that as a researcher, I was there to observe, and not fully participate in their activities.¹³

¹³ The only activity around which I received fairly consistent push-back for my lack of participation occurred at the closing of Disciples Journey meetings, when the group would pray in small groups or collectively. Group members would circle together and take turns sharing things for which they sought guidance and support. The group would then take turns praying over each other out loud, and members of the group always asked me if there was something they could pray over me for. I spent a good deal of time thinking about how to navigate these moments, especially during my first few months at Lakeview. I usually declined this invitation, but on a few nights, when the dynamics of the group were such that I felt it would be offensive to decline, I used the language of “good wishes” and would provide information about my life that didn’t add too much to what they already knew about me. For example, one evening I said, “you can send good wishes to my students, who are preparing to write their final papers for my class this week.” About 6 months in to my time with Disciples Journey, Pastor Jeff and other group members had adopted my language and would specifically ask me if there were things in my life for which I was accepting “good wishes” or “good thoughts.” This on-going interaction also highlights evangelical’s ability and desire to shift their own language in a way that best engages with secular outsiders.

Disciples Journey was founded in 2014, just the year before I began fieldwork at Lakeview. Disciples Journey was broadly defined as an adult support group, and what I came to realize during my time with them was that this was a group in which adults worked together to understand their multifaceted lives as evangelicals, as family members, as husbands and wives, as followers of Jesus, as church members, as parents, as coworkers, and as friends. Four of the group members had worked for three years to put together a curriculum that they wanted to implement in all general small groups at Lakeview, and, if successful, something they hoped to sell to other churches. Disciples Journey became the beta testers for this curriculum.

The curriculum, called Pathways, contained multiple units that represented the themes listed above. The curriculum ranged in topics and covered dating, marriage, parenting, sexuality, discipleship in the workplace, financial responsibility, emotional health, conflict resolution, relationships with Jesus, preparation for mission trips, personality tests, ways to speak across generations, and ways to speak across religious and cultural divides. Each week, the curriculum often included at-home exercises and worksheets, Bible verses that related to the themes of the week, examples, stories, and devotionals that related to the themes of the week and talking points and “experientials” for the weekly in-person meetings.

Disciples Journey met every Thursday night for two years to work through this curriculum. The group, which varied in weekly attendance from as few as 10 and as many as 24 members, met in a brightly-lit, fairly empty conference room on the church campus. The room was often set up with folding tables pushed to the perimeters, and folding chairs arranged in a circle at the center of the room. Sometimes, depending on the activity and topic for the night, the chairs were arranged in a semi-circle to face the one white board in the room. Carrie, who worked in the church during the day, often stayed after work to set up the room before the group

meeting began each week. Many weeks, depending on traffic, I would arrive early to chat with Carrie and help her set up chairs before everyone arrived.

While the group had no initial questions for me before they met me, once I had established myself in the group, I frequently received questions about my work, my teaching, and the progress of my dissertation. Group members liked to talk about my previous work on men who pledged sexual abstinence until marriage. In that work I found that the church removed small group support for these sexually abstinent men once they were married (Diefendorf 2015). When I would share these findings with group members, usually after they asked me how I came to my current project, they would nod in agreement about the importance of talking about marriage and relationships over the life course. This connection often led to dynamic and lively conversations in which they would tell me about the important work being done at Lakeview to support marriage and relationships, and many times, individuals shared stories with me about friends and family members who had struggled in similar ways to those of my former respondents. One group member edited dissertations and book manuscripts for part-time work, so enjoyed asking me about the progress on my own dissertation. The members of Disciples Journey were curious, supportive, and generally nonplused about my presence with them.

There were times when I received questions about my personal life. I most often present as a feminine woman, and didn't alter this presentation during my time at Lakeview. Each week, I wore fitted jeans with boots or flats, a business-casual blouse with a high neckline, and, depending on the temperature, a cardigan and/or a scarf. I would blow dry and straighten my shoulder-length hair, accessorize my clothing with a necklace and earrings, and sported very light eye-makeup. Due to our cultural equations of gender performance and sexual identity, I was thus usually able to avoid questions or assumptions or concerns about my sexual identity.

While I identify as a queer woman, I chose not to disclose this aspect of my life to the Lakeview community and it was not evident because of my gender normative presentation. I spent a good deal of time thinking about this decision, and consulted with Lynne Gerber, a researcher with expertise on evangelicals, who helped me come to the conclusion that for both the ease of my data collection and my own personal health, such a disclosure was not necessary for this work. However, I also feel strongly that I not blatantly lie to those who are sharing their own vulnerabilities, stories, and thoughts with me. I decided that, if I got to know someone at Lakeview well, and they asked me about my relationship history and current relationship status, I would not lie. I was only ever asked this question once, which I elaborate on in Chapter 3. These moments and questions were infrequent, because when those at Lakeview asked me questions, it was most often a strong curiosity about my own religious identity and background, which echoed my previous research experiences with evangelicals, in which questions of my religious identity often trumped questions about my gender or sexual identity (Diefendorf 2015: Moon 2004). More often than not, though, questions directed to me were about my research and teaching, something I spoke about frequently as a way to share and respect their desire that I share things with them.

Disciples Journey as a group, along with its individual members, represent a *data outcropping* (Luker 2010), a case or set of cases that is reasonably representative of the larger phenomenon I seek to investigate. That is, a small group in which men and women are engaging in dialogue and debate and support over issues, concerns, and questions related to evangelical life is a methodologically appropriate venue through which to investigate how evangelicals work to shift their beliefs in light of larger cultural shifts.

While the groups change every few months, in my two years there, there were an average of 30 small groups offered to the congregation at Lakeview every season. These groups fell and continue to fall into these major categories: community service, bible study, grief, interest groups (such as knitting), a group devoted to weight loss and family work-outs (Gerber 2011), two groups for alcoholics anonymous, one group for sexual addiction for men, one group for women whose partners deal with sexual addition, a group for Latinx families, and the rest devoted to couples and marriage.

Small groups become an interactional space through which new ideas and debates are forged, through which a sense of community is forged within the larger organization. However, small groups are not always reflective of the content and messages of larger Sunday sermons, or of the beliefs of the institution and all of the people who belong to it. That larger organization is of great interest for this work as well. I investigate the institution of the evangelical church: the content of Sunday sermons, the atmosphere, the leadership team, the congregants, and the many events and missions that combine and give meaning and context to Disciples Journey.

Larger Research Site: Lakeview Church

Lakeview Church is located in a suburban city in the Pacific Northwest, and is home to a majority white, economically and generationally diverse congregation of about 1500 members, qualifying it as a mega-church. Between 15-20% of the parishioners at Lakeview Church do not identify as white, which makes Lakeview Church about as diverse as the evangelical community that makes up the state of Washington. Evangelicals in Washington state are 84% white, 5% Black, 5% Latino and 1% Asian, and 5% Other/Mixed according to Pew's Religious Landscape Survey from 2014. Evangelicals in Washington State are more highly educated than evangelicals

across the country (Pew 2015), and Lakeview Church reflects these higher rates of education. Every person interviewed in this work completed at least some college (this is true for 35% of evangelicals across the United States) (Pew 2015). These levels of education, combined with the types of employment reported¹⁴ by those I spoke with at Lakeview, suggest that Lakeview's congregation reflects a majority middle and upper middle class population. In Washington State, 43% of evangelicals report an income over \$99,000 a year, comparable to the 42% of evangelicals across the nation (Pew 2015).

Lakeview was founded in the 1970s and still exists in the same building today. Lakeview Church was founded as a member of the FourSquare denomination. Lakeview is one of 1600 FourSquare churches in the United States and one of 66,000 FourSquare churches worldwide. Lakeview's membership in this denominational network provides a degree of generalizability to the field site unlike other non-denominational churches in the area.

The church's campus is sprawling, with massive parking lots, and a multi-storied structure that is the compilation of many additions over the building's history. In the Spring, cherry trees bloom and cover the building's boundaries in blankets of pink. Children often play tag outside in the mornings, running through the trees as their parents encourage them to come indoors. Teenagers congregate by the northern entrance to the building, and a group of young men usually toss around a football in the parking lot, to the dismay of incoming cars. Police officers are present on Sundays to ensure the easy flow of exit traffic. Small buses crowd the roundabout at the entrance, for ease in dropping off local senior citizens for the services.

¹⁴ Members of the Lakeview community worked in the technology industry, in software design, as nurses, graphic designers, in social work, for the church, in human resources, for the military, in engineering, as lawyers, and for small and large businesses.

Inside, the two main foyers of the church bustle before Sunday morning services. Lakeview offers three Sunday services and a variety of small group meetings to its parishioners. In one area, congregants gather in front of tables where small groups advertise their meetings and missions trips display photographs and ask people to contribute to their upcoming trips. Others skip these tables entirely and head straight for the donut wall, where about 100 wooden pegs protrude from the wall and hold three to four donuts each. Individuals grab donuts just as fast as the high school volunteers can replace them on the pegs, and then many often head into the second foyer and stand in line for a latte at International Java. Volunteers work behind the counters at the registers and as baristas, moving quickly below large banners that hang from the ceiling with photos that depict smiling children of color, presumably in areas outside of the United States. All proceeds from International Java go directly to Lakeview's international mission trips. For those who just want coffee, there are multiple stands set up at all entrances to Lakeview, where individuals can fill cups with coffee before entering the sanctuary.

The sanctuary at Lakeview seats 1000 individuals. There are five separate entrances to the sanctuary, and an individual greeter is stationed at each set of doors to pass out Lakeview's printed weekly bulletin to all of its members. The weekly bulletin advertises many facets of Lakeview's community life, including upcoming church events, small groups that are accepting new members, community service opportunities, youth groups, volunteer opportunities in the church, ways to contribute financially to the church, mission trips, news about the larger Foursquare denomination, Lakeview's social media presence and information, and, seasonally, information about children's summer camps. On the back page of the weekly handout, Lakeview provides space to take notes on the Sunday sermons. Sometimes, this space includes an outline of the sermon to come.

Sunday sermons at Lakeview Church have a rhythm: for the first twenty minutes, the worship team, a band of individual musicians that ranges in size each week, leads the congregation in song and prayer. The pastoral team usually stands with their families in the front rows to worship during this part of the service. The lyrics to each song are projected on to a large screen behind the stage. After the worship songs end, there is usually a series of church announcements before the Lead Pastor comes up onto the stage and Sunday sermon begins. The Lead Pastor wears a wireless headset and microphone, and uses an iPad to refer to notes for their sermon. A group of people operate a sound board at the back of the room, and another group of people operates cameras that project the Lead Pastor onto a large screen behind the stage. Often, the images on the screen toggle between live views of the Pastor, slides that include bullet points, Bible verses, or phrases from the Sunday sermon, or graphic designs that in some way relate to the theme of the sermon for the day. For example, during a sermon series titled “Jonah” an image is projected of a man on a wooden boat that floats on teal ocean water, with the outline of a massive whale resting just below the surface of the water.

During the two years I spent at Lakeview Church, I witnessed the transition between Lead Pastors Isaac and Dave. Pastor Isaac left during my first year at Lakeview after he was called to plant¹⁵ a church in another state. I did not find that this transition in leadership created large changes in the church culture (as observed by the content of Sunday sermons, church events and activities). The majority of the church leadership and staff remained during this transition, and none of the individuals I met in the initial months I was at Lakeview left in the two years I was there.

¹⁵ Church planting is a process through which a new church is established. Pastor Isaac felt that he was called by god to plant a new church and lead a new congregation.

Lakeview, with its Sunday morning routines, bustling halls and full weekly schedules represents one of many thriving evangelical churches in the United States today. Lakeview Church is a place in which evangelicals are actively debating their beliefs in changing times, and during a time in which they feel they are losing cultural sway and desperately want it back.

Data Management and Presentation

This work totals 282 hours of participant observation, in-depth interactional and interview data on 36 individual parishioners¹⁶, 10 couples, and over 1200 pages of church materials and documents. The data I present in the chapters to come has been edited to include pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, and, in a few cases, to protect parishioner's identities, I have created composite personae (Hochschild 1989; Moon 2004).

I spent over a year attending Disciples Journey and Sunday sermons before I asked parishioners attending the small group for individual interviews. After 16 months, Lakeview offered to put my interview request on the weekly bulletin that is distributed at Sunday sermons. This interview request ran for three months over the summer of 2017. These interviews introduced me to the larger church community, where I was otherwise just another body attending a large Sunday sermon.

I conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with individual members of Lakeview Church, with attention to sample regarding representation of gender, age, marital status, and race/ethnicity. I recruited members of the church for interviews via snowball sampling and advertisement through small group meetings and the church's weekly bulletin. These interviews

¹⁶ Please refer to Appendix A for a table that includes pseudonyms and demographic information for all of those interviewed for this research.

lasted between one hour and 2 hours and 20 minutes and were recorded for transcription and analysis.

I conducted participant observation at Disciples Journey to better understand the ways in which meanings around gender, sexuality, the family, and religious beliefs are produced interactionally in this space. Disciples Journey often devoted meetings to issues of gender, sexuality, and the family, so observations at this group provided insight into the ways in which church members debated these issues outside of Sunday Sermons. Like Moon found in her work on evangelical debates around sexuality, "...In church debates I found people committed to articulating their beliefs, to seeking shared moral ground—much more so than in many secular debates. By articulating to one another their logics, members reveal their grounding assumptions, allowing us to refine our understanding of what is at stake in such debates" (2004:5). Further, and importantly, religious beliefs depend on individual religious believers to reproduce them (Berger 1967; Moon 2004), and in only focusing on the content of Sunday sermons, researchers then potentially deny "that members are thinking and communicating people who learn from a variety of sources, including one another" (Moon 2004:13; Dillon 1999). My interactional observations at Disciples Journey largely formed my understanding of evangelical debates today, and provided much greater nuance, detail, and at times, contradiction, to the content of Lakeview's Sunday sermons.

During my observation of the small group, I did not ask questions as a researcher. I took detailed notes on the content of the conversations of each meeting, and the interactions between group members. On my long drives back to my home after fieldwork, I would record myself talking into my cell phone. When I arrived home, I would write up more detailed field notes

from both the notes taken during the small group meetings and the notes I would leave myself on the audio-recording.

I also interviewed evangelical dating and married couples to investigate the ways in which men and women bring gendered messages from the small group and the church to a heterosexual partnership. I recruited couples for interviews from Disciples Journey and via the announcement that went out on the weekly bulletin. These interviews typically lasted longer than the individual interviews, and ranged in duration between two hours and two hours and 50 minutes.

I attended weekly Sunday sermons at Lakeview for two years, where I documented the context of sermons, the interactions between parishioners, and the day-to-day details of church life. As a white, feminine-presenting woman, I am afforded a certain level of invisibility in the mega-church. During sermons, I took notes on the content of the sermons and overall themes and events that occurred, but not on identifiable individuals. Finally, I conducted observation at church-sanctioned events, such as barbeques, prayer meetings, holiday pageants, and parishioner-specific events, like weekend women's lunches.

I conducted inductive, iterative coding of field notes and interview transcripts based on emergent themes and patterns. I coded line-by-line, using participants' meanings to produce categories and concepts based on "local" meanings, and conducted more focused coding once themes emerged (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I wrote analytic and theoretical memos to elaborate upon emergent patterns and themes during the coding process (Emerson et al. 2011; Glaser and Strauss 1967). In the final stages of coding, I examined how my findings compared to existing research. Together with the participant observation and interviews, the overall data provide a robust ethnographic account of this religious institution.

Ethnographic fieldwork is at its best simultaneously scientific, creative, and ambitious (Nippert-Eng 2015), and allows for an in-depth understanding of a group, institution, or culture. This research on evangelical sexual politics, and my methodological approach to the questions at hand, builds on current work that seeks to understand the relationship between evangelical Christianity and support for Donald Trump through theoretical ideas (Hills 2017; Gorski 2017), historical data (Balmer et al 2017; Braunstein 2017; Gorski 2017; Edgell 2017), surveys and polls (Jung 2016; McElwee and McDaniel 2017; Whitehead et al 2018), and media analysis (Berezin 2017). My work documents the on-the-ground mechanisms, debates, and divides that work to shape this multi-faceted relationship between evangelism and conservative politics in the United States. I use this data to document contemporary evangelical debates and understandings of sexual politics in the following chapters:

I begin by arguing that the rhetoric of the “culture wars” that I discuss here in the introduction can obscure the fact that both evangelical and secular worlds constitute each other, especially around meanings and beliefs related to gender and sexuality. I introduce theoretical models of religion that help explain the endurance of evangelism in the United States and build on Smith’s concept of the umbrella (1998) to argue that one of the best places to look at these negotiations that keep evangelicals culturally relevant is around questions of gender and sexuality. I provide an overview of research on evangelical women and men’s beliefs and behaviors related to gender and sexuality that find that evangelical Christians have nuanced and varied responses to questions of gender and sexuality. This work underscores the overlap between evangelical and secular beliefs and values. This overlap provides an understanding that when evangelicals are grappling with their beliefs during times of change, they are not doing so in isolation. The literature at the intersections of religion, gender and sexuality also highlights the

need to take a multi-level approach to studies of gender and sexuality within the evangelical church. I suggest that the pairing of Gallagher's *reinterpretation thesis* and a model of gender relations (Connell 1987; Schippers 2007) can help frame current evangelical debates around gender and sexuality within the church and help articulate when and why evangelicals are willing to negotiate these issues.

In my first empirical chapter, I argue that the church grapples with changes in understandings of gender and sexuality against the backdrop of what I call an *imagined secular* world. The *imagined secular* is a world full of non-religious individuals who push for access to abortion, trans rights, gay rights, deviant sex, and marriages void of God (e.g. not appropriate marriages). As the evangelical church finds itself in flux, it is constructing its own identity in relation to a perceived outside identity: that of the non-religious, secular, outsider. Evangelicals evoke the *imagined secular* in their debates about gender and sexuality in the church today, as a way of defining their own contemporary religious identities. This chapter details this construction of the *imagined secular* through three evangelical responses to feminism: constructions of an evangelical feminism, seeking a middle ground, and rejecting feminism. I argue that the church creates space for and encourages a type of "messiness" that allows for these varied responses to feminist beliefs, but that these varied responses all seem to suggest that evangelicals are not very willing to budge when it comes to gendered change. I suggest that feminist scholars must continue to recognize this messiness and the beliefs it reproduces to understand contemporary evangelical gender and sexual politics, which provides a transition point to the final two empirical chapters of the dissertation.

While the *imagined secular* world is discussed in Chapter 3 in detail as it relates to feminist discourses and debates in the church, the next two chapters focus on two key aspects of

evangelical identity that are often left unexamined: whiteness and heterosexuality. Much like there is a “messiness” associated with, and in fact central to, evangelical debates about feminism and sexism (and really, about questions of gender and the family), there is also quite a bit of discussion, confusion, and movement around questions related to whiteness and heterosexuality. While those who suggest Trump works as a secular protector (Gorski 2017) and a secular protector that evokes a sense of Christian nationalism (Whitehead et al 2018) are correct, this work does not document the ways in which that understanding of protection is collectively reached, nor does it leave much room, in its implications, for an understanding of evangelicals as needing protection because they are *changing*; rather, it suggests that evangelicals seek protection for a way of life that is under threat. While evangelicals at Lakeview do express feelings of Christian stigma, suffering, and threat to their way of life, they are also actively working to bring people in to the church, and to appear welcoming in light of the myriad cultural shifts around them.

Evangelical political action is most intensely spurred when the *white* evangelical family appears to be under attack. While white evangelicals have experienced individual economic gains, educational gains, and as a whole, tremendous religious growth in the United States, they feel threatened. Along with others, I will argue that how evangelicals *feel* they are doing matters quite a bit as well. To understand contemporary evangelical politics, we must understand how evangelicals feel they are doing in the social world, and how they feel the social world is doing. In Chapter Four, my findings suggest that these feelings are intimately tied to notions of, and protections of, whiteness. Lakeview church encourages conversations around race within the church, but these conversations are individualistic in their approach, and relegated to the “outside” world. Whiteness, at Lakeview Church, is set up as something that can be “taken for

granted” (Frankenberg 1993; Tranby and Hartmann 2008). The evangelical church today and the rise of the Christian Right, are born out of a history of racism. However, the majority of white evangelical churches today do not operate on blatant messages of racial dominance or exclusion. Rather, whiteness is established and normalized through discourses of individualistic and loving approaches to everyone that mask, ignore, and dismiss larger structural issues, and, in some cases, place blame for issues related to race on already marginalized communities. Scholars can apply the concept of the white spatial imaginary—often used to study urban environments—to a majority white suburban church, to help theorize the normalization of whiteness that occurs in these spaces. Applying the concept of the white spatial imaginary to our understandings of race within the church provide analytical leverage that help us better understand the relationship between evangelicals, support for Trump, and their desire to reinforce and uphold norms of whiteness, specifically through the use of the concept of the “spectacle”: raced moments that both attract attention and provided misdirection from the larger structural inequalities at play in the world outside of the white church. The data I present in this chapter suggest that the imagined secular world is created within the white spatial imaginary. White evangelical understandings of the array of liberal projects that they actively debate and discuss, as outlined in Chapter 3, are created in a predominately white space, and a white space that has little knowledge of the lives and experiences of people of color.

In my final empirical chapter, Chapter 5, I argue that scholars and pundits have not thoroughly or critically interrogated the relationship between white evangelicals’ overwhelming support for Donald Trump and their dual support for, and reinforcement of, heterosexuality. I suggest that this relationship has been ignored, because the tactics of evangelicals have shifted. The relationship between sexuality and conservative religious politics has also been ignored in

recent efforts to understand evangelical Christian support for Trump because academics have not fully incorporated theoretical and empirical acknowledgements of sex and sexuality as an organizing principle of social life (Seidman 1994). Heterosexuality remains central to evangelical identity today, but the means of supporting and encouraging this identity have shifted. Evangelicals at Lakeview have moved their collective umbrella (Smith 1998) to one that is working to protect and understand singleness, coupledness, and heterosexual marriage. Evangelicals assert Christian family as a privileged identity, but whereas before that was primarily contrasted to homosexuality, today it is being contrasted to a secular heterosexuality that is part of the *imagined secular* world. This allows evangelicals to retain a privileged position while jettisoning some of the associations with homophobia. While this may lead some to think that evangelicals have lost that facet of the culture war, I document the ways in which they reassert these inequalities through a focus on heterosexuality.

In the second part of this chapter, I discuss two themes that emerge in evangelical conversations around heterosexuality: 1) singleness and 2) containments of sex. Both of these themes highlight a larger anxiety at play in the church. I conclude by suggesting that this anxiety, and confusion and focus on heterosexuality, intertwined with conversations about same-sex desire, help us understand evangelical sexual politics in the contemporary world. Evangelicals are trying to figure out a way to maintain a status hierarchy around sexuality that is stripped of its more hostile connotations. Like their treatment of race, evangelicals profess acceptance while latching on to and reinforcing a privileged position.

While Donald Trump provided evangelicals with a rhetoric centered on whiteness and individual-level approaches to systematic problems, he also promised evangelicals the gift of time: I argue that Donald Trump works as a symbol to keep the *imagined secular* world at bay,

while evangelicals refocus their efforts on their constructions and defense of heterosexuality. While some scholars (see Gorski 2017) assert similar claims about evangelical support for Trump, this work provides the data that highlights the mechanisms for that support. This work also highlights that evangelicals are not seeking protection to remain unchanged and frozen in the social world; rather, Trump bought them time while they reconcile core beliefs around gender and sexuality so that they can work to hold on to a cultural status they feel they are losing.

CHAPTER 2: THEORY

The founders of modern evangelism in the United States successfully created a space between fundamentalism and liberalism, and the history of this space was provided in the introduction. Evangelicals have “invited a variety of religious players to move into that space” to participate in the “identity work and mission being accomplished there” (Smith 1998:15). We are still witnessing that collective identity work today. And, this is not just identity work, though—it is identity work within a space that carries with it much larger meanings indicative of societal cultural debates and the institutional and political work that shapes a nation.

The ability for evangelicals to maintain this space in the cultural landscape of the United States is understood as a theoretical puzzle for scholars of religion and sociology. Many predicted that the remnants and results of industrialization and modernization, such as the vast changes we witnessed in the 1950s-1970s in the United States, would result in a decline in the significance of religion in public life (Bruce 2002; Stark and Bainbridge 1985). This line of work argues that wake of modernization, religion and religious life would wane. For example, Berger provides a conceptual model of a “sacred canopy,” (Berger 1967) a sacredly defined cultural milieu that sustains a distinct worldview and envelops and protects members from “anomic chaos and terror” (Smith 1998:106). Berger argues that this sacred canopy is torn apart by modernity, providing a vivid image of the destructive force modernity might have on religious life (1967).

Others suggest that we have seen strong evidence of resurgence in religion in public life and argue that this is because religions and religious groups, such as American evangelicals, thrive on distinction (Bartowski 1996; Smith 1998). For example, evangelicals hold on to certain beliefs precisely because they work as one of the few markers that distinguish them from non-

evangelicals (Gallagher 2004a). This distinction provides meaning to, and sustains the group in times of change.

A theory of subcultural identity might provide reason for evangelical's continued religious success in the United States (Smith 1998). This theoretical framework suggests that a religious movement that unites both clear cultural distinction *and* intense social engagement will be capable of thriving in a pluralistic, modern society. One of the ways that social groups, and indeed religious groups, provide their members with identity and meaning is by "inculcating in them a normative and moral orientation to life and the world" (Smith 1998:90). Another way of saying this, is that social groups know who they are in large measure by knowing who they are not. And this way of knowing, and orienting to the world, is an ongoing social achievement, which Smith argues is accomplished through processes of social interaction (Smith 1998). These interactions produce and negotiation symbols that mark differences between insiders and outsiders and is an ongoing and interactive group process. As Smith argues, "religious traditions have always strategically renegotiated their collective identities by continually reformulating the ways their constructed orthodoxies engage the changing sociocultural environments they confront" (1998:97). As such, groups that are better at constructing these distinct identities, and doing so in times of change, will grow in size and strength, whereas those who have difficulty will grow relatively weaker. Evangelicals, then, thrive because they are quite good at creating these in and out group boundaries, and, because as a collective, they have the ability to "sustain the articulation of the tradition's essential orthodoxy in a reformulated way appropriate for their given context" (Smith 1998:101).

Smith suggests that we can imagine this continued thriving through the image of a sacred umbrella. Here, Smith is riffing off of Berger (1967), and suggests that while canopies are

expansive and immobile, and importantly held up by props that extend well beyond the people they cover, umbrellas, in contrast, are small, handheld, and portable. They are the pieces of that broken canopy, shattered by modernization, that the founders of modern day evangelism picked back up and remanufactured. When the fundamentalists retreated following the conclusion and press around the Scopes Trial, their canopy in collapse, other evangelicals picked up the torn pieces, and found new spaces for them in the social world. These sacred umbrellas provide individuals with small and accessible and relational worlds, under which, their beliefs can make complete sense (Smith 1998:106).

This concept of the sacred umbrella, understood in Smith's larger argument, that evangelicalism is strong because it is, or at least perceives itself to be, "embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it" (Smith 1998:89) raises some questions. Smith continues to say that "evangelicalism...thrives on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat" (1998:89). However, in the same study, Smith states that his interviews with evangelicals "generally did not perceive that the dominant culture was preventing them from practicing the kind of lifestyle they were committed to—nor were they concerned about America turning from God centered on the loss of social status that they were suffering or would have suffered as a consequence" (1998:84). While the imagery of the sacred umbrella makes a lot of sense for the purposes of this study, I would first like to discuss what it fails to encapsulate. While Smith provides an outline for the potential malleability of evangelical faith, he does not capture it, nor suggest, through his findings, how and when such malleability is necessary. The external threat, off of which the umbrella and identity of evangelicals is created, seems to be fairly absent from this work.

We must also critically interrogate the boundaries around debates and beliefs and presumed divides between religious and secular life in the United States today. Gallagher outlines a paradigm, what she calls *abandoning, reinterpreting, and using tradition*, and what I will shorten to the *reinterpretation thesis*, to argue that, in the face of modernity and the changes that come with it, certain religious traditions are abandoned within the church, but importantly adds that other traditions do remain, and, further and most importantly, are then infused with new meanings (2004). The *reinterpretation thesis* places more emphasis on individual agency, as Gallagher argues that evangelicals “actively sort, sift, and synthesize religious beliefs in a way that compliments contemporary life” (Gallagher 2004:12). This thesis articulates that evangelical and secular worlds are perhaps not separate worlds at all, and helps provide a language to articulate the ways in which evangelicals within the church might mobilize during times of change, during moments when it seems as though they need to move their umbrella.

