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Crabgrass Piety: The Rise of Megachurches and the Suburban Social Religion, 1960-2000

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CRABGRASS PIETY: THE RISE OF MEGACHURCHES AND THE SUBURBAN
SOCIAL RELIGION, 1960-2000

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Dedication

To Ruthanne, Lillian, and Abraham, my treasures

and

To Roger, Kathy, and Matthew Saunders, and Elsie Granger (1916-2013), the reasons I
became an historian

Acknowledgements

I loved Ruthanne from the beginning, and even though it took her awhile to come around, when she did she was committed all the way. She married me even though she knew I wanted to go to graduate school. She was even bragged on me to her friends. She is obviously very special, and although she probably deserves to be married to a megachurch pastor, she always lets me know she is glad she said yes when I asked.

Lillian had no say in whether or not her dad started graduate school in a city two hours away when she was only four months old, but she went with it. Some people say they cannot imagine having children in graduate school. I cannot imagine not having one. Nothing helps the writing process like when your four-year-old grabs one of your books, pulls a chair up next to your desk, and tells Mommy she is going to study with Daddy.

When I was in the third grade, Roger and Kathy Saunders refused to take me back to school to get a book I forgot I needed to study for a test. I got a D on the test, and that day changed my study habits forever. What also changed my study habits forever was having a brother like Matthew. I never knew anything other than working hard and striving for excellence were options, because Matthew was my example. High expectations and lots of love have gone a long way. Speaking of love, his wife Lara has never shown me anything but that. I look forward to spending the next several decades hanging out with them and watching Maddie and Luke and Lillian and Abraham grow up together.

One of the best things about graduate school was getting to reconnect with my old friend George Cooper and making a new friend in his wife, Lauren. They certainly did not have to let me stay at their house one or two nights each week while I was in graduate school, but there is no way I would have finished had they not. Little do they know I actually finished two years ago, but I just kept coming to Columbia because I wanted to keep spending time with them.

At his own doctoral defense Clint Page called me his brother, and the feeling is mutual. We have been through a lot together since 1994, and his brilliance deserves much more recognition than it has yet received. But the best things in life usually have little to do with others recognizing our brilliance and much to do with eating buffalo wings while watching a Ric Flair match from 1987. Clint provides times like those in abundance.

Lauren Sklaroff has encouraged and challenged me to tighten up my writing and arguments since my first semester in graduate school, and I will always be grateful. Larry Glickman is the one who challenged me to expand my study to include all megachurches. His office was open when I needed to talk, and his willingness to advise me even after moving to a new university speaks to his commitment and his generous spirit. Bobby Donaldson is always good for a lengthy conversation about church, race, South Carolina history, or whatever else. I also appreciate his kindness in giving me work during graduate school and in shepherding me through the interview process that got me my current job. Paul Harvey took time out of his busy schedule to serve on the committee of a doctoral student he had never met two thousand miles away. All four of these committee members provided valuable encouragement at critical times, and for that I am very, very thankful.

Ron Atkinson was not on my committee, but he was instrumental in my growth as a scholar. A great teacher and mentor, he has become a great friend too. He has helped me in countless ways, including my golf swing. Speaking of which, now that the dissertation is complete, we can look forward to a few rounds together.

I used to think I did not have that many friends, but a number of people who have encouraged me come to mind as I write this. Bartges and Brett helped me through some tough times, and made me interact with others when I wanted to hide. My nephews Cody and Cameron brightened my days, and in the process gave me a crash course in being a dad. Rod has become great friend, and I am proud to call him my brother-in-law. Sheila welcomed me into her family, and has always been supportive. The Granger clan, especially my aunts and uncles (Judy and Ben, Mary and Billy, Scarlett and Dale) were always interested, encouraging, and most importantly, loving. Granny Saunders' love was always there, too, and her courage, strength, and gentleness continue to be an inspiration.

Thank you all.

Abstract

Although there were less than twenty megachurches (churches averaging over two thousand in weekly attendance) in the United States before 1960, by 2010 there were approximately fifteen hundred. Megachurches are not a homogenous group, but they exist in all parts of the country and they have enough in common to warrant their identification as part of a coherent trend in American evangelical culture. Specifically, most megachurches appeal to an ethos that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s known as the suburban social religion. The suburban social religion combined to differing degrees the American civil religion described by Robert Bellah, meritocratic consumerism, the Therapeutic Moralistic Deism described by Christian Smith, and a faith in managerial science.

With respect to church structure, the suburban social religion placed a high value on running the church as a business and giving worshippers what they wanted. These values meshed well with those of the Church Growth Movement. The suburban social religion helped engender the celebration and emulation of entrepreneurial pastors, entertaining worship services, and therapeutic messages. It also fit well with the center-right political discourse of the national Republican Party. Megachurch growth provoked a number of critics, who in the early 1990s severely chastised large churches for catering to consumerism. Finally, American megachurches connected with large churches in other parts of the world. These large churches in many cases predate the rise of American

megachurches, and have become important centers in an emerging global evangelical megachurch culture.

Although new megachurches will continue to appear, and existing ones will remain strong for many years to come, they have not managed to arrest the secularization of American society. Megachurches are in fact a prime example of the church's loss of influence over other social spheres. Furthermore, in most communities megachurches have failed to stop the overall decline of religious adherence rates among Protestants. They have nevertheless become the most visible evangelical cultural institutions in most metropolitan areas. An understanding of megachurches therefore deepens an understanding of how American communities have changed more generally since 1970.

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Chapter 1 Megachurches

The Bible Belt no longer exists, and the primary evidence is the megachurch. The megachurch represents a new evangelicalism that transcends regional and denominational boundaries. Evangelicals from all parts of the country and from a wide variety of backgrounds now unite around a common style of worship and a common way of organizing churches rather than denominational traditions or beliefs. While there were less than twenty megachurches (churches averaging over two thousand in weekly attendance) in the country in 1960, by the second decade of the twenty-first century there were over fifteen hundred. Megachurches are not a homogenous group. Nevertheless, according to the sociologists and church consultants Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, the megachurch's size "alters its social dynamics and organizational characteristics, making it bear little resemblance to smaller, more traditional congregations." These social dynamics and organizational characteristics are common to all very large churches, and so megachurches constitute a coherent trend in American evangelical culture.¹

¹ I compiled statistics on megachurches in the Summer of 2013 using information published by Hartford Seminary as well as the annual list of largest churches in the United States published each Fall by *Outreach* magazine. While the Hartford Seminary list includes all churches with more than eighteen hundred in weekly attendance, I included only those with nineteen hundred and more. I also examined the denominational affiliations used in the Hartford Seminary data and provided what I believe to be more accurately descriptive denominational labels. For the most part, however, the Hartford Seminary data was reliable. It can be found at "Database of Megachurches in the U.S.," Hartford Institute for Religion Research, accessed May 23, 2013, <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>. See also Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 2.

The Bible Belt has always been somewhat of a myth. The rural South has had its share of pious evangelicals, but northern denominations centered in northern metropolitan areas supplied the intellectual energy for the fundamentalist and evangelical movements of the twentieth century. William Bell Riley built his fundamentalist Baptist empire from Minneapolis. J. Gresham Machen fought theological liberalism from his base at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Harold John Ockenga, one of the few megachurch pastors of the 1940s and 1950s, led Park Street Church in Boston. Another early megachurch pastor, Paul Rader, broadcast his radio program from the Chicago Gospel Tabernacle. Although not exactly an evangelical, Norman Vincent Peale influenced millions from his Marble Collegiate Church in Manhattan. Even early Pentecostalism had a non-southern accent. The Azusa Street Revival of 1906 broke out in Los Angeles. William H. Durham of Chicago became a flashpoint for controversy, and in the process profoundly influenced the distinctive Pentecostalism of the Assemblies of God. Indianapolis stood out as the center of African American Oneness (non-trinitarian) Pentecostalism. Institutions such as Bob Jones University and Columbia Bible College, as well as denominations such as the Church of God in Christ, the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), certainly found homes in the South. Nevertheless, the North nurtured fundamentalists and incipient evangelicals to a greater degree than Dixie.²

After World War II, however, evangelicalism coalesced as a pan-denominational movement, and this time its leaders settled in the nation-spanning sixteen-state region

² For an account of fundamentalism in America after the Scopes Trial, including the geographical power bases of important fundamentalists and evangelicals, see Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For an understanding of the geography of early Pentecostalism, see Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 203.

known as the Sun Belt. Fuller Theological Seminary, founded by radio preacher Charles E. Fuller in Pasadena in 1947, became an intellectual force in evangelicalism. North Carolina evangelist Billy Graham began his rise to fame with a Los Angeles tent revival in 1949. Campus Crusade of Christ started on the campus of UCLA in 1951. Pioneering Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson bought his first television station in Virginia Beach in 1960.³

The postwar Sun Belt was also home to some of the country's largest churches. Powerful fundamentalist pastors, almost all Baptists, built churches like Highland Park Baptist in Chattanooga, Tennessee; Thomas Road Baptist in Lynchburg, Virginia; First Baptist Church (FBC) Dallas; and FBC Van Nuys, California. Robert Schuller started his influential Garden Grove Community Church (later known as the Crystal Cathedral) in Orange County, California in 1955. These churches were just the beginning as the Sun Belt has continued to provide a hospitable environment for large churches.

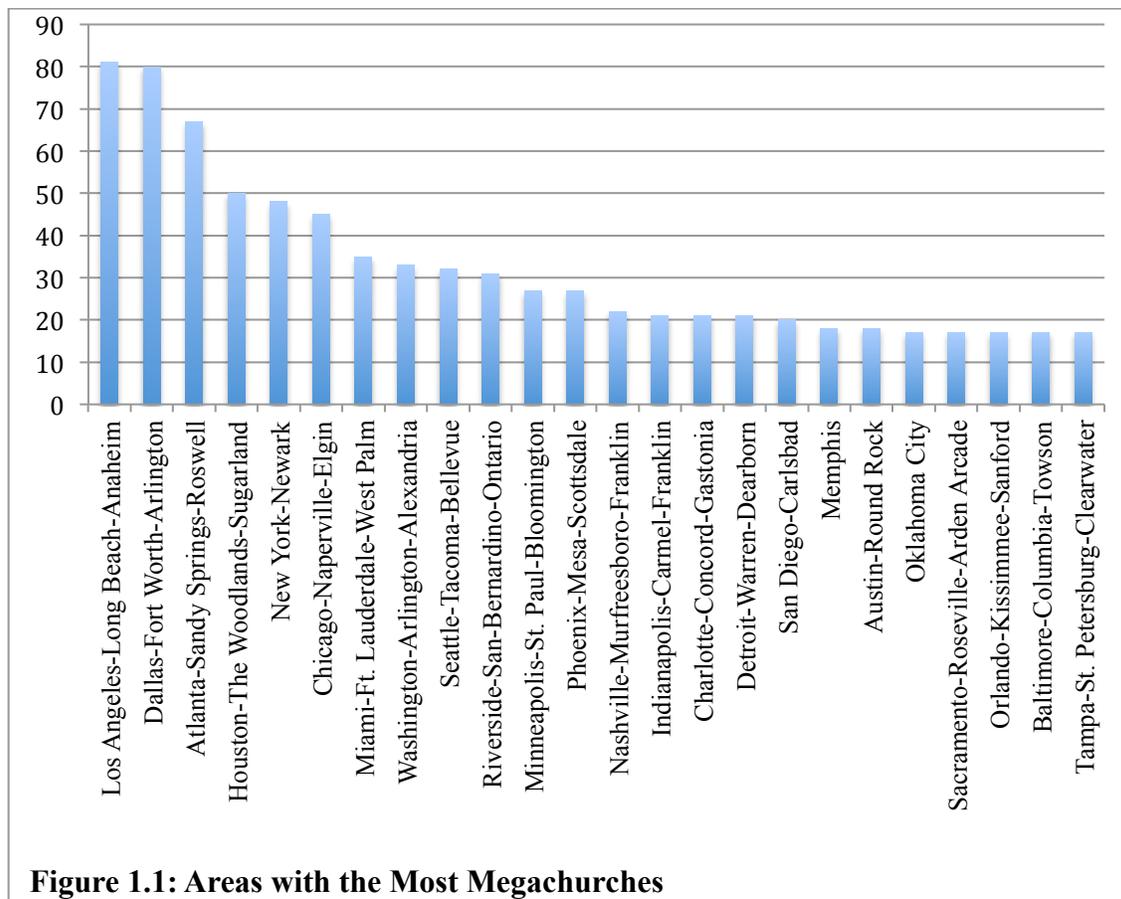
Approximately 62% of all megachurches are in the Sun Belt, with Texas, Florida, Georgia and California leading all states. The prominence of Sun Belt churches, in addition to educational and media institutions based in the region, signaled that, like the population, evangelical influence was shifting southward.⁴