Regardless of their presumed differences in beliefs and values, both religious and secular communities mutually influence and constitute the other. Calhoun argues that thinking about religion and secularization as distinct assumes a false dichotomy. Rather, secularization is not something that is “left when religion fades” but rather a “presence” that affects religion, religious life, and American culture (2012:335). As Moon argues, “Considering how many Americans attend worship services regularly...it stands to reason that religious views would inform secular debates and vice versa” (2004:4). A variety of scholarship finds that evangelical identity is often constructed in relation to perceptions of secular ideals. For example, evangelical men involved in the Promise Keeper’s movement create a “godly masculinity” that is understood in relation to a secular masculinity (Bartowski 1996). In evangelical crisis pregnancy centers, evangelical women volunteers actively engage with secular gendered norms as a way of constructing their

own identity as evangelical women (Kelly 2012). Finally, men who pledge sexual abstinence until marriage construct a sacred sexuality against what they understand to be a beastly sexuality of the secular world (Diefendorf 2015). When studying evangelicals, we must account for this interplay between religious and secular beliefs, the malleability and the moments of tension and compromise.

This work documents the malleability of evangelical faith and life, the negotiations and tensions that cause evangelicals to move their umbrellas. This imagery of the umbrella as a metaphor is helpful, because it gets us to understand these religious groups, and the cultural spaces they occupy, as moving spaces, and as spaces that are, in part, created as a result of the world outside of it. If we are to extend Smith's metaphor, an umbrella is only required when it rains; evangelicals use their umbrellas, and rely on them for understanding in the world, because they do not live in the type of Christian Nation they envision. They need to provide maintenance checks on their umbrellas during times of social change, when they feel as though new or differing social norms are raining down on them.

The umbrella metaphor also signals the idea of protection, and protection from the outside world, which sounds more reminiscent of a fundamentalist Christian's interaction with and understanding of the secular world. Others posit that the relationship between the contemporary secular and evangelical religious worlds in the United States is more nuanced, and argue that American [secular] culture is a locus of evangelical identity formation, and even aspiration (Gerber 2011). As Moon finds in her research on evangelical understandings of homosexuality, "...church was not separate from secular life, but a place where people went, in part, to learn how to be better persons in the secular world" (2004:4). The best way to approach and understand evangelical life, and evangelical endurance, in this contemporary moment, is to

understand, in line with Smith, that evangelicals thrive on a distinction that relies on a constant renegotiation of boundaries (1998), but that this distinction often builds on, and is in reaction to, and informed by, the outside world.

Smith's work seems to suggest that the "external threats" of broader American culture are minimal to evangelical's day to day livelihood and ability to worship and grow¹⁷. Twenty years later, evangelicals at Lakeview Church are actively debating the external threats to their livelihood, of which they are very concerned. My understanding and conceptualization of the *imagined* secular that I introduce in Chapter 3—a symbolic bundled set of issues to which evangelicals are opposed—might be understood partially as what Smith calls these "external threats" but what is different is that this is not an external other that they do not engage with—they do not put up their umbrellas to protect from the rains of secularism around them. Rather, evangelicals are actively engaging with their own boundaries, and their own boundaries as they relate to this outside world. These boundaries are increasingly malleable, especially during moments of great perceived change in the larger social landscape (Dillon and Wink 2007; Edgell et al 2006; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Pachuki et al 2007).

Evangelicals do not always thrive on distinction (Smith 1998). That distinction causes anxiety, concern for the future durability of the church, and uncertainty about where their beliefs should and do fall during times of change. This work builds off of Smith, and extends his metaphor, in an effort to highlight how and when the umbrella starts to move, the negotiations

¹⁷ Smith states, for example, that "Nor were their concerns about American turning from God centered on the loss of social status that *they* were suffering or would suffer as a consequence. The issue of evangelical social status was noticeably absent from their language and logic—status concerns hardly seemed to enter their minds, even when we specifically asked about them. Instead, their concerns about America's turn from God focused almost exclusively on the deleterious social and spiritual consequences they believed that *other* individuals and *the nation* as a whole would suffer as a result" (1998:84).

around those moves, the hesitations, the inconsistencies. This umbrella, or umbrellas, that make up evangelical faith are not unified, nor are their moves. Rather, this work documents the back and forth, the tugging, that helps highlight what evangelicals care most about. And, how and when this umbrella starts to move can also shed light on some of the issues that may have been most pertinent in the last presidential election, and the issues that continue to keep evangelicals and conservative political groups and leaders intertwined.

The umbrellas, the symbolic boundaries around contemporary evangelical life, shift in reaction to the secular world, and the boundaries of the secular world move in reaction to the evangelical world, too. Evangelical distinction can be simultaneously heightened and thrown into question during these times. The space that evangelicals hold between fundamentalists and liberal life in the United States can start to blur, especially around the very questions that brought that space into being 100 years ago. This space becomes an arena that must constantly be interrogated during times of change. And this space, because of its malleability, must be understood as something in flux—something that contains within it certain disjunctures and surprises that might not map neatly onto political and religious ideologies. The utility and necessity of framing research on the contemporary evangelical church through metaphors of space and malleability become clearer when we look at current research on evangelical gendered beliefs.

What the Language of “Culture War” Masks: Contemporary Evangelical Approaches to Questions of Sexuality and Gender

As the emergence of the “culture wars” suggests, evangelicals’ collective entrance into public life is intimately connected to discourses around the family, gender, and sexuality. The rhetoric of the “culture wars” that describe evangelicals’ engagement with public life, however,

sets up an assumption of opposition. That is, in using the language of war, we envision two ideological camps with vastly different views, and competing goals to help spread those views. However, much research on evangelicals' understandings of gender, sexuality, and the family, documents vast differences from secular life, and *also* finds great nuance and variation in approaches to these issues. Further, this work finds that contrary to theories of secularization, evangelicals and seculars mutually constitute the other. The overlap between evangelical Christian and secular ideals, as well as internal varied responses within the evangelical church, matter for our theoretical approach to studying the intersections of gender, sexuality, and religious life.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will present an overview of research on contemporary evangelicals' engagement with questions of gender and sexuality. I will highlight the complexities of these findings, and argue that we must study both evangelical men and women together, and do so in a way that allows for understandings of agency on the part of both men and women in conservative religious institutions.

Sociologists of religion and sociologists of gender are in conversation about the ways in which to best approach questions of gender and sexuality in the church (Avishai and Irby 2017). I will use both sociological theories of religion and sociological theories of gender and sexuality to help bridge what are often practiced as two separate research agendas. I will argue that to best research and understand contemporary debates in the evangelical church, Gallagher's *reinterpretation thesis* and a model of gender relations (Connell 1987; Schippers 2007) are most fruitful. I will conclude by providing an overview of my approach to questions of individual and institutional reflexivity in this project, and will suggest that the theoretical framing for this work is well-suited to answer calls for critical feminist reflexivity in ethnographies.

Gender Essentialism and Headship in the Evangelical Church: Alternatives and Disruptions

The relationship and dynamic between evangelical religious and secular belief formation is increasingly complicated when looking at evangelical gendered beliefs. There are two basic tenets of evangelism that shape evangelical understandings of gender: a belief in 1) gender essentialism—that gender differences are a reflection of God’s creation, and 2) headship—that part of God’s ordained characteristics for men and women include that men are the authority within the household, family life, and society (Bartowski 2001; Gallagher 2004a; Kelly 2012; Scholz 2005). In light of these beliefs, evangelical women are understood to submit to men’s authority (Griffith 1997). Some argue that white evangelical women are upholding a patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti 1998), accepting gendered beliefs that disadvantage women overall, while maximizing their individual power and options. However, much research finds that evangelical women’s responses to these beliefs suggest a more complicated interplay between gendered and religious values (Brasher 1998; Gallagher 2003; Gallagher 2004a; Griffith 1997; Ingersoll 2002; Kelly 2012; Schreiber 2008; Stacy and Gerard 1990). And, much work finds that evangelical men, even when engaging in practices that might challenge norms of gender, work to reinforce gender essentialist ideals in new and different ways.

Evangelical Men

There is a good deal of work that focuses on evangelical men and their understandings of gender and sexuality. Generally, such work on evangelical men documents practices that may seem transgressive, especially in relation to norms of gender essentialism. However, just as much of this work finds that these gendered practices do little to challenge boundaries and hierarchies

(Diefendorf 2015; Wilkins 2009). For example, evangelical men who engage in erotic cross-dressing and pegging practices construct an understanding of gender that Burke (2014) calls *gender omniscience*, whereby men are able to justify non-normative sexual practices through a discourse that places emphasis on God's all-knowing certainty in their heterosexuality and masculinity. In ex-gay therapies, the "healing" of homosexual men is done through a "doing" of hegemonically masculine behaviors and interactions (Robinson and Spivey 2007). Evangelical ex-gay ministries employ "queerish" strategies that ground gender essentialism in creation, and thus highlight the ability of gender to change, while also maintaining a commitment to heterosexual normativity through these strategies (Gerber 2008).

Work on the Promise Keepers movement finds evidence of a variety of "strategic possibilities" for men to resolve a perceived tension between an understood "natural" male role and contemporary pressures that challenge the assumed inherent nature of such roles (Donovan 1998). Such strategies allow for more flexibility and sensitivity within domestic spheres while simultaneously allowing for the persistence of hegemonic masculinity under this same "vener of sensitivity" (1998, 826). Similarly, Heath (2003) argues that the Promise Keepers movement fosters what she calls "soft-boiled masculinity:" a gender strategy that includes the embrace of more egalitarian gender values at the individual level while leaving larger structures that reinforce men's power unquestioned. Donovan argues that the Promise Keepers movement might best illustrate what Schwalbe (1996) terms "loose essentialism," the idea that men can change through redefining feminine traits as masculine. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) posit that evangelical Christian men may be the "quintessential example" of this concept of "loose essentialism."

The concept of evangelical men's "loose essentialism" provides an example of a larger and more recent work to address constructions of masculinity at multiple levels of analysis. More recent theoretical work on hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2012) conceptualizes masculinities as influencing each other through micro-level processes, and understand masculinities as incorporating a variety of practices to create the most appropriate strategies for the reproduction of patriarchy (see also Demetriou 2001).

Hybrid masculinity is a theoretical extension of these recent articulations of hegemonic masculinity, and this framing focuses on the ways that (mostly) straight, young, white men selectively incorporate performances of masculinity that are historically, structurally, and culturally associated with nonhegemonic masculinities (Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014, 250). Hybrid masculinities both acknowledge the relational effects of nonhegemonic masculinities while also highlighting the ways that these incorporations often work to reinforce hegemonic ideals. Through methods of "strategic borrowing" and "discursive distancing," men create symbolic distance between themselves and hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously aligning themselves with it via more subtle means (Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014). In other words, in only attending to micro-level practices, we may see a story of difference or transgression (Deutsch 2007) or non-normative behavior within these evangelical spaces (such as sexual abstinence (Diefendorf 2015) pegging or cross-dressing among evangelical men (Burke 2014;2016). However, when we also incorporate structural and cultural elements into our understandings of the production of gender and sexuality, we may find that such seemingly transgressive behaviors actually work to reinforce a larger gender hegemony.

Evangelical men question, rework, and maintain gendered and sexual norms within the church through a variety of behaviors that suggest a certain degree of variability in acceptability. For example, even for men who are not sexually active, conversations and attention to discourses around sexuality work to boast their masculinity (Diefendorf 2015; Wilkins 2009). Wilkins' interviews with men who have pledged abstinence until marriage serve as an example of this concept of hybrid masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Wilkins (2009) finds that in emphasizing that sexual abstinence is a *choice*, men are able to maintain their authority and credibility as hegemonically masculine. In place of sexual activity, these men enact "collective performances of temptation," through which they strategically emphasize the difficulty in abstaining from sexual activity and thus reassert themselves as highly sexual men. As Wilkins suggests, these men are able to "claim heterosexual desire in the absence of heterosexual practice" (2009:354). Evangelical men are able to maintain the gendered systems that give them interactional power in creative ways not necessarily afforded to evangelical women.

Evangelical Women

Evangelical women are those frequently caught in the middle of the Christian conservative culture war over gender (Ingersoll 2002); however, research that focuses on gender at the institutional level misses some variation in gendered practices at the interactional level. As work on evangelical men finds that interactional behaviors do little to challenge larger structural forces, research on evangelical women also highlights the need to take a multi-level analytical approach to studying gender and sexuality.

Much of the work on women in religiously conservative institutions assumes that religious institutions do not provide an arena in which women can enact their gendered identities

in ways that are both institutionally appropriate *and* agentic (Avishai 2008; Cadge 2004; Pridelli 2004; Scheible and Fleischmann 2013); in other words, our work often assumes that conservative religious women, due to their membership in a religious group that privileges the rights of men over women, lack agency. This research, in its theoretical assumptions, and therefore research questions and design, highlight a larger mistake we make when studying conservative religious women: we assume that men's agency and identity is not threatened by the organizations and institutions with which they interact, and that women are inherently silenced, conflicted and non-agentic within these spaces. When we look at the every day gendered practices of many evangelical women, we see that, much like evangelical men, these women approach gendered beliefs in ways that challenge our normative assumptions.

Evangelical women navigate a complex system of gendered and religious beliefs, but, much like evangelical men, understand norms of gender essentialism and headship in surprising ways. Some find that evangelical notions of headship are largely symbolic (Gallagher 2004a), and others add that norms of headship are abandoned when concerns and safety for women come to the fore (Kelly 2012). For example, Kelly interviews evangelical women who volunteer in crisis pregnancy centers and finds that it is the women volunteers' belief in gender essentialism that allows women to advocate for other women. When clients enter these crisis centers, evangelical women encourage them not to return to their male partners if they are unhappy. Secondly, these same evangelical volunteers protect women clients from male partners who are acting in a coercive manner when it comes to decisions around abortion. These evangelical women honor a gender essentialist understanding that, as women, they have a special role in their ability to understand other pregnant women; simultaneously, and perhaps even because of gender essentialist beliefs, their submission is not inevitable. The volunteers are fulfilling a role

unique to women, and as such, their views as women take priority over men's in this context. Kelly's respondents act in a way that suggests that "what God gives men, evangelical women may take away" (2012:224).

While evangelical norms of headship reveal rifts in day to day practices, research also documents that evangelical beliefs in gender essentialism can be reworked in ways that empower the women who espouse those beliefs in headship (Brasher 1998; Griffith 1997). Ethnographic research on a women's charismatic prayer group finds that women adhere to roles as submissive wives, and thus align with men-centered gender essentialist beliefs. However, this same understanding of gender essentialism also opens up the opportunity for these women as religious "soldiers" (Griffith 1997). These women believe they are more attuned to emotional and spiritual thinking as women, and are therefore best positioned on the front lines of the "spiritual warfare" with which they feel they are engaging in (and against) in the contemporary secular world (Griffith 1997). Others argue that much of this work focuses on those who are in positions of power within the church, and thus represent a skewed vision of the very complicated "gender battles" that conservative Christian women face (Ingersoll 2002).

While some of these beliefs may seem contradictory, approaching this work with what Avishai calls an "active frame of doing" (2008) allows us to see that evangelical women are agentic in conservative religious spaces. Avishai argues that we should move beyond the "paradox approach" when studying women in conservative religious institutions, that assumes a juxtaposition between agency and complicity, and instead frame women's participation in religious institutions as an agentic "doing" of religion (2008). My research centers the complexity that characterizes the intersections of gendered and religious beliefs (Avishai, Gerber

and Randles 2012; Irby 2014; Ingersoll 2002). We will see this more explicitly in Chapter 3 in evangelical discussions and debates around feminism and sexism.

Research on evangelical men and evangelical women documents the unique ways in which conservative religious individuals navigate beliefs of gender essentialism and headship. These findings document the many varied approaches to questions of gender within the evangelical church, and reinforce the importance of approaching this work with the *reinterpretation thesis*, which allows room to acknowledge the ways in which evangelical and secular ideals are combined and navigated to approach the world, and a theoretical space to account for shifts, inconsistencies, and changes in evangelical beliefs (Smith 1998).

A theoretical approach to Gender and Sexuality: Gender Relationality in the Church

As Burke (2016) notes, scholars in critical heterosexuality studies have long documented the ways in which religion historically contributed to constructions of heterosexuality. However, these scholars tend to ignore religion as a “modern force” of heterosexuality (2016:5). Religion and heterosexuality are deeply intertwined in the United States, and, our theoretical understandings of gender and gender relations are deeply intertwined with theoretical understandings of heterosexuality as well (Connell 1987; Schippers 2007).

Gender is understood as something produced at the individual (Chodorow 2005), interactional (West and Zimmerman 1987), and structural levels (Connell 1987; Martin 2004; Risman 2004) of the social world. Connell outlines a four-part structural model for gender relations that helps lay bare the ways in which gender is forged at all levels of society. Connell defines the social structure as the constraints that lie in a given form of a social organization (1987). These constraints, Connell argues, operate on social practice through a complex interplay

of powers, and through an array of social institutions. These structures—labor, power, cathexis, and symbolic relations(Connell 2002)—operate in different ways and through different means, but none of these structures can be independent of the other. Connell’s theoretical concept of the structure of cathexis describes the “emotional, even erotic dimension” to social relationships. These sexual-social relationships are organized in terms of prohibitions, and on two principles: 1) objects of desire are generally defined by the dichotomy and opposition of feminine and masculine, and 2) sexual practice is mainly organized in couple relationships.

The structure of cathexis nicely frames evangelical tenets of gender essentialism; central to evangelical gendered belief is the belief and practice of gendered difference and opposition, and an opposition that structures family and everyday life. Second, this gendered difference is often most institutionalized through the practice of heterosexuality, and a heterosexuality enacted in couples’ married lives. Connell also argues that this “erotic reciprocity” in heterosexuality is based on an unequal exchange, in which men receive and reinforce more power and status than women.

This work has been extended more recently. To begin to analyze these gender relations, Schippers argues that we must first acknowledge, in line with Butler (1990), that heterosexual desire is the binding force between masculinity and femininity¹⁸, and that such binding results in both a binary and hierarchical relationship (Connell 1987; Schippers 2007). While the relationship between masculinity and heterosexual desire and practice has been studied and well documented, Schippers argues that heterosexual desire is also the “basis of the *difference*

¹⁸ This work aligns with other queer theoretical scholarship that calls for a more serious understanding of the nonnormative alignments of gender and sexuality, and understanding their intersections as both “performed and performative in nature (Valocchi 2005), while also understanding sexuality in our larger understandings of social and cultural organization (Seidman 1994, 1996).

between and complementarity of masculinity and femininity” (2007:90). In other words, while gender difference is institutionalized (Schippers 2007), so is what Schippers calls *gender relationality*. The relational character of heterosexual desire allows for the establishment of symbolic meaning between men and women that in turn legitimate men’s dominance over women. The ways in which *both* men and women, as social actors, interact relationally around the axis of heterosexuality, is understudied. In Chapter 3, I document the ways in which evangelical couples understand their gendered identities in the context of a heterosexual relationship when questions of feminism and sexism come to the fore.

Indeed, a key feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual (Connell 1987; 1992; Wilkins 2009). Heterosexuality is understood through a gendered language of desires and drives that are often “uncontrollable” and “relentless” among young men (Wilkins 2009). Hegemonically masculine men are considered to be highly sexual beings who exert a certain amount of control over women, who are seen as less sexual beings. This link between hegemonic masculinity and sexual practice is well documented (e.g., Fine et al 1997; Flood 2008; Hinojosa 2010; Pascoe 2011; Renold 2007; Thorne 1993). An ethnographic study masculinity and sexuality in high school highlights the abundance of sexualized discourse present in interactions between young men, or what Pascoe (2011) calls “compulsive heterosexuality.” Such innuendo and bravado are not indicative of sexual desire, nor just a way to be “one of the guys” (Pascoe 2011: 86). Rather, these interactions serve as a way in which young men symbolically display their power over women in an effort to reinforce their masculinity (Fine et al. 1997; Pascoe 2011; Renold 2007; Rich 1980; Thorne 1993). As Kimmel (2008) finds through interviews with men in *Guyland*, “the actual experience of sex pales in comparison to the experience of talking about sex” (2008: 206). For men in the contemporary

United States, sexual activity isn't only important for pleasure or intimacy, but for the ways it works to reinforce ideals of hegemonic masculinity. In Chapters 4 and 5, I discuss how evangelical men and women relate to Donald Trump through a language of sexual brokenness and sexual redemption, an understanding that reinforces normative definitions of masculinity and one that also works through a gendered rhetoric of sexuality that is pervasive in evangelical communities.

Women, however, are often described as facing a “double-standard” with sexuality; women are expected to be virginal and pure while also heterosexually desirable. Tolman interviews girls in high school about sexual desire, looking to investigate what Fine aptly called “the missing discourse of desire” (Fine 1988; Tolman 2005). Tolman finds what she calls a narrative of “dilemmas of desire;” that is, while many of young women experience sexual desire, due to the social gendered constructions of sexuality, they used one of two strategies, either shutting down or being ambivalent about desire, to negotiate the perceived and felt disconnect between their own desires and the societal expectations for those desires. This does not seem to disappear with age. For example, contemporary college women are expected to be sexually active within the hookup culture, but remain a virginal “good girl” in relationships in their twenties, which sets up a dichotomy in which some women adopt a strategy of “splitting,” separating felt sexual desire from committed relationships (Bell 2013). Women are stigmatized for having casual sex while men are applauded for it (Armstrong, England, and Forgarty 2012; Kimmel 2005). To succeed at emphasized, or hegemonic femininity, is to appropriately balance this double standard; to entertain sexual desire, and discuss it in the way men do, is *pariah* (Schippers 2007). How evangelical women negotiate conversations around sexuality, and

heterosexuality, and simultaneously uphold normative enactments of femininity and is part of the focus of Chapter 5.

When women embody qualities of pariah femininity, Shippers argues they are *not* masculine—they are coded as feminine, as they are understood as undesirable.¹ As Halberstam argues (1998), women can engage with these masculine characteristics as a form of oppositional culture, which in turn can act as a building block for hegemonically masculine men. As such, Schippers suggests that specific features of hegemonic masculinity, as investigated through empirical explorations, may be identified by finding and identifying these pariah femininities (2007). In this sense, investigating the ways in which women are read as disrupting the gender hegemony can tell us something about the creation of that hegemony itself, which in turn emphasizes the need to study both men and women together when asking questions about the construction of gender and sexuality.

The relationship between gender relations and the larger social structures in which they are embedded is an ongoing theoretical debate. Connell suggests that too often, scholars look to the one on one relationships and interactions between individual social actors, or to society as a whole, when investigating questions of gender, with the one notable exception of the family. Connell seems to remedy this theoretical gap, and stresses the importance of looking at the intermediate level of social organization to understand gender relations (1987). Connell urges others to investigate other intermediate levels of organization, and suggests that to do so, gender must first be conceptualized as a social institution (Connell 1987; Martin 2004), which draws attention to practices, power, the material body, acknowledgements of disjuncture, conflict, and in totality challenges the micro-macro dualisms present in much theorization of gender. If we are able to conceptualize gender as a social structure, we can better pay attention to its multiple

dimensions. Social structures affect individuals, but individuals also affect the social structure (Giddens 1984; Risman 2004). This structured approach to questions of gender allow for attention to the mutually reinforcing relationships between individual interaction and the social world within which such interactions take place.

Sociologists have documented the myriad ways in which gender is accomplished interactionally, and in a variety of institutional settings, such as the family (Brines 1994; Coltrane 1989; Dalton and Bielby 2000; Erickson 2005; Pyke 1996; Ridgeway 2011), the workplace (Ridgeway 2011; Schilt 2006; Schilt and Westbrook 2009), schools (Pascoe 2011; Thorne 1993), sport (see Messner 2005 for a review), and through new media (Ward 2008), the body (Courtenay 2000; Dozier 2005), and the relationship to sexuality (Kimmel 2008; Pascoe 2011; Loe 2006; Ward 2008). Aspects of gendered production within the evangelical church have been documented, to varying degrees (Burke 2016; Ezren 2006; Gerber 2011). However, much of this work often focuses on either men or women in methodological approach and/or analysis. When we research gender and sexuality in the evangelical church, we must study both men and women together, to fully grasp the intricacies of alternatives, disruptions, transgressions and reinforcing of norms that work together to produce understandings of gender and sexuality in the church today. This research seeks to better understand the relational component between men and women that contributes to gender hegemony.

Sociologists have not yet adequately explored the construction of gender in the evangelical church, which is a problem because such inquiries will lend insight into the ways in which a significant portion of the US population produces, reproduces, and navigates issues of gender and sexuality—and how these questions and constructs of gender and sexuality help inform the boundaries around which evangelicals' sacred umbrellas are constructed.

This research investigates the hegemonic understandings of masculinity and femininity in the evangelical church. I document and analyze *gender relationality* within the evangelical church, commonly characterized by heterosexual desire. This work will approach these intersections of gender and sexuality by studying both men and women at the individual, interactional, and structural levels of analyses, and doing such will both highlight that gender is a process (Pascoe 2007), and a process that may or may not include alternatives and disruptions. I compare these gendered understandings with larger understandings of gender and sexuality in the United States to highlight which constructions are unique to evangelical spaces. Finally, I question whether documented differences in behavior, practice, and understanding translate into challenges to contemporary inequalities.

In taking a tri-fold approach to the study of gender relationality within the evangelical church, this work frames these findings through the reinterpretation thesis: individuals in the evangelical church abandon some traditions and shift the meanings of many of the traditions that do remain in the face of great change; and attending to these shifts both highlights the multi-dimensions of gender construction both within and outside of church walls. This construction, and the debates around them, can help inform the ways in which evangelicals work to maintain, protect, and in some cases, shift the cultural space they have created in the United States. To answer the call in the recent special issue of *Gender and Society*, in “treating neither religion nor gender as a variable, but rather examining their complex intersections...” (2015:13) is to better understand both evangelical culture and larger discourse in the contemporary United States around issues of gender and sexuality.

Sexual politics and gender inequality are intertwined. One should not be sidelined to the other (Connell 1987). To study gender in the evangelical church, or any other social institution,

is to also study and question norms around sexuality, and the ways in which those norms are enforced, understood, upheld, and questioned. However, unlike other social institutions, constructions of gender and sexuality within the evangelical church are explicitly related to larger political goals. The ways in which evangelicals navigate questions of gender and sexuality provides insight to their willingness to change, the anxiety that comes with these changes, and the beliefs, structures, and inequalities that endure during said times of change.

Conducting Feminist Ethnography; A note on reflexivities:

Earlier, foundational theories of gender and feminist work are critiqued for the inherent white, middle-class bias that systematically ignores the ways in which people, and specifically women, of different races, ethnicities, classes, and sexualities experience gender. West and Fenstermaker build off of the “doing gender” framework, and argue for its continued importance, with new caveats: specifically, the authors argue for the concept of *simultaneity*, the idea that all situated contexts (interactions) are not only gendered, but raced and classed as well, and experienced by all social actors, regardless of their race, class, and gender (1995). This initial call for a removal of such bias goes hand in hand with a growing call for intersectionality (Crenshaw 1997; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1994; Nakano-Glenn 1994; Nakano-Glenn 1999; West and Fenstermaker 1995) to document the ways in which gender, class, race, and sexuality are experienced simultaneously (Pyke 1996; Schilt 2006; Ward 2008). This literature also addresses the power imbalances between researchers and subjects that are often inherent in producing social knowledge. These critiques of feminist methods and knowledge production have led to critical reflections on the part of the researcher, with special attention to feminist researcher’s historical tendency toward knowledge production from often privileged social

positions (Avishai, Gerber and Randles 2012). I acknowledge and practice individual reflexivity in this work, through a continued acknowledgement of my own social positions, and how those social positions affect my position in the field, my interactions in the field, and my analysis of my data.

More recently, scholars suggest that we incorporate both an individual reflexivity, as well as an institutional reflexivity, into feminist ethnographies. Avishai, Gerber and Randles (2012) use their experiences studying conservative social spaces to argue that the merging of feminist political and analytical aims can affect a feminist researcher's ability to make sense of "feminism's political and cultural opponents" (2012:396). The authors argue that conservative social spaces are especially important sites through which a "feminist ethnographer's dilemma" is forged, questioned, and potentially dismantled, as such sites require the feminist researcher to study subjects who may not identify with feminism as a political project, "but whose lives and life chances have been shaped by the possibilities and limitations feminism generates" (Avishai et al. 2012:417). The authors urge "progressive ethnographers" to critically investigate these conservative social spaces, but to do so with 1) a resistance toward any temptation to impose *a priori* feminist frameworks, 2) theoretical frameworks that are grounded in empirical realities rather than political opposition to the communities in question, and 3) be open to possibilities that both ideologies and practices that may seem nonfeminist (or even antifeminist) may contain feminist influences, and do not need to be compatible with feminist orthodoxies (Avishai et al. 2012). I argue that both Gallagher's *reinterpretation thesis* and a theoretical understanding of gender relations allow for an approach to the field that assumes a mutual constitution of meaning between conservative and less-conservative social spaces, privilege's assumptions of both

women's and men's individual agency within these spaces, and does so without expectations of anti-feminist *or* feminist beliefs.

There is a tendency among feminist researchers that both individual and institutional moments of reflexivity appear in the appendices and margins of text and thought. I work to weave these critical acknowledgements throughout the text to come. These critical interrogations are especially important (and present) in Chapter 3, "Evangelical Responses to Feminism and the Imagined Secular."

The state of knowledge on gender and religion suggest that religious institutions are places in which both men and women enact gendered dynamics in ways that can both uphold and disrupt larger gendered inequalities. This literature also highlights the importance of talking to both men and women to understand the ways in which gender is forged relationally in religious spaces, and how this is related to sexuality and heterosexuality. I combine this relational model of gender with my methodologically reflective and ethnographic approach, which made it possible for me to see the surprising connections between evangelical understandings of gender, the family, sexuality, and race and politics. This work documents a local set of evangelical understandings of the world because I was able to observe people in the context of their religious institution, and interview them about their multi-faceted thoughts and beliefs, all of which are the subjects of the chapters to come.

As Edgell posits in her recent statement on the agenda for research on religion in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, "How do religion, race, gender, sexuality, class and other aspects of social location intersect to constitute people's understandings of their identities and interests?" Edgell is among the only recent scholars to ask for an investigation into the relationship between questions of gender, sexuality, and conservative religious politics in light of

the election of President Trump. My research begins to answer this call in documenting these intersecting social positions and identities in larger conversations around evangelical life and support for Donald Trump. Importantly, though, this work not only documents this identity work within the church. This identity work occurs within a space that carries with it much larger meanings indicative of societal cultural debates and the institutional and political work that shapes a nation.

CHAPTER 3: The Imagined Secular: Evangelical Responses to Feminism

A wooden outline of Mt. Rainier and its surrounding foothills decorates the back of an illuminated stage. Blue and green lights flash over the installation, paying homage to the colors of the nearest beloved NFL team. The worship band, comprised of younger and older adults alike, finishes leading a song while the 500 or so adults in the sanctuary sing a “praise song,” standing in reverence with their arms raised to the ceiling. The final line of the song, “*you lay down your life that I would be set free, oh Jesus I sing for all that you’ve done for me*” fades and begins to mix with the sounds of clapping and hollering. An Associate Pastor comes to the stage and makes a joke about the upcoming Super Bowl and high consumption of processed cheese. He then announces that the church will host a Lady’s Lunch the following weekend. “This is for the women only. I’m sure there will be delicious food [pauses to think]...what do women eat? Dainty foods. Yes, probably something dainty.” He laughs before exiting the stage, and the congregation laughs in response.

Pastor Dave replaces him, and before he starts his weekly sermon, begins by saying “For all the feminists in the room, I want to start by acknowledging that men and women eat the same food.” A good portion of the room laughs, cheers, and claps in response. He then adds “Wow, feminism is alive and well out here. [pause, laughter]. For some of you, I bet that in just hearing the F word, you just switched churches in your head! Ocean Side [other church name], here I come!” There is more laughter and applause before the sermon begins.

This seemingly innocent joke about food and women highlights a larger central tension in the contemporary American evangelical church involving changing mores of gender and sexuality. Meanings of gender and sexuality have changed dramatically in the last 50 years: LGBTQ people have the right to marry and birth control and the sexual revolution have altered

our approaches to sexuality and family formation. More recently, women's issues have been at the center of the largest protests in US history (Chenoweth and Pressman 2017).

I began this project with a research focus on evangelical debates related to gender and sexuality. As my entry to Lakeview Church was with a small group dedicated broadly to evangelical identity today, I was able to gain a larger sense of evangelical understandings about their place in the world. However, in this chapter, I begin with the questions that brought me to the field. I will focus specifically on evangelical group formation in relation to the secular community in the United States, a relationship in part defined by moral debates about sexuality, gender, and the family.

In this chapter, I argue that the church grapples with changes in understandings of gender and sexuality against the backdrop of an *imagined secular*¹⁹ world. The *imagined secular* is a world full of non-religious individuals who push for access to abortion, trans rights, gay rights, deviant sex, and marriages void of God (e.g. not appropriate marriages). As the evangelical church finds itself in flux, it is constructing its own identity in relation to a perceived outside identity: that of the non-religious, secular, outsider. This identity construction within the church is much larger than a question of one church's identity, though: the work Lakeview is doing to understand its place in the United States today is about much larger questions of competing cultures and competing discourses.

¹⁹ This term is also used in Badran's (2005) work in a different context to mean an imagined future in which a nation was more secular than religious. Calhoun uses the term "secular imaginary" to describe social institutions in which "the relevant explanations of their operations are all this-worldly" (2012:338). The phrase and its variations are used more widely to describe these tensions and divides between religious and secular worlds, such as Avishai's (2008) work in which she describes the looming presence of the "secular Other" in her interviews with Orthodox Jewish women. I acknowledge the influence of this work on my own thinking, but argue for a very specific definition of this concept in my work.

The *imagined secular* symbolizes a bundled set of issues to which evangelicals are opposed, and this imagined other helps define and set the terms and symbolic boundaries for their current debates. My research suggests that any mention of one aspect of this imagined other brings the secular to the fore in its entirety, including the very real felt anxiety that such an outside world will infringe on the ways of life evangelical Americans seek to protect. In this chapter, I present data on one aspect of this imagined secular world: feminism²⁰.

Evangelical responses to feminism illuminate and evoke the *imagined secular* world. I find that evangelicals respond to feminism in one of three ways: by creating an evangelical feminism, seeking a middle ground, or rejecting feminism. What this data reveals is that the actual definition of feminism doesn't matter. Rather, feminism works as a symbol that is part of the larger *imagined secular* world, and thus demands that evangelicals grapple with it. However, I also find that the church creates space for, and encourages a type of "messiness"²¹ that allows individuals to grapple with feminism, and allows for these varied responses to feminist beliefs. Lakeview Church is not saying that feminism is bad; rather, different discourses exist in the church around the relationship between feminism and the *imagined secular*. In this chapter, I

²⁰ Feminist discourses within the evangelical church were not on my radar when I began fieldwork in the late Fall of 2015. It was not until the joking between pastors on that Super Bowl Sunday in February of 2017 that I amended my semi-structured interview schedule and included questions about feminism and feminist beliefs in the church (Charmaz 2014; Glaser and Straus 1967). I asked these questions in an open-ended manner to ensure that I left plenty of room for response for what seemed to be an emerging dialogue in the church. Respondents provided a range of reactions to the question, and, most importantly, these questions brought a variety of other topics to the fore. The connections these parishioners made between feminism and the other themes described below highlight a larger cultural moment in which the evangelical church is currently situated.

²¹ I use the term "messiness" as it comes directly from an individual, Pastor Dave, that I observed in this project. Pastor Dave's word choice echoes a call made by Jodi O'Brien that sociologists might benefit from acknowledging the "messiness" that informs our scholarship—the contradictions, tensions, and ambiguity present in our findings—what she calls an "epistemology of contradictions" (2010:471).

unpack these variant discourses around feminism, one symbol of the *imagined secular* world that evokes a whole range of responses—messiness—within one church. Feminist scholars must continue to recognize this messiness to understand contemporary evangelical gender and sexual politics.

The Relationship Between Evangelism and Feminism

For many evangelicals, feminist beliefs directly contradict norms around the family, gender, and sexuality. Some of the existing research on conservative Christian religious responses to the feminist movement finds that, for evangelicals, second-wave feminism was understood as hostile to evangelical life and values (Gallagher 2003; 2004a; 2004b), specifically promoting a form of selfishness that detracts from the important focus on the family. Feminist tenets also run counter to evangelical norms of gender essentialism and headship, as discussed in Chapter 2 (Bartowski 2001; Gallagher 2004a; Kelly 2012; Scholz 2005).

Lakeview Church's leadership frequently demonstrates the centrality of their beliefs in headship and gender essentialism. For example, on a sunny April morning in 2016, Associate Pastor Rachel climbed the small stairs to the stage after the worship team finished twenty minutes of singing. Pastor Rachel, a 39-year-old white woman, lead a morning prayer for the congregation before she told the guys to “shut their ears off” to get the attention of the women in the congregation. Rachel then lamented to the women in the audience that “the guys have been showing us up, and that can't happen!” Rachel was referring to the many men's events that the church had hosted so far that year, all of which reported consistent and large attendance. The women in the audience laughed and clapped and continued to do so as Rachel reminded the congregation of an upcoming women's luncheon in an effort to drum up excitement about the

event. This encouragement for a gendered division of space is not necessarily counter to some feminist values. However, this consistent encouragement and upholding of gender difference is part of a larger normalization and enforcement of gender essentialism, especially as it relates to marriage and the family.

The Lead Pastor of Lakeview at the time, Pastor Isaac, spoke that same Sunday, on an analysis of 1 Peter 3.1-3.8 to provide guidance for parishioners around marriage. Pastor Isaac honed in on verse 3.7²², the verse on the “weaker partner” in his words. Pastor Isaac, with his almost invisible wireless headset, pearl snap shirt, big smile and gelled hair, told the congregation that this verse means “not weaker as in less but weaker as in delicate, fragile, and beautiful. It’s simple what women need. You want to be loved. And men, at the end of the day, we need to be respected.” Pastor Isaac then turned his upper body to look at one of the many screens in the room, which lit up with a projection of “What Peter said to Wives: Submit to your husbands²³.” Pastor Isaac went over verses 3.1-3.5 in his own words, and further elaborated on the statement on the screen by encouraging the women in the audience to “Submit to your husbands! Win them over with purity and reverence.” Pastor Isaac then added that “Beauty should come from your inner self...In the culture we live in, sisters, I feel for you because every message we get says the opposite of that.” Pastor Isaac provided a biblical justification for women’s submission to men’s headship and did so in a larger sermon about the gender differences central to a marriage at Lakeview. Pastor Isaac also suggested an understanding for

²² From the King James Version of the Bible: “Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.”

²³ Pastor Isaac is referring to verse 3.1, from the King James Version of the Bible: “Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives.”

the pressures women face from the social world in regard to standards of beauty and constructions and performances of femininity. In one sermon, Pastor Isaac elaborates on a tension consistently documented in my time at Lakeview regarding parishioner's navigation of gendered beliefs: they contain contradictions, inconsistencies, and sometimes hidden reinforcements of larger gendered inequalities, much like the social world at large.

Pastor Isaac's sermon on marriage reveals the problems inherent in theoretical work that assumes that evangelical and secular communities exist and operate along lines of opposition. For example, some work documents many evangelical women who do identify as feminist but find it difficult to pair their religious beliefs with their own feminist identities (Brasher 1998; Scanzoni and Hardesty 1992). Gallagher (2004b; 460) finds that very few evangelical women are engaged in "any sort of culture war with feminism." Rather, almost two thirds of the evangelical women respondents showed a cautious appreciation for the feminist movement and the accompanying rights gains for women, such as shedding light on issues of domestic abuse. Gallagher (2004b) frames these findings as a focus on the personal and individual gains of women, rather than an acknowledgement of the fight for structural inequalities in the United States.

This individualistic appreciation for the feminist movement is due, in part, to the class and race privilege of many evangelical women that can ignore the larger structural inequalities specific to working class women and women of color (Gallagher 2004b). The second wave feminist movement is critiqued for its privileging of white women's concerns over others, and, secondly, then understanding those concerns as representative of the concerns of all women. Evangelical women are not alone in their selective appreciation and read of feminist dialogue and beliefs. Feminism has long contained exclusionary components. Feminism, as a political

identity, body of thought, and approach to the world, mirrors the interests and needs of those voicing their feminist beliefs, and we should not think of evangelicals as operating differently.

When it comes to the contemporary “culture wars” feminism may not be the most divisive issue. However, previous research on evangelical responses to feminism, as shown through the interplay between gender essentialist and more feminist tenets, highlight a continued exchange between evangelical and more secular beliefs. As such, looking at evangelical responses to feminism today provides an interesting place to investigate how evangelicals are responding to larger shifts in gender and sexuality in the US. What evangelicals do and do not adopt, from the secular world, can help highlight contemporary rifts in American culture. The act of moving the umbrella (Smith 1998) is a messy one. Within the church, there exists a wide range of responses to feminism that highlight the church’s willingness to provide space for debate and a simultaneous hesitancy to promote changes in the gendered order.

A Church and Nation in Flux: Establishing Messiness

The pastoral team at Lakeview Church is asking its congregants to think about a question about which many are curious: what does it mean to be an evangelical today? The church, in questioning its beliefs of the past, is setting the stage for conversations about its current beliefs and how they might shift. In September of 2017, the relatively new Lead Pastor, Pastor Dave, started his sermon by providing the congregation with a list of actions that were until recently illegal, an example being interracial marriage. He ended with a sigh and “Lord, forgive us for having that mindset.” The church is willing to change its views regarding a racialized

heterosexuality²⁴ (in this narrow instance, at least) but, as I will discuss, seems less willing to do so when it comes to the gendered components of heterosexuality.

While Pastor Dave began with a statement of inclusion, or at least a nod to the blatant racist and exclusionary practices of the past, Pastor Dave followed this statement by asking the church to imagine attending an institution that is so liberal that it is “accepting of every lifestyle.” The Pastor reminded the congregation that there is a right and wrong way to do things; and, if, as evangelicals, they aren’t careful, they, too, will “go there” [become too accepting]. So, what is Lakeview to do, instead? Pastor Dave ended the Sunday Sermon by stating that their church is a “messy church”; messy, much like history, as reflected in the laws Pastor Dave reminded the audience were once applauded and now understood as ridiculous. Pastor Dave added that the church will continue to be messy because it is full of people, and thus suggests that the congregation embrace this messiness in changing times.

This messiness is reflected in the varied responses and feelings parishioners have towards feminism. Creations of the *imagined secular* do not only occur from the pulpit. In mega churches such as Lakeview, it is misleading to understand the content of a Sunday Sermon as emblematic of the entirety of the congregation’s beliefs. Mega-churches often rely on a large number of small groups, such as Disciples Journey, which vary in their size, commitments, and themes, to establish a sense of community that many seek in religious spaces. Interviews and small groups provide a methodologically rich space to study interactions and debates within the church. In this chapter, I use data from my participant observation in Disciples Journey, along with individuals and couples’ interviews with parishioners and church leaders, to provide insight in to that

²⁴ In Chapter 4, I suggest that evangelical understandings and individualized approaches to, and normalizations of, whiteness, allow for nods to these discussions of race, but in ways that do little to destabilize racist views within the church.

“messiness” with which the current evangelical church is grappling. The “contradictions, tension, and ambiguity” (O’Brien 2010:471) present in the totality of these responses reinforces the importance of ethnographic work. If I were to only rely on Disciples Journey’s thoughts on feminism, or took Pastor Dave’s statements about feminism as reflective of the entirety congregation, I would miss the variation in responses, and its importance, to evangelicals at Lakeview today.

Evangelical Responses to Feminism

I present three different responses to feminism at Lakeview Church: constructions of an evangelical feminism, those that seek a middle ground between their feminist and religious beliefs, and those who reject feminism. In presenting this typology of evangelical responses to feminism, there still exists complicated overlap between them. An evangelical response to feminism, much like evangelical responses to many current topics related to gender and sexuality, is not unified or clear-cut. However, what they all have in common is an understanding of an *imagined secular* world that forms their reactions.

An Evangelical Feminism

The following church parishioners identify as feminists. However, when I asked these individuals about feminism and their feminist beliefs, the *imagined secular* is immediately invoked, in their response that include their beliefs on gay rights, politics, and concerns about protecting the family. Katherine, a 55-year-old, white recently divorced woman and member of Disciples Journey, describes Jesus Christ as a “‘radical feminist.’ I mean, he’s letting Mary sit there at his feet. ‘Here, go! Go serve, woman!’ You know? ‘Go away!’ You know? So, the first

time he claimed to be the son of God out loud was not just to a woman, but a woman of ill repute and a Samaritan.”

I ask Katherine if she identifies as a radical feminist, as she explained Jesus that way, and, if because of that, she thinks she is in the minority at Lakeview. She responds:

I don't know. I really don't know. I think, probably. I think we welcome people in. But, the gay rights issue, I'd have to say I don't believe in gay marriage, unless it's classified marriage as differently in terms of whether it's a social marriage or a covenant...I don't think that God has a problem with gays. The thing is that, the problems with gay marriage and divorce and all these things, they are a satanic attack on the family.

Later, Katherine adds that, “The family group is a good thing, but if you have somebody that's not a good persuasion sexually in your family, you don't deny them your family. You don't deny them if they don't believe in Christ. Jesus wasn't gonna do that kind of thing.”

Katherine describes Jesus as a radical feminist²⁵. There is a large disconnect between a radical feminist agenda and the protection of a nuclear family set-up. Further, Katherine employs a somewhat liberal stance on feminism and gay rights at first, justifying and understanding her beliefs in relation to what she believes Jesus would do in a similar situation. Katherine, however, also draws quick connections between feminism, gay marriage, and “satanic attacks on the family,” even as someone who herself identifies as a radical feminist.

We can conclude with a degree of certainty that two different understandings of radical feminism are at play here. That is, Katherine's definition of radical feminism differs from someone who identifies as a radical feminist outside of the church. In contrast to many of her fellow parishioner's beliefs, Katherine may indeed see her views as “radical.” Further, Katherine also has a particular view of Jesus as radical. Jesus is a symbol that gets reworked

²⁵ Radical feminism is a strand of feminism notable for its positioning of patriarchy and its destruction as its central goal.

in many points in Christian history (Prothero 2003). Similarly, Katherine is making feminism palatable by making Jesus a feminist.

I interviewed Maggie, a white, married mother in her mid-thirties, with a master's degree in early childhood education, who is currently out of the paid workforce while she raises her children. Maggie is using her background and expertise to start up a group for mothers of young children at Lakeview. I met Maggie on a July morning in 2016 while her children were attending a summer Bible camp at Lakeview. Maggie told me about her recent negotiations with her husband around child care, and the frustration she was experiencing that morning with her children. I asked Maggie many follow-up questions about her family and her frustrations, and in the context of these questions, Maggie told me that she identifies as a feminist. Maggie jumped to politics and gay rights when I asked her more about this identification. Maggie said,

[T]he church I had ties with growing up literally stood up and said this is who you are voting for. And I think a lot of churches still do that. So, I think I prefer that a little bit, and I think he [Pastor Dave] is very aware of that, and with some of those things like gay rights, I think he almost just tried to not go there, good or bad I'm not sure. Sometimes you know it would be nice to hear a little bit like, from the Bible, but I don't know, can you tie that in, can you find something to talk about Hillary or Trump for the Bible, I'm not sure how that would sway us one way or the other [laughs].

Maggie, somewhat in jest, acknowledges that, in order to fully understand her feminism and the current political and cultural climate, she needs more guidance from both the church and the Bible. She also highlights what she sees as a disconnect between the Bible and our last presidential election. Both Katherine and Maggie, who identify as feminists, are also quick to bring up politics, gay rights and family life when discussing their feminisms. It is common to have feminism, and a feminist identity, stand in for, and encapsulate a multitude of beliefs and orientation to the world. For example, many feminists draw quick linkages between a patriarchal culture and sexual inequalities (Ferguson 1981; Freedman and Thorne 1984; Shulman 1980).

However, for these evangelicals who identify as feminist, they understand their feminism in relation to aspects of the *imagined secular* world, a world that exists outside of their own, and one to which they must respond.

Along with a host of parishioners at Lakeview Church, the Lead Pastor at Lakeview often embraces feminist statements in his sermons. In the summer of 2017, Pastor Dave began the Sunday sermon with an update on his children. Pastor Dave was ruminating on a recent conversation with his oldest daughters about career options. He shared the following sentiment with the congregation, much like he had shared with his daughters earlier that week: “I think it’s ridiculous that women are not paid the same amount as men, and not afforded the same opportunities as men, in our country. And if that’s not your theology this isn’t your church.” Pastor Dave delivered a feminist statement for equal pay and rights. People cheered when Pastor Dave, red in the face and visibly upset at the world his daughters were born in to, exclaimed this to the crowd. Pastor Dave then, somewhat under his breath and with a smile on his face, joked “I mean come on, we’re not Baptists!”

Such sentiment, and distancing from seemingly more conservative religious groups, is an increasingly common phenomenon at Lakeview. Evangelical Christians continue to get pushed to the political center, at least in dialogue, if not in action. I argue that we will start to see increasing work within the church to both establish and distance itself within larger conservative religious communities. If Lakeview, and other evangelical religious institutions, want to engage with the messiness of change, they will need to do so with open doors, and do so at a great distance from those who are perceived to be on the far Right in a nation divided.²⁶

²⁶ It may be that this distancing is connected to geographic location. Lakeview Church, and other prominent evangelical churches in the Pacific Northwest, may do more “distancing” work than a

For those who embrace feminism at Lakeview, feminism is understood as central to gender equality in the workplace, not slut-shaming women (in Katherine's discussion of Mary) and a certain form of kindness and acceptance of difference, in Katherine's discussion of Jesus and the Samaritans. However, not all parishioners at Lakeview are quick to accept Pastor Dave's and other Lakeview feminist's ideals.

Seeking a Middle Ground

Many individuals at Lakeview acknowledge feminist ideals, but actively work to distance themselves from them. This distancing, as echoed in the words of respondents, often includes an embracing of certain feminist ideals and beliefs as well. I interviewed Becky, a 52-year old Mexican-American woman, and a member of Disciples Journey, on an unusually warm spring afternoon. Becky and I met at a Starbucks of her choice on her day off from her new job as a receptionist. Becky, who jokingly describes herself as a "half tree-hugger" devotes quite a bit of her week to her essential oils and earth-friendly home cleaners businesses, but mainly uses both of those business opportunities to get discounts for her family and her friends. Becky tells me that selling those products does not bring in consistent money. While we waited for our drinks, Becky struck up a friendly and lively conversation with the barista. She looked at the barista's name tag and called her by her name—a small moment that highlights Becky's outgoing and warm personality. When we got our drinks, Becky pulled a metal straw out of her purse and gave me "her spiel" on the environmental and health concerns related to the copious numbers of plastic straws we use and discard daily. While we walked to a nearby park to enjoy the first

church in a more politically conservative part of the country, as a way of attracting and retaining more liberal congregants.

sunny warm day of Spring, Becky joked that she cannot identify as a “full tree-hugger” as she hasn’t been dedicated to the environment her entire life. While Becky creates personal stipulations around her environmental and activist identity, she fully and happily identifies as a Christ-loving evangelical.

We sat together on a park bench, and over the course of a 2-hour interview, I asked Becky about her thoughts on feminism. Becky responded to my question with a story. Becky told me that, at her previous church, the lead pastor left quickly in the midst of a financial scandal, and the church needed to find a quick interim replacement for him. Becky told me that the church hired a female pastor, and that she was “not hip to that.” Becky described getting to know this female pastor quite well, as Becky was working as a staff assistant for the church during this time. Becky told me that this blossoming relationship with the female pastor changed her thoughts on women in positions of leadership:

She was actually the pastor of, uh, Lutheran Central, which is all the socially supportive [church]. You know, it’s the gay-lesbian church, they support all those causes, so that was kind of, probably a softening for me. You know, it gave me some softening to my thoughts about a female pastor... You know, I believe in equality... on the feminist side, I want to be given an opportunity just like anybody else. I have something valuable to say, potentially, just like anybody else, regardless if I am a woman, or black, or white, or gay, or whatever.

Becky espouses certain feminist beliefs for her rights and the rights of others, and, at the same time, Becky also sees a disconnect between feminism and the traditional family life she considers ideal. Becky’s response suggests ambivalence, as feminism stokes fears about shifts in the heterosexual nuclear family:

So, for me, I want the church to be open to that [feminism], but at the same point in time, I think in the nuclear of the family, yes. It should be that triangle.²⁷ We’re both corners of that triangle, and God is leading us to the right solution...it’s more about a partnership

²⁷ Becky is referring to a relationship between husband, wife, and God.

than taking my stand as a woman. I just, I don't want people to take a stand because they're a woman, or take a stand because they're gay, or to take a stand because they're black. I want people to be people and be treated right because they're people.

For many evangelicals, their particular forms of sexual normativity and gender normativity are so intertwined that perceived components of feminism threaten both the gendered order and their understandings of heterosexuality. I will document and discuss the centrality of heterosexuality to these fears and anxieties in Chapter 5. Becky also rejects identity politics in her response, invoking a statement similar in its sentiment to “All Lives Matter.” Becky wants to be treated equally because she is a human, not because she is a woman. This rejection of difference is central to evangelical understandings of race, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4.

I interviewed Darren, a white 29-year old male social worker, after Sunday services one morning. Darren wears thick, hip glasses, has sleeves of tattoos on both arms, and lovingly smiles at his wife, Annie, who sits next to him while he talks. Darren brings up trans rights and bathroom bills²⁸ when asked about feminism. Darren, in part of a larger conversation during a couple's interview, discusses what he sees as a “fine line” between being caring, loving, and accepting of people as Christians, and society becoming too thin-skinned. For Darren, “feminism and social justice have contributed to this [society becoming thin-skinned].” Darren adds, “don't get me wrong, I am accepting of trans rights and using bathrooms, but this whole ‘did you just assume my gender’ is too far.” Darren talks about seeing individuals in service worker positions (the example he provides is Starbucks baristas) who have their preferred gender pronoun on their

²⁸ A “bathroom bill” is the commonly used name for legislation that defines access to public restrooms by transgender individuals.

nametags. These nametags are helpful for Darren, as someone who is “trying to learn,” but who gets frustrated when individuals get mad when people mis-gender them.

For Darren, a question about feminism brings up debates central to understandings of gender and sexuality in the United States today. However, Darren’s response is in many ways quite different from others who bring up a variety of issues, like abortion, and gay marriage, as examples of progressive and liberal causes they do NOT agree with. Here, feminism for Darren evokes a progressive cause he with which he *does* agree. Even if Darren complains about people being thin-skinned, his response also illustrates the complicated interplay between evangelical and secular beliefs that do not neatly align into separate camps, as the rhetoric of the “culture wars” might suggest.

Debates over trans rights and a focus on bathrooms are examples of “gender panics” where conversations about trans individuals access to sex-segregated spaces is partially about trans rights, but more largely, about core beliefs on what it is to be a man and a woman in the United States today (Schilt and Westbrook 2015). In a follow-up question, I asked Darren if he had experienced trans individuals getting angry for “assuming their gender.” Darren had not had that experience. This is the *imagined secular*; questions of feminism invoke the topics of bathroom bills and trans rights, as well as perceived, but not actualized or experienced, anger on the part of those trans folks as well. This imagined anger was so powerful for Darren that it shaped his stance on an issue, even though he has never experienced this type of interaction with a trans individual. Both Becky and Darren espouse some feminist beliefs, but work to distance themselves from a feminist identity due to concerns about what else feminism represents in a changing world.

While Darren and Becky's responses do not embrace feminism in their sentiments, they highlight just how far to the political and ideological center the evangelical right has been pushed in conversations about gender and sexuality. The word feminism evoked responses on gay rights, trans rights, women in leadership, equal pay, and debates around family life and the nuclear family. The *imagined secular* world, as a catch-all for what evangelicals see as liberal ideals, evokes a broad range of responses to feminism within the evangelical community.

We see this connection between feminism and concerns about a changing world in Disciples Journey. The night after the 2016 Presidential election, Disciples Journey held a special "prayer and brainstorming session" during what they felt was a season of transition, both in regard to the presidential election, and the church, which was undergoing a shift in some of its leadership, in the transition from Pastor Isaac to Pastor Dave. This prayer night was, at best, unclear in its goals. The church, in praying for a "changing" nation, was leaving space for the messiness it is encouraging. Indeed, in the small group that night, I watched some rejoice over the election results, while others appeared worried and distressed in their facial expressions and tone.

After we all arrived, the group spent 30 minutes praying for the nation. Joe, a white 52-year-old, led the group in an impromptu prayer. Joe started by suggesting to the group that they pray for those in the church, and that they pray for those not yet in the church. Emily, an Asian-American 29-year-old, added that they also "pray for those that we can go out and attack!" The election night seemed to mobilize excitement about evangelizing, or, in Emily's words, "attacking" those not in the church, or those who are not espousing an evangelical worldview. There were many tears, and some conversations about being able to sleep again at night. A few individuals employed in the military sector expressed a renewed sense of job security due to

Trump's pro-war stance. This started a lengthy conversation on the connection to job security and spousal support:

Earl: It takes a strong wife to make a career. As a [military officer], you need a party wife. I didn't have that, so maybe I would have been higher up, but I am happy. But same goes for the pastor's wife. She was nice but not outgoing, not open to other women. She never shook [wife's name] hand, and I saw that as a breakdown for women here.

Jess: I am not sure that is a realistic expectation to put on a pastor's wife. Historically yes but that is not reasonable or fair now.

Kelly: Yes, they are not hosting potlucks or anything now.

Earl: Maybe it is inappropriate, but when someone is expecting that and it's not being fulfilled it's hard to be drawn in [to the church].