To identify the megachurch as a Sun Belt phenomenon would however be a mistake. Some of the most influential and well-known megachurches are in the Pacific

³ For the purposes of this paper, the Sun Belt consists of the eleven states of the Old Confederacy plus Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and California. On Fuller, Graham, and Bright see Darren Dochuck, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 120, 141-3, 178-9. On Robertson, see J. Gordon Melton, Phillip Charles Lucas, and John R. Stone, eds. *Prime-Time Religion: An Encyclopedia of Religious Broadcasting* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1997), 57-9, 288-9.

⁴ According to the United States Census Bureau, in 1950 roughly 34% of the nation's population lived in the Sun Belt. Roughly 49% lived there by 2012.

Northwest, the Rust Belt, and the Northeast. Megachurches exist wherever population densities allow. The ten states with the lowest population densities have a combined total of forty megachurches. The ten most densely populated states have a combined total of 310 megachurches even though only one of those states (Florida) is in the Sunbelt. As for metropolitan areas with the most megachurches, Sun Belt metropolises have a large share, but New York, Chicago, and Seattle all appear in the top ten, with Minneapolis and Detroit showing up in the top twenty.



Population centers throughout the country incubate large churches. Ninety-six percent of megachurches lie within the nation’s 381 metropolitan statistical areas. Perhaps even more telling, 91% of megachurches are located within the nation’s two hundred most populous metropolitan statistical areas. Furthermore, over 88% of the two

hundred largest metropolitan areas in the United States have at least one megachurch. Once a metropolitan statistical area dips below approximately 160,000 residents, it is more likely to lack a megachurch than to have one, regardless of its location. Only one of the 1,537 megachurches in the dataset appears outside of a metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area – Christian Faith Center in Granville County, North Carolina. This church is however a mere thirty-minute drive from downtown Raleigh.

Raw data on megachurches by state or city masks the prevalence of megachurches in individual communities, so it might be helpful to look closely at megachurch densities in metropolitan areas. A list of the thirty metropolitan areas with the lowest number of people per megachurch, and a minimum of three megachurches, further reveals the national scope of the megachurch phenomenon.

Table 1.1: High Concentration Megachurch Areas

Metropolitan Statistical Area with at least three megachurches	Number of people per megachurch	Number of megachurches
Redding, California	59,529	3
Gainesville, Georgia	61,805	3
Fort Collins, Colorado	62,907	5
Chattanooga, Tennessee	62,236	8
Bellingham, Washington	68,420	3
Greenville-Anderson-Mauldin, South Carolina	70,238	12
Springfield, Illinois	70,664	3
Huntsville, Alabama	71,789	6
Memphis, Tennessee	74,538	18
Birmingham-Hoover, Alabama	75,777	15
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma	76,268	17
Macon, Georgia	77,574	3
Evansville, Indiana	78,358	4
Nashville-Davidson-Murfreesboro-Franklin, Tennessee	78,486	22
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell, Georgia	81,460	67
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington	83,762	80
Lynchburg, Virginia	85,114	3
Amarillo, Texas	85,859	3
Springfield, Missouri	88,923	5

Little Rock-North Little Rock-Conway, Arkansas	89,708	8
Grand Rapids-Wyoming, Michigan	91,423	11
Indianapolis-Carmel-Anderson, Indiana	91,856	21
Pensacola-Ferry Pass-Brent, Florida	92,245	5
Fayetteville, North Carolina	93,646	4
Knoxville, Tennessee	94,261	9
Colorado Springs, Colorado	95,479	7
Lubbock, Texas	99,223	3
Boulder, Colorado	101,773	3
Austin-Round Rock, Texas	101,906	18
Modesto, California	104,345	5

The Sun Belt is heavily represented, but cities like Bellingham, Washington and Fort Collins, Colorado also appear high on the list. Those two cities, as well as the Rust Belt metropolitan area of Grand Rapids, Michigan, come out ahead of every metropolitan area in Florida and Arizona, and Los Angeles and San Diego fail to make the list.

Even these statistics miss local variations in megachurch prevalence, variations that further reveal the megachurch phenomenon as national in scope. Megachurches outside of the Sun Belt tend to cluster in the central counties of metropolitan areas. Statistics focusing on whole metropolitan statistical areas as opposed to specific counties might therefore underrepresent megachurch centers outside of the Sun Belt. Twenty-five of the forty-eight megachurches in the New York-Newark area lie within the five counties that make up New York City. The Long Island suburbs of Nassau and Suffolk Counties have only three. The other New York-Newark suburban counties within the state of New York – Dutchess, Orange, Putnam, Rockland, and Westchester – have a total of only two. By contrast, the suburban Atlanta counties of Gwinnett and DeKalb have more megachurches (25) than Fulton County (19), and the Dallas-Fort Worth megachurches are scattered throughout the Metroplex. Broward County, Florida actually has more megachurches (16) than the central county of Miami-Dade (13). This general

observation about megachurch concentration in central counties holds true for metropolitan areas in the Rustbelt and Pacific Northwest as well. Hennepin County, Minnesota (Minneapolis) has thirteen megachurches, or one for every 91,121 people. King County, Washington (Seattle) has one for every 95,592 people. El Paso County, Colorado (Colorado Springs) has one for every 88,894 people. Franklin County, Ohio (Columbus) has one for every 108,685 people. All of these counties have a greater concentration of megachurches than heavily populated Sun Belt counties like Maricopa County, Arizona (Phoenix) with its one megachurch for every 146,006 people, Bexar County, Texas (San Antonio) with its one megachurch for every 162,337 people, or Los Angeles County (one for every 188,819 people). Even economically struggling Wayne County, Michigan (Detroit), with one megachurch for every 179,237 people, comes out ahead of Los Angeles County.

This difference in megachurch concentration in central counties does not mean that northern megachurches are in central cities. Only three of the thirteen megachurches in Hennepin County are in Minneapolis itself. Six of the eleven megachurches in Franklin County, Ohio are outside of the city of Columbus. Sixteen of King County, Washington's twenty-one megachurches are outside of Seattle. Thirteen of the twenty-seven megachurches in Cook County, Illinois are outside of Chicago. Survey results from 2005 indicate that, nationally, 74% of megachurches are in the suburbs, and another 14% are in older residential neighborhoods. Only 12% are in downtown areas. Older, northeastern cities such as Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York appear to be exceptional in that

megachurches have found a home in city centers while failing to take root in the suburbs.⁵

As for the Sun Belt itself, megachurches have in fact taken hold in only certain parts of that region. That population density, rather than latitude, is a key factor in the incidence of megachurches becomes more apparent when comparing megachurch centers outside of the Sun Belt with regions typically associated with the Bible Belt. The Seattle metropolitan area has more megachurches (thirty-two) and a lower number of people per megachurch (one for every 111,004 people) than the states of Arkansas and Mississippi combined (twenty-five megachurches, or one for every 237,362 people). With sixteen megachurches, the Denver metropolitan statistical area has more megachurches than Mississippi or New Mexico, and just as many as Arkansas. Denver also has more per capita (one for every 188,958 people) than either of those states. Seattle and Denver lead Mississippi and Arkansas even though the two Bible Belt states having a greater combined population than either metropolitan area.

The relative dearth of megachurches in less densely populated areas of the Sun Belt points toward a second myth about the Bible Belt – its internal unity or homogeneity. As certain areas of the South grow in terms of both population and income, their religious practices began to resemble those of suburban residents throughout the country. The driver along I-85 North who embarks the 520 mile trip from the Georgia-Alabama boarder to the North Carolina-Virginia boarder passes through counties containing a total of ninety-six megachurches. The driver on I-95 North who undertakes the 492 mile trip from the Florida-Georgia boarder to the North Carolina-Virginia

⁵ Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, 9-10.

boarder passes through counties containing a total of nine megachurches, even though the driver on this trip passes through the same three states as the driver on I-85. Seven of these I-95 megachurches are in the Savannah, Georgia and Fayetteville, North Carolina areas. Atlanta, Greenville-Spartanburg, Charlotte, Greensboro, and Raleigh-Durham all lie along I-85 in Georgia and the Carolinas. Aside from Savannah and Fayetteville, I-95 passes through the small metropolitan statistical areas of Sumter and Florence in South Carolina and Rocky Mount in North Carolina. With respect to megachurches, counties in the Appalachian foothills of Georgia and the Carolinas have more in common with Minneapolis and Seattle than they do with their neighbors less than two hundred miles away on the coastal plains.

The prevalence of megachurches in more densely populated areas across the country begs the question of why some densely populated areas that lack them. Four of the one hundred largest metropolitan statistical areas lack a megachurch – Providence-Warwick, Rhode Island; Springfield, Massachusetts; and Salt Lake City and Provo-Orem in Utah. In fact, Maine, Vermont, Rhode Island and Delaware have no megachurches, even though the latter two states are among the ten most densely populated. Indeed, New England stands out as the only exception to the national trend toward megachurches. Massachusetts and Connecticut, the third and fourth most densely populated states respectively, have only eight megachurches each. New Jersey, the most densely populated state, has twenty-three, and Maryland, the fifth most densely populated state, has twenty-five.