The conversation presented from Disciples Journey is less about what a specific question of feminism invokes. Instead, these observations indicate that within the church, there is often debate about women and men, and how gendered positions are changing in the social world. Importantly, one of these lengthy debates, only part of which is described above, occurred within the context of a prayer night for a changing nation. Both Jess and Kelly, two white women in their 30s, question Earl, a 63-year-old white man, and his comments on women and the roles of wives in men's careers; small groups provide a venue in which evangelicals actively debate and question each other about gendered beliefs. Within the messiness of the current church, there is space for those who identify as feminist, for those who work to distance themselves from it, and for debates that question both shifts in and endurances of certain beliefs.

Rejecting Feminism

There are many parishioners at Lakeview who actively reject feminist ideals. For these individuals, feminism invokes the *imagined secular* world in a way that brings an overwhelming constellation of debates, changes, and threats to the fore, leading them to more actively reject

feminist ideals. However, as I discuss below, this rejection of feminism, in most cases, also come with statements that a researcher might code as feminist.

Monica, a 65-year-old Mexican-American woman with long silver hair, black clothing and a bright lime-colored scarf, sits across from me with an excited and warm smile as we discuss women in the church. Monica went to a different coffee shop than the one she recommended for our interview, and after some frantic back-and-forth emails on my part, we found each other. I offered to buy Monica a sandwich, as our morning interview was now approaching lunch time, and I felt badly for the confusion and added time commitment to her day. Monica seemed totally unfazed by the mix-up, and told me this is something she does regularly in her life and laughed it off.

Monica offered to split her sandwich with me, shared on one plate, which was a quick act of intimacy indicative of her immediate openness and vulnerability reflected in her interview responses. About half way through our interview, I ask Monica her thoughts on feminism. I reminded her of the jokes made on Super Bowl Sunday about women, food, and feminism as a transition to this topic in the interview. She frowned, and quickly told me that being a feminist and Christian are in direct conflict. Monica said, “Men and women have certain roles. Feminism is Gloria Stein-man [sic] and abortion.” For Monica, feminism is antithetical to a division of household labor and family life that is central to an evangelical identity. Importantly, the word feminism immediately brings Gloria Steinem and reproductive rights to the fore, the issue many pundits named as key in the evangelical voter turnout for President Trump, and indeed something that is often treated as synonymous with feminism. Upon further probing, though, Monica’s thoughts reveal a much more complicated dynamic. When I asked Monica to explain her statement on men’s and women’s roles, she began by saying, “Well, men and women are

equal. I do believe that. But we aren't MADE [*emphasis hers*] equal. Women were made from Adam's rib." Monica invokes a biblical literalism central to contemporary evangelical identity, while also espousing a belief in equality between men and women, a statement many could code as feminist. This internal contradiction was a recurring theme in interviews with parishioners: an apparent tension between long-held and enduring beliefs in gender essentialism and beliefs in gender equality. And these tensions, while both consistent and multi-faceted, are all occurring within one evangelical church.

A week after the 2016 presidential election, I attended Disciples Journey on Thursday evening. As an ethnographer, I found this to be an especially difficult time in the field. I was distraught over the election results, and my personal political beliefs, irrespective of my fieldwork, made it a tough week as I, like many others in my community, worked to understand what had happened. As an ethnographer at an evangelical mega-church, I felt confused and worried. According to the just-released exit polls, it seemed that a good portion of those I had spent over a year researching had voted Donald Trump into office. While I had spoken openly to department members and friends in my community that I felt like the media were not paying enough attention to the evangelical vote, I did not think evangelical support for Trump would be quite so strong. I was worried because, being an evangelical in the US seemed to suddenly mean something new and different. What would people now think of me, when I sat in public with a group of people holding their Bibles and talking about their church? I spent a good portion of my car ride to field work that evening on the phone with a friend and fellow sociologist who is also an ethnographer, crying about the events of the week and mustering up courage to enter a space that all of a sudden felt quite different to me as an outsider, an identity that was reinforced that night.

Disciples Journey met in a Starbucks close to Lakeview the night. Lakeview had rented out a good deal of its space to a local organization for events that evening, so we met outside of our usual conference room setting. Our Starbucks table was crowded with a couple Bibles, worksheets, binders, new Pathways materials for the group to discuss, and beverages. While group members drank tea and nibbled on biscotti, they casually discussed marriage and how to be a good Christian in a long-term relationship. Frank, a white, 67-year-old military veteran, said the following: “You think marriage is easy?! No way.” Frank shared with the group that, because of his career and constant travel before retirement, he now makes sure that his wife “calls the shots” about their schedule and her wishes. Frank tries to do everything he can to cater to her day, after she spent decades doing the same for him. In the middle of this group conversation, Frank paused and said that he noticed a new ring on my finger. The group resumed its conversation when I responded “no” to Frank’s question about a recent engagement. Frank, however, followed me into the parking lot after the meeting. Frank was wearing a hat that said “Love your freedom? Thank a Vet!” He again brought up my ring and I asked him if he felt somehow deceived or confused that I was wearing a ring on my “ring finger” without an engagement. He said no and shook his head, and then explained that part of his military training was to notice details, and to do so immediately. I have frequent mentions in my field notes of Frank noticing things about me. For example, Frank always noted the car I drove each week (for a brief period of time I was using Zipcar, and thus had a different vehicle each week), even though I never saw him in the parking lot when I arrived. Frank always seemed to be well-aware of his surroundings, so this comment about my ring did not feel new or unusual to me.

Frank continued to talk about his military days, and how he feels we do not act as strongly as we should as a national military today. To illustrate his point, Frank talked about

how, while women need protecting, we as a nation do not protect them enough²⁹: “[Imagine] If someone brutally raped someone—I don’t mean got her drunk and raped her³⁰—I mean brutally raped her—we went after him. If someone touched my wife, or hurt my wife, you better believe they would be paying for it. And I don’t mean a quick death...I would inflict the kind of pain I saw in Vietnam.” He then transitioned to say that while he didn’t love Trump, Frank was happy with the election results because Clinton could not protect the nation in the ways he wanted. Further, Frank stated “I don’t love Trump, but I HATE Hillary. She is the MOST deceitful and corrupt politician out there...she surrounds herself with lesbians.” Frank and I chatted a bit more, and I asked him to expand on his claims about Hillary Clinton’s associates and their sexual identities. Frank went to his truck and grabbed a book he was reading, and quickly opened up to the page that talked about how, in Frank’s summary, “The [White House] staff made sure that Monica didn’t get near Bill, and Bill tried to hide her from others, but it wasn’t just her, there were lots of women, and Hillary knew!”

At this point, Frank held the book out toward my face and pointed to the section that he had underlined and said “See?!” Frank closed the book and continued to say, “and it’s not just that. She had a secret thing on the side too. She’s had a secret lesbian relationship for 25 years.” I asked Frank who Hillary Clinton’s secret lesbian relationship was with, as it was clear at this point that he had diverged from the details he had been reading on the page, and was speaking from his own perspective. Frank laughed and said, “I can’t divulge that to you!” Frank frequently

²⁹ Frank’s immediate connection between nationalism and protection of women echoes work on the centrality of gender to nation building (Balogun 2012).

³⁰ Frank’s comments also illustrate a very specific and hierarchical understanding of sexual assault not reflective of the majority of those I interviewed.

mentioned work trips to Washington D.C. to engage in some military consulting, and here, Frank was alluding to some insider knowledge gained from those work trips.

For Frank, and many others in the church, Hillary Clinton symbolized the *imagined secular* feminist they work to define themselves against. The *imagined secular* world includes women politicians who, in their positions of power, break a whole host of norms around gender and sexuality. For Frank, his concerns with the Clintons did not center on Bill Clinton's documented affair, but rather Hillary's knowledge of the affair, and rumors about her own lesbian affair as well. Evangelical Christians have a language and focus and understanding of sexual redemption for men, and a sexual redemption of men that often requires the help, encouragement, and gatekeeping from women (Diefendorf 2015). For Frank, Hillary Clinton failed in her role as a woman in this way, by "knowing" about the affair but, according to Frank, not doing anything with this knowledge. Importantly, Hillary Clinton also failed in her role as a woman, by engaging in an affair of her own, according to Frank, and an affair with another woman, no less. Further, in relation to Frank's earlier sentiment that women need to be protected, and be protected by men, the introductory statement that led to this conversation, Clinton may have also symbolized a woman who, due to her political career and successes in life, represented the type of woman that did not signal a need for protection, an enactment of femininity antithetical to many evangelical's understandings of gender essentialism.

When Frank refused to tell me the details about Hillary Clinton's lesbian affair, he quickly started asking me if I had a boyfriend. Every time I responded with "no" and provided a different reason to appease him (such as finishing graduate school and working on my dissertation and field work) Frank would again respond to my answer with the question of "why don't you have a boyfriend," which signaled that my answers were not sufficient. Frank, visibly

frustrated with my responses, started telling me a story about a long-time friend who he refers to as his soul-mate. Frank leaned in to me, and confessed, “If I had a soul mate, it is her, not my wife.” In the midst of what felt like an interrogation, Frank opened up to me, and shared something I imagine is not general information, especially given the evangelical orientation to the importance of marriage and emotional and sexual monogamy. I believe that Frank was opening up to me in hopes that I would share more with him.

Frank continued, and said that, until recently, this old friend of his was single. He went on about how “she was so focused on her career. She is great at it, but now that she is retired, she doesn’t have anything. Nothing to show. She was always saying she would make time for it later, later, later, and life happened.” Frank paused and looked at me, standing alone together in the cold and dark parking lot, and said “You know, you’re willing to stay here with me way longer than you should tonight. Maybe you can say it’s for your dissertation, I don’t know. But it seems like you could focus on other things too. Every time you talk it seems like this is what you are focused on, and that’s not good...The greatest loss you could have in life is to not let love it, to not let people around you love you.” Within the course of an evening, the small group went from a conversation that, again, might be coded as containing feminist sentiments, as Frank discussed the importance of building egalitarianism into a long-term marriage and recognizing the privileges and power that he, as a husband had around decision-making in the past, to a conversation about individuals and politicians who are perceived to engage in activities outside of the heterosexual nuclear family and thus cannot be trusted to protect others, and, finally, to my own relationship status as a researcher. Heterosexuality, the nuclear family, and threats to those arrangements are deeply intertwined with evangelical voting and politics.

And, in this particular interaction with a respondent, my identity as a researcher toed the line of a threatening outsider as well. In the context of Frank's remarks about Hillary Clinton's lesbian associates, I imagine Frank was also questioning my sexual identity. While I spent a good deal of time with the members of Disciples Journey over my two years at Lakeview, I often occupied a liminal status between a daughter in need of saving and a threatening outsider. When Hillary Clinton's sex life was in question, as an outsider and a threat to Frank's way of life, I, too, was understood in my role as an outsider.

There is another way to read this interaction, as well. As a feminine-presenting woman, and as an especially feminine-presenting woman when attending field work at Lakeview, Frank may not even think of the possibility that I do not have a boyfriend because, I, instead, have a girlfriend. Normative understandings of gender and sexuality are intertwined for parishioners at Lakeview Church (and for much of the general public), and this conflation granted me entrance into this space as a queer woman, but also resulted in moments of discord between myself and the respondents in this work. As I discuss in my methods, I had initially decided to disclose my sexual identity to those who explicitly asked, especially if it was someone I had gotten to know well during my time at Lakeview, but I did not feel particularly safe in this scenario and decided not to provide Frank with information about my life, especially in the context of his comments about Hillary Clinton as a threatening lesbian.

Feminism, Feelings, and Gender Relationality

In order to understand how evangelicals navigate this seemingly endless range of liberal projects—democratic lesbians, trans rights, threats to the family and gender order—we must also understand their feelings. Often missing in our explanations of political behavior and beliefs is

the *emotion* of politics, and the importance of understanding feelings (Hochschild 1979; 2016). Using Hochschild's approach, I next question how this "messiness" play out within a heterosexual marriage, a core aspect of an evangelical identity, and a place where questions of headship and gender essentialism come to the fore. Below, I present part of one couple's *deep story*, what sociologist Arlie Hochschild refers to as an individual's sense of who they are and what their values are (2016). Importantly, deep stories do not need to be completely accurate. But, very importantly, they have to feel true to the individual. Deep stories are the stories that individuals tell themselves as a way of capturing the felt emotions related to hopes, fears, and anxieties (Hochschild 2016). Annie and Darren's deep stories tap into their own perceptions of their married life, the gendered arrangements that follow, and how their simultaneous repudiation of feminism and sense of men and women's "roles" in the world are reflective of their larger desires for a different church.

Annie, a white 29-year-old in Human Resources, is married to Darren. Over the course of a three-hour couple's interview, Annie and Darren smile at each other and take turns answering my questions about feminism. Darren begins, speaking for both of them, in stating that "feminism doesn't apply to us because, while I am the head of the household, Annie is my better and my superior. She doesn't need to rise up with feminism." For Darren, feminism represents a disruption to their family life and gendered roles within the household. Darren espouses a cultural view of feminism that assumes innate differences between men and women, and simultaneously works to assign and validate specific attributes to women.

Darren also espouses a "good guy" rhetoric by putting his wife first, while simultaneously establishing his dominance and headship. This logic continues in the couple's shared dialogue about the Bible. Darren states that, as the Bible says,

Husbands should love their wives the way Christ loved the church. If I'm supposed to love her so much that I'm going to get crucified?!—like—that's a long way to go that I have to catch up to treating her like that... It's hard in a relationship when one person is serving the other and they aren't getting reciprocated, but if both people are serving each other and putting each other first, it will balance.

Here, Annie interjects with the following: “The first half of that [biblical verse] is ‘wives submitting to husbands’—sometimes that can be perceived as like, ‘what?! I’m not a slave, I don’t have to submit!’ But you have to read the other half of the scripture, which is husbands love your wives as much as you love the church.” Darren interrupts Annie with, “yeah, I would happily change positions with her and submit to her [*Annie laughs*] over being crucified and dying for our sins.” In the end, of course, Annie will actually submit to Darren’s wishes and authority in the household, and Darren will not get crucified. However, Darren’s logic of love and crucifixion work to masculinize his love and place the emotional burden of the relationship on him.

Both Annie and Darren set up a tension between an assumed feminist rhetoric and a biblical literalism and interpretation that places men in positions of power and women in positions of reverence and submission. For this evangelical couple, Annie and Darren’s deep story entails the feelings and belief that men have a more difficult position both in marriage and submission. Darren recodes a common part of an evangelical masculinity, headship, with one often coded as feminine: love (Cancian 1987). Darren’s story is in line with other work that finds that evangelical men enact and describe behaviors that would normally be understood as unmasculine in normatively masculine ways, finding new and surprising alternatives for asserting their masculinity (Diefendorf 2015; Heath 2003; Sheldon 2017; Wilkins 2009). Annie doesn’t need to “rise up” with feminism, because to do so would suggest that Darren’s masculinity does not have the strength to bear the burdens of the household and marital love.

This evangelical couple's discussion of feminism also resonates with a larger cultural backlash against feminism that argues that feminism emasculates men.

Annie and Darren construct feminism in relation to their understandings of the categories of woman and man. These categories contain qualities that, embedded within a larger system of symbolic meanings, define gender positions (Butler 1990; Schippers 2007). These gendered positions are defined by difference, and a difference that is central to heterosexual desire (Butler 1990). As Schippers argues, "In contemporary Western societies, heterosexual desire is defined as an erotic attachment to difference, and as such, it does the hegemonic work of fusing masculinity and femininity together as complementary opposites" (2007:90). While Schippers suggests that there is much more to the content of both masculinity and femininity than just erotic desire, the centrality of heterosexual desire to the "essence of gender difference" is key to establishing and giving symbolic meaning to the relationship between masculinity and femininity. As such, feminism, for many evangelicals, may be understood as a force that threatens the core of gender difference. Annie doesn't need to "rise up" with feminism, because to do so might challenge the gendered order of difference on which the foundations of an evangelical family rest.

While parishioners at Lakeview Church are well aware of contemporary debates in the United States, fissures appear in understandings between the religious and secular worlds, a theme that gained much attention in the wake of the 2016 presidential election. For example, when I initially asked Annie about feminism, we had the following exchange:

Annie: I think feminism exists, but I don't see myself as being a part of that.

Sarah: Exists in the church, or in the world?

Annie: In the world. But I am not a part of that, because I think both roles are treated unequally. In our relationship, Darren wants to be a stay at home dad, and I want to work.

Just the other day I was reading an article about men who go to their child's something or other, and are alone in the corner, not being included. It can be viewed from both sides. Women do get paid less than men, and it depends on the type of woman you are. Something I learned through getting my Master's degree, if you are a really bitchy woman, you are going to get paid way more than a woman who is really nice. For men, it is the opposite. That is really backwards, I don't think that's right, but I also don't think it's right that men are excluded from taking care of their children, that we view them as less of a parent because they are male. So, I don't think I am the right person to ask about feminism because it both ways, it's not feminism, it's sexism in general. You know, I hear about Trump putting down women, and that's not okay, that's not right, but it's not right to put men down either.

Both Annie and Darren project a future that partially pushes against normative gender dynamics of a nuclear family. While such wishes might be understood as indicative of changing times, again, both Darren and Annie suggest that the burden for such change is felt more heavily by Darren, and other men. Parishioners at Lakeview understand feminism as something that hurts men, just as much as, if not more than, something that helps women. In a community in which norms of headship are still central to daily life, feminism is viewed as a threat to the family structure, and for Annie and Darren, these leads them to reject feminism. At the same time, all respondents espouse beliefs that can be coded as feminist: the desire and belief in equal rights for both men and women, equal pay, gendered biases in the workplace and although outside the realm of this paper, for many, an equal and egalitarian household division of labor. This echoes Gallagher's (2004b) findings that for evangelicals, equality is important in some realms, such as the workforce, but less accepted in the home. While it is less accepted for Annie, Darren, and others, they are also simultaneously grappling with equality in the home, in the sense that they are positing equivalent household and relationship burdens for men. For some evangelicals, they want to maintain role distinctions and hierarchies but still grapple with feminism at the core of family life.

Further, Annie does mention that Trump's recent behaviors at the time of this interview (most notably, the press around the video leakage in which Trump described "grabbing women by the pussy"), what Annie calls "putting women down," is linked as an example to her thoughts on feminism and sexism. But, much like Annie and Darren understand shifts in gendered relational and family dynamics as disproportionately affecting and burdening men, Annie is also quick to highlight that putting both men *and* women down is bad. Annie is uncomfortable claiming rights for herself and others as women, and, like Becky's earlier sentiment, is perhaps more comfortable taking a "humanist" approach to understandings of gendered change.

Feminism, as an ideal and symbol of the secular world, is understood as bundled with and part of the *imagined secular*. Feminism is linked with gay rights, changes in gendered household dynamics, and threats to the nuclear, heterosexual family. The topics that emerge when asking respondents about feminism are a reaction to a changing world in which norms around gender and sexuality are in flux, stoking a type of fear that comes with change.

The Implications of Varied Evangelical Responses to Feminism

Evangelical conversations about and responses to feminism are not the opposite of perceptions of the outsider, secular feminist. As Gallagher rightly suggests, evangelicals sort and shift their religious beliefs in ways that complement and engage with contemporary life and shifts in the larger US culture (Gallagher 2003). Evangelicals are engaged in ongoing debates, and these debates are, in the words of Pastor Dave, "messy." The term feminism, as one example of these contemporary debates, evokes feelings on specific feminist agendas, such as equal pay, equal access to the workforce, and, on a basic level, equal standing regardless of gender. However, feminism is, in the minds of many evangelicals, bundled with feelings related to gay

rights, gay marriage, trans rights, and “attacks” on the nuclear family. Feminism becomes a symbol for a much larger bundled set of issues in the *imagined secular* world. Perceptions of the *imagined secular* sets the stage for the debate about feminist values within the church.

Parsing out apparent contradictions in the evangelical church highlights the core of contemporary debates, and contemporary fears, among many in the United States (evangelicals and otherwise) as norms around gender and sexuality shift. As Ingersoll argues, ethnographers must “incorporate the conflict and complexity that characterizes gender norms, expectations, and ideology in these traditions” (2002:8) in order to fully understand these religious groups and their cultural beliefs. A joke about women and dainty foods represents a much larger anxiety central to the evangelical church today.

Parishioners and church leaders at Lakeview present a complicated range of beliefs on feminism, and their conversations around these beliefs suggest that these ongoing and larger questions and debates around gender, sexuality, and the family, are also deeply intertwined with conversations about politics and voting. Just like parishioners at Lakeview are not unified in their beliefs, we cannot understand the Religious Right as entirely unified. Feminist academics, in particular, must pay attention to this messiness, and do so with careful attention when studying places and individuals usually understood as nonfeminist (Avishai, Gerber and Randles 2013). Understanding the feelings and *deep stories* of individuals in the United States—the feelings that drive often contradictory behaviors and ideals—can aid in understanding the massive political and cultural divides in the United States today.

The concept of the *imagined secular* helps articulate that, for evangelicals at Lakeview Church, the outside world is a present force in their day to day lives and thoughts, and one that immediately brings up their understandings of the family and gendered relations within the

family. As Smith documented almost 20 years ago in interviews with evangelicals, evangelicals then expressed “grave concerns” with changes in the family, and they still do today (Smith 2000). Evangelicals put the family, and family unit first, before the church and before politics (Smith 2000). The family is the site of much anxiety for evangelicals during times of change, but what causes that anxiety, and that need for protection, shifts. Conversations around race and sexuality help highlight how much and when evangelicals actually choose to engage with what Avishai calls this “looming presence” (2008). This will be the focus of Chapters 4 and 5.

CHAPTER 4: Normalizing Whiteness

For weeks in the Spring of 2016, Pastor Isaac started Sunday sermons by reminding the congregation of an upcoming visit from Pastor Darryl, who would be visiting Lakeview from Ferguson, Missouri. Ferguson, in 2016, was a city at the center of protest around race relations in the US, especially in the year prior to Pastor Darryl's visit, when Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black teenager, was fatally shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer who was not indicted in the shooting death.³¹ Pastor Dave described Pastor Darryl's upcoming visit to Lakeview as a chance for the congregation to talk about "the state of race in the country." I argue that we can understand Pastor Darryl's highly symbolic visit as a spectacle—a spectacle that both attracted attention and provided misdirection from the larger structural inequalities at play in the world outside of the white church (Lipsitz 2011).

Pastor Darryl brought a renewed sense of energy and enthusiasm to Lakeview that morning, a stark contrast to the quieter, more serious sermons often delivered by his friend, Pastor Isaac. Pastor Darryl joked about this noticeable shift, and told the congregation that when his voice got loud and fast, they would know he was preaching. He demonstrated this difference in speech cadence and tone to the audience before he laughed and said "I'm going to try to hold back my teeny tiny afro so that I don't blackinize everyone in prayer today!" Pastor Darryl then discussed some key factors related to fellowship. The first one that Pastor Darryl read to the captivated audience was that, according to the Bible, "it didn't matter what ethnicity you were, they were all working together!" This comment generated lots of loud "amens!" from the crowd, a type of call and response style usually very uncommon at Lakeview. This generated excitement

³¹ In my memo before the services that Sunday morning in February of 2016, I wrote "this will be a good litmus test for where Lakeview stands regarding current debates on race in the United States."

from the stage, and Darryl's voice heightened as he said "I don't know what it is about Lakeview, but you all bring our my afro-centrism!" The crowd laughed loudly at his continued jokes about his blackness and perceived cultural differences between "preaching" and pastoring. We can understand this interaction between Pastor Darryl, an older black man visiting a predominantly white space thousands of miles from his home, and the responses from the crowd, as emblematic of the symbolic material that emerges through rituals of race (Goffman 1967). This statement might be understood as a form of stigma management in the predominantly white space (Goffman 1963).

Pastor Darryl continued his discussion of fellowship, and suggested to the crowd that, when one person suffers, everyone suffers with him. Pastor Darryl then paused, and looked out at the congregation intently and thoughtfully. In a quieter voice, Pastor Darryl said, "This isn't PC³², but I'm going to say it..." to which a white woman in the audience sitting towards the front of the stage loudly said "SAY IT!" to the response of cheers around her. Pastor Darryl smiled, and continued with "I'm going to use a Miss-sippi-ism—I ain't interested in Black Lives Matter, I'm interested in All Lives Matter! The devil sold us a lie!" In this moment, the congregation rose to a standing ovation, marking the only time in two years at this church that I witnessed that type of response. The audience roared in verbal praise and clapping, and only quieted once Pastor Darryl started to speak again. Pastor Darryl targeted a bald, white man sitting in the front row, and started talking about that man's "teeny tiny afro." Pastor Darryl asked the parishioner how he got to be so handsome. This too generated lots of laughter in the audience, and perhaps worked to diffuse any lingering tension as a "ritual of deference" (Goffman 1967) after talking

³² Here, Pastor Darryl is using the short-hand acronym for "politically-correct."

about Black Lives Matter. Pastor Darryl relied on jokes of difference to lighten up the crowd before moving on with the remainder of the sermon.

On November 8th, 2016, several months after Pastor Darryl’s visit, white evangelicals went to the polls en masse. Pundits and scholars give large credit to white evangelicals for the election of Donald Trump, who received 81% of their vote (Pew 2016), but there is great debate over why. For some evangelicals, it may be that Trump represented the lesser of two evils, a sentiment invoked repeatedly over the course of the election process. For many evangelicals, though, Trump was the first choice from the start.

Trump’s a-religious stance, multiple allegations of sexual misconduct and assault, multiple marriages and anti-Christian actions led many to believe that evangelicals would not support him on election day. And, in some sense, this is correct. Evangelicals did not support Trump for his religious beliefs, but rather out of a fear of what other candidates might bring. Evangelicals did not support Trump because of what he can bring to the table, but rather, what he can hold off.

I argue that evangelical support for Trump is in part due to the invocation of the *imagined secular* world: fears of change related to things like feminism, same-sex marriage, abortion, and bathroom bills. As we see in evangelical responses to feminism, ideals of the family, gender, sexuality, and politics remain deeply intertwined for evangelicals—and as evangelicals engage with the “messiness” that comes in times of change, they remain firm in their beliefs about gender and the family through a variety of different means and justifications. These perceived cultural changes lead some to argue that evangelicals saw decisions and debates around these shifts in understandings of gender, sexuality as the beginning of a much larger threat to

evangelical religious freedom, perhaps part of a “larger campaign of anti-Christian harassment and intimidation that was being waged on social media and in college classrooms” (Gorski 2017:340; Green 2016). This argument is reminiscent of evangelical responses to the FCC in the 1980s, when millions of evangelicals wrote letters to the FCC following their threat to no longer extend licenses to evangelical broadcasts, a decision many perceived to be a “gag” order on their beliefs (Guth 1996). We have historical data that suggest that evangelicals mobilize when they feel their cultural influence is threatened, and the concept of the *imagined secular* helps to articulate the unity of that perceived threat today.

In a society in which evangelicals continue to fear their traditional values and way of life is under threat (Green 2016), Trump has positioned himself as a secular protector (Gorski 2017), and this work illuminates the ways in which that understanding of protection is enacted, accomplished, and in some cases, reworked. I suggest that Donald Trump is a symbol that can hold off the *imagined secular* world. However, Trump is not holding off the progressive social changes of the *imagined secular* world for good, but is doing so while evangelicals debate their understandings of race and sexuality in an effort to be more welcoming. While the *imagined secular* world is discussed in Chapter 3 in detail as it relates to feminist discourses and debates in the church, I focus the next two chapters on two key aspects of evangelical identity that are often left critically unexamined: whiteness and heterosexuality. Much like there is a “messiness” associated with, and in fact central to, evangelical debates about feminism and sexism (and really, about questions of gender and the family), there is also quite a bit of discussion, confusion, and movement around questions related to whiteness and heterosexuality. While those who suggest Trump works as a secular protector (Gorski 2017) and a secular protector that evokes a sense of Christian nationalism (Whitehead et al 2018) are correct, this work does not

document the ways in which that understanding of protection is collectively reached, nor does it leave much room, in its implications, for an understanding of evangelicals as needing protection because they are *changing*; rather, it suggests that evangelicals seek protection for a way of life that is under threat. While evangelicals at Lakeview do express feelings of Christian stigma, suffering, and threat to their way of life, they are also actively working to bring people in to the church, and to appear welcoming in light of the myriad cultural shifts around them.

Evangelicals thrive on distinction (Smith 1998), and this distinction has, for the most part, historically privileged both whiteness and heterosexuality. While the salience of these identities are not new for evangelicals, I argue that the ways in which evangelicals go about working to protect them—and the reasons for that perceived need for protection—have changed. Recognizing this change matters for our understandings of the most recent presidential election. In examining evangelical approaches to both these identities, or what Lipsitz calls “conditions” (2011)—we see that in this current cultural and political moment, evangelicals are doubling down on these dominant status markers as a response to the imagined secular world and the changes occurring in it. White evangelicals are working to talk about race in a time in which explicit racism is understood as unacceptable, but are simultaneously upholding racist institutions. Indeed, part of evangelical’s willingness to engage with this imagined other is to do so in a way that upholds a central evangelical pillar of whiteness. Trump, through his racist and nativist rhetoric associated with his slogan of “Make America Great Again” (Huber 2016; Gomez 2018; Whitehead et al 2018) symbolizes someone who will uphold, or at least not further push against, that pillar of whiteness.

In this chapter, I will discuss this protection and reinforcement of whiteness as it relates to two aspects of church life: 1) through the use of the “spectacle” (Lipstiz 2011) and 2) through a focus on individualism and a rhetoric of love through both Jesus and Donald Trump.

Evangelicals and Race

This chapter builds on the work of others who call for more attention to the role of religion and religious institutions in racial and ethnic relations in the United States (Emerson and Smith 2000; Knott 2008; Tranby and Hartmann 2008). The most influential work in this field finds that white evangelical Christian’s recent efforts towards reconciliation have little impact, and, in some cases, work to redraw racial boundaries in new ways. I build on this scholarship and argue that evangelical Christians today are more adamantly and intentionally working to exclude than in the past. I draw on debates between Emerson and Smith (2000) and Tranby and Hartmann (2008) to argue for the continued importance of the rhetoric of individuality that is central to evangelism in the US as important in our understandings of social change within the church, as well as how these perceptions of social change and race are linked to large concerns of evangelical culture and nationalism. I suggest that applying the concept of the white spatial imaginary to our understandings of race within the church provide analytical leverage that help us better understand the relationship between evangelicals, support for Trump, and their desire to reinforce and uphold norms of whiteness.

Following the Civil Rights Movement, the United States saw increasing attention toward racial reconciliation among and between white and black evangelicals. The decades following the 1960s were full of evangelical materials on racial reconciliation, prominent new authors and experts in this area, and national organizations, such as the Promise Keepers, who enveloped

racial reconciliation into their work on masculinity and fatherhood. The Promise Keepers called racism a sin and declared reconciliation a core value (Bracey and Moore 2017; Emerson and Smith 2000). Gone were the days, it seemed, of white evangelical silence around race relations.

However, evangelical churches across the country have been, and remain, fairly segregated. As Lee states, “Today, the black-white divide among evangelicals is far greater than it is among the broader American population” (2015:27). In an effort to understand both the causes and continued divides between white and black evangelicals in the United States, scholars apply a theory of racialization to the evangelical church. This transition from “separate pews to separate churches” (Emerson and Smith 2000) can be understood by applying this theoretical approach that suggests that racial practices that reproduce racial divisions in the United States are increasingly covert, embedded in normal operations of institutions, avoid direct racial terminology, and are invisible to most whites (Emerson and Smith 2000: 9). As Emerson and Smith argue, “This framework understands that people need not intend their actions to contribute to racial division and inequality for their actions to do so” (2000:9). While we have seen increased efforts toward racial reconciliation within the white evangelical church, these efforts fundamentally clash with the evangelical tenets of individualism and antistructuralism, which result in the church’s relatively little impact in a racialized society.

Raced divides among evangelicals are due in part to evangelical religious beliefs and practices, but these practices are, of course, informed by history. Because of the legacy of slavery in the United States, and the continued patterns of racial inequality in the United States, black and white evangelicals interpret the world in different ways (Emerson and Smith 2000; Lee 2015). These interpretations are intertwined with both values of individualism, or what Emerson and Smith call “accountable freewill individualism” (2008) and systematic oppression (Lee

2015). White evangelicals believe that the desire to live a positive and moral life is a personal achievement and personal responsibility. This achievement is accomplished through a personal relationship with Christ, first, and then with others. This logic continues, then, that failure is individual failure; as Lee suggests, “any social problems are seen as rooted in negative relationships and poor choices...collective sin is typically ignored” (2015:28).

Black evangelicals, in contrast, while valuing individualism rooted in responsibility, also see this individualism as part of a system that has unfairly disadvantaged them. Historically black evangelical churches emphasize a theology focused on a collective salvation that emphasizes deliverance for the oppressed; white evangelical churches focus on individual salvation (Lee 2015). Interviewing queer individuals and people of color who have returned to the evangelical church, Lee describes one respondent whose mother taught her that “White evangelicals look for redemption—people who have sinned against each other look for redemption, whereas people who have been sinned against look for salvation” (2015:21). Lee argues that churches remain segregated around these different theologies, and that, over time, these theologies have further developed in isolation, which has “helped feed white evangelical support of policies and institutions that carry out black oppression” (2015:25; Emerson and Smith 2000).

We can better articulate the ways in which evangelical faith and practices continue to be rooted in a larger systems of race relations by applying theories of critical whiteness to Emerson and Smith’s foundational work (Tranby and Hartmann 2008). The white evangelical religiocultural toolkit (Smith 2000), in this line of thinking, is intimately bundled with ideas of race and nation. Because of the hidden nature of whiteness and cultural values, “evangelicals may tend not to perceive this threat as explicitly racial, but instead as a threat to the continued

existence of the evangelical culture” (2008:348). That is, while an evangelical, individual and anti-structuralist approach the world might make change difficult, evangelicals may also *not* want change, as these conversations around race pose bigger threats to their understandings of evangelism in general.

Evangelicals view their primary tasks as evangelism and discipleship. Evangelicals, in order to remain true to their faith, need to continue to bring people into relationship with Jesus. Because of this, they tend to avoid issues that hinder these activities. White evangelicals are working to maintain some cultural status in our changing social world; they know that to do so requires conversations about many facets of the *imagined secular* world and talking about race is one way to manage the threats that come with change. As Emerson and Smith argue, “With some significant exceptions, they avoid rocking the boat and live within the confines of the larger culture” (2000:35). Evangelicals, according to these scholars, are generally not “counter-cultural.” While they may thrive on distinction, that distinction does not create large wakes within the social world. Smith and Emerson suggest evangelicals live within the confines of the larger cultural world without intentional cause for disruption, but other scholars suggest that evangelicals’ compliance with larger systems of domination are intentional.

The church’s understanding of the *imagined secular* world, and how they grapple with its racialized and sexualized elements, suggest that evangelicals are more willing to go against what they perceive to be the dominant culture, because, for them, the dominant culture has drastically changed. The limited effects of efforts toward racial reconciliation, and the continued existence of racial exclusion within the church, are not just byproducts of evangelical religious beliefs centered on individualism and anti-structuralism. Evangelicals know that they can not be understood as racist if they hope to grow as a community, but the ways in which they engage in

these conversations and debates result in a doubling down on their protections of whiteness and heterosexuality. Evangelicals can manage the threats of the imagined secular world by engaging in debates that work to continue to uphold heterosexuality and whiteness and simultaneously mask those dominant cultural markers in the process.

In a recent article in the New York Times, Michael Emerson, one of the two authors of *Divided by Faith*, the foundational work on race relations within the evangelical church, is quoted as suggesting that “Everything we tried is not working. The election itself was the single most harmful event to the whole movement of reconciliation in at least the past 30 years,” he said. “It’s about to completely break apart.” Emerson’s words echo the specter of the imagined at Lakeview. Evangelicals feel the pressure and concern over a loss of cultural status, and have looked for, and continue to look for ways in which to protect and maintain the space they have created in the social world. This space is a space defined by whiteness, and that is increasingly clear leading up to and after the presidential election.

A Suburban White Spatial Imaginary: Applying theories of race and space to the church

Critical race theories of racialization and whiteness allow us to see that “largely because of racialized space, whiteness in this society is not so much a color as a condition” (Lipsitz 2011:3). This condition, and way of being in the world, is structured by what Lipsitz calls a white spatial imaginary, the causes and consequences of which hold the key to understanding what has happened since the civil rights movement (2011:14). The continued segregation since the Civil Rights Movement, along with the subtle and overt means by whites to maintain a racial hierarchy, have resulted in a world in which white people and black people know very little about each other. We live in white and black spatial imaginaries, each with very different

understandings and approaches to the world. The white spatial imaginary portrays the properly gendered prosperous suburban home as the privileged moral geography of the nation, a moral geography that includes deeply embedded racial assumptions about urban sites (Lipsitz 2011:13). Scholars have long argued that cultural debates and concerns around gender and sexuality are concerns for protection of the family—and the white family (Rubin 1982). The white spatial imaginary, as a concept and theoretical orientation to race and space, provides a language and arena in which to understand how the church, as operating within a white spatial imaginary, engages with the *imagined secular* world in relation to a protection of whiteness.

The maintenance of the white spatial imaginary often relies on moments of misdirection, and on spectacles that attract attention. These spectacles work to detract attention from the structural links that connect urban place and race, further promoting the type of individual-level responses and orientations to the world that make sense to evangelicals. While Lipsitz focuses his theoretical orientation towards the connections between blackness and urban environments (2011), I argue that we can use this framing in a similar way to better connect suburban place and race. This work articulates how and when whiteness is connected to the suburbs and to this evangelical church. As Martin Luther King argued, “Suburbs are the white nooses around the black neck of the cities” (Lipsitz 2011:17). How race is constructed in the suburbs has implications for the lives of all—both inside and outside of the church.

While Emerson and Smith argue that churches have little effect in a racialized society (2001), connecting my concept of the imagined secular with the white spatial imaginary brings to light the felt and realized repercussions of the church’s understandings and actions around issues of race today—and the raced church in Trump’s America.

The Spectacle

By inviting Pastor Darryl to speak at Lakeview, the congregation (and really, in this case, its leadership), is able to establish itself as caring and loving towards those who are not white, who are the immigrant, the other. Pastor Darryl's visit and guest sermon at Lakeview functioned as a type of purification rite, in which the parishioners were ritually absolved of their racism through Pastor Darryl's invitation and guest sermon (Goffman 1959;1971) at the same time they were made to feel as though they were adequately engaging in dialogue about race relations in the United States today. However, this dialogue does little in the way of efforts toward racial justice or reconciliation. Penny Becker (1998) finds that racial integration in churches is most easily achieved when race is not understood or presented as a political issue; Moon argues that people find politics to be both "destabilizing" and "denaturalizing" in church environments (Moon 2004:26). At Lakeview Church, Black Lives Matter is understood as a deeply political issue, and a political issue that symbolizes part of the *imagined secular* world.

Pastor Darryl's remarks invoke an individualist approach to race in the United States, calling for messages of unity that mask the very felt and real systematic differences and barriers people of color face in the US. This individualistic approach and understanding of the world is common, and is a key marker of approaches to racism at Lakeview, and a key marker of American life (Bellah et al 1985). American individualism makes it hard for those in the United States to envision which contributions they can make to the social world due to what Bellah et al describe as "conflicting images of public good" (1985:252). The authors argue that religious institutions can act as key sites to mitigate these differences, and work to bring individuals

together as social actors if religious leaders can clarify to their parishioners that “individuality and society are not opposite but require each other” (1985:246-247). I will discuss later the ways in which Lakeview Church actively avoids such clarifications, and pushes forth individual-level solutions that do little to address larger social problems, as they find “less truth in collective action and more truth in isolated individuals’ emotions” (Moon 2004:25).

If a result of the white spatial imaginary is that white and black people do not know each other, then when a black man, and a black man who is revered in his position of power as a preacher, is flown in as part of this spectacle of conversations on race, his statement that “All Lives Matter” can carry with it a good deal of weight, and perhaps be understood as indicative of what all black people—or what all good, Christian black people—think. This message may reinforce the idea that there is no structural work that needs to be done on the part of evangelicals, because, as Pastor Darryl says, that work is, in fact, the work of the devil.

The congregation’s reaction to Pastor Darryl’s message about All Lives Matter is indicative of the felt tension among many evangelicals today. Because evangelical Christianity, both historically and in this contemporary moment, is heavily intertwined with norms of whiteness, and support of whiteness, when this “hidden equation” of whiteness and cultural values comes to the fore, strong reactions are evoked. Evangelicals do not perhaps view Black Lives Matter as a threat that is “explicitly racial, but instead as a threat to the continued existent of the evangelical culture” itself (Tranby and Hartmann 2008:348). However, part of this tension stems from evangelical’s continued goals to bring people into the church, and to do so through messages of inclusion.

Pastor Darryl’s visit can be understood as a spectacle (Lipsitz 2011), and perhaps even a “race test”—an over-exaggerated welcome for a person of color into an often highly public,

racially stereotypical role, in which the person is welcomed in to speak to congregations on the subject of diversity (Bracey and Moore 2017). This spectacle, or test, presents the white space of the church as being racially progressive without challenging any norms around race (Bracey and Moore 2017). President Donald Trump's message about race and race relations in the United States evoke similar sentiment, that paint him as a politician who will discuss matters that the church perceives are important, but will do so without risk of shaking the foundations on which the church is built.

The evangelical church today and the rise of the Christian Right are born out of a history of racism. However, the majority of white evangelical churches today do not operate on blatant messages of racial dominance or exclusion. Rather, whiteness is established and normalized through discourses of individualistic and loving approaches to everyone that mask, ignore, and dismiss larger structural issues, and, in some cases, place blame for issues related to race on already marginalized communities. Lakeview Church preaches a message of love and acceptance, but this message, through an individualist approach to structural issues of race, allows for surface-level conversations around race and race relations in the United States that work to re-affirm and uphold norms of whiteness through those very conversations.

Maintaining and Normalizing Whiteness

Parishioners at Lakeview frequently discuss the increasing diversity of the church³³ and of the local neighborhoods in which Lakeview parishioners live. On a cold fall evening,

³³ As a recap and reminder from the introduction, Lakeview Church is about as diverse as the evangelical community that makes up the state of Washington. Evangelicals in Washington state are 84% white, 5% Black, 5% Latino and 1% Asian, and 5% Other/Mixed according to Pew's Religious Landscape Survey from 2014. Lakeview, and most large evangelical churches in the

members of Disciples Journey sat in a semi-circle in the brightly-lit conference room. One of the group leaders, Carrie, read the Pathways prompt for the evening, which referenced the “African Tundra³⁴.” The group immediately interrupted, and started debating whether or not there exists an “African Tundra.” Carrie, as one of the authors of the prompt, seemed both embarrassed and annoyed, as two people in the group pulled out their smart phones to help answer the question at hand. The use of technology in this way started a larger conversation about how the “world has changed now that we have smartphones at our fingertips.” Pastor Jeff chimed in in agreement, and talked about how his neighborhood has changed so much, based on the “ethnic makeup and demographics.” Pastor Jeff referenced a Hindi cultural center and a Sikh temple that are now both two blocks from his home.

Another group member, Katherine, a middle-aged white woman, jumped in and talked about her first memory of seeing a black person in church. She paused and said, “Well, I guess I saw some when we would put on our gloves and church dresses and go downtown when I was little.” The “race-neutral” (Tranby and Hartmann 2008) urban space of the city becomes a space of black people, and a space far away, outside of the imaginary of Katherine’s childhood. Seattle, the closest urban space to Lakeview Church, was frequently talked about in ways that suggest distance and difference. Katherine continued by saying that “People used to not want to sound

Washington area are majority white (a reflection of the continued segregation of evangelical places of worship), but about 15-20% of the parishioners do not identify as white.

³⁴ The full excerpt reads as follows: “Our access to adventure in the world is like no other time in history. Within a matter of hours, we can walk along the Great Wall of China, run on island beaches in the Caribbean, roam the jungles of the Amazon, wander the markets of Hong Kong, search the African tundra for lions, or climb the seven highest peaks on the seven continents. Not only can we go, but the world now comes to us. We can explore the world and communicate with people who are thousands of miles away instantly on our technological devices. Ray Bakke, author of *A Theology as Big as the City*, notes that ‘Yesterday, cities were in the nations; today all the nations are in our cities.’ Cultures from around the globe are in our neighborhoods.”

foreign, but now people come in groups, and it's a patchwork quilt instead of a melting pot!" Katherine laughed and sounded excited as she said this to the group. While Katherine may indeed feel excited about these demographic shifts, there is a type of othering that occurs in small groups and individual interviews through discussions around race that equate non-white identities with change.

Conversations about race are a bit different at Sunday sermons, where everyone is together in the same place. At Sunday sermons, messages both acknowledge change and focus on messages of inclusion. In the days leading up to Easter Sunday, Lakeview sent an email out to all of its parishioners that stated, "Also, please be on the lookout during our Good Friday and Easter services for people who are new to Lakeview Church. Our warmth and smiles communicate, 'We like you, and we are glad you are here!'" At Lakeview and churches across the country, Easter Sunday brings many new faces to the church, whether they are family members of parishioners visiting for the holiday, or, those who are colloquially referred to as "C and Es³⁵," Lakeview experiences a rapid uptick in attendance at Easter Sunday sermons, and the church wanted to remind everyone that they should come across as open and welcoming for those who are new. Lakeview, like many other evangelical churches across the country, knows that the solution to obtaining greater cultural influence lay in the ability to bring new people into church. Lakeview's Easter email highlights this larger urge to bring people in, and to make them feel welcome. However, there are bounds to this inclusion.

The relative diversity of Lakeview Church, as well as the increasing diversity of the neighborhoods and area in which Lakeview is located, could situate Lakeview as a prime site for

³⁵ The Phrase "C and Es" refers to church members who only attend religious services on Christmas and Easter

conversations about racial reconciliation. Evangelicals at Lakeview Church recognize the diversity of their congregation in theory, and, between this visible diversity, as well as the larger national push towards the political center discussed in Chapter 3, parishioners at Lakeview know that race is something they are supposed to talk about, and race is something they are supposed to care about. I document the ways in which evangelicals at Lakeview talk about race. Rather than moving towards efforts of reconciliation, members of Lakeview's church continue, in their focus on individual responsibility, and larger concerns about the imagined secular, rooted in a white spatial imaginary, to uphold norms of whiteness in both unintentional and intentional ways.

Reinforcing Individuality through Jesus and Trump

There are interesting overlaps between the ways in which evangelicals talk about Trump and the ways in which they understand and talk about Jesus Christ. Both highlight the salience and importance of individual figures as symbolic of much larger fights, and both have larger connections to the ways in which evangelicals approach conversations about race.

Individual relationships to Jesus Christ, what Emerson and Smith reference as “accountable freewill individualism” are a cornerstone of evangelism (2001). “Relationship to Jesus” was my most frequent code during my first round of coding. This code overwhelmed all others, and overlapped with almost all other codes. Conversations around and about Jesus are part of all aspects of church life. Because of this, Jesus is often reworked in a way that makes sense to people when they are thinking through and wrestling with their own beliefs in times of perceived change (Prothero 2003). We saw this with Katherine, who reworked Jesus as a radical feminist in an effort to understand and come to terms with her own feminist identity.

Further, conversations around an individual's relationship with Jesus often center around love. I mean this in two ways. Frequently, evangelicals at Lakeview, and evangelicals at large, talk about 1) love from Jesus, and 2) their ability to love others, and indeed love all, because of their relationship *with* Jesus. This dual focus on love and individuality are important in our understandings of evangelical conversations around race. For evangelicals, a focus on individual love eclipses larger conversations about inequality; an evangelical response to a problem is to respond with individual love, while oftentimes, secular responses to social problems look to change social institutions themselves. Evangelical and secular worlds speak past each other when it comes to conversations around racism, and the solutions to racism in the United States. Part of what differentiates evangelical and imagined secular worlds is the solution to a particular social problem at hand, as the evangelical solutions to race and racism in the United States delineate them from many others.

The weekend before Easter, in April of 2017, Pastor Dave began the Sunday Sermon with a sigh. He stated that there are a lot of "racial divides and immigration in this country" and that, the root of these divides, comes down to whether or not "you love people." The audience at the 9am sermon, of about 400 people, audibly sighed in response. They sighed, because they can feel that they are loving people, and, therefore, are not racist and are not part of the larger problems and structural racial divides in the United States. An older white woman sitting directly in front of me nodded her head enthusiastically. Pastor Dave acknowledged a large national debate while simultaneously reducing it to a problem and debate around love. As evangelicals, members of Lakeview Church are frequently reminded to love each other, love thy neighbor, and love their enemies. This rhetoric of love is a common facet of Sunday sermons and intimately tied with core aspects of their relationships with Jesus. That is, to be a good evangelical is to have a solid

relationship with Jesus. To have a solid relationship with Jesus is to have love in your heart for those around you. Pastor Dave explains the racial divides in the US as a matter of love, invoking what Emerson and Smith call the “individualist toolkit” approach to solving problems of race (2001). In proposing that a solution to racial divides can be found in “loving thy neighbor,” evangelicals are able to ignore structural and state-based problems and solutions that might in face “cause extensive discomfort or change to their economic and cultural lives” (Emerson and Smith 2001:130; Swidler 1986; Tranby and Hartmann 2008).

The figure of Jesus, who Prothero argues we should understand as a “cultural Jesus” has been “something of a chameleon” (8) in the United States. Evangelicals work and rework Jesus as a cultural symbol to help make sense of him, and use him as guidance, during times of change. As Prothero argues,

To hold Jesus up to the mirror of American culture is to conduct a Rorschach test of ever-changing national sensibilities. What Americans have seen in him has been an expression of their own hopes and fears—a reflection not simply of some “wholly other” but also of themselves and their nation (2003:9).

While evangelicals frequently rework their symbols and understandings of Jesus, I find that evangelicals also rework their understandings of Donald Trump, and what he symbolizes, to account for the disconnect that many see between his religious beliefs and evangelical support for him, as well as to reinforce the values that evangelicals work to uphold in this contemporary political moment.

Katherine describes Trump as a “broken man” before reassuring me that “we are all broken,” which reinforces both an individualist approach to understanding politics in the United States, and, secondly, the commonly held belief among evangelicals that, we are, all indeed

broken, and can be saved through Jesus³⁶. Katherine, and many others I spoke with at Lakeview, discuss Trump in these terms, reworking his image in a way that makes him relatable and easier to understand and support. Evangelicals emphasize individual salvation through Jesus Christ, and then emphasize their ability to love others, and indeed love all, because of this salvation through and relationship with Jesus. Trump, as someone who is broken, becomes a palatable figure whose actions can be understood as a manifestation for brokenness, and, thus, as someone who needs to be supported, loved, and prayed for, just like all others. Further, Katherine talks about a meme she saw on Facebook that was distributed by “The Other 98%³⁷.” Katherine describes the post that was making fun of Trump and making fun of his family. Katherine tells me how upset this makes her, and that “we have to see Trump as God sees him, really.” The family, for Katherine, is untouchable when it comes to political humor. Katherine highlights her beliefs in the importance of protecting the family, a theme that emerged in Chapter 3.

Katherine’s narrative of Trump as a “broken man” also fits with an evangelical narrative of sexual redemption, and, specifically, sexual redemption for men. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, Trump’s history of failed marriages, sexual affairs, a sexual affair with an adult-film star, sexual harassment of women, and openly disparaging comments about women and women’s bodies, fit within a larger evangelical understanding of men as needing help and guidance when it comes to a whole range of sexual and relationship behaviors. There exists a whole range of

³⁶ These findings, of a simultaneous reworking of both Trump and Jesus, mirror Gerber’s (2011) findings around the rhetoric of “a sin is a sin” used to grapple with both fatness and homosexuality.

³⁷ The mission statement for the Facebook group reads as follows: We specialize in spanking greedy corporate asses for the harder working classes and provide a home on the internet for the millions of Americans who want to fight the power and make our country work for the other 98% of us. Other98 is the only group out there with the kind of massive audience, bold language, and knack for storytelling that we need to create the seismic cultural shifts we need to change the world. Join us.

books³⁸, websites, curricula, counseling, and even conferences for evangelical men who seek sexual redemption. Some of the qualities that make Donald Trump seem antithetical to evangelical values are used by evangelicals to understand him as a man seeking redemption like all others, an ideal that permeates Christian rhetoric.

Donna, a white 49-year-old, talks about her work as a translator at a local hospital for primarily Spanish-speaking patients. While Donna discussed the sense of importance she derives from her work at length, and her relationship and love for her clients, when I ask Donna about Donald Trump, she immediately and defiantly tells me that, “I voted for Trump, 'cause I didn't want Hillary to... I mean, eight years of Obama?! We were fortunate to get through that 'cause... he really, I think, intentionally tried to destroy our nation. I was so glad to get rid of him and I did not want Hillary 'cause she was just like him. So I think, I, mean Trump... he's a newcomer politician, shall we say?” Donna continues, and tells me that, “He's never been a politician before but I believe that he's a strong man. He is highly intelligent, and I like that during the election, or during the campaign he was reaching out to evangelicals, 'cause he wanted their influence in his life and in his governing, and so I thought that was, that was very healthy and I like that also. You know, a lot of people don't like him. You know, I work with Spanish speaking patients and a lot of them don't like him because of his immigration stance or whatever but actually, he's trying to protect our borders which... I think is wise.” Like Katherine, Donna approaches her understanding of Trump through an individualistic language that focuses on his lack of experience as a politician, and, when larger, structural forces at play come into question—here, concerns over immigration from the clients Donna knows and loves—Donna focuses on Trump

³⁸ A recent, popular example includes Harry Schaumburg's (2009) *Undeified: Redemption from Sexual Sin, Restoration for Broken Relationships*

as a “strong man” as more important than the concerns of immigrants. Trump’s strength, for Donna, is reflected in his stance on immigration.

Both Katherine and Donna discuss Trump in individual terms that work to justify their own support for him, and, work to reinforce both symbolic and real boundaries around whiteness for Donna. Trump symbolizes whiteness, just like Jesus has been rendered white (Prothero 2003). These understandings of Trump highlight the individual approach and understanding of the world that is also deeply connected to evangelical’s approach to conversations on race. Further, these understandings of Trump highlight the importance of both gendered difference and the institution of the family (even if Trump’s family is perhaps not totally conventional), issues that continue to seem more important to evangelicals than issues of immigration, for example.

Finally, Raymond, a white 55-year-old, active marathon runner who feels ambivalent about Trump and the church’s stance on our political climate, suggests to me that Trump’s election might be a sign of the end times. Katherine, who I discuss above, states something similar. Katherine says, “I do think it [the past presidential election] is part of the end times, which I think is coming faster than I thought. I thought we would have five or ten years. It’s coming a lot faster than I thought. And, what happens, has to happen before Christ comes ‘cause everything man tries has to fail. And, I’m afraid that also includes Democracy, or Republicanism.” For those who are more ambivalent, or not supportive of Trump and his presidential reign, they still rework Trump within a narrative that makes sense to them, and does not call for the type of work or calling out of the structural issues that may have helped elect Trump into office. The perceived concerns or failings of a politician they are not excited about can be understood in much more positive terms: the return of Jesus Christ.

Concerns About this Individual Approach: Calling out Ethnocentrism

Some members of Lakeview Church did express concerns about an individualist approach to race relations in the United States, but, their concerns do not reflect different end results. For example, Henry, a 31 year-old white male who frequently volunteers in downtown Seattle at a homeless shelter, worries about what often feels like an insular community within the church. I interviewed Henry immediately following a Sunday sermon, a sermon that was focused on not wasting one's life. Pastor Dave ended the sermon that morning by asking everyone in the congregation to high-five the person next to them while exclaiming "I will not waste my life!" It is this message that Henry is reflecting on in his response.

Over lattes, Henry says to me, "It was a really good message but at the same time, like, give us something to do, whether that's telling us how we can interact with others in our daily life to show them our love and then they'll look at us and be like 'Why is that person different than other people I see?' and they'll ask and you'll be like 'It's because I know Christ,' and that's- I'm called to be more and more like Him." Here, Henry is frustrated by the somewhat hollow-feeling nature of the Sunday Sermon, but his solution is the individual-level approach to change through teaching the love of Jesus Christ. Henry continues, "For people where, like, work and the community around them is very... I don't know if this is the right term, but ethnocentric? Like, it's pretty much the same all around them, giving them opportunities to, I don't know, like create a soup kitchen on Wednesdays at the church- for, like, people to come in and then these people have an opportunity to come and serve." Henry talks further about how, while he feels it is his personal calling to reach outside the church, Henry knows many would feel uncomfortable actually doing so without a clear opportunity. Henry then describes the work he is involved in to reach outside of his ethnocentric community: "At my university, we had Lighthouse Ministry,

which was making sack lunches and going out into Seattle, and finding homeless populations and actually giving them food.” Henry, and many others at Lakeview, are working hard to find solutions to the ailments of the social world around them, and are doing so during a time in which racism and sexism are becoming increasingly unacceptable.