The dearth of megachurches in New England and Utah requires explanation, one that helps set some important parameters for this study. According to the Pew Religious

Landscape Survey, every New England state falls well below the national average with respect to the percentage of the population that identifies itself as evangelical Protestant, and well above the national average with respect to the percentage of the population that identifies itself as Catholic. Nationally, 26% of respondents identify as evangelical, while 24% identify as Catholic. In Connecticut/Rhode Island, only 10% identify as evangelical while 43% identify as Catholic. Massachusetts is almost identical. In New Hampshire/Vermont, 11% identify as evangelical and 34% identify as Catholic. Only 7% of those in Utah call themselves evangelical, and only 10% refer to themselves as Catholic. Latter-Day Saints constitute 58% of the population in Utah, compared to only 2% for the rest of the country.⁶

Various megachurch lists compiled over the years do not include Catholic or Mormon megachurches. The latter group probably has no congregations exceeding two thousand in average weekly attendance. The Roman Catholic Church in the United States, on the other hand, probably has several. Among Roman Catholics, the bishop decides how many parishes belong in his diocese, and all Catholic families in a given geographical area belong to that parish. Although Catholic parishes have always been large, consolidation over the past fifty years has increased their size. In 1965, the average parish contained 2,625 worshippers. As of 2014, that figure stood at 3,809. On average, however, only 31% of Roman Catholics connected to a parish attend mass each week. The Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, intentionally keep their congregations (known as “wards”) small, with the average ward in the United States containing 461 members. As with the Roman Catholic Church, a central authority organizes wards within a given

⁶ “Religious Landscape Survey,” Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, accessed July 2, 2014, <http://religions.pewforum.org/maps>.

geographical area. When wards grow too large, they split, although they might not construct another church building. Multiple wards might share a building, even though they constitute formally separate congregations. With respect to both Roman Catholics and Mormons, worshippers do not decide to which congregation they will belong, who will pastor them, or if for some reason they would like to start a new congregation. The forces that decide the size of a Mormon or a Roman Catholic congregation are not the same as those that decide the size of Protestant churches. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church has had large parishes for over a century, and so the size of Catholic congregations bears little relationship to the social and cultural dynamics that led to the rise of the Protestant megachurches during the 1970s.⁷

This observation of where megachurches are *not* provides an important nuance to the thesis that megachurches are a national phenomenon. They exist not simply where population densities allow, but where densities of white evangelical or African American Protestants allow. This observation also explains why megachurches in the Northeast occur with greater frequency in central cities. Twelve of the twenty-five megachurches in New York City are African American, a proportion that is three times the national average of 16%. The Philadelphia metropolitan area has a low density of megachurches (one for every 376,175 people), but five of the central city's seven megachurches are

⁷ "Frequently Requested Research Statistics," Center for the Applied Research in the Apostolate, July 2, 2014, <http://cara.georgetown.edu/caraservices/requestedchurchstats.html>; "A Micro-scoping View of U.S. Catholic Populations," *1964* (blog), Center for the Applied Research in the Apostolate, May 11, 2012, <http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2012/05/microscoping-view-of-us-catholic.html>; "How the Church is Organized," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 2, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/topics/church-organization/how-the-church-is-organized?lang=eng>; "Facts and Statistics: The United States," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints newsroom, accessed July 2, 2014, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/united-states>.

African American. As we will see, African American megachurches drive the local megachurch culture in many of the areas that lack white megachurches.

The historian Edward Ayers writes that it is “religion that seems to set the South apart the most.” He believes religion that serves as the basis for a whole host of regional distinctions. At the same time, he recognizes the “need to recognize that structures of economy, ideology, religion, fashions, and politics cut across the South, connecting some individuals with allies and counterparts elsewhere.” Regional convergence has become an important theme in the historiography of the late twentieth century. As early as 1974, the journalist John Egerton wrote that the South “is becoming indistinguishable from the North and East and West” while the North “has lately shown itself more and more like the South in the political, racial, social, and religious inclinations of its collective majority.” Later historians approached the idea of regional convergence from a different angle. Instead of arguing that a backlash against the civil rights movement knit together whites from across the country, they point toward the economic development of the South and persistent white racism in the North, a racism based on a sense of middle-class privilege. As the historians Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino note, the regions do differ, but “most regional characteristics cited as evidence of differences of kind are really differences of degree.” The distribution of megachurches more than bears out these observations.⁸

⁸ Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuff, *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 75, 80-1; John Egerton, *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper’s Press, 1974), xix; Matthew D. Lassiter, “Introduction,” in *The End of Southern Exceptionalism*, eds. Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6-7, 12, 13.

The Suburban Experience

Suburbanization stands out as one of the primary reasons why the regions have grown more alike. This study of megachurches falls within this same broad subfield of post-World War II suburban history. Kenneth Jackson, in his magisterial *Crabgrass Frontier*, describes how the mass production of housing materials during the post-war housing boom undercut regionally distinctive architecture. As regional architecture merged, so did regional ideologies. Matthew Lassiter describes a new “suburban populism” that arose during the late 1960s, one that championed “a free-market defense of middle-class consumer meritocracy and white residential privilege, marked by the increasing convergence of southern and national politics.” Suburbanites from coast to coast spoke “a bipartisan language of private property values, individual taxpayer rights, children’s educational privileges, family residential security, and white racial innocence.” All of these ideas found their root in what Lassiter calls “a suburban synthesis of the gospel of growth and the ethos of individualism at the heart of the middle-class American dream.” Entrepreneurial pastors’ common responses to common, national trends in suburbanization have likewise created somewhat similar, if not entirely homogenous, megachurches.⁹

Suburbanization accelerated dramatically after World War II. While one quarter of Americans lived in suburbs in 1950, a majority did by 1990. And the suburbs themselves were changing. The pre-1960s suburbs were bedroom communities. With the migration of manufacturing, retail, and white-collar jobs away from central cities during

⁹ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 240; Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 118, 249, 304.

the 1960s, the suburbs experienced greater independence and a more diversified economy. In the 1970s the suburbs grew more rapidly, and even developed more diversified economies than the central cities to which they were attached. With the widespread deindustrialization of the American economy during 1970s the suburban economy focused on service and consumer-oriented sectors. Education, healthcare, finance, distribution, accounting, legal, communications, advertising, and management services dominated the suburban labor market during the last third of the twentieth century.¹⁰

The sociologist Sharon Zukin differentiates the post-World War II suburb from the central cities of an earlier period by noting “the sheer amount of suburban space devoted to consumption.” And these spaces devoted to consumption include much more than shopping centers, drugstores, and restaurants. The houses that suburbanites leave when they go shopping, and the cars they drive to shopping centers, constitute both suburbanites’ most expensive purchases and the consumer goods that make the suburbs possible. Elizabeth Cohen notes that as the home ownership rate rose from 44% in 1940 to 62% in 1960, “the suburban home itself became the Consumers’ Republic’s quintessential mass consumer commodity, capable of fueling the fires of the postwar economy while also improving the standard of living of the mass of Americans.” As the historians Matthew Lassiter and Jefferson Cowie explain, anti-busing activists of the

¹⁰ Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, “Introduction,” *The New Suburban History*, eds. Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1; Thomas M. Stanback, Jr., *The Suburbanization: Challenges to the Central City* (Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press, 1991), 3, 20, 60; On the deindustrialization of the Sunbelt workforce, where three-fourths of the jobs created during the 1980s were in the service and wholesale and retail sectors, see James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1993), 267.

1970s saw themselves as protecting their rights as consumers and their investment in their most prized consumer good.¹¹

Consumerism, according to the historian Gary Cross, “was the ‘ism’ that won” in the twentieth century. Instead of coalescing around what Cross calls “shared values and active citizenship,” Americans bonded around shopping. In some ways, however, consumerism drives Americans apart. Both Cross and Cohen argue that in post-1960s America, consumption has become more individualistic. Firms developed more focused advertising aimed at smaller niches. A host of cultural critics, from Michael Harrington to Daniel Bell to Tom Wolfe to Christopher Lasch, have decried Americans’ apparently increasing selfishness and shallowness. It seemed that even the classic struggle between management and labor became more individualistic. Deindustrialization and increasing differentiation of the labor market crippled unions and failed to provide solid ground for a sense of shared identity. As Richard Sennet and Jonathan Cobb wrote in 1972, “struggle between men leads to struggle within each man,” a type of “inner class warfare.” The intertwining of consumerism and suburbanization meant that suburban churches have had to somehow come to terms with an increasingly individualistic consumer society.¹²

Evangelicals and Consumerism

American evangelicals have both stoked individualistic consumerism and responded to it. According to Colin Campbell, Puritan theology played a crucial role in

¹¹ Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disneyworld* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 141; Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 195; Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 4-5.

¹² Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 1, 234; Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 17.

the formation of the consumerist ethos. Because good works and proper recitation of the creeds did not suffice as evidence of conversion, revivalistic Puritans and their evangelical descendants looked to “subjective experience ... as the crucial test of religious worth.” Focusing on personal experience led the Puritans “to place a special value upon the possession and manifestation of feelings.” This emphasis on inward experiences is integral to what Campbell calls the “romantic ethic,” an ethic that is in turn central to “the spirit of modern consumerism.”¹³

Evangelicals have never been aloof from the market. David Paul Nord argues that evangelicals pioneered the commodification of print media and also laid the blueprint for the not-for-profit corporation, the legal category in which most megachurches and evangelical television and radio ministries belong. With respect to the celebration of Easter, Leigh Eric Schmidt describes how florid church decorations preached a silent message of “style, taste, abundance, and novelty – the very values of the burgeoning consumer culture.” Retailers recognized the power of ecclesiastical ornamentation and adopted church styles in their Easter sales displays. As for the workers in the suburban consumer economy, Bethany Moreton explains that the Christian idea of “servant leadership” made low-paying service and retail work not only palatable, but personally satisfying. Even in the realm of entertainment, a sector of the economy with which evangelicals have had a more fraught relationship, believers have demonstrated a steady appetite. In the early days of film, churches showed movies for free so frequently that theater operators charged them with trying to ruin their business. Pious American

¹³ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Capitalism* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 129, 216.

Protestants have therefore always been complicit in the ongoing expansion of American consumer culture.¹⁴

The line between evangelicals' participation in the market and evangelical religion as a commodity often blurs. The historian R. Laurence Moore writes that, in the absence of an established church, American religion has "had to sell itself not only in the competitive church market, but also in a general market of other cultural commodities." Moore goes so far as to claim that "Americans remained a religious people because their leaders ... found ways to make religion competitive" and that had they not done so "their churches would be as empty as they are many European countries." The historian Nathan Hatch sees a host of social benefits that came along with competition between churches during the Second Great Awakening, arguing that the open marketplace encouraged fervency and personal piety while also contributing to the democratization of American politics.¹⁵

The sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark engendered considerable scholarly debate when they released the first edition of *The Churching of America* in 1993. Their statistical studies rankled many historians – including many of the deans of American religious studies – who called for more nuanced interpretations and greater contextualization. Martin Marty chided them because, as he saw it, their work contained

¹⁴ David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6-7; Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 202, 210; Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 74-89. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, "A History of Learning with the Lights Off," in *Learning with the Lights Off*, eds. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23-4.

¹⁵ R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 10-1, 38; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 9.

“no God or religion or spirituality, no issue of truth or beauty or goodness, no faith or hope or love, no justice or mercy; only winning or losing in the churching game matters.” George Marsden called the book “intriguing but unreliable” and criticized Finke and Stark for both their tone and their “insistence on ‘market share’ as the only relevant basis for judging a denomination’s success.” Jon Butler charged that “[h]istorical variation, change through time, sophisticated if conditional explanation, much less an appreciation for the complexity of American Christianity or American religion generally are largely lost in this account.”¹⁶

Despite this heavy criticism, *The Churching of America* effectively challenged conventional wisdom among American religious scholars. Although their description of vitality among fundamentalists and sectarian groups was not new, Finke and Stark were among the first to place a positive spin on these groups’ growth as opposed to the hand wringing evident in the work of mainline denominational historians. They also knocked down the myth of “urban irreligion.” Their theoretical framework eventually gained acceptance from the wider community of historians and sociologists of religion. Marty admitted that “[m]ost students of American religion use some economic insights and market metaphors.” In a 2004 essay, Jon Butler also recognized the importance of market metaphors in describing American religion. Although many no doubt feel uncomfortable with designating some congregations and denominations as winners and others as losers,

¹⁶ Martin E. Marty, “Churches as Winners, Loser,” *Christian Century*, January 27, 1993, 88; George M. Marsden, “Review of *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark,” *Church History* 62 (Sept. 1993): 450-1; Jon Butler, “Review of *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark,” *American Historical Review* 99 (Feb. 1994): 289.

the market paradigm has gained considerable force among students of modern American religion.¹⁷

The Religious Marketplace of the Baby Boom Generation

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, many American church leaders began to worry that they were in fact losers in the religious economy. While Peter Berger fretted over cutthroat competition, church leaders grew anxious that their institutions were not competitive enough. Although Finke and Stark found that rates of religious adherence actually rose slightly between 1952 and 1980 (from 59% of the population to 62%), denominational leaders and researchers clearly felt that the 1960s forever changed the ecclesiastical landscape. This sense of crisis stemmed in part from depressing membership statistics for America's mainline denominations. Membership in the United Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church in America, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and the Episcopal Church all peaked around 1967. These denominations then began a precipitous decline. The United Church of Christ, a denomination made up of many older Congregational churches in the Northeast, peaked in 1960 but by 1975 had fallen below 1950 membership levels. The United Methodists and United Presbyterians had as many adherents in 1975 as in 1950, and the Lutheran Church in America and Episcopal Church were on their way to 1950 levels. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod held steady. Of the large non-Pentecostal denominations, only the Southern Baptists (usually not considered a "mainline" denomination) experienced

¹⁷ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 201-4; Marty, "Churches as Winners and Losers," 88; Jon Butler, "Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History," *Journal of American History* 90 (Mar. 2004): 1375.

sustained growth. Overall, while 56.2% of Americans belonged to a Protestant Church in 1967, by 1975 the proportion had fallen to 50.4%¹⁸

Out of this ecclesiastical crisis of confidence emerged the Church Growth Movement. Its founder, Donald McGavran, was a missionary in India with the Disciples of Christ from 1923 until 1961. As a student of missions, McGavran wondered why Christianity experienced steady growth in Uganda throughout the first half of the twentieth century while missionaries in Kenya saw only modest success. He proposed studying church growth in a systematic, even scientific way. Although he knew that churchmen would react against his focus on numerical growth because it “looks mechanical and seems to slight spiritual development,” he believed that “[n]umerical increase presupposes and necessitates good spiritual care.” McGavran’s books *The Bridges of God* (1955) and *How Churches Grow* (1959) attained wide influence in the field of missiology. In 1961, McGavran returned to the United States to teach his principles to the next generation of missionaries at the new Institute for Church Growth at Northwest Christian College in Eugene, Oregon.¹⁹

The Institute for Church Growth gained greater visibility in 1965 when it moved to Fuller Theological Seminary, a flagship evangelical school in Pasadena, California.

The Institute also began publishing a newsletter called *Church Growth Bulletin*. In 1972,

¹⁸ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churaching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 23; David A. Roozen and Jackson W. Carroll, “Recent Trends in Church Membership and Participation: An Introduction,” in *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950-1978*, eds. Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1979), 22, 25.

¹⁹ Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955), 3; Donald Anderson McGavran, *How Churches Grow: The New Frontiers of Mission* (New York: Friendship Press, 1959), 16; C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 2nd ed. (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1984), 14.

the missionary C. Peter Wagner joined McGavran at the Institute and the two developed a course on church growth for the American context. McGavran intended his writings of the 1950s and 1960s for missionaries, but some American pastors and denominational leaders began applying his theories on church growth in Asia to their own neighborhoods. By 1972, Wagner believed that “the time was ripe” for an American Church Growth Movement because of “all the turmoil” of the previous decade. He found a receptive audience. Wagner connected with Jerry Falwell associate, co-founder of Liberty University, and church growth researcher Elmer Towns. Wagner’s and McGavran’s 1972 class also inspired student Win Arn to found the Institute for American Church Growth as well as the periodical *Church Growth: America*. In 1975, future megachurch pastor John Wimber started the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth, also in Pasadena. Church growth consultants trained at these institutions fanned out across the country to help churches halt their decline and reach their communities for Christ. More importantly, Wagner cultivated a network of megachurch pastors that included, among others, Robert Schuller at Garden Grove Community Church, Jack Hyles at FBC Hammond, Indiana and D. James Kennedy at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, not to mention Wagner’s own doctoral student Rick Warren.²⁰

These church growth theorists wanted to know why some churches grew while others did not and what declining churches might do to reverse their fortunes. First, they recognized that American culture had changed dramatically, and that pastors could no longer expect people to darken their doors unless their churches put forth some effort. Although decline in mainline church attendance, and in church attendance overall, began

²⁰ Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 16-7, 19, 20.

decades before the 1960s, church leaders at least perceived that decade as turning their world upside down. James H. Montgomery, writing for *Church Growth Bulletin* in 1976, explained that “Americans have seen riots in the cities and on the campuses” and have witnessed “economic changes, the sexual revolution, the new role for women, political scandals, and so on.” In 1968, Curtis Ringness of the Assemblies of God warned pastors that, in the aftermath of the 1960s, the United States “is no longer a Christian nation.” Writing in 1991, church growth consultant William Easum claimed that, because of the social upheaval of the 1960s, “the marriage between American culture and Christianity is coming to an end.” McGavran and Arn warned church planters that modern America is “growing more pluralistic and secular by the day” and “giving birth to many strains of relativism.” Ringness argued that, because of pluralism, “there is no social pressure to become a Christian.” Until Christians recognize Americans’ “widespread alienation” from religion, McGavran warned, “the church will limp.”²¹

When McGavran and Wagner left India and Bolivia respectively, they saw themselves as stepping out of one mission field and into another. They believed that the United States had shifted from a missionary sending country to one that needed missionaries, and they impressed that idea on their students at every turn. In 1979, McGavran and Arn reminded Christians that “enormous numbers of Americans are outside of the Church, outside of the body, outside of Christ.” Just how many Americans remained outside of the Church was unclear. McGavran and Arn believed the number to

²¹ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 245-7; James H. Montgomery, “Church Growth Flourishes in America,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 13, no. 2 (Nov. 1976): 86; Curtis W. Ringness, “New Opportunities for Homefront Evangelism,” *Advance*, July 1968, 20; William Easum, *How to Reach Baby Boomers* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 17-8; Donald McGavran and Win Arn, *Back to Basics in Church Growth* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1981), 126; Donald McGavran, “Church Growth in Europe and America,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 6, no. 6 (July 1970): 73.

be around 160 million. In a 1975 article, though, McGavran claimed the number was around one hundred million. In 1977, McGavran associate George Hunter identified 105 million nominal Christians and fifty million who never claimed to be Christians. In 1979, Assistant General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God G. Raymond Carlson categorized eighty million Americans as “unreached” and sixty million as “nominal or inactive.” In light of these statistics, Easum concluded that baby boomers “are the first generation of Americans to live in an unchurched culture.”²²

Absolute numbers aside, church leaders stressed that America felt and looked like a country in a need of missionaries. Hunter called the United States “the largest mission field of any country in the western hemisphere.” Owen C. Carr, in describing a place “where people grow up without ever hearing that Jesus is a person” emphasized that he was “not talking about Africa or India or the Islands of the Sea,” but Chicago. He also claimed, notwithstanding the existence of numerous evangelical churches in New York City, that the great metropolis “has almost no gospel witness.” Wagner even described the unchurched as belonging to “the Fourth World,” a new mission field that “embraces all of those people who, regardless where they may be located geographically, have yet to come to Christ.” In the early 1990s, Florida megachurch pastor Rich Wilkerson called on religious leaders to reach “the ‘Third World Empire’ of Inner-City U.S.A.” Around that same time, Assemblies of God Assistant Superintendent Gordon O. Wood wrote to Tommy Barnett, pastor of the gargantuan Phoenix First Assembly, asking him to transfer

²² McGavran and Arn, *Back to Basics in Church Growth*, 80, 123; Donald McGavran, “Church Growth in North America,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 11, no. 5 (May 1975): 502; George Hunter, “Can United Methodists Recover Evangelism,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 13, no. 4 (March 1977): 113; G. Raymond Carlson, “The Early Church Sets a Pattern for Church Planting,” *Home Missions*, January-February 1979, 4; Easum, *How to Reach Baby Boomers*, 18.

to Los Angeles, “the most ethnically diverse of any comparable geographic space in the world” and “the greatest mission field in the world.”²³

The leaders of the Church Growth Movement understood their task as both descriptive and prescriptive. They were not satisfied with describing obstacles to growth and pointing out successful churches. They hoped to give churches a plan for growth. Against critics of the Church Growth Movement – most notably Robert Hudnut and his 1979 book *Church Growth is Not the Point* – Wagner forcefully asserted that “[i]t is simply biblical and theological nonsense to argue that God is pleased when churches, year after year and generation after generation lose members.” Looking at the Book of Acts, he noted that the early church grew exponentially, from 120 to three thousand on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41) to approximately five thousand a few weeks later (Acts 4:4). Those associated with the Church Growth Movement believed that such growth was characteristic of healthy churches. Wagner flatly concluded that “[i]f the Lord is not adding new members, something is wrong with the church.”²⁴

To this end, researchers sought out general strategies that churches could follow if they wished to grow. Early on, the Church Growth Movement saw itself as exercising a “scientific function” in its effort to uncover “universal principles” of church growth. Arn, for example, claimed in the mid-1980s that after analyzing “the information in the

²³ Hunter, “Can United Methodists Recover Evangelism,” 113; Owen C. Carr, “How Shall They Hear?” *Home Missions*, January-February, 1979, 5, 7; C. Peter Wagner, “The Goal is the Fourth World,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 8, no. 4 (March 1972): 214; Rich Wilkerson, “Invasion 39: 39 by 99,” March 31, 1994, Papers of the Division of Home Missions – New Church Evangelism, Folder 11-40, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center; George O. Wood to Tommy Barnett, 17 October 1991, Papers of the Division of Home Missions – New Church Evangelism, Folder 11-40, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center.