Henry worries about the ethnocentric set-up of the church culture. Henry’s personal solution is volunteering and outreach towards a population comprised of individuals quite different from him, volunteering in downtown Seattle. For Henry and many others at Lakeview, the most popular missions are “local missions” to the “heart” of the city, most often a homeless shelter associated with a Christian non-profit. For Henry and many others at Lakeview, issues of race are relegated to the homeless shelters in the closest city, not the interpersonal relationships within the pews at a Sunday Service. As Tranby and Hartmann argue, “The social isolation of white evangelicals allows them to minimize and individualize the racial problem” (2008:344). Henry wants to do good in the world and wants to help others by bringing them to Jesus Christ. And while Henry is concerned by what he calls the ethnocentrism of the church, or the insular communities in which he and many others operate. Henry’s solution, and a solution paraded by Lakeview, reinforce ideals of the urban, black spatial imaginary while leaving the white spatial imaginary relatively untouched (Lipsitz 2011).

Jesse, a white 21-year old recent graduate from a local Christian College, reflects on some of the views and concerns of his classmates when I asked him about the election of Donald Trump, at an interview I conducted with Jesse and his girlfriend, Lyndsey, in October of 2017. Jesse and Lyndsey both talked about students of color on their Christian college campus, and specifically, immigrant students who, in the wake of the election, feared deportation. Jesse stated that people voted for Trump because of “moral issues” that made him “more Christian” in his

answers than Clinton. Jesse and Lyndsey acknowledge that this response, they believe, is specific to white people. As Jesse said, “I think people kinda' weighed, like, 'cause there were things he was saying that I would say, like, conservative Christians did not agree with, but I think they kinda' weighed what's most important and what's not to them, or in a sense maybe what's more important... their faith, and generalizing that they're mostly white. They're not really worried about being deported. Um, so that's not our first concern.” Lyndsey agreed, and said she understood why people on her campus, where she is still a student, were worried, but simultaneously dismissed her classmates worries by saying “Their friends aren't gonna get deported, probably” with a shrug, before drinking another sip of her coffee. Jesse stepped in and said, “Yeah, and ultimately I care more about babies who might be killed than I do, like, people who might get deported, or things like that.” Both Jesse and Lyndsey establish their voting behaviors and concerns as concerns specific to them as white evangelicals. They acknowledge that they should care about the concerns of their classmates, exhibiting, perhaps, the messages of love expressed in Sunday Sermons at Lakeview, but also make quite clear that the concerns of others are just that—the concerns of others. While Trump might not protect the racialized Other, and even some of their classmates and friends, people that they know and seemingly care about, Trump will fight to protect their individual values, which are in this instance related to abortion.

Reinforcing Difference

These individualist responses to race in America, while advocating for love and understanding for the position of the other, to an extent, are not just an evangelical phenomenon. These responses, and inability or lack of desire to see or understand race as structural, are also “foundational for American ideals about race and its proper place in society” (Tranby and Hartmann 2008:345), and, as such, are part of much larger and uncritical group-based anti-black

attitudes (Tranby and Hartmann 2008). As Tranby and Hartmann argue, “the problems of race are also nurtured and sustained by deep-seated racialized—if not simply racist—images and ideas” (2008:346).

Monica, who I introduced in Chapter 3, exhibited some of these racist images and ideas during her individual interview. I interviewed Monica on the one-year anniversary of the police shooting of Philando Castile. On my drive to meet Monica that morning, I spent the entire ride listening to NPR coverage of the shooting and the wake of continued protests in the year following. When I asked Monica about her thoughts on the election of President Trump, Monica began by talking about border control and the importance of Trump’s stance on immigration because “It has overwhelmed us and depleted us a nation...you know, just, just sucked us dry, pretty much.” Monica continued with her thoughts on immigration, and then started talking about the “ISIS terrorists killing Christians. I mean, torturing them. It’s horrible.” Monica got a glazed look over her face and apologized and asked me again what my question was. I assured her that she was answering it, and asked if perhaps she could think of any more local or national examples related to her political support for Donald Trump. At this re-wording of the question, Monica said “Like children...children’s starvation, children being hungry, and not having opportunity. Black violence. That kinda’ thing. I think people get on a bandwagon and they start killing policemen, so I think that’s civil unrest...I find it very alarming and unpleasant. You know, because, innocent people get killed. You know, ‘cuz they’re always killing policemen. They just pick them of like...you know, it’s horrible.” I wonder if Monica, too, was listening to coverage of the one year anniversary of the shooting of Philandro Castille, and if that coverage affected what came to the fore during this part of our interviewing. If it did, I imagine that Monica was listening to a very different type of media coverage than I was that morning. The

media works to sustain these racialized ideas, a phenomenon that has gained increasing attention and coverage in the wake of the presidential election (Jamieson and Cappella 2008).

The *imagined secular* world and the fears that come with it are created in juxtaposition to the white spatial imaginary of the church (Lipsitz 1995). This maintained polarization between the inside and outside world, a polarization built on understandings and stereotypes related to racial difference, often draws from the assumption that racial difference comes “from the existence of blacks rather than the behavior of whites” (Lipsitz 1995:369). Monica’s focus on the existence of black people, through her descriptions and concerns over black violence on the one year anniversary of the shooting of a black man by a white cop, draw attention away from the actions of whites and refocus on the mere existence of people of color as the locus of social problems in the United States. Monica’s beliefs provide empirical evidence for some of the beliefs that Gorski (2017) theorizes about his claims that evangelical Christian support for Donald Trump was due to a desire to uphold norms of White Christian Nationalism.

This combination of messages and sentiment about individualized care and solutions, voiced distant concern, and voicing of racist stereotypes, provides, at best, a type of lip-service to racial politics that aligns with many of the messages of Donald Trump. Further, these sentiments simultaneously evoke an underlying fear of persecution on the part of evangelicals: whether that be through the language of ISIS killings or pro-life, anti abortion beliefs.

Controlling the Conversation: Leaving Race at the Door

Pastor Dave makes quite clear that the individualist approach to messages of love, when it comes to matters of race, are both the beginning and end of conversation about these cultural divides. On that same April Sunday that Pastor Dave began the morning with an

acknowledgement of issues of racial divides and immigration in the United States, he ended with the following: “We don't bring that stuff in here. Race thing, age thing, gender thing, that's what's modeled for us in the outside world, we don't bring that in here.” Pastor Dave both enforces conversations around race that are color-blind (Bonilla-Silva 2009), individualistic, and simultaneously works to keep them as part of the outside, *imagined secular* world. By implying that race and gender and age only exist outside of the church, Pastor Dave works to normalize whiteness and masculinity within the church. Whiteness, at Lakeview Church, is set up as something that can be “taken for granted” (Frankenberg 1993; Tranby and Hartmann 2008). These ideas of individualism and anti-structuralist approaches to the social world, and sometimes outright racist stereotypes and worldviews, are only understood as legitimate in a community in which everyone is thought to possess equal opportunity. This view of the world is only possible through both the marginalization and cultural exclusion of racial minorities (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Lewis 2004; Tranby and Hartmann 2008). Whiteness, in this understanding of the world, is normative, and nonwhite cultures are seen as deviations of this norm (Crenshaw 1997).

The symbolic boundaries Lakeview draws around itself to keep the imagined secular at bay are white boundaries. Pastor Dave, the same person who encourages Lakeview not to bring race into the church, brought Pastor Darryl in to talk about race. However, this invitation, while seemingly contradicting Pastor Dave's boundaries around whiteness, worked to uphold them. People of color can come in to the church, but in a way that invokes some type of color-blind, post racial approach to difference. Race is not something that needs to be talked about, because it isn't an issue. When race is an issue, it is an issue of the urban city, and issue that is focused on during local missions to homeless shelters and soup kitchens, myths of black violence and killing

of cops. The conversations and beliefs held by those at Lakeview allow for a continued normalization of whiteness. However, as is often the case with social norms and values, the mechanisms of normalization are often unclear at best, or masked behind efforts towards inclusion, conversation, and debate.

Rituals of Race

Lakeview Church works to maintain symbolic boundaries of whiteness through an individualistic approach to questions of race, and through the use of the “spectacle” (Lipsitz 2011) that reinforces the white spatial imaginary in which notions of the outside, imagined secular world are created and maintained. I suggest that Donald Trump, in his promises and own rhetoric around race in the United States, symbolizes an individual who will work to uphold these boundaries. While Trump symbolizes what Gorksi (2017) calls a “secular protector,” evangelicals also work to rework his image in a way that upholds and reinforces these boundaries around race, gender, and fear of change.

In line with the scholars who argue for bringing questions of race and ethnicity to the church, I argue we can continue to do so with theories of racialized space. Sacred spaces take shape based on socially constructed maps of the world. Human beings bring place into being, and often do so through ritual in sacred places (Knott 2008). Gender, and gendered difference, is ritualized within the church, as discussed in Chapter 3, and racial difference is ritualized within the church as well. All of these rituals, and their meanings, are tied to the changes occurring in the world outside them. If the imagined secular world contains and symbolizes the profane, then the content of the rituals that work to maintain the sacred can tell us what evangelicals hold on to during times of change.

The space between fundamentalism and liberalism that evangelicals have forged is, for most evangelicals, still understood and maintained as a white space. Understanding the perceived differences between white and black spaces within the evangelical church might lend insight to precisely why these liberal projects are bundled together in the *imagined secular*. Lakeview Church draws symbolic boundaries around their white spatial congregation—and these boundaries are raced. However, symbolic boundaries are permeable. Just as Bracey and Moore (2017) suggest that white congregations know they must let people of color in to not seem racist, evangelicals at Lakeview know they need to talk about race, and they need to both welcome certain conversations and appear accepting of all. The ways in which evangelicals go about constructing conversations around race illustrate what aspects of the *imagined secular* they are willing to engage, and which aspects of it are most threatening.

Applying evangelical beliefs with larger critical race theories of both critical whiteness and the white spatial imaginary help us to better build on Smith and Emerson's (2001) assertion that religious institutions can do little to affect change when it comes to efforts for racial reconciliation. The conversations at Lakeview Church suggest, instead, that evangelicals maintain boundaries of racial exclusion in their efforts to have conversations about race. While evangelicals work to debate and potentially move their umbrellas around issues of gender and sexuality, white evangelicals, and predominantly white churches, hold their umbrellas firmly for protection (and thus a continued normalization) of whiteness. When we can conceptualize of the church as a predominately white space, we see that “no longer is [space]...the passive container or backdrop for human activity. It is thoroughly enmeshed in embodiment and everyday practice, knowledge and discourse, and in processes of production and reproduction, and consequently, it is enmeshed in religion no less than in other areas of social and cultural life” (Knott 2008:1111).

Race is not merely an ascribed identity that differentiates evangelicals. Rather, race, and whiteness, are worked as “conditions” (Lipsitz 2011) that are a result of their maintenance within the church. As such, this work also suggests that, when discussing the relationship between religious and secular communities in the United States, we must also attend to these overlapping relations along different axes of difference. That is, white churches might be more or less willing to engage with aspects of secular communities than others, for example.

The evangelical understandings of gender, sexuality, and the family discussed in Chapter 3 must be understood as institutionalized through a white spatial imaginary. The imagined secular world is wrestled with and debated within the confines of the white spatial imaginary, and as such, our understandings of evangelical responses to these concerns and fears around change are also intimately tied with whiteness. I now turn to a discussion about the ways in which evangelicals manage their vulnerability, their fears, and their grasp on cultural relevance by documenting the ways in which evangelicals have shifted their attention from concerns of same-sex sexuality to concerns and protections over heterosexuality.

CHAPTER 5: What Lurks in the Shadows: Evangelical Heterosexuality in Times of Change

In the Summer of 2016, Pastor Isaac gets up during final song and asks everyone to grab a hand next to them. I am sitting in back row alone and don't hold hands. He asks for us to join in prayer, prayer for Dallas, for Minneapolis, and for Russia, “where they just passed a series of laws that will make it very hard to be a Christian and do Christian work there.” Here, Pastor Isaac is referring to the shooting of five Dallas police officers, the shooting of Philando Castile in Minneapolis, and the perceived legal persecution of Christians, and evangelical Christians who wish to engage in missionary work outside of the United States. Pastor Isaac is acknowledging the state of race relations, as he knows he should, and is doing so while simultaneously reminding the audience of what they, as Christians, continue to suffer through in a broken world. Pastor Isaac then talks about how Lakeview, as a church, is open to everyone. He tears up and pauses to take a breath. With tears visible on the large screens that project an image of his face out to the congregation, Pastor Isaac says that he welcomed someone new in the lobby this morning before the services began. He starts crying more audibly, and says “I was able to say that this is a place for everyone” before he begins the Sunday sermon.

Those who attend Lakeview Church receive fairly consistent messages that they should be welcoming, and welcoming to everyone. In this chapter, I explore the bounds, and confusions, and questions related to this welcoming, specifically around questions related to sexual identity. Evangelicals are working to shift their beliefs on sexuality, and these beliefs are tied to their continued support of conservative religious politics, a relationship that has been largely ignored in assertions about evangelical support for Donald Trump (Balmer et al 2017; Berezin 2017;

Braunstein 2017; Hills 2017; Gorski 2017; Jung 2016; McElwee and McDaniel 2017; Whitehead et al 2018).

A Selective Abandonment: Changing Tactics and Remaining Fears

Today, at Lakeview Church, there are no small groups for same-sex attraction. The majority of the groups are devoted to heterosexual couples and to questions related to heterosexual marriage. For example, these groups have names such as “How to Love” which is a group that explores the book by the same name, in an effort to highlight and name “frustrating relational patterns in your marriage” and a married couples group called quite literally “Stay Married!”

This transition, from many groups devoted to same-sex attraction to none, with the simultaneous growth of small groups devoted to marriage and coupledom, is something we can understand as a selective abandonment. Lakeview Church has refocused its attention from homosexuality to a preserving of heterosexuality. Homosexuality is still discussed, but, as evident in the lack of small groups present on the topic, the solutions have changed. Conversations at Lakeview around homosexuality mirror those of the past: often, homosexuality is discussed as a sin on par with any other sin, echoing the rhetoric of sexual desire as a choice, and thus a choice that can be changed. Second, these conversations and debate discuss welcoming the LGB³⁹ community in the church, and that this welcoming, and how to welcome people, is an issue that needs to be talked about, and talked about differently. Third, and finally,

³⁹ I use LGB as an acronym for short-hand reference to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community. I do not include the often included “T” to represent the trans community, as trans individuals were never discussed in conversations explicitly about sexuality. The trans community was discussed, as noted, in larger conversations about the *imagined secular*, described in Chapter 3.

there appears to be quite a bit of anxiety around this welcoming. These conversations still work to uphold heterosexuality and maintain homosexuality as the “other” identity off of which heterosexuality is created and forged.

While cultural understandings of race and sexuality have markedly different histories, and lived experiences associated with them, evangelicals at Lakeview church approach topics of both race and sexual identity in a similar vein: they know they should be talking about both race and sexuality, and, importantly, also know that they should care about issues related to race and sexuality. But, much like conversations around race at Lakeview work to reinforce whiteness as normal, conversations around sexuality, and specifically, same-sex sexuality, work to reinforce heterosexuality within Lakeview’s community. And, both this normalization of whiteness and normalization of heterosexuality are reflected in and reflective of Lakeview member’s support for and relationship with conservative religious politics.

Scholars and pundits have not thoroughly or critically interrogated the relationship between white evangelicals’ overwhelming support for Donald Trump and their dual support for, and reinforcement of, heterosexuality. I suggest that this relationship has been ignored, because the tactics of evangelicals have shifted. While the centrality of heterosexuality in the evangelical church has often, historically, been expressed as anti-homosexuality, today, evangelicals spend much more time discussing heterosexuality than they do homosexuality. The relationship between sexuality and conservative religious politics has also been ignored in recent efforts to understand evangelical Christian support for Trump because academics have not fully incorporated theoretical and empirical acknowledgements of sex and sexuality as an organizing principle of social life (Green 2008; Seidman 1994). Heterosexuality remains central to evangelical identity today, but the means of supporting and encouraging this identity have

shifted. Evangelicals at Lakeview have moved their collective umbrella (Smith 1998) to one that is working to protect and understand singleness, coupledness, and heterosexual marriage.

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of evangelical approaches to same-sex sexuality in the past to highlight the recent pivot we have seen in an evangelical approach to sexuality. I will then discuss how evangelicals approach conversations on same-sex sexuality in Lakeview Church today. I'll argue that these discussions highlight two things: 1) evangelicals know that they should be talking about same-sex sexuality, and 2) they talk about same-sex sexuality in a way that works to reaffirm heterosexuality. These conversations and debates also suggest that evangelicals know that heterosexuality is no longer a "given" identity among individuals. This is a confusing period of time for evangelicals at Lakeview, and they need time to figure out how to best support and uphold heterosexuality today. In the second part of this chapter, I will discuss two themes that emerge in evangelical conversations around heterosexuality: 1) singleness and 2) containments of sex. Both of these themes highlight a larger anxiety at play in the church. I conclude by suggesting that this anxiety, and confusion and focus on heterosexuality, intertwined with conversations about same-sex desire, help us understand evangelical sexual politics in the contemporary world. While Donald Trump provided evangelicals with a rhetoric centered on whiteness and individual-level approaches to systematic social problems, he also promised evangelicals the gift of time: Donald Trump works as a symbol to keep the infringement of the socially progressive policies of the *imagined secular* world at bay, while evangelicals refocus their efforts on their defense and understanding of heterosexuality.

A History of Anti-Homosexuality in the Evangelical Church

A sense of one's identity is often constructed through opposition, and often, an opposition to a labeled and scorned "other." For Christian conservatives, homosexuality has served as this "other" for multiple decades (Stein 2001). Stein suggests that "These Christians see gay people—affirming relationships that have no strings attached, no mutual duty, and no guarantee of duration—as the antithesis of moral individuals, the embodiment of a world in which rules, order, self-discipline, and stability are severely lacking" (2001:106). For many evangelical Christians, gay individuals have represented a lack of morality that is perhaps a step toward social disorder. Constructions of gay individuals in the church were and are often also linked to concerns about norms of gender essentialism, a central tenet of evangelical family views, as discussed in Chapter 3. Stein suggests that "In the Christian Right imagination, homosexuals represent undisciplined male sexuality, freed from the 'civilizing' influence of women" (2001:107). Gay individuals represent an affront to Christian morality and teachings, and an affront to evangelical's essential understandings about gender, which, of course, are also closely related to constructions of appropriate family and intimate relationships. We can think of this relationship as emblematic of Butler's heterosexual matrix—and Schippers' focus on the binding force of heterosexual desire (2007). That is, gender is forged through heterosexuality. It is not about being an evangelical man or woman, or being secular or religious, or just gay or straight; rather, the construction of an evangelical heterosexuality is central to, and in many ways precedes, all of those other categorical understandings of identity.

Evangelicals have historically shown this support and privileging of heterosexuality through anti-homosexual discourses, as heterosexuality was understood as a godly ideal (Gerber 2011) unlike the sinful threat of homosexuality. Evangelical leaders and organizations have long

been at the front lines of anti-gay legislation, measures, and activities. One of the more well-known of these movements was Focus on the Family's Love Won Out ex-gay ministry, which was founded in 1998 and had a mission statement as follows: "To provide a Christ-centered, comprehensive conference which will enlighten, empower and equip families, church and youth leaders, educators, counselors, policy-makers, and the gay community on the truth about homosexuality and its impact on culture, family, and youth."

That truth about homosexuality, according to Love Won Out, was that homosexuality was something that could be overcome. The organization argued that there were no conclusive studies to support a biological or genetic cause for homosexuality, and thus, homosexuality, understood a choice, could also be understood as sin to overcome. James Dobson, the then president of Focus on the Family, backed the sub-organization's beliefs with the following statement: "There is no evidence that homosexuals as a class are discriminated against in the present society. They are not like African-Americans, Hispanics, or other historically disadvantaged groups, for their identity is based on changeable behavior" (Love Won Out Conference Guide, 2005-2006). While Dobson's words nod to racial discrimination of the past and present, he argues that, homosexuality, as a chosen identity, unlike race, cannot be understood as something discriminated against. Many sociologists have documented evangelicals' long-standing understanding of homosexuality as a choice (Erzen 2006; Gerber 2008; Gerber 2011; Moon 2004).

Those who overcame the sin of homosexuality, with the help of Love Won Out and other similar organizations and efforts, often identified as or are identified as "ex-gays". Many ex-gays, along with the organizations that produced them, often spoke out against society's messages about homosexuality as something normal and healthy. Love Won Out targeted the

media's "misrepresentation" of homosexuality as something predetermined, and school's "pro-gay agendas," invoking the sentiment of the culture wars started decades before.

Anti-homosexuality efforts existed at the local level as well. In large and small evangelical churches, this anti-gay sentiment was most often executed through same-sex attraction groups. Same-Sex attraction (SSA) groups often, historically, take the sentiment of "pray the gay away" and translate it into tangible action and goals. These groups operate under the idea that same-sex sexuality, attraction, and desire are a sin on par with any other sin, and therefore should be treated as such: through prayer, materials, accountability and support to make sure that sin is avoided in the future.

A common approach within SSA groups is to promote celibacy. SSA is understood as both a sin and a choice, and, perhaps like premarital sex, is something that can be avoided. The church discusses urges around sexual desires before marriage, but advocates and supports its members in talking through these desires. These groups also often provide specific forms of accountability to group members to help individuals avoid acting on these desires (Diefendorf 2015). Similarly, the church has historically encouraged those struggling with SSA to join a group where such desires can be discussed and controlled.

This approach to SSA has presented the evangelical church with some challenges. In discussing sexuality and sexual identity as something that can change, the evangelical church inadvertently aligns itself with more progressive groups who talk about sexuality as fluid. As Erzen argues in her work on ex-gay ministries in San Francisco, in constructing same-sex attraction as a choice, evangelicals, as a result, "point to the instability and changeability of their own identities rather than serve as a testament to heterosexuality" (Erzen 2006:14). This

instability of heterosexuality has become a key focus of the church over the past decade, and a focus that is intertwined with changing conversations about homosexuality.

In 2013, after much push-back, controversy, and a continued financial strain, Love Won Out was disbanded by the board of directors of Exodus International (a larger, interdenominational ex-Gay Christian organization), which had purchased the organization in 2009. Exodus International disbanded shortly after dismantling Love Wont Out. Then president of Exodus International, Alan Chambers, apologized to the LGBT community for causing them “pain and hurt” as the organization closed. This moment marked a larger moment for evangelicals in the United States, as the disbanding of this organization reflected a sign of changing times.

Today, Focus on the Family and evangelicals, broadly, continue to approach homosexuality as a choice, and emphasize that these attractions are things that can be changed, and sins that can be changed that do not need to operate as a defining feature of ones’ life⁴⁰. While these national evangelical organizations, along with a good majority of evangelical

⁴⁰ Here is the statement pulled from the Focus on the Family’s website: “Many people with same-sex attractions choose not to identify as homosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual. Instead, their primary identification comes from their faith in Jesus Christ. They identify as Christians, followers of Jesus and God’s children. And they choose to live according to biblical truths and values, reserving sexual expression for marriage between a man and a woman. We understand that this may be a difficult struggle, requiring help and assistance from other Christians. The following articles demonstrate Focus on the Family’s support for those who choose this path and help explain some of the struggles that those with unwanted same-sex attractions encounter. For those making this journey, and for their families, friends and churches, these articles also give wisdom and point to other helpful resources – articles, books, support groups and counseling referrals.” The articles include information about counseling for “unwanted Same-sex attraction”, resources for men and women “with unwanted homosexuality” and “growth into manhood” as some examples. Oftentimes, homosexuality within the evangelical church is understood as a failure to uphold specific gendered roles. Historically and currently, deviant sex is also about a deviance to gender essentialism, a key component of evangelical identity.

churches, have not changed their beliefs regarding homosexuality and SSA, their approaches to non-heterosexual sex and desire have shifted.

In her ethnography of a small town in Oregon battling local legislation around same-sex marriage, many of Stein's respondents suggested that homosexuality was not something that was part of their lives, nor something that would really affect their lives. However, Stein finds that Christians began to mobilize against this legislation only when they began to see signs of its "normalization" (Stein 2001) in their town. Homosexuality was normalized on a national scale in the United States in 2015; the sexual identity, desire, and attraction long fought by evangelicals was granted federal status.

The assumptions of heterosexuality as a "given," as well as what Ezren refers to as its instability (2006), were highlighted for evangelicals. There was quite a bit of backlash to the 2015 supreme court decision. Conservative culture warriors reassembled under the flag of "religious freedom" after the legalization of same-sex marriage (Gorski 2017). Others condemned those within: In August 2017, a group of 150 prominent evangelicals wrote and released the "Nashville Statement" which condemned Christians who support the LGB community. The statement reads that "such approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness." Evangelicals felt like, and continue to feel like, while other groups are having new rights conferred on them, theirs are being taken away, and, perhaps worse, as some who identify as evangelical support it. As Jenkins argues, "Such a war [the culture wars] is a zero-sum game in which coexistence is not an option and talk of moral equivalence is not allowed" (2008:12). In understanding that the United States should be a Christian nation, many evangelicals understand these legal actions as part of a zero-sum game, in which gains for the LGBT community represent a loss for them.

However, evangelical's response to these shifts was and is not to continue to "pray the gay away." Evangelicals, in shifting their umbrella of protection, need to find a new way to reinforce their own beliefs around sexuality. Molly Worthen argues in a 2016 article in *The New York Times*, "The anti-gay ideology that has long held sway in American evangelicalism seems to be crumbling." An outward focus on anti-homosexuality might be crumbling, yes.

Evangelicals have turned inward, and begun to critically interrogate one of their major pillars: heterosexuality. I argue that this does not mean that evangelicals care less about issues of sexuality, though—again, they have just found new ways of going about their beliefs, and slight shift in these beliefs. As such, I argue that, in our efforts to understand evangelical support for Donald Trump, we must return to the issues that have historically mobilized evangelicals.

Evangelical support for Trump is not a story of economics, but rather is a story about fear, and fear related to status loss, and status loss for the white, heterosexual family.

Is a Sin Just a Sin?

All of the parishioners I spoke with at Lakeview Church discuss SSA as a sin, on par with any other sin, except for Riley, a 37-year-old white woman who, in an individual interview, discussed same-sex attraction as something akin to addiction. Riley told me that "I did some research on it because I guess I believe it's more DNA based, it's a more natural sort of thing." Riley then tells me Pastor Isaac spoke of same-sex relationships directly following the 2015 decision, and that Pastor Isaac "really stuck with the idea that it wasn't [natural] and that people had the ability to change and make those choices to change." But, Riley continued, she thinks same-sex attraction is "Sort of similar to drug addiction, I guess I've always swung the other way, that it is similar to a drug addiction in that you are kind of wired that way." Riley distanced

herself from the commonly-held evangelical belief that sexual behaviors and desires can and should be regulated, and instead suggests that sexual desire is grounded in genetics. Riley also acknowledges, in this interview, that she is most likely in the minority at Lakeview in holding such an opinion. The majority of individuals at Lakeview Church discuss SSA as a choice. However, as I suggest below, these convictions also come with their fair share of ambivalence, questions, and, at times, clear acknowledgement that SSA isn't something that needs to be thought about much today.

Darren, like many of his fellow congregants at Lakeview, believes that same-sex behavior and desire are sins no different than any other. Darren also suggests that, as a fellow sinner (like everyone else) he should not judge, because, in the end, God will be the one to judge them all. Darren states that "I think we should be witnessing to all these people from a loving standpoint instead of, 'we're here to judge you on your mistake,' 'cause we have no mistakes apparently." Darren continues by saying,

'Cause what makes their sin different from our sin? I think a lot of that stems from the work I do, and people, the population I work with who has lots of traumatic experiences with Christians, and the church...I think it's a complex issue to try to navigate. I have a new coworker and I was having a lot of conversations with him, and he is openly gay and in a relationship and we're talking about our different relationships and me and Annie and how well we fit together, and he was talking about him and his partner and how well they fit together and different stuff like that and I almost feel like, I'm a Christian, but I have to let you know, like, I read the Bible as love and, 'Who is without sin, cast the first stone'. I'm not going to judge you because I'm not the one to judge you.

Darren seeks to accept the LGB community because to not accept them is to not accept himself, either. There is an accidental queering to understandings of sexuality when it is described, by evangelicals, as a choice (Gerber 2008). But, partially because of this understanding of sexuality as fluid, and as something that can and should be avoided, Darren must accept it, because this

framing of sexuality is also in line with the framing of a whole host of other sins that he himself also deals with, or might in the future.

During a couples' interview, I asked Nicole and Craig what they would do if a same-sex couple came to church. Nicole, 19 years old and white, and Craig, 21 years old and Latino, have been dating for two years, and are both actively involved in youth ministry at Lakeview. Although Nicole and Craig represent one of the younger couples in this study, they were adamant that they be taken seriously when I expressed my initial surprise at their age when they walked through the door to meet me. Nicole and Craig had responded to my call for interviews placed in the weekly bulletin. I had not met them before and did not know anything about them before their arrival, which was an unusual experience for me in this study. When I asked how long the two had been together, and if they were married, they told me no, but Craig, who quickly smiled and blushed, proudly told me that he picked the coffee shop we all sat in because it was the location of his first date with Nicole. Nicole smiled too and looked down while Craig beamed at her. Well into my interview with Nicole and Craig, I asked, specifically, "If a same-sex couple came to Lakeview on Sunday, would you welcome them in?" Nicole responds first with a "For sure. Yeah. For sure." Her boyfriend, Craig, agrees and says excitedly, "That would be great!" Here, both Craig and Nicole laugh. I ask them why it would be great, and Craig responds with "Because they're there. They're coming to church. They're at Lakeview. They're just people. They're not worse than me, but I think that maybe they don't know that Christians think that, or some Christians think that. I see it as any other sin." Nicole and Craig treat SSA like any other sin, and do not immediately respond with a need or desire to fix that sin.