²⁴ Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 189, 195; C. Peter Wagner, “Three Spiritual Gifts a Pastor Doesn’t Need,” in *The Pastor’s Church Growth Handbook*, ed. Win Arn (Pasadena: Church Growth Press, 1979), 162.

computer data file at the Institute for Church Growth,” he discovered that “certain minimum ratios seem to be essential for a church that is serious about effective outreach.” For example, the “friendship ratio” is 1:7. Arn believed each “new member should be able to identify seven friends in the church within the first six months” or else they would most likely stop attending that church. The “role task ratio” is 60:100 – “sixty roles and tasks available for every one hundred members in a church.” New members must find “meaningful responsibility,” or again, they would likely leave. The “staff ratio” should be 1:150, or “one full-time staff member for every 150 persons in worship,” and the “visitor ratio” should be 3:10, or three out of every ten first-time visitors “should be actively involved within a year.” Other ratios included the “group ratio,” the “new group ratio,” the “board ratio,” and the “‘the Great Commission Conscience’ ratio.” Arn believed that familiarity with these ratios “can help a church be more intentional and efficient.”²⁵

Above all, the Church Growth Movement encouraged pastors to draw inspiration from the world of business. Churches had often acted unconsciously like firms competing in a marketplace, but the Church Growth Movement consciously embraced the business as a model for its operations. Churches viewed themselves as retail outlets seeking consumers. Even before he joined McGavran in Pasadena, Wagner stated that converts “can be counted by missionaries as readily as profit can be counted by businessmen.” Elmer Towns praised innovative pastors because “they run church in a business-like manner.” According to Towns, the successful church of the future “will be consumer

²⁵ A.R. Tippet, “1970 Retrospect and Prospect,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 6, no. 4 (March 1970): 50; Win Arn, “How to Use Ratios to Effect Church Growth.” in *Church Growth: State of the Art*, eds. C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn, and Elmer Towns (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1986), 97-103.

oriented.” Like businesses that practice “niche-marketing,” churches must identify their “target person” and develop methods “that will reach those responsive-receptive people.” Churches should be “selling Jesus like we sell Coca-Cola.”²⁶

The extremely popular and influential Robert Schuller operated his church according to church growth principles and taught them at his annual Institute for Successful Church Leadership. Schuller wholeheartedly embraced the suburban retail establishment as the primary model of how to grow a church. In 1974, he asserted that if pastors want their churches to grow in post-1960s America, they “had better discover the secrets of successful religious retailing.” Schuller did not see the flight of businesses, or churches for that matter, from central cities after World War II as bad. He exulted over the “exciting new retailing developments called ‘shopping centers.’” In typical Schuller fashion, he laid out seven principles of retailing that churches can adopt from shopping centers. The first was accessibility, followed closely by ample parking. Schuller felt so strongly about parking that he called it “the number one criterion that must be met in order to grow.” Third, churches must have adequate inventory. Schuller believed that churches should have the resources necessary “to meet every human need.” Fourth, churches must offer excellent service with a smile. Fifth, he pushed churches to advertise, claiming that it is in fact impossible for churches to “over-advertise.” After encouraging churches to think optimistically and always keep an eye on expansion, Schuller closed his list of principles by admonishing churches to maintain “good cash flow.” Schuller

²⁶ C. Peter Wagner, “Mission Executives and Strategy Planning,” *Church Growth Bulletin* 6, no. 2 (November 1969): 21; Elmer L. Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1990), 11, 16-7, 219.

himself followed these principles for success, culminating in his walk-in, drive-in church, a complex that he proudly described as a “a 20-acre shopping center for Jesus Christ.”²⁷

The Church and Suburban Consumers

The Church Growth Movement sparked considerable debate and offered mixed results. Church Growth Movement leaders were unable to agree on the number of principles churches should follow for optimal growth, and all of them suggested far too many for any one church to follow consistently. One researcher calculated that McGavran offered sixty-seven principles, Wagner gave fifty-one, and Arn kept his list at a trim twenty-eight. The Movement’s primary contribution to American church culture stemmed not from its specific dicta, but from its persistent, even relentless, encouragement for pastors to engage in extensive research to find out what might bring community members into the church and to judge their success by the bottom line – the number of active church members added over a one, five, or ten year period.²⁸

At the same time, church growth experts cautioned against going too far in giving people what they wanted in order to draw a crowd. Wagner taught that mainline churches declined because they abandoned conservative theology and became sheepish about personal evangelism. These once proud churches ironically lost members because they did not want to offend potential customers. Towns likewise believed that “evangelistic zeal” was one primary key to growth. McGavran wrote that “without Bible-based conviction,” specifically the “unshakable conviction that Jesus Christ [is] essential for

²⁷ Robert H. Schuller, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities* (Glendale, California: G/L Regal Books, 1974), 18-29.

²⁸ John N. Vaughan, “The Fuller Factor,” in *The Complete Book of Church Growth*, eds. Elmer L. Towns, John N. Vaughan, and David J. Seifert (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1981), 109.

salvation,” churches “become religious clubs and lapse back into a stagnant condition.” After pastors conducted all their market research and community studies, they could do anything they thought might work to bring people in as long as they did not stray from the fundamentals of the faith.²⁹

Churches that grew in the late twentieth century found the right balance between affirming the wider culture and grounding themselves in what they saw as timeless truth. The concept of tension between religious beliefs and the wider culture is in fact one of the most important contributions of *The Churching of America*, but also one of the most overlooked of the authors’ insights. Finke and Stark found that churchgoers seek out “religions that offer close relationships with the supernatural and distinctive demands for membership, without isolating individuals from the culture around them.” In other words, churches that maintain the right amount of tension with the wider culture grow. These churches sustain the fervency of a sect without maturing into an institutional church or descending into a cult.³⁰

The concept of tension, a concept that those concerned about church growth implicitly recognized, actually undermines Finke and Stark’s own market-oriented approach. Something within evangelical beliefs and culture prevent churches from going as far as they might in attempting to draw attention to themselves or attract worshippers. Regardless of worship style, churches large and small rarely deviate from the pattern of

²⁹ C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth: The Secret of Pastor/People Partnership in Dynamic Church Growth* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1984), 33-4; Elmer L Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 116-7; McGavran and Arn, *Back to Basics in Church Growth*, 22, 32.

³⁰ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 275. For a much earlier discussion of growing conservative churches, see Dean Kelley, *Why Conservatives Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

weekly worship consisting of singing and a sermon followed by midweek Bible studies and fellowship activities. An economic analysis of church growth and decline does not account for the fact that churches still expect attenders to sit still for a forty-five minute lecture on Sunday morning, all while the wider culture beckons them to recreational activities and tells them that they should not ever have to submit themselves to an experience that has disappeared from all other spheres of life, including school. Furthermore, theologically liberal churches generally do not attain megachurch status even though their politics and teachings on personal morality would seem to appeal to wide segments of American culture. Almost all of the churches on the megachurch list are theologically conservative. An understanding of why megachurches become megachurches and why they arose when they did therefore requires an analysis of what they do and teach, and why what they do and teach resonates with a wide audience.³¹

In his groundbreaking 1967 article, the sociologist Robert Bellah described the American civil religion. This civil religion consists of “a set of beliefs, symbols and rituals” that point toward a spiritual aspect of America’s history and current activities in the world. This civil religion is “neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian,” although it employs broad Judeo-Christian language. The American civil religion is in fact “an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate universal reality” and incorporates “certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share.” Bellah described the civil religion as “unitarian,” “on the austere side,” and “more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love.” After the Civil War, it incorporated themes of sacrifice and rebirth. The civil religion stands

³¹ For an empirical study of the typical activities of American congregations, see Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 172-201.

above and in judgment over the will of the people, and it constitutes the true center of American unity.³²

Bellah worried that in post-1960s America the civil religion was in trouble. American society seemed fragmented. At the same time, other belief sets became prevalent. The sociologist Christian Smith identifies “Therapeutic Moralistic Deism” as the religion of America’s churchgoing youth. Like the civil religion, this belief set is nonsectarian. It holds that God “created and ordered the world and watches over human life” and that “God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other.” Furthermore, the “central goal in life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.” God rewards good behavior with happiness, but for the most part people do not need to consult the deity unless they encounter a problem. Smith found that “personally feeling good and being happy” more than any other criterion “defines the dominant epistemological framework and evaluative standard for most contemporary U.S. teenagers – and probably for most of their baby-boomer parents.”³³

Smith identifies Therapeutic Moralistic Deism as “a shared American religion analogous to the American civil religion that Robert Bellah astutely described in 1967, yet that operates at an entirely different level than civil religion.” While the civil religion “unif[ies] and give[s] purpose to the nation at the level of civic affairs,” Therapeutic Moralistic Deism “foster[s] subjective well-being in its believers” and “lubricate[s] interpersonal relationships in the local public sphere.” In a later work, Bellah himself

³² Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 170, 171, 175, 177, 185.

³³ Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 162-3; Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162-3, 168.

recognized therapeutic individualism – the idea that “personal satisfaction” and “individual well-being” constitute the primary goals of human existence – as one of the most influential cultural forces in the late twentieth century. Bellah also cited “the manager,” a product of twentieth-century bureaucratic structures, as defining American individualism. The manager must “persuade, inspire, manipulate, cajole, and intimidate those he manages so that his organization measures up to criteria of effectiveness shaped ultimately by the market.” The ideals of the therapist and the manager work together, encouraging modern Americans to carve out a personally fulfilling life most efficiently within the framework of “bureaucratic consumer capitalism”³⁴

Bellah, Smith, and the historians of suburbanization and consumerism all point toward aspects of a common suburban ethos, a new suburban social religion. This suburban social religion is not entirely individualistic and therapeutic, nor does it achieve the overarching level of a civil religion. It nevertheless includes aspects of these religious discourses and served as a powerful ideology in suburban America. Thus, the emerging suburban social religion of the 1970s and 1980s combined to differing degrees the American civil religion, meritocratic consumerism, Therapeutic Moralistic Deism, and the managerial ethos. Like the civil religion, it was nonsectarian. Personal success and happiness were not simply worthy goals, but signs of God’s blessing. The best government, according to this view, taxed little, handed out little, and fought foreign enemies who threatened the suburban way of life. Efficiency became a worthy goal in itself, but was even more powerful when combined with the goal of personal happiness.

³⁴ Smith with Denton, *Soul Searching*, 168, 169; Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Anne Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 45, 47.

The evolving suburban social religion was, in sum, individualistic, meritocratic, efficient, consumer-oriented, therapeutic, and politically conservative.

I argue that megachurches became the most salient symbol of a new national evangelicalism because they successfully mediated between historic conservative Protestantism and the new suburban social religion. Beginning in the 1970s, these churches succeeded at mixing the emerging suburban ethos with evangelicalism better than any other churches. In doing so, they maintained the right tension between an increasingly secular culture and conservative doctrines such as the inerrancy of Scripture, the exclusivity of salvation through Jesus Christ, his virgin birth and resurrection, and the Second Coming. Some churches that challenged various aspects of the suburban social religion did manage to become very large, but they stand out as exceptions. Furthermore, large churches that spoke against, or at least did not keep step with, the suburban social religion dwindled. Megachurch pastors play many roles, but Old Testament prophet is usually not one they can play for very long.