Becky, like Darren, and Craig, agrees that same-sex behavior is a sin (and thus, a choice). Becky says, "I, personally, don't believe that's the way God intended it. I don't believe that it is

correct, biblically. However, it's not my place to judge that, and if that person has a heart for God, and has, I mean, you know, has the ability to speak to people that can bring other people to Christ, I don't think that that should be an obstacle, not for the church... We just have to get beyond that. We have to let people be their people and not judge them." Both Becky and Darren focus on judgment as a concern that the church should move beyond. Darren, specifically, references the "traumatic experiences" that the LGB community has faced from Christians, perhaps referencing the previous tactics towards ex-gay ministries and conversion therapy. Becky focuses on the importance of a relationship with Jesus Christ, a primary component of evangelical identity. Becky, Darren, Nicole and Craig all work explain how and why they would welcome members of the LGB community in to Lakeview Church, and do so with a discourse focused on an egalitarian understanding of sin.

Finding the Line: Marriage and Leadership

While individuals at Lakeview pair their understanding of sin, and understanding of sexual desire and attraction as a choice, and thus something that can be controlled, their professed love and acceptance toward the LGB community has specific conditions regarding both marriage and leadership. As Craig states, fairly bluntly after a lot of back and forth on the subject, "I don't agree with same-sex relationships, so in turn, I don't agree with marriage." Nicole, Craig's girlfriend, nods her head as Craig says this, and adds "But as far as gay and lesbian people, I don't think that they're making up the feelings. I don't think that it's not a real struggle." Here, Nicole reinforces an individual-level support and validation of the feelings of the LGB community, but, much like the church's long-standing approach to SSA, differentiates between an individual's feelings of sexual desire by acknowledging and validating them, while

also making clear that such desires should be kept just to the realm of desire. LGB relationships, and therefore marriage, should not be condoned by the church.

Pastor Dave highlights the difficulty and emotions that rise to the fore when evangelicals attempt to discuss SSA. On a Sunday Spring morning in 2017 Pastor Dave addresses the congregation by saying that “sexuality can be a really emotional topic.” Pastor Dave describes an example from his old church, in a large city on the other side of the country, where, one day, he saw a lesbian couple sitting in the front row. Pastor Dave tells the crowd at Lakeview that “It was pretty obvious they were in love with each other—they were demonstrating that with their hands.” Pastor Dave describes running up to the couple and hugging them after the sermon, and how he thanked them both for being there. The two women requested a meeting with him at a later date, where they disclosed that their time together in the church was exceedingly meaningful, and had in fact saved their marriage. This was not an example used to highlight how emotional and intense marriages and relationships can be, though. When Pastor Dave told the congregation at Lakeview about this comment that their marriage was saved due to their attendance at church, the congregation laughed. And Pastor Dave laughed too, albeit a bit nervously.

Pastor Dave went on to say “I don’t know what to do with that information. We disagree on what a biblical marriage is...you know that, right? This is an area that is confusing and one that we are still dialoguing in...” The congregation grew quiet, and after a minute, he said “Do you hear that sound? That is the sound of the fun train screeching to a halt this morning.” The audience laughed loudly, which worked to break up the tension in the room. Pastor Dave got more serious again and said that “We want to give everyone the benefit of the doubt that they are trying to find Jesus—you don’t have to be in or out of a certain box to be here. But we do need to

go to the bible for answers.” Pastor Dave references the Sermon on the Mount, and specifically highlights Matthew 5:28⁴¹, a popular verse about adultery. Pastor Dave then posits the following to the congregation: “As we have had ‘status changes’ in culture—how do we live? Jesus is not embarrassed about answering this—one of the most blessed things that we can have is sexuality. But it can have potential for great damage.” Pastor Dave directly acknowledges the changes in status that evangelicals are grappling with, and in this case, status changes that are related to larger cultural shifts in sexuality. Pastor Dave’s words also highlight the confusion that surrounds these status changes, and the time that the church needs while they figure out how to best approach questions of same-sex marriage.

Pastor Dave continues this sermon with, “How do we know that Jesus cares so much about sex? Look what he says about it. It can take you to hell. It has the potential to do that. We can debate what hell is—lots of debates about that going on—but one is that it’s when sex becomes completely removed from its original design...if we misuse sex, it creates a brokenness in us. Sex changes you either way. It will warp and distort you or move you to wholeness. The second thing Jesus says is that it is part of a covenant⁴²—a covenantal marriage. And I say that because at some point it is going to be different than state marriage. We might be entering a new

⁴¹ In the King James version of the Bible, Matthew 5:28 reads as “But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.”

⁴² A covenant marriage is a type of marriage that is legally distinct in three states in the United States in 2018. In a covenant marriage in these states, those marrying consent to pre-marital counseling, and, in addition, consent to more limited grounds for a later divorce. At Lakeview, and in the evangelical community at large, the term is being used more colloquially to invoke meanings of difference between a marriage in which God is present, in contrast to how evangelicals view and understand many secular marriages. Evangelicals, and many other religious groups in the United States, are working to redefine and promote heterosexual marriage in times of change (Heath 2012).

season where the church actually separates biblical covenant from legal marriage. I don't know if that is right around the corner, but we will have to see." Pastor Dave dismisses the feelings of the lesbian couple who found support in the church, because, in his understanding, such support would be impossible to find, because their marriage is not what marriage in the church is. Herein lay some of the limits to the love and welcoming espoused by many in the congregation.

Pastor Dave also suggests that the church might need to further prepare and articulate their stance on a covenant marriage. If gay couples are not only permitted to get married, but are showing up in the church, then the church needs to think seriously about their own understandings of what marriage is and represents. And, a willingness to have certain conversations, and to regroup around an institution so central to evangelical identity, also comes hand in hand with an acknowledgement of larger cultural changes at play. The church is having these conversations out of necessity, and not because they necessarily want to. Pastor Dave brings these points up in relation to the "status changes" evangelicals have experienced in a changing world.

Pastor Dave returns to the most common theme, and answer, in response to these status changes: the steadfastness of a relationship with, and guidance from Jesus Christ. Evangelicals are concerned about these status changes in their group, especially in light of their other economic, political, and religious gains. In order to make sense of, and avoid further status changes, evangelicals must turn to Jesus, and simultaneously defend a marriage within the church that is only open to heterosexual couples.

These felt status changes are deeply tied to notions of sex and sexuality, but this is something that has not been discussed in current theorizing of evangelical support for Trump. This linkage may have seemed, and continue to seem, ridiculous due to Trump's sexual history,

remarks, and allegations of assault. As Annie acknowledges in Chapter 3, Trump's actions are often understood as "not okay" (such as the example she discussed about grabbing women by the pussy), but neither are these larger issues: giving women too much power via feminism (in Chapter 3), and here, homosexuality, and a large-scale acceptance of homosexuality. Further, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, Trump is reworked and understood as an individual in need of saving like everyone else. And, if homosexuality is a choice, so is an entire range of sexual behaviors, both good and bad. Part of understanding Trump as a broken man is to also understand his sexual brokenness, a relatable trait or description for many evangelicals. Trump's sexual and relationship history does not turn evangelicals away from him, but rather highlights the need for redemption, control, and support when it comes to the many sexual temptations of which men are constantly at risk of succumbing (Diefendorf 2015). Trump is a sexually broken man who evangelicals understand through a language of (potential) redemption. Further, Trump, in his excessive posturing of heterosexual desire, also represents a figure who will continue to defend and uphold heterosexuality, both in his words and political actions.

While evangelicals draw lines around homosexuality when it comes to the institution of marriage, they also do so in regard to leadership positions within the church. While Nicole describes the importance of loving and respecting LGB individuals, she says, "I wouldn't put anyone in a same-sex relationship in a leadership position." Craig agrees with her and adds, "if that outward sin is showing and present in their life, whether it be a same-sex struggle or pornography, or pridefulness, or anything...stealing even. If it's an outward sin, it has to be dealt with." Craig adds that, "there are stipulations....if they walked in and were just congregants and were just there to be part of the church, fine and be there, that'd be great. We'd be inviting. We would love to have them." Here, Craig reinforces the more current belief that the LGB

community be welcome into the church, but that they join quietly, and without display of their “outward sins.” Craig continues and says, “But if they wanted to start leading a small group, and leading Bible Studies through the church and stuff, like, that's another conversation to have.” Craig ends by saying that, “We all sin. Sin is looked at on somewhat of an equal playing field in a sense, but I think same-sex marriage or even relation is an outward sin.” Craig works to discuss same-sex relationships and attraction as a sin on par with any other sin, while also differentiating between inward and “outward” sins. For Craig, and others at Lakeview, same-sex attraction, and really, acting on those desires in the form of a relationship, are an outward sin that presents itself as an affront to church doctrine. Gays and lesbians are allowed into the church, but quietly. They will not be given a podium or a voice, and they will not be understood, but they are promised a certain form of love and respect.

Joe, a white, recently widowed man in his early 50s, tells me that, “while I don’t agree with it [gay marriage] by any means, I think there’s a proper way and an improper way to handle it.” Joe adds that, if a gay person were in leadership, and got married, “I would think, they're not even acknowledging that what they're doing is not okay. And we're putting them in leadership positions...” Joe then tells me that, in his mind, leaders should be “trying to do their best” but that if gay individuals were in leadership, Joe would understand that individual to think “No. This is fine. I don’t believe that it’s a sin.” Joe continues to justify his beliefs by saying that “Even if you're just gonna come down to like, the doctrine of Lakeview, the doctrine doesn’t agree. If somebody's prostituting themselves or if somebody is... struggling with pornography or they're having sex with their [girlfriend], living with their girlfriend. Those things like that. I wouldn't put them in leadership 'cause they're not growing. They're not. They're not able to disciple somebody else or be in that place of leadership that they need to be if they're still trying

to work on something in themselves.” Joe’s thoughts reinforce the understanding of sexuality and a whole range of sexual behaviors as a choice, and as such, as sins on par with any other sins. But, the difference between homosexuality, and the other sexual transgressions Joe lists, is that at Lakeview, pornography, pre-marital sex, and sex work are not described as “outward sins.” They are not understood as a more blatant disregard for church teachings and are not thus relegated to the newer shadows that have emerged since the legalization of same-sex marriage. Rather, we see groups devoted to sexual addiction offered at Lakeview every season, and pre-marital sexuality is something discussed openly and frequently in the church, and indeed a key component of pre-marital counseling.

Congregants at Lakeview Church approach SSA with an understanding of love, but this is a conditional understanding of love, and a type of love that both informs and is informed by their perceived status changes in the world. Lakeview understands that they must let same-sex couples, or individuals “experiencing” SSA into the church in order to remain culturally relevant, but that welcome is bounded: LGB individuals within the church are not permitted access to marriage ceremonies within the church or positions of leadership. Systems of inequality can transform, rather than disappear, when their foundations are questioned (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Tilly 1999). Lakeview Church is not removing homophobia from its institutional design, but rather finding new and different boundaries around it.

Further, the LGB individuals that Lakeview members describe must not be “out” with their sins. This differentiation between outward and inward sins implies that some behaviors can and should, perhaps, be hidden. Some struggles should be between a congregant and God, and talking about same-sex attraction this way, as something outward but something that congregants at Lakeview would prefer to be pushed inward, lay in stark contrast to tactics around same-sex

attraction of the past. While churches like Lakeview used to have multiple groups where individuals were welcome in to talk very openly about these “out” sins, now both these groups and the conversations that occurred within them are gone. Lakeview has opened the church to LBG individuals without a focus on fixing them, but they want them to be quiet about it.

A Forced Excitement?

The question remains: is the church more willing to open its doors to the LGB community because they genuinely feel this action aligns with their faith, and with their relationship to Jesus, or is this more a matter of a response to changes in the larger world that push to the political and ideological center that has evangelicals feeling even more disenfranchised?

In an individual interview with Pastor Jeff, we sat outside on the patio of his favorite coffee shop down the street from Lakeview that many Lakeview staff frequent on a daily basis. Although it was 50 degrees on this July morning, Pastor Jeff and I sat outside at his favorite table and we both drank iced coffees and talked about running, an activity we both shared a love for. Pastor Jeff and I ran the same half-marathon the fall before, and saw each other and high-fived along the course. This was a moment that allowed for a bit of bonding outside of our researcher/leader relationship in the church. We talked for quite a while about training and upcoming races before we talked about Lakeview. I made sure to bring up the topic of running at the beginning of our interview, as a way of establishing a bit more comfort and trying to level my own feelings around the power dynamics present in the interview, as Pastor Jeff not only represented a leader within the church, but also my initial gatekeeper to the Lakeview community.

At the beginning of his interview, Pastor Jeff had mentioned the “tough issues” that the church needed to “tackle” to stay relevant. I followed up on what those tough issues were, according to him. He responded as follows:

Oh, gosh. Well, we gotta talk about same-sex attraction, gender issues, the church has not navigated that conversation well. But I think Lakeview has in its DNA, there’s a great book by Pastor Bill Jones, who was one of our pastors... and it’s kind of one of the books that’s in the DNA of Lakeview. Love is not licensed, or, acceptance is not agreement, and forgiveness is not- I think it’s forgiveness is not forgetting. Love, Acceptance, Forgiveness, so if I’m gonna love, accept and forgive people, I can accept somebody who maybe is in a lifestyle that I don’t agree with, but by accepting them does not imply that I agree, and that’s a hard conversation, I think, to have sometimes, but I think as Christians, we gotta get around our own hang-ups and issues and just go- like, if a lesbian couple comes into Lakeview, I need to be okay with that. In fact, be excited about it. Doesn’t mean that I’m going to agree with their lifestyle choices, I have some very strong opinions about Biblical covenant marriage, um, that are very counter-cultural. But getting back to the original question, we gotta talk about same-sex attraction, we need to talk about gender issues, gender identity, and then I think we need to talk about the things that Millennials really care about.

Here, Pastor Jeff acknowledges that while he may not agree with a homosexual “lifestyle” he feels he not only needs to welcome everyone into the church, but that he needs to be *excited* about it. Pastor Jeff’s words illustrate a larger sentiment at Lakeview. For example, after Pastor Isaac left in the Fall of 2016, Eileen and Eric, middle-aged white individuals, talked to me after Disciples Journey one night about how their sadness in his departure stemmed from the fact that “Pastor Isaac knew how to love people that I don’t know how to.” Eileen and Eric, appreciated the ways in which they could learn how to be more welcoming and more loving, and more excited and open to this loving, from Pastor Isaac, the man who, with tears in his eyes, told the congregation how good it felt to welcome someone new into church on that summer morning described in the beginning of this chapter.

This excitement, and understanding that Pastor Jeff, Pastor Isaac, and others at Lakeview need to feel excited about welcoming the LGB community into church, are juxtaposed against

Pastor Jeff's simultaneous feeling that as someone who believes firmly in covenant marriage, he, today, is "counter-cultural." Evangelicals are grappling with the dual efforts to rework their beliefs and messages in an effort to regain some cultural significance in our current moment, and set themselves up for continued growth in the future, while also understanding that the beliefs they feel most strongly about posit them as distinctly counter to the very cultural body they want to influence. Further, Pastor Jeff's words suggest that Lakeview is shifting its approach to the LGB community because it feels like it needs to, and also because their faith tells them to. According to Pastor Jeff, loving all is "built into the DNA" of Lakeview Church, but, that this DNA is more recently acknowledged through the younger generations at Lakeview.

Pastor Jeff implies a generational shift that may be partially responsible for this shift in approach to same-sex couples. Perhaps these feelings of excitement are coming from younger members of the church, the Millennials, as Pastor Jeff suggests⁴³. Annie, Darren's wife, who would, in her age of 29, be classified as a Millennial, describes a similar observation from a small group she joined at Lakeview. The group is a generic women's bible study. Annie states that "It's actually really interesting with my specific Bible study because we have three different generations. We have this older generation that are, like, in their seventies where they're very conservative, right? And so they know the Bible well and they know what is right and what is wrong and it's really hard for them to have a gray area. But what I think is really cool is that we have these other generations that are able to bring them to a place of, 'Yeah, but we still love them, right? (laughs), and how can we, like, show them respect and show them love?' and they

⁴³ This notion of Millennials as driving change and also as the group to which the church should focus its attention was a common idea shared by the Lakeview leadership staff. However, as Pastor Dave suggested in his Sunday sermon in the opening vignette of this work, Millennials are simultaneously a group that the church does not understand.

agree with that but it's also very black and white for them and so, so it's been very interesting to have those conversations and sometimes we don't, because of the differing views that we have.” Annie discusses intergenerational debates around the LGB community, and also suggests that at times, it is difficult to approach conversations on same-sex attraction, due to differing views within the Bible study. Annie’s words highlight a level of disagreement that, for many at Lakeview, results in some confusion on where the church stands. Small groups remain an important site of debate and locus of negotiation around evangelical identity and beliefs, but still require a certain amount of foundational guidance from the church.

Nicole highlights these needs for institutional guidance from the church, and tells me that gay marriage needs “to be addressed and I think that we, one, need to know where we stand with that but also paired up with that, know how to love those people, even though we may not agree with what they're doing or how they think. So, I think it's important to have those outlets to talk about those things and to, like, come to some kind of conclusion, but also paired with the fact that we still love these people and, know how to interact with them in a loving way and respectful way.” Nicole knows she is supposed to approach LGB individuals with love and respect, and acknowledges the importance of the small group of which she is a part as a space to debate and articulate her beliefs. However, Nicole also seeks more guidance from the church in regards to how to do so.

Carrie, who I interviewed individually, but who is also one of the leaders of Disciples Journey, reflected on the topic of same-sex relationships in regard to small group conversations. Carrie says, “As far as the congregation as a whole, I mean, we don’t even really talk about it, and I notice how Thursday nights, it’s never really come up a ton. I was surprised the week, um, when we were talking about with the marriage and singleness in Disciples Journey, I don’t think

it really came up. It's not something that's in the forefront." As I will discuss in more detail later, questions of heterosexual marriage and family are often what are at the forefront of Disciples Journey instead.

Allison, a 24 year old white woman who joined Lakeview Church a year prior after moving from Georgia, describes same-sex relationships as something she doesn't need to think much about. Allison says that "It's so easy to be like, oh no one is every going to ask me, so I don't need to know!" Allison laughs, as part of the joke, of course, is that I am making her think about this as a researcher. Allison pauses to think, and says "Like, If Pastor Dave was asked about this, per say, I don't even know what I would expect him to say. Or even what I would think if he decided to allow gay marriage here, like, not giving in to it, or not doing it could risk things—but it's kind of against God, against my religion, so I am not gonna do that, and I'm gonna trust that it's gonna work out. Like if you don't wanna marry them, that's like, legally against the law. But does it matter if it's a law or not? I know that God wants us to respect authority and laws wherever we are. If I become associated with a denomination and become pastors, like, or I had to put myself in a place where someone asked me to marry them who was not, who was like in a lesbian relationship or a gay relationship, like, what would I say?" Allison draws a distinction between the federal legality of same-sex marriage and her own religious views on same-sex marriage, but this distinction presents some confusion, as Allison's religious beliefs also suggest that she act as a law-abiding citizen. When cultural shifts around gender and sexuality occur, evangelicals need to work to rearticulate their religious beliefs with legal measures. This disconnect between Allison's religious beliefs and larger changes results in both confusion and anxiety, and highlights a larger concern about the disconnect between evangelical

and larger cultural stances on sexual rights, which find that society is becoming increasingly accepting of gay marriage, while evangelicals are not (Le Miere 2018).

Becky also described this uncertainty she felt around the church's stance on the LGB community. Becky told me a long story about joining a Buy Nothing Group on Facebook to give away some of her plants. Becky is an avid and proud gardener, and at the end of a successful spring growing season, wanted to give away many of her plants that she was otherwise going to "rip up" to make room for others. It was through this process of giving her plants away in this online forum, that Becky met a gay man and his partner. He took some of her plants, and, later that same year, when Becky returned to the group to seek help finding a prop for her daughter's play, Carlos and his partner Tod helped Becky out, as she needed a full-sized wine barrel for her daughter's school production of Tom Sawyer. Becky said that after Carlos loaned her the wine barrel, "we got talking and stuff and then I posted these free plants, and he came and got some. And we had conversation, and I always make a point of, I always put stuff out there, like, when I need to. Like, 'Can I come by and pick up your thing on my way home from church?' And, I'll put things out there, that's kind of my way of, I've now told you what I'm doing. If you want to inquire, go for it." Here, Becky is illustrating to me one of her tactics in evangelizing to her local community. Becky does not immediately invite people to church. She first likes to put feelers out to individuals to gauge their interest. In Becky's words, "And, he did [get interested], and so we had this conversation. We had a long conversation, and he told me his story a little bit, and he's had some tragedy, and he's with this gay partner. And, it was kind of almost like- it was a really interesting story. You know, he was married and had a son, and they got killed, in an accident, and stuff like that. And, then he ended up being with, you know, a man, and blah, blah, blah." At

this point in the story, Becky is less willing, and perhaps a bit uncomfortable, in relaying any details about Carlos and Tod's relationship.

Becky continues and says "So, now he's in this relationship, but he is from Colombia. Colombia? Cuba. I think he's from Cuba, and you know, he was wearing a cross and stuff. Anyways, so we had this conversation, and I was really conflicted. And, it was during the time of [Pastor] Isaac, but I was really conflicted. Can I invite this man to church? Like, is he going to be welcomed? Is he going to feel awkward? You know what I mean? If he comes in with his partner, you know..." Becky trails off here. I imagine part of Becky's concern is that, Carlos alone may be able to hide his sin, and keep it inward, but if Carlos and Tod came together, their outward sin might more easily show.

Becky is also concerned about the reactions of her peers at church, even though most all preach love and welcoming of LGB individuals. "There's the people that I know, I just don't know if I can invite this gay person to church here or not. I don't want to invite somebody and then they get a bad taste, which, potentially, prevents them from further seeking. But the conversation that I had with this guy was very much, like, he missed being in a church... I think that's gotta be a challenge because there's so many narrow-minded Christians out there." Molly Worthen, who researches conservative Christians, argues in a recent piece in the New York Times that "In an era when the right worships the nuclear family and the left celebrates sexual authenticity and gay marriage, *celibate* gay Christians have no comfortable home on either side of the political spectrum." We can extend Worthen's argument, here, and suggest that gay Christians, regardless of their sexual activity, find little comfort on either side of the political spectrum. As the culture wars progress, and progress around questions of sexuality, those who

blur the assumed lines between camps might feel increasing pressure and stigma until new beliefs are formed and articulated.

I got to know Becky fairly well over the two years I spent at Lakeview, and knew Becky to be an outgoing, well-connected and outspoken church community member. This hesitancy regarding her outreach to Tod and Carlos surprised me. I asked Becky if she talked to the pastoral team at Lakeview about her predicament. Becky had talked to Pastor Jeff about this predicament, and describes his response as follows: “Oh, he was totally, like, we are here to serve people who want to know Jesus no matter what. So, he said, ‘I think that it would, frankly, make some people uncomfortable. Too bad. Bring him, you know, if you want to bring him, bring him. You know, Pastor Dave will be one of the first to go up and shake their hand, probably.’ It’s like okay. I never brought him.” I then asked Becky if she would feel comfortable inviting Carlos to church now. Here, Becky responds to me with the following: “Yes, I still would. I just didn’t, ‘cause it’s not somebody, like I *know*, know. You know what I mean? It’s just somebody in the neighborhood that’s come over and put plants out of my yard...he’s not my buddy. So, if our paths cross again, and circumstances come around, I should probably just invite him.” Becky then describes that if the “perfect situation” arises, she will invite him. Becky is one of the most dominant personalities of Disciples Journey, a force both within the small group and within the larger church. Becky is quick to talk to strangers, quick to make friends, and quick to follow up with individuals she meets. This ambivalence and hesitancy on Becky’s part over Carlos, as someone who is “not her buddy” has less to do with her insecurities around evangelizing, and much more to do with her insecurities around inviting a gay man into the church.

Becky's response entails quite a bit of back and forth as she struggles to describe how to go about inviting a gay man to church with her. While Becky feels supported from Pastor Jeff, there is an ambivalence and uncertainty in her voice as she thinks out loud about how best to invite Carlos to church. Becky is unsure if loving the LGB community also means bringing them into the church. For Becky, and others, that might feel like the symbolic line between the sacred church and the *imagined secular* world is crossed, and that they are intentionally allowing for a blurring around this line. Part of this confusion, too, lay in the somewhat mixed messages and rhetoric of the church today. Evangelicals should love everyone, but that love has conditions on it. Further, if sexual activities and desires are a choice, but one also must feel excited about welcoming those in to the church who make these choices, do evangelicals still feel comfortable discussing sexuality as a choice? It is one thing to provide some lip-service acceptance of the LGB community, but should they be sitting in the pews next to everyone else? Further, these conversations are not happening as frequently, or with as much focus as they have in the past, because, instead, that focus is on straightness and heterosexuality. Confusion around homosexuality, for evangelicals, also means confusion around heterosexuality.

In a moment in which evangelicals know that ex-gay conversion is wrong, and that they are supposed to love, respect, and even be "excited" about gay and lesbian individuals joining them in church, there is still much uncertainty about what that might actually look like in practice. Parishioners at Lakeview who are thinking about and debating SSA are looking to the church for more guidance and directives on their beliefs and stance in changing times. At the same time, it appears that younger generations within the church may be pushing those conversations forward, and that Lakeview, as a church, needs to catch up, as echoed in Pastor Jeff's reflection. There are also members at Lakeview who state that SSA is not something they

need to think about, or have not thought about. While these remarks may reflect the pervasiveness and endurance of heteronormativity in the church, regardless of larger cultural shifts, these remarks may also reflect a shift in the church's focus. That is, the accidental queering that the church's discourses of choice imply shakes the ground on which heterosexuality, as an institution, is built. The church's way of handling this continued rhetoric of SSA as choice, along with its feelings of perceived need for "excitement", acceptance, and confusion, have resulted in a re-focusing on heterosexuality, not homosexuality.

As Stein suggests, there is a sense of forbidden desire, and danger, that comes with the sense of homosexuality as something hidden, or lurking in the shadows (2001). While the evangelical church was quite upfront about homosexuality, partially out of an initial fear of this lurking sin that was starting to normalize around them, the irony is that, today, evangelicals have, in many ways, relegated SSA back to the shadows. However, the anxiety, and forbidden desire around it, still emerges, and, as discussed in Chapter 3, often emerges in larger conversations about marriage, gender, and the family.

During one of my first Thursday evenings with Disciples Journey, Carrie directed the individuals in the room to pair off for an exercise on spousal communication. Each pair was given a prompt for a typical decision-making conversation a couple would need to confront. The idea behind the exercise was to practice engaging in a typical, but potentially difficult, spousal conversation, take notes on the conversation, and then report the conversation to the larger group for feedback. This exercise was part of a larger unit on married life. Due to an uneven gendered split in the room, Will and Steve, two middle-aged white men, paired off together. Will and Steve turned their chairs to face each other and read their prompt out loud. In this exercise, they were tasked with finding a place to live. Instead of just going along with the prompt, the two men

started lisping and flailing their wrists, giggling and engaging in a bit of what Pascoe calls the fag discourse (2011). This interaction between Will and Steve highlights some anxiety about pretending to be in a marriage with another man. As this back and forth continued, the two men joked that, if they were supposed to be choosing a place to live, “obviously” they would need to move to Belltown, “the gay neighborhood of Seattle.” Belltown is *not* the gay neighborhood of Seattle. Rather, it is a hub of affluent, young workers in the tech industry. For these two men, they thought they were being funny, showing their knowledge of gay life in Seattle, while also making fun of it. However, Will and Steve entirely misunderstood what that neighborhood is at the same time.

Seattle, as part of the urban spatial imaginary in the suburban and urban divide elaborated on in Chapter 4, represents the place, and space, where the gays are. There appears, in this joking moment during a marriage exercise, the inability for Will and Steve, and I am sure many others at Lakeview, to imagine that gay people might live in their neighborhood, or actually attend their church. When Will and Steve joke about being a gay couple, these shifts in their sexual identity also means a major physical move in order to make the relationship make sense to them. Individuals at Lakeview talk about gay life as if they know what gay life, as a cultural other in relation to their own lives, is, because in today’s world, individuals, both evangelical and secular, are now supposed to know the LGB community. Parishioners at Lakeview are trained in this cultural knowledge, but the cultural knowledge is still deeply informed by the *imagined secular*.

There is a type of double imaginary at play here as well. Those who occupy the secular world imagine conservative religious folks to express quite a bit of hostility, and sometimes blatant hatred, towards the LGB community, often through their continued reputation of a desire to “pray the gay away.” But, as we see at Lakeview, that is not the approach to the LGB

community today. It is not even as simple as the often used rhetoric of “hate the sin, love the sinner.” Because, on the other side of this divide, for evangelicals, gays are no longer understood as the scary recruiters for the homosexual agenda, the individuals who face sin squarely and ignore it. Rather, they are showing up in church on Sunday, and even thanking the church for help with their marriage. Members of the *imagined secular* world are now sitting amongst evangelicals during Sunday sermons. What does that mean, and how do evangelicals make sense of that? For some, it is grappling with how to welcome the LGB community into the church, and for others, it is a welcoming and a love that is conditional. For others, still, it is easier to think about the LGB community as part of the city, and part of the imagined city. These varied responses, much like varied responses to feminism articulated in Chapter 3, uncover the messiness that comes with change, especially when social institutions work to reformulate their stance on foundational social issues. While they work to reformulate, it is unclear where the dust will settle.

What is clear, is that this continued normalization of the LGB community has brought up a core issue for evangelicals: heterosexuality is no longer a given. Because it is not a given, evangelicals at Lakeview need to work to protect it through a focus and concern regarding singleness, and containment of the sex heterosexuality represents.

Heterosexuality: A Christian Defense

Sociologist Arlene Stein argues that, for evangelicals, “If homosexuality is affirmed along with heterosexuality, Christians believed, the meaning of heterosexual marriage is diminished” (2001:21). Homosexuality has, to an extent, been affirmed alongside heterosexuality over the past decade. While there still exists rampant homophobia and personal and structural

forms of violence to the LGBT community in the United States, of course, Lakeview's conversations around SSA do indicate a certain level of acknowledgement of its larger cultural affirmation. Evangelicals at Lakeview Church, however, are spending less time focusing on fixing the gays, and more time focused on saving heterosexuality. Evangelicals are working to save heterosexuality due to an increased fear and recognition of the normalization of LGB members. This explicit focus on heterosexuality emerges, partially, in new conversations about LGB members, as we have seen, but also, through explicit conversations about heterosexuality. Evangelicals at Lakeview are working to contain heterosexuality via explicit conversations about singleness, and explicit conversations about married sex.

In the Spring of 2016, Pastor Isaac began Sunday Sermon with a joke about his two daughters, who he had asked what "they have learned about marriage just from the way he and Amy [his wife] interact." Pastor Isaac continues and says, "One was quiet and one had a lot to say!" Both he and the congregation laugh, and Pastor Isaac begins the sermon by telling the audience the following: "Ladies you will probably never know when you affirm your husband in his identity what that means to him. Empowering. And husbands if we are telling our wives how beautiful they are in that outfit... actually maybe you look a little too beautiful and should go change...(here, Pastor Isaac pauses while the congregation laughs in response)...how prideful our words are. For those perusing a relationship and not yet married, be holy. Don't buy the lie. And don't settle for a mate who isn't running your pace of faith." Here, Pastor Isaac makes reference to James Dobson, the former head of Focus on the Family, nodding to his work on marriage and the central importance of a shared commitment to faith within the marriage. Pastor Isaac ends with this: "Finally, a word for those who are single or divorced, be encouraged and reminded that Christ is your spouse and he is the greatest husband we will ever have." Pastor

Rachel gets back up for the benediction, and before she closes out the morning in prayer, tells the congregation that “The easy things for ladies is the makeup and adornment, all the external stuff. But the hard work is submission.”

Pastors Isaac and Rachel describe marriage in a familiar gender essentialist language, reinforcing the connections between both heterosexuality and gendered enactments understood by the church. Further, though, Pastor Isaac takes time to remind the congregation, in his sermon on marriage, that those who are not marriage should remain “holy.” Here, holy, or holiness, comes out of a concern for the increasing length of time individuals are spending as single, or unmarried. Gone are the days where heterosexuality is automatically assumed, and gone are the days in which men and women are getting married by age 20 (Bongaarts et al 2017). To both speak to those who are unmarried in the audience, and in an effort to provide them guidance during that period before marriage, the pastors remind the congregation that “Christ is your spouse and he is the greatest husband we will ever have.” This statement might be directed to the women in the audience, perhaps with the assumption that women carry greater anxiety and uncertainty before they find a spouse; this statement, that Christ is everyone’s greatest husband, may also allude to a bit of the “queerish” experiments that Gerber documents in the evangelical church (2008).

Singleness in the church is discussed as a phase, not an identity. Singleness is referred to as a “stage of life” on Lakeview’s website, along with other stages of life that are listed to help people indicate, for example, which small groups are appropriate for them to join. Singleness is treat as a phase, not as an identity, but it is simultaneously used as a way to mark, categorize and sort people into spaces for worship and discipleship, as though there is something fundamentally different about being single versus being married. To be single is to be not-yet-married—the

assumption is always that marriage is the end goal. Singleness is rooted in larger conversations about marriage and gender. In that way, singleness is normalized. It is a path on the way to marriage. But because for many, that timeline and phase has been extended (due to the increased age at first marriage, as well as the increased divorce rate among the baby-boomers), the church needs to do some work around protection during that time.

This singleness, when it is experienced for a long period of time, is justified through an enforcement of an individual relationship with Christ. No evangelical is every truly single; Jesus Christ is the best and most important husband for all. Second, if a covenant marriage is the ultimate goal, this marriage serves in the minds of evangelicals as a type of institutional protection from the outside world—the imagined, and the gay. Singleness is understood, among evangelicals at Lakeview, as a potentially dangerous time in which someone is potentially even more open to succumbing to a variety of sins, and a variety of choices, sexual and otherwise. As such, Lakeview encourages their parishioners to make it through this phase by acknowledging their spousal relationship with Jesus, and by focusing on the ultimate goal of marriage.

Because singleness is understood as a phase, and a potentially dangerous phase, it is something that carries with it quite a bit of work and preparation for the next phase: marriage. I begin with an interview with Carrie, a 39-year-old single woman who is also an event planner at the church. I got to know Carrie quite well over my two years at Lakeview, as she was also a member and occasional leader of Disciples Journey. Carrie would frequently update me on her dating life before small group meetings began, and so, when I interviewed her formally, over coffee and scones at a local Starbucks, I began by asking Carrie if she had any dating updates.

Carrie has tried Match, EHarmony, and is now on OKCupid. Carrie has paid for the other sides, and those sites only yielded about one date every three months, in Carrie's estimation.

These numbers seemed low to Carrie, especially because she was paying for the service. Carrie likes OkCupid because it is free, but Carrie *especially* likes OKCupid because the site matches individuals based off of a series of endless questions that one can answer on their own time and at their own will. When an individual wants to look at others on OKCupid, they can see what questions people choose to answer, and how they answer them, only if the individual looking has answered them as well. This prompts people to answer more questions, which in turn also provides individuals with more information about those they are thinking about asking out on a date.

Carrie says that, in an ideal world, she would be able to filter people based off of two question responses: 1) men who state that they have a personal relationship with Jesus, not just with God, as, in Carrie's words, that would "include all the other religions," and 2) men who value involvement in church community. As Carrie says to me, with a laugh, "That's about as basic as—that's what I am looking for!"

As we talk more, however, Carrie gets increasingly specific in her desires. In discussing the various questions OKCupid asks individuals, and how Carrie approaches what can be a lot of information about any given person, she states, quickly, "Right away I go to religion and sex...you get a better sense of where they are at because what is interesting to me is that sometimes you'll get someone who says they are a Christian, but then you get to the question on do you believe in creation or evolution, and they'll click evolution and I am like, OKAY WHAT?!" We talk about how this is a huge conflict in beliefs for her before I ask her what she looks for in responses regarding sex. On OKCupid, you can answer a question about how quickly you are willing to have sex after a date. The available responses include first date, after 3-5 dates, more than that, or after the wedding night. Her preferred response is after the wedding

night. But she finds that most guys check 3-5 dates. The people who Carrie matches with, in terms of highest percentage, do not answer this question at all. Carrie thinks that is because secular men don't want other people to know how quickly they are willing to have sex. Carrie also thinks that for some secular men, a woman who wants to wait for marriage isn't going to be of interest. However, Carrie believes that for perhaps JUST as many men, they would rather wait until after the wedding night to engage in sexual activity, but that such a desire is stigmatized by the secular world.

Carrie, however, has had no interactions, let alone any dates, with men who have checked "after the wedding night." She thinks that this may be because these men have so many dating options, so many other women like Carrie looking for them. Carrie is coming up with a narrative to understand her singleness, and it is a narrative that relies on a vision of the world in which abstinent men are so sought after that she cannot get to them. This narrative is perhaps especially important in an online space in which the religious and secular worlds are coming together. Carrie's *imagined secular* world is one full of sexually active men, and sexually abstinent men who are the real prize and desire in comparison. As Carrie works at Lakeview and attends Lakeview, the vast majority of her world revolves around that one church campus. The online world of OKCupid has the potential to put Carrie in direct contact with many who differ dramatically from her.

Carrie is not rapidly swiping through choices on a dating app, or taking a casual approach to online dating that many others outside of the church express (Birnie-Porter and Hunt 2015). Rather, Carrie is very focused and very methodological in her approach to who she will date and how she will date them, because even a date and time spent with the opposite sex needs control. Carrie talks at length, and quite sorrowfully, about a man she dated for months, who she fell in

love with. Based off of Carrie's retelling of their relationship, it sounds like he was quite smitten with her too, and asked her to relocate to the east coast with him due to a work-related move. Carrie said no, and ended the relationship. Carrie tells me this was not because of the idea of a move, and starting over, but because he was Catholic. He was "Christian, but not Christian enough" for Carrie. He checked off all the other boxes, and "happily respected" Carrie's desire to wait to engage in sexual activity until marriage, but Carrie needs both a man who shares her faith, and a man who shares her understanding (or at least respects it and abides by it) of sexuality.

An evangelical, covenant marriage, is a goal, institution, and identity that evangelicals at Lakeview strive to be a part of, and strive to maintain. Carrie is willing to give up love, and remain single, to wait for a man who will meet her definition of Christianity. Carrie refers to a couple women in Disciples Journey whose husbands no longer attend the church, who have "lapsed." This thought is horrifying to Carrie, as, for her and others at Lakeview, a true evangelical marriage is one built on a triad: husband, wife, and God. Carrie, members of Disciples Journey, and the congregation at large is told, frequently, what the bounds of a healthy marriage are today. While such direction from the church is not new to evangelicals, the boundaries appear to be getting stronger, and the conversations around them more explicit.

The topic of dating, and singleness, is a common theme in the church these days. During Disciples Journey's unit on marriage, the group devoted a weekly small group meeting to the topic of singleness. The daily devotional, the passage, or idea, that the group is supposed to discuss for the evening, is the following: "marriage and singleness are both gifts." The group talks somewhat opaquely about how this can be a difficult concept to remember, invoking the phrase "the grass is always greener on the other side." Pastor Jeff, who was there to help lead

small group that night, transitioned the conversation by reminding the group that, at the meeting the week prior, when group members were given the opportunity to write down questions about the topic of marriage in advance of this week's discussion, many of the questions centered around cohabitation. These questions were written anonymously on sticky notes and then placed on the wall of the conference room. Because of these questions regarding cohabitation, the small group leaders prepared an "object lesson" for the night.

While Eileen, a middle-aged white woman who was in attendance with her husband, read over the Pathways daily devotional out loud, Carrie started gluing found objects from the church campus together. Using superglue, Carrie and James, a 32-year old parent-to-be in the group, glued together a plastic cup and tissue paper, two Styrofoam cups, and two old VHS covers, one a film titled "The Myth of Safe Sex" and the other titled "Sex and Lies." The group members were then urged to pass the objects around and try to pull them apart. They were also encouraged to comment and reflect on that part of the object lesson.

Frank began and pulled apart the two VHS covers and said "Look, they are torn apart and still wet!" Carrie walked the covers around the room for everyone to inspect. Laurie, a white woman in her early 50s, who was sitting next to her husband, added "One cover is more damaged than the other! The less damaged cover must have been the instigator!" The tissue and plastic cup was passed around next, and the tissue unsurprisingly ripped when removed from the cup. The cup is left covered in tissue and glue. Will reminds the group that in order to remove super glue, the packaging recommends acetone. Steve adds "and what does that do to plastic?! Burns it!" James, sitting next to his pregnant wife, wonders aloud, with a bright red-face and sheepish grin, what the damage would be if a third object were added to the other two.

The running theme in this “object lesson” prepared to start conversation and answer questions about cohabitation, is that sex is something that is damaging unless it is contained. The subtext, here, then, is that sex within cohabitation does not allow for containment. Sex, between two people, in the confines of marriage, does. However, this needs to be sexual activity that is saved for marriage. Sex has to be contained, otherwise, the object lesson indicates that it will quite literally rip you apart. Against all empirical evidence, there is a very vivid imaginative at play here about what non-sacred, non-married sex will do to an individual. This conversation is in line with my previous work on sexually abstinent men (Diefendorf 2015), that finds that men who pledge sexual abstinence until marriage understand pre-marital sex as “bestly” and thus must work together to identify, discuss, and contain sexuality’s bestly elements so that they can avoid it before marriage.

There is a key difference between these conversations about sex in Disciples Journey and those I documented over four years at The River, though (Diefendorf 2015). The men who spoke so openly about sex and sexuality in The River were all unmarried. Further, these conversations were banned by the church once these men did get married, with the understanding that such conversations in married life were inappropriate, due to the fact that these men would then be talking about their wives, which didn’t sit well with the church and their understandings of femininity and sexuality (Fine 1988; Tolman 2005), and women’s protection by men. Secondly, the church held the belief that, once married, evangelicals do not need help with their sex lives, or with their marriages. While this research was conducted between 2008-2012, and thus occurred a decade ago, we see a fairly rapid shift in conversations around sex in the church today. Evangelicals at Lakeview and elsewhere are now debating sex, and sexuality, within

marriage, because the normalization of homosexuality has called into question the stability of heterosexuality.

At the end of the object lesson that evening, Sally, a Latina middle-aged woman and one of the quieter members of the group, tried to pull apart the two Styrofoam cups, the last of the glued objects to be circulated around the room. Thinking that she will be able to pull them apart, she pre-emptively stated that “different surfaces are meant to mate, not similar ones!” The room laughed and a few people nodded. What occurred next was a bit of a funny moment for me as a researcher and new observer at the group. The two identically surfaced cups did not, in fact, pull apart. One could have then made the argument that perhaps “cups with the same surface” are just fine mating, but that part of the analogy was selectively ignored by the room. Sally placed the cups on the empty seat next to her, still clinging together, and the conversation moved forward.

The object lesson described from Disciples Journey highlights a larger theme in the church: marriage takes work, and sex, and sexual activity, thought of within this community as something that is contained within a marriage, needs to be discussed and controlled. Disciples Journey spends much of their meeting time discussing relationship communication, finances, ways to keep God as the central part of and defining feature of the marital triad and heterosexual sexual activity. Lakeview Church and its members understand heterosexuality as an institution that needs to be protected, but they also feel the need to articulate the sexual boundaries around heterosexuality. Again, this is a marked shift from my previous work, which found that, once evangelicals were married, the church removed space for discussions around sexual activity in marriage (Diefendorf 2015). This shift is best understood within the larger conversations about both homosexuality and heterosexuality in the church. Lakeview church is talking about homosexuality less, and grappling with ways to welcome and love the LGB community within

certain bounds, and, while they do that and *because* they feel they need to do that, they are focusing on talking about heterosexuality more.

Conclusion

The 2015 Obergefell vs. Hodges decision put evangelicals in crisis, when homosexuality was normalized on a national scale. Much like we see in regards to conversations around the *imagined secular*, evangelicals have been pushed to the center with conversations around the LGB community. Evangelicals at Lakeview know they are supposed to be talking about the LGB community in different ways than they have in the past, and they know that, in order to remain culturally relevant and powerful, the church must find ways to welcome the LGB community in. Evangelicals shift their tactics and understandings to go with the times, and that is what we are seeing them do here with the LGB community. But those shifts uphold dominant cultural status markers that allow them to hold on to certain privileged identities when they feel like they are losing influence in the larger American cultural arena.

This welcome, and the professed love that comes with it, is conditional and bounded, especially when understanding the LGB community in relation to leadership within the church, and marriage. Evangelicals at Lakeview also know that, on top of being more welcoming and inclusive, they are supposed to feel excited about these changes. These seemingly rapid shifts, concerns over these changes, and anxieties about their own beliefs, and frustration over being pushed in these ways, make for an unclear path forward for many in the church. The normalization of homosexuality puts questions of heterosexuality and marriage into new debate, and evangelicals are wrestling with that, caught in a balance between partially accepting the

LGB community while working through the ways in which that partial acceptance calls into question all these other pillars of identity they continue to work through.

American cultural obsessions are often Christian ones (Gerber 2011). In some sense, this may be a story of heteronormativity, and a heteronormativity that is present and pervasive across most all social institutions in the United States. But, while the power of heteronormativity lay in the difficulty for many to name it, to find it and dislocate it, we see the normalization of homosexuality doing just that within the evangelical community. If part of the path to Jesus, and to a strong relationship with God, is through marriage, what does it mean for evangelicals today that the LGB community can get married now too? It might mean, as Pastor Dave suggested, that the church needs to have some very serious conversations about the differences between legal and covenant marriage. Currently, I argue that it also means an explicit return to conversations around heterosexuality, and a doubling down on heterosexuality as a category, institution, and identity that carries with it a lot of other meanings for evangelicals. As is discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, for evangelicals, notions of appropriate gendered enactments, gender essentialism, the structure of the family, whiteness, and indeed heterosexuality, remain deeply intertwined. For evangelicals, the normalization of homosexuality is not just about a protection and concern over shifts in heterosexuality, but concerns and shifts in a white heterosexuality, marriage, gendered relations, and the family. As Stein argued in 2001, homosexuality becomes the focus of a whole host of larger cultural anxieties that come with change. That was true in 2001, and in 2018, that remains true as well, but the ways in which evangelicals go about expressing that anxiety have shifted.

As Pastor Jeff stated in a Sunday Sermon titled “Fear”: “We will never conquer what we don’t confront.” Today, evangelicals are working to confront and conquer homosexuality and

heterosexuality simultaneously. And, such work takes time. Evangelicals want the LGB community to come to church, but they don't want to confer upon them any more rights or cultural power than they already have. The policies of the Trump administration suggest that Trump will work to keep those rights, and that power, at bay, if not actively work to dismantle it. Further, President Trump is not telling anyone that they need to feel excited about the LGBT population. And, while Trump has a long record of sexual activity outside of the confines of married sex, Trump's activities fall under the umbrella of heterosexuality, and heterosexual sins that the church is positioned to talk about, work through, and understand.

We think of heterosexuality as stable. Even in our many theoretical and empirical debates and work on social construction of sexualities, heterosexuality is still often presumed as something somewhat natural, to which "others" are compared. This work highlights the many divisions and ways of organizing around a type of evangelical heterosexuality that is central to their faith, central to understandings of being a man or a woman, and central to their debates about cultural relevance and power. In going into a very "heterosexual" space without presuming heterosexuality, we can examine the cultural underpinnings of heterosexual construction, and the socialization work it takes to accomplish an evangelical heterosexuality, and specifically, an evangelical heterosexuality created against the changing *imagined secular* world. Sociologist Arlene Stein argues that sexuality is a "resonant symbol" upon which a group of citizens project a host of anxieties about the changing world around them (2001:4). In investigating evangelical's contemporary debates around, and shifts in their approaches to questions of gender and sexuality, we can also uncover larger cultural anxieties at play within the evangelical community. This work, as such, helps uncover the mechanisms and intentionality through which the "umbrella" is moved, and the messiness, debate, and anxiety that comes with those pivots. And, again, those

pivots, and the issues evangelicals mobilize around, debate, and defend, can illuminate their larger understandings of their current place in the world.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

*“In times of change and uncertainty...people have trouble believing that the divine sits still”
(Moon 2004:27).*

At the end of a couples' interview with Darren and Annie, Darren talks with me about how the church might best market itself as a more accepting one in the future. Evangelicals at Lakeview church understand their identities and beliefs both in relation to an *imagined secular* world, and, as they get pushed further towards the ideological center, in relation to churches from which they seek to distance themselves. As Darren says, “I think we are starting to see a greater divide between acceptance of everyone and hard line ‘we’re not going to let people in.’ And that is kind of good. You’re going to a place like Lakeview where it’s like, ‘so glad you’re here, you’re welcome,’ or you’re going to a church that’s like, ‘no gay people are allowed here! If you don’t fit our exact beliefs we don’t want you hear either. Let’s talk about fire raining down from heaven on the people we don’t like!”” Darren and Annie both start laughing at this point. Darren and Annie, and indeed many parishioners at Lakeview, understand Lakeview to be a place of acceptance. As I document in this work, Darren, Annie, and many of their fellow parishioners importantly *want* Lakeview to feel like a place of acceptance. Others know that they are *supposed* to make the church a more inclusive space. The people that make up Lakeview Church are actively working to engage with the outside world, and to do so in a way that works to position the church as welcoming and accepting. In the words of Pastor Jeff, Lakeview wants to appear to be “open for business.” But, how to both appear and remain “open for business” was a topic of great debate during the two years I spent at Lakeview, and frequently caused disagreements, confusion, and in some cases, a strong desire for a previous time, in which

parishioners felt they were not working quite so hard or intensely to figure out how and when to move their spiritual umbrellas (Smith 1998).

In this work, I argue that parishioners at Lakeview Church understand that they need to move their religious umbrellas, and actively work to reestablish and renegotiate the boundaries around their religious beliefs, due to the presence of the *imagined secular* world. Evangelicals at Lakeview engage with the *imagined secular* world as a bundled set of issues to which evangelicals are opposed. This imagined other helps define and set the terms and symbolic boundaries for their current debates. I document the ways in which mentions of one aspect of this *imagined secular* world, feminism, invokes a much larger, overwhelming constellation of debates, changes, and perceived threats to evangelical life. For many evangelicals at Lakeview, this leads them to work to reject the symbols of the *imagined secular* world. For many others, however, these symbols of the *imagined secular* produce great variation and debate, the necessary tenets of what Pastor Dave calls a “messy” church during times of change.

Central to these debates at Lakeview are questions of gender, sexuality, and the white family. As I document, in line with the reinterpretation thesis (Gallagher 2004), evangelicals at Lakeview work to hold on to some of their core beliefs during these moments of change while they simultaneously and actively work to shift some of their beliefs and practices. Through many highly symbolic moments and conversations, we see the members of Lakeview Church negotiate the boundaries around their beliefs and practices in new ways. Lakeview is talking about feminism, trans rights, same-sex sexuality, Black Lives Matter, and these conversations represent the myriad ways in which evangelical communities have been pushed to a more ideological and political center in their debates and beliefs. However, in the midst and wake of these

conversations at Lakeview, parishioners are working to move their umbrellas of protection over both whiteness and heterosexuality. These shifts are sometimes blatant, but most often subtle.

Lakeview Church's congregation knows that we are in a time in which sexism, racism, and homophobia are not socially appropriate. Members of the Lakeview community also feel as though they are losing cultural sway, and are determining the best ways in which to hold on to both cultural status and change with the times. Darren continues with his thoughts on Lakeview's current position in the social world, and says "Instead of it being just kind of gray zones I think it is starting to shift into the two extremes which I think is going to be better. Because I think eventually, the churches who are preaching this hate, it will be easier to identify those as different... I think more people are understanding the difference between the two, and if Christianity could push a little bit more like that, we could point and say that is an extreme sect, they aren't preaching love, which is what Jesus was teaching." Darren suggests that the church follow the teachings of Jesus, with an individual focus on love, as a way of bringing people in to the church. Further, Darren wishes for certain Christian groups to continue towards the "extremes" so that he and others at Lakeview have a group to point to, to blame for and associate with the loss of status that evangelicals are experiencing.

Darren acknowledges that many evangelicals are now understood as losing cultural sway and losing cultural sway because they are thought to be unaccepting and hateful. Darren says that "I think a big issue is, people who aren't involved in the church are like, well, I am seeing this person on TV who is identifying as Christian saying all of these hateful things, and it's hard for them to identify that as different. We also have the same kind of issue with Islam, a lot of people struggling to see the difference between this person is a Muslim, this person is a terrorist." Darren and his wife, Annie recognize the need for the church to promote itself as more open,

liberal, and willing to change if it is going to survive in the contemporary world. Darren recognizes the need to engage fully with the *imagined secular* world, even though it is a world that appears to hinge on his beliefs and way of life as an evangelical married man. Part of Darren and his peers' willingness to more readily engaging with the imagined secular world is because they work to do so in a way that protects and upholds normalizations of whiteness and heterosexuality.

The tensions I document at Lakeview uncover and provide more reasons for evangelicals' continued alignment with conservative politics, and their overwhelming support for Donald Trump. As Guth suggests, "with some exceptions, studies of evangelicals' political views have found that they 'look like everyone else'—except on social and 'moral' issues, of course. The political alignment of evangelical votes, then, may depend on the relative salience of social and economic issues during any particular period—and on the choices offered by contending political forces" (1996:11). Evangelicals at Lakeview, in their words and actions, suggest that some of the key social issues during our particular cultural period revolve directly around questions of gender, sexuality, and the family, although critical investigations into the relationship between these themes and evangelical support for Trump has been under-investigated. This work helps document what those conversations look like, and how deeply intertwined evangelical understandings of gender, sexuality, the white family, and conservative politics are today. As Connell argues, "Gender is institutionalized to the extent that the network of links to the reproduction system is formed by cyclical practices. It is stabilized to the extent that the groups constituted in the network have interests in the conditions for cyclical rather than divergent practices" (Connell 1987:141). While evangelicals at Lakeview do exhibit divergent practices in some arenas, many of their conversations circle back to the same issues that brought evangelicals

together as a political and cultural force in the United States 50 years ago, exhibiting evidence for and interests in the “conditions for [the] cyclical.”

Michelle Boorstein of The Washington Post recently suggested that there is a good deal of “chaos” over the term evangelical. This research finds that evangelicals are experiencing quite a bit of external chaos, but also importantly documents the internal messiness of the group. Evangelicals at Lakeview Church are grappling with larger cultural shifts in gender, sexuality, and the family, and this perceived external chaos is creating internal turmoil as well. Scholars must continue to pay attention to this internal turmoil, these moments of debate, disjuncture, and reinforcement of specific identities and beliefs as we work to continue to map the “shifting movements” (Noll and Kellstedt 1996) of evangelical life in the United States.

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Appendix

| Participant | Race | Gender | Age |
|--------------------|------------------|---------------|------------|
| Carrie | White | Woman | 39 |
| Kelly | White | Woman | 30 |
| Steve | White | Man | 47 |
| Elaine | White | Woman | 72 |
| Heather | White | Woman | 64 |
| Frank | White | Man | 67 |
| Katherine | White | Woman | 55 |
| Emily | Asian-American | Woman | 29 |
| Will | White | Man | 34 |
| Donna | White | Woman | 49 |
| Earl | White | Man | 63 |
| Becky | Mexican-American | Woman | 52 |
| Pastor Jeff | White | Man | 48 |
| Laurie | White | Woman | 47 |
| Kimberley | White | Woman | 41 |
| Anthony | Black | Man | 60 |
| Lyndsey | White | Woman | 19 |
| Jesse | White | Man | 21 |
| Eric | White | Man | 45 |
| Henry | White | Man | 31 |
| Jess | White | Woman | 38 |
| Marjorie | White | Woman | 57 |
| Adam | White | Man | 36 |
| Riley | White | Woman | 37 |
| Raymond | White | Man | 55 |
| Joe | White | Man | 52 |
| Allison | White | Woman | 24 |
| Paula | White | Woman | 51 |
| Sally | Latina | Woman | 48 |
| James | White | Man | 32 |

| | | | |
|------------------------|------------------|-------|----|
| Monica | Mexican-American | Woman | 65 |
| Nicole | White | Woman | 19 |
| Craig | Latino | Man | 21 |
| Darren | White | Man | 29 |
| Annie | White | Woman | 29 |
| Eileen | White | Woman | 54 |
| Maggie | White | Woman | 36 |
| Kevin | Asian-American | Man | 38 |
| Megan | White | Woman | 44 |
| Bill | White | Man | 50 |
| Shannon | White | Woman | 43 |
| Leadership Team | | | |
| Pastor Isaac | White | Man | 38 |
| Pastor Dave | White | Man | 52 |
| Pastor Darryl | Black | Man | 63 |
| Pastor Rachel | White | Woman | 39 |
| Pastor Amy | White | Woman | 35 |