The late 1960s to the late 1980s constitute a transitional period for the megachurch. This period witnessed the continued growth of downtown, denominational megachurches like FBC Dallas, First Presbyterian Orlando, and Mt. Olivet Lutheran in Minneapolis. At this same time, this period witnessed the birth of what the sociologist Donald Miller calls “new paradigm” churches that are unaffiliated with traditional denominations and that appropriate “stylistics and organizational elements from our postmodern culture.” The coexistence of these different types of megachurches reveals the emergence of the suburban social religion. “New paradigm” churches now far outnumber older, denominational megachurches, but those older denominational

megachurches that managed to appeal to the suburban social religion have remained strong. Indeed, as of 2013, attendance at Houston's Second Baptist Church was still larger than that of Rick Warren's more famous, new paradigm but still Southern Baptist Saddleback Church.³⁵

The periodization of this study also reveals a corollary to the primary thesis that megachurches are inherently non-prophetic and succeed to the extent that they appeal to the suburban social religion. Despite the claims of numerous sociologists and observers, the megachurch's explosion actually validates the secularization hypothesis. This argument unfolds throughout the dissertation, but primarily centers on the idea that megachurches of all types grew because they could no longer take their place in society for granted. Megachurches maintained their status only by expending considerable amounts of time, thought, and energy to tailor their sermons and church structures to appeal to the suburban social religion, a nonsectarian, and in many ways even nonreligious, ideology. Even the Moral Majority, a group founded and led by megachurch pastors, constituted the end of one era of evangelical social and cultural engagement rather than the beginning of a new movement.³⁶

This dissertation explores how since the late 1960s megachurches and their pastors have built their ministries so that they resonate with the adherents of the suburban social religion. The second chapter, entitled "Entrepreneurs," profiles eight megachurch pastors who, at least for a time, experienced wild success in reaching their communities.

³⁵ Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 11.

³⁶ The geographer Justin Wilford has vigorously argued for the continued relevance of the secularization paradigm in his study of Saddleback's use of place and space. See Justin G. Wilford, *Sacred Subdivisions: The Postsuburban Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 22-3.

In his groundbreaking 1969 study of the nation's ten largest Sunday Schools, Towns found that in each one "the pastor is the chief administrator, both in the church, the Sunday School and/or the Christian education program of the church." In a 1984 book, Towns and Jerry Falwell identified the pastors' faith as "one of the main reasons for the growth of large churches" and claimed that the pastors of large churches have a special "gift of faith." Wagner believed that pastoral leadership was the most important factor in whether a church grew or declined. He commended Rick Warren for placing his name in large font at the top of his letterhead while placing the name of his church in small letters at the bottom. Wagner believed that the pastor had to be the face of the church for it to grow. The pastors profiled in the first chapter all led their churches through periods of spectacular growth, and all of them attained hero status for many inside and outside of their congregations.³⁷

These pastors were also celebrities. The third chapter, "Entertainers," engages the field of celebrity studies and explores how pastors used books, radio, television, and music to reach their communities. Megachurch pastors constructed rags-to-riches narratives of personal success and propagated these narratives through the media and at church growth conferences that proliferated throughout the country. Christian television also promoted megachurch pastors. The Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), the largest and most enduring of the religious cable networks, did not simply feature the sermons of these pastors, but invited them onto their nightly "Praise the Lord" broadcast, a variety show that resembled Johnny Carson more than the staid mainline productions of an

³⁷ Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*, 124; C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth*, 46, 49; Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns, *Stepping Out on Faith*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale, 1984), 10.

earlier period. The growth of megachurches also coincided with the growth of the Contemporary Christian music industry, with many growing churches updating their worship program with praise choruses featuring guitar and drums rather than organ and piano.

The fourth chapter, entitled “Therapists,” examines the messages that megachurch pastors preached. Megachurch pastors of the 1960s usually preached evangelistic messages that ended in a call for decisions to follow Christ. Following the lead of Robert Schuller, and through him Norman Vincent Peale, evangelical pastors increasingly shifted from purely evangelistic messages to those focused on emotional wholeness and personal wellbeing. They sensed, and some even collected data that pointed to the fact, that their suburbanites wanted to know more about how to have a successful marriage, how to deal with anxiety, and how to manage their money. Theological messages or exhortations to evangelize neighbors simply did not draw a crowd. Even pastors like John MacArthur at Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, famous for preaching verse-by-verse through the New Testament over a forty-year period, developed an extensive counseling ministry. Therapeutic preaching focused on individual felt needs, and many pastors saw it as the key to growing a successful church.

The fifth chapter, “Politicians,” describes the relationship between megachurches, electoral politics, and the civil religion. All five original Moral Majority board members – Charles Stanley, Tim LaHaye, D. James Kennedy, Jerry Falwell, and Greg Dixon – were megachurch pastors before they were icons of the New Christian Right. Megachurch pastors have literal pulpits from which to expound their views, and they often shared the suburban ethos described by Lassiter. Here again, megachurch pastors

have tailored their messages so as to reduce tension between conservative Protestantism and the suburban social religion. At the same time, the demise of their organization in the late 1980s reveals that most suburban Americans were not in step with their view of the state's role in American life. Although African American megachurches have generally supported Democratic policies, suburban African American megachurch pastors like Creflo Dollar and Eddie Long in Atlanta and Keith Butler in Southfield, Michigan push the Republican platform, and their messages reveal not just a regional convergence in American evangelicalism, but perhaps a racial one as well.³⁸

The sixth chapter, entitled "Critics," looks at those who disagree with the philosophies and practices of the Church Growth Movement and their expression in the megachurches. Theologically conservative observers, including some megachurch pastors, have questioned the extent to which megachurches have given in to consumerism and so compromised the faith. More liberal critics attack what they see as the individualism of megachurches, their social and economic conservatism, and the amount of money that they spend on buildings as opposed to community improvement. Ironically, history suggests that if megachurches take these criticisms to heart and focus on more theological depth, or alternately become heavily involved in social justice and community activism, they will cease to be megachurches. They have found the right balance between affirming the historic faith and the surrounding culture, a stance that leaves radical critics from both the left and right dissatisfied.

Megachurches have also taken root in other countries. Each national context engenders its own tension between conservative Christian theology and the prevailing

³⁸ William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 200.

culture. The proliferation of megachurches around the globe reveals that this institutional form is successful at mediating Christianity to a variety of cultures. David Yonggi Cho of the million-member Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea has long served as a valuable object lesson in the American Church Growth circles. This seventh chapter, “Missionaries,” explores how megachurches have flourished in places very different from the suburban United States. The similarity in worship style and administrative structure between churches in the United States and Uganda, not to mention the frequent preaching tours that American megachurch pastors take in that country, begs several questions concerning the interaction between socioeconomic environment and institutional forms. Does America’s suburban social religion of the 1970s and 1980s exist outside of the social and cultural milieu that gave rise to it? If not, then why and how are American megachurches different from ones in Nigeria or Brazil? The megachurch may not simply be the face of a new American evangelicalism, but a global evangelicalism as well.

Many aspects of the megachurch are not new. Celebrity pastors who are politically engaged and who preach a therapeutic message certainly predate the 1960s. At the same, all of these aspects have coalesced into an institutional form at a specific moment in history. If long-term trends in church attendance continue, megachurches will only grow more numerous. The sociologist Mark Chaves notes that even though the average congregation in America contains only seventy-five people, most people attend a congregation of around four hundred people. Furthermore, “the largest 10 percent of congregations contain about half of all churchgoers.” Perhaps even more striking, the largest 1% of Protestant churches contain 15% of the people, money and staff. American churchgoers are increasingly concentrating in the highest profile churches in their

communities. Understanding the megachurch phenomenon and the suburban social religion with which it interacts is therefore integral to understanding an increasingly national evangelical culture and the suburban neighborhoods in which these churches make their home.³⁹

³⁹ Chaves, *Congregations in America*, 22-3; Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 64.

Chapter 2 Entrepreneurs

John C. Maxwell assumed the pulpit of Skyline Wesleyan Church in Lemon Grove, California in 1981. By 1990, Skyline averaged 3,500 in weekly attendance and had an annual budget of \$3.5 million. With book titles like *Your Attitude: The Key to Success* and *Be All You Can Be*, Maxwell focused on personal empowerment and fulfillment. He also built INJOY Ministries, a corporation that provided leadership training and ministry resources to churches across the country. In 1993, Maxwell completed a Doctor of Ministry degree at Fuller Theological Seminary, home of the Church Growth Institute. By any reckoning, Maxwell had built an impressive ministerial career.¹

Maxwell left Skyline in 1995, however, to devote more time to speaking and writing on leadership. While at Skyline, he assembled what Elmer Towns called “the best gathering of associate pastors in the country” and enlisted over half the church’s membership in active ministry. Maxwell believed that the senior pastor is the most important factor in deciding whether a church will grow or decline. He translated these insights into enormously successful publishing career, with *Developing the Leader Within You* (1993), *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (1998), and *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader* (1999) each selling more than a million copies.

¹ Elmer L. Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today’s most Innovative Churches* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1990), 21; “Skyline Looks to Replace Popular Senior Pastor Maxwell,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, March 3, 1995.

Maxwell has sold over nineteen million books in all. Fortune 500 Companies and professional sports teams have called on him for training and motivation. In 2008 Maxwell returned to full-time ministry, this time as a teaching pastor at the 18,000-member Christ Fellowship in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida.²

Megachurch pastors are entrepreneurs. They head corporations with hundreds of employees. Many founded the churches they pastor, while others took over small churches and led them to unprecedented heights. Whether they started their church or took over from another pastor, the megachurch researchers Scott Thumma and Dave Travis found in a 2005 study that 83% of megachurches “grew dramatically during the tenure of the current pastor.” Horatio Alger imagery pervades their official biographies on church websites. Humble beginnings lead to great things, all because of vision, faith, and hard work. Jerry Falwell’s Thomas Road Baptist Church first met in June 1956 with thirty-five people at Mt. Vernon Elementary School. With a vision to build “the greatest church since Pentecost,” Falwell led Thomas Road to build a \$12 million facility on a campus that stretched for several hundred acres. “A great church,” Falwell explained, “is reflected in large buildings and adequate space for expansion.” Robert Schuller – “president of the corporation and chairman of the board” at Garden Grove Community Church – began his church on March 27, 1955 in a drive-in movie theater. He “had a dream,” however, “to build a great church.” He saw his dream come to fruition with the completion of the all-glass Crystal Cathedral, designed by world-renowned architect Philip Johnson. It instantly became one of the most recognizable church buildings in the

² Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today’s Most Innovative Churches*, 21-2, 26-7; Christ Fellowship, “Our Pastors,” accessed April 2, 2014, <http://gochristfellowship.com/about-us/our-pastors>; John Maxwell on Leadership, “About,” accessed April 2, 2014, <http://johnmaxwellonleadership.com/about>.

world after its completion in 1980. Bill Hybels “dreamed about Acts 2” and what could happen if a church modeled itself on the earliest congregations. His Willow Creek Community Church outside of Chicago began in a movie theater in 1975. The church collected \$600 each week in offering, and had \$50 left over after paying rent for the theater and multimedia equipment. By 1992, Willow Creek had over 17,000 in attendance and had formed its own association of churches to disseminate its ministry and training resources.³

The entrepreneur is an icon of late twentieth century. As the political scientist Corey Robin explains, ideological conservatives defend the right of some to rule over others on the basis of personal merit just as often as they do tradition. Those who overcome adversity, who make their own destiny regardless of the obstacles they face, have the right to rule over and speak for the masses. While men traditionally proved themselves on battlefields, in twentieth-century America the market became the arena in which they fought for membership in the ruling class. According to Robin, “the warrior and the businessman” have “become twin icons” of the modern West. Lee Iacocca, Steve Jobs and Sam Walton took their place as heroes of a post-World War II generation that never fought in a war in which they felt they could be proud. In the words of Bethany

³ Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 59; Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns, *Capturing a Town for Christ* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1973), 7, 10, 16-7; Robert H. Schuller, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities* (Glendale, California: G/L Regal Books, 1974), 55; Robert H. Schuller, *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967), 9; Robert H. Schuller, *Success is Never Ending, Failure is Never Final* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 42, 55; Bill Hybels and Lynn Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 50, 59, 67, 123, 125.

Moreton, even as the majority of American entered the corporate workforce, “the entrepreneur wore the mantle of capitalist virtue.”⁴

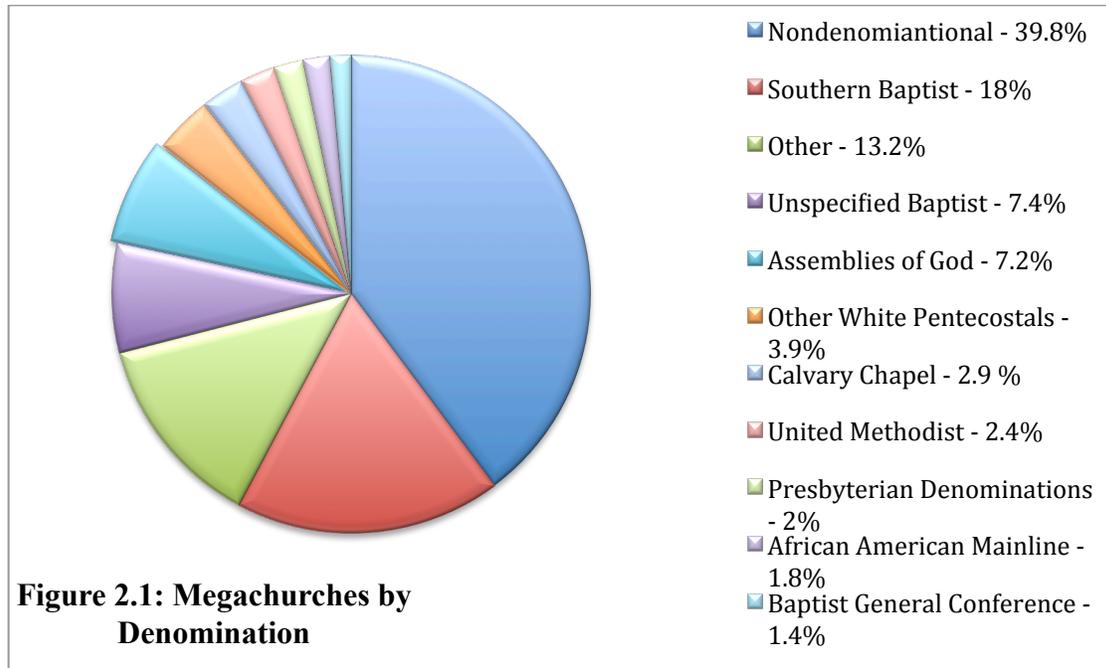
Pastors who are largely free of denominational oversight can organize their churches and worship services as they wish, and they usually wish to attract the greatest number of worshippers from the surrounding community. Most megachurch pastors operate within a free- church tradition. A large plurality (39%) of all megachurches have no discernable denominational affiliation, a sharp increase from 1980 when only 16% of megachurches were unaffiliated. Another 7.4% call themselves Baptist but do not appear to have formal ties to a Baptist denomination. Baptist churches typically have a congregational form of church government, hire their own pastors, own their land and buildings, and ordain whomever they wish without consulting denominational authorities. Denominational ties are therefore not as important for Baptists as for, say, Presbyterians or Methodists. Thus, the 276 Southern Baptist megachurches also enjoy considerable autonomy.⁵

Pentecostal denominations often exercise more institutional oversight over their churches. The Assemblies of God, for example, have a weak presbyterian form of church government. Aspiring pastors seek ordination from the district leaders rather than the local church. The International Pentecostal Holiness Church and the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel resemble episcopal denominations like the United Methodist Church. The entry barriers for enterprising pastors is however much lower for Pentecostal

⁴ Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29-31; Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 212.

⁵ Elmer Towns, John N. Vaughan, and David J. Seifert, *The Complete Book of Church Growth* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1981), 349-52, 356-9.

denominations than for mainline groups. Anyone who feels called by God can seek ordination, regardless of their level of education. Furthermore, because these denominations stress following the leading of the Holy Spirit, pastors are free to plan and organize their church worship services as they see fit. In all, 88.8% of megachurches do not belong to any denomination or belong to Holiness, Pentecostal or Baptist groups.



Denominations in the United States have never been static entities, and denominational loyalty has often waned during times of revival. The Great Awakening simultaneously weakened Congregationalism and Anglicanism and strengthened Methodists and Baptists. The Cane Ridge revivals of Kentucky and the Second Great Awakening witnessed the rise of the Churches of Christ, the Cumberland Presbyterians, and several Holiness groups. Holiness churches formed their own networks when existing denominations did not welcome them. Early Pentecostals followed a similar path. When fundamentalists during the 1920s and 1930s found themselves alienated from denominational leadership, they formed their own independent seminaries, magazines,

and missionary agencies. American evangelicals have not shied away from schism if they believe existing ecclesiastical groups are irredeemably blind to the truth.⁶

The weakening of denominational ties prevalent in the megachurch movement differs from previous crises of denominationalism because it stems not from doctrinal controversy – human ability to bring about salvation, Christian perfectionism, speaking in tongues, the inerrancy of the Bible – but from methodological differences centered on the local church. Furthermore, the megachurch movement has for the most not led to the formation of any new denominations. Denominationalism has in fact weakened significantly among American Protestants since World War II. The sociologist Robert Wuthnow notes that interregional migration, increased income and education levels among evangelical Protestants, and converging attitudes on social issues like abortion and premarital sex have all smoothed out social differences between denominational adherents. The lowering of social barriers between denominations has in turn led to increased denominational switching. A 1955 Gallup survey revealed that only one in twenty-five adults attended a church of a different denomination than the one they attended as a child. Wuthnow's 1984 survey found that the proportion had risen to one in three. As the twentieth century came to close, megachurch pastors increasingly downplayed doctrinal questions and sought fellowship with other successful pastors regardless of theological differences.⁷

⁶ Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 52; Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 32, 56.

⁷ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 85-6, 88.

The American civil religion and Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, and hence the suburban social religion, are inherently nonsectarian. The eight megachurch leaders described in this chapter succeeded at least in part because their messages focused on connections between conservative Protestantism and the suburban social religion, a task that required the downplaying of denominational distinctions. These eight are not necessarily the most successful pastors, but they do represent national trends in belief and practice. Those that espoused or embodied a different message did not maintain high attendance levels. As denominational loyalties have declined, enterprising megachurch pastors have enjoyed an expanding market for their messages. “Sheep stealing” – a phrase pastors use to describe other pastors’ attempts to lure away their congregants – can now take place both within and across denominations.

Jack Hyles – First Baptist Church, Hammond, IN

In 1976, First Baptist Church (FBC) of Hammond, Indiana averaged 14,004 attendees in Sunday School, making it the largest Sunday School in the country. First Baptist Church had held this position at least since 1972, but its phenomenal growth began in 1959 when Jack Hyles assumed the pastorate. Beginning in 1952 Hyles built Miller Road Baptist Church in Garland, Texas from ninety-two people to over 3,400. He found only a few hundred members when he arrived at his new post in Hammond. When he died in 2001, the church numbered approximately twenty thousand.⁸

⁸ Elmer Towns, “100 Largest Sunday Schools – 1976: How the Big Get Bigger,” *Christian Life*, October 1976, 38; Jack Hyles, *How to Boost Your Church Attendance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 8; Corrie Cutrer, “In Memorium: Megachurch Pastor Jack Hyles Dead at 74,” *Christianity Today*, April 2, 2001, p.; Cathleen Falsani, “Brother Jack Hyles of Hammond Dies at 74,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 8, 2001.

FBC Hammond represented an older type of megachurch, and Jack Hyles an older type of megachurch pastor. When Elmer Towns first published his study of the nation's ten largest Sunday Schools in 1969, three were independent fundamental Baptist Churches, one was Southern Baptist, one was nondenominational, and five belonged to the loose conglomeration of fundamentalist Baptist churches known as the Baptist Bible Fellowship (BBF). Independent fundamental Baptist churches, and the churches of the BBF, emphasized strict separation from worldly amusements like dancing, card playing, going to the movies, and of course, drinking and smoking. Many also preached only from the King James Version of the Bible and saw cooperation with the SBC as apostasy. Some of these churches nevertheless grew rapidly. The denominational trends that Towns noticed in 1969 continued in 1976, with six BBF churches, one SBC church, and three independent fundamental Baptist churches appearing among the ten largest Sunday Schools. Five of these were in the Midwestern states of Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. There was only one each in Texas, Florida, and California. A megachurch list from 1980 reveals that 19% were unaffiliated white Baptist churches. These megachurches outnumbered those from all other denominations except for the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).⁹

Unlike most newer megachurches, independent fundamental Baptist churches focused almost exclusively on evangelism through extensive home visitation programs and a Sunday School bus ministry. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, most megachurches adopted an “attractional” model exemplified in Schuller’s Garden Grove Community

⁹ Elmer L. Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 160-1; Towns, “100 Largest Sunday Schools – 1976,” 38; Towns, Vaughn, and Seifert, *The Complete Book of Church Growth*, 349-52, 356-9.

Church. Instead of going out and finding people, they sought to bring in worshippers by offering numerous ministries and conducting an upbeat and professional Sunday morning worship service. Hyles, on the other hand, recommended that churches “make visitation the biggest thing,” and perhaps even the only thing, that they do outside of Sunday activities. Hyles’ confrontational ministry in Hammond’s neighborhoods, as well as his passionate preaching, alienated the church’s more affluent members. Hyles quickly replaced them with large numbers of poor people from the wider Hammond area. As early as 1965, FBC Hammond had seventeen bus routes that brought five hundred people into the church each Sunday.¹⁰

Despite these differences in style and tactics, FBC Hammond in many ways prefigured the newer megachurch. Although Hyles maintained a more adversarial stance towards the wider culture – in one sermon he sternly warned teenagers that he could “tell which ones are going to high school dances” – he nevertheless made bringing in the unsaved and unchurched his primary goal. He also thought carefully about how worship services might be more successful in reaping lost souls. He told pastors that worshippers “should definitely be loosened up in the early part of the service, and feel themselves a part of it.” He also counseled pastors to make their conclusions abrupt so that the lost person in the audience “will not have time to prepare himself for the invitation” and so steel his resolve against responding to the call to come to Christ. Like later megachurch pastors, Hyles believed that the “public service is the most important thing in the life of

¹⁰ Hyles, *How to Boost Your Church Attendance*, 21-2; Jack Hyles, *Kisses of Calvary and Other Sermons* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1965), 92.

the church,” and churches had to put effort and thought into the Sunday morning performance if they wished to grow.¹¹

Although nondenominational megachurches of the 1980s cooperated more readily with other churches, they still evinced a taste for independence prefigured in churches like FBC Hammond. Like FBC Hammond, they formed their own church networks or even built their own quasi-denominational institutions. Hyles’ friend and fellow independent fundamental Baptist Jerry Falwell believed that the megachurch could replicate “all the ministries usually found at the denominational level.” FBC Hammond, and many more recent megachurches, have almost become denominations unto themselves. Hyles started six schools and the unaccredited Hyles-Anderson College. Hyles and his successor and son-in-law Jack Schaap also published many of their books through the Hyles-Anderson publishing house. As Hyles-Anderson graduates spread across the country, they have created an informal network of churches affiliated with Hyles and FBC Hammond.¹²

Beginning in the late 1980s, a number of scandals rocked FBC Hammond. In 1989, Robert Sumner, publisher of a newsletter entitled *The Biblical Evangelist*, printed an exceptionally well-documented account of Hyles’ long affair with his secretary. The piece also detailed the serial adultery of Hyles’ son and FBC Hammond youth pastor David Hyles. In 1991, deacon A.V. Ballenger faced charges of child molestation and would later serve five years in prison. Another accusation against FBC Hammond leaders

¹¹ Hyles, *Kisses of Calvary*, 114; Hyles, *How to Boost Your Church Attendance*, 41-4.

¹² Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns, *Capturing a Town for Christ* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1973), 17; Falsani, “Brother Jack Hyles of Hammond Dies at 74.” Bryan Smith, “Let Us Prey: Big Trouble At First Baptist Church,” *Chicago*, January 2013.

involved the cover-up of the sexual abuse of a twelve-year old mentally disabled girl. Her parents settled out of court. In 2000, Joseph Combs, a professor at Hyles-Anderson College, was sentenced to 114 years in prison for sexually and physically abusing his adopted daughter. Then in 2012, Schaap himself pled guilty to taking a minor across state lines for the purpose of engaging in sexual intercourse. He received a twelve-year sentence. Average attendance at FBC Hammond declined from a high of 20,000 in the early 1990s to approximately 13,400 in 2012 and Hyles-Anderson College appeared to be in economic trouble.¹³

Even without the scandals, FBC Hammond would likely have declined somewhat. All of the churches on the 1969 list have. Akron Baptist Temple fell from 5,762 people to approximately 3,000. Instead of holding the title of largest church in the country, it now stands at number 617 on the megachurch list. Five churches – Highland Park Baptist Church of Chattanooga, Canton Baptist Temple, Landmark Baptist Temple of Cincinnati, Temple Baptist of Detroit, FBC Van Nuys, and Calvary Temple of Denver – are no longer megachurches. In 1969 John Rawlings of Landmark Baptist Temple predicted that by 1980 there would be twenty-five to fifty independent fundamental Baptist churches with over three thousand in Sunday School. Today, there are only twenty-one independent white Baptist megachurches. Only one of these – FBC Hammond – currently appears among the two hundred largest churches in the country.¹⁴

These independent fundamental Baptist megachurch pastors knew their communities were changing, but did not fully understand the ramifications of those

¹³ Robert Sumner, “The Saddest Story We Ever Published,” *Biblical Evangelist*, accessed April 2, 2014, http://www.biblicalevangelist.org/jack_hyles_chapter3.php; Smith, “Let Us Prey.”

¹⁴ Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*, 6, 11.

changes. Akron Baptist Temple reduced their bus fleet from forty to seven because their members had become “suburbanites who drive.” Rawlings at Landmark Baptist Temple still used buses but he did not send them into poor areas, believing that “the stability of building on middle class suburbanites is another reason for the great potential of this church.” These new suburbanites did not stay within the fold, however. Perhaps they chafed at Hyles’ strictures against dancing or Akron Baptist Temple pastor Dallas Billington’s rules against “roller skating” and “swimming parties.” Lee Roberson at Highland Park Baptist Church once fired a Sunday School teacher because he saw her picture in the newspaper at a local dance. Churches that maintain strong tension between their teachings and the wider community attract members only to a point. The “blue collar clientele” made up of transplants from “the Carolinas and Georgia” flocked to the independent fundamental Baptist churches. Their children and grandchildren looked elsewhere.¹⁵

Chuck Smith – Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa

If Jack Hyles exemplified the megachurch past, Chuck Smith prefigured the megachurch future. Smith was far more successful than his independent fundamental Baptist counterparts at translating evangelicalism into the idiom of a new, suburbanized generation. Smith grew up in the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, a denomination founded by celebrity megachurch pastor Aimee Semple McPherson. He attended the denomination’s LIFE College and received ordination as a Foursquare minister in 1948. After preaching in Arizona for a time, he returned to southern California to pastor a Foursquare church in Corona. He grew frustrated, however,

¹⁵ Ibid., 21, 22, 61, 72, 125, 127.

because his congregation did not seem to share his zeal for evangelism. After a couple of disappointing years preaching in Southern California, he left the ministry.¹⁶

Smith did not stay away from preaching for long, however. After driving a truck for a uniform delivery service, he took a small church in Huntington Beach. While pastoring this congregation, Smith discovered that he enjoyed teaching the Bible expositionally, going verse-by-verse through passages of Scripture. His congregation also enjoyed his teaching. He moved around to several churches during the early sixties, and each successive church he led experienced more dramatic growth. By 1965, Smith was leading mid-week Bible studies in several homes within a fifty-mile radius of his church in Los Serranos.¹⁷

Smith believed that simple Bible teaching was the key to his success. He felt shackled, though, by certain aspects of his denomination. First, he believed that “the Foursquare name was a problem.” Whenever he invited people to his church and they asked about the name, he found himself providing lengthy explanations of Pentecostal views on the atoning work of Christ. He also felt that tongues-speaking in the worship service was “strange enough to modern ears to scare off more than it drew.” The last straw for Smith involved an evangelism contest that pitted Foursquare churches against one another. Smith believed that “not all of the programs launched by our churches to win these contests reflected biblical ideals.” He refused to participate and so drew the ire of his superiors in the denomination. His church actually won more converts, and so won

¹⁶ Chuck Smith, *A Memoir of Grace* (Costa Mesa: The Word for Today, 2009), 73-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 77-8, 80-1, 116-7, 123.

the contest, without even trying. This experience convinced Smith that simple Bible teaching drew people to a church far more effectively than gimmicks.¹⁸

Smith was a poor fit for the Foursquare denomination in other ways. He complained that those who worshipped in Foursquare churches wanted their worship services to include “miracles, divine healings, and speaking in tongues.” Foursquare members wanted “inspired prophecies” and “a preacher who ‘got excited about God,’ paced a platform in mock battles with the devil, and shouted down the power of God.” He dreamed “of what [he] might be able to do if [he] led a non-denominational church without having to drag around the weight of that name.” In the meantime, a group of Smith’s supporters formed a non-profit group known as the Corona Christian Association. They produced and distributed tapes of his teaching. They also aired them on a local radio station. In 1965 an independent church in Costa Mesa named Calvary Chapel asked Smith if he would like to be their pastor. Smith agreed, and he left the Foursquare denomination behind for good.¹⁹

Calvary Chapel initially met in a mobile home park for retirees before finding a small church building. Calvary Chapel then grew phenomenally, first renting a church building from a Lutheran congregation and then moving into an old elementary school. When the church outgrew that facility it purchased eleven acres and began meeting in a circus tent until their new 2,300-seat sanctuary was completed in 1974. Even then, Calvary Chapel had to have three services to accommodate all the worshippers.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 118-9, 124, 126-7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 134, 138-9, 148-9.

²⁰ Smith, *A Memoir of Grace*, 157; Chuck Smith, *The History of Calvary Chapel* (Costa Mesa: The Word for Today, 1981), 5, 8, 10.

Smith attributed the success of Calvary Chapel to a number of factors. First, the Charismatic Movement that began in 1961 created a fresh hunger for an authentic, spiritual experience with God. This Movement also involved the adoption of Pentecostal teachings in mainline and evangelical churches. Second, Smith believed that by 1969 much of the optimism of the hippie movement was gone. These hippies “did not want to turn their backs on the values they had embraced – non-materialist lifestyles, the importance of the human person, treating all people with love, and the earth with kindness, and so on – but they could no longer find support for their values in the naïve belief that all they had to do was get the entire world to ‘turn on.’” He concluded that “the Christian church, which was from its founding an outpost on the margin of society, provided the ideal environment for hippies to be reconciled to God.”²¹

Smith was more open than other pastors to welcoming the ex-hippie Jesus People into his church. Upon meeting the hippie preacher Lonnie Frisbee in 1968, Smith wrote that “he talked about Jesus like he had just come from a meeting with him.” Frisbee helped bridge the cultural gap between the Pentecostal and already middle-aged Smith and the young people that Smith hoped to reach. Young hippie converts often brought guitars with them to Frisbee’s mid-week Bible studies at Calvary. They wrote their own praise songs and Scripture choruses describing their newfound faith. Early contemporary Christian groups Love Song, The Children of the Day, and Gentle Faith all got their start at Calvary Chapel. Calvary Chapel eventually started its own record label to promote these artists. The first album on Maranatha! Records, a compilation of Calvary Chapel bands entitled *The Everlastin’ Living Jesus Music Concert*, became one of the most

²¹ Smith, *A Memoir of Grace*, 180.

important albums in the history of contemporary Christian music. Maranatha! praise albums influenced contemporary worship in churches across the country for more than three decades.²²

As Smith's popularity grew, home Bible studies sprang up around southern California. Many of these simply listened to Smith's taped messages. These Bible studies evolved into churches, many of which took the Calvary Chapel name. The Calvary Chapel movement soon spread across the nation, forming a denomination of sorts. Today, forty-four megachurches are associated with Calvary Chapel. Southern California pastors Greg Laurie of Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, Steve Mays of Calvary Chapel South Bay, Jeff Johnson of Calvary Chapel Downey, Raul Ries of Calvary Chapel Golden Springs, and Mike MacIntosh of Horizon Christian Fellowship in San Diego were all members of Smith's original Calvary Chapel, and all currently lead churches that have more than seven thousand regular attendees. Smith's protégés have successfully spread the Calvary Chapel method and message outside of southern California. Skip Heitzig's Calvary Chapel Albuquerque is the largest church in New Mexico, and Jon Courson's Applegate Christian Fellowship is the largest church in Oregon. Joe Focht, another member of the original Calvary Chapel, took Smith's formula to the East Coast. His Calvary Chapel Philadelphia averages approximately ten thousand attendees and is the second largest church in Pennsylvania. There are also Calvary Chapel megachurches in New Jersey and Massachusetts.²³

²² Smith, *A Memoir of Grace*, 175; David W. Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil: Christian Pop Music and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 22, 198.

²³ Smith, *A Memoir of Grace*, 191-2.

Original Calvary Chapel member Ken Gulliksen was more willing to allow open expression of the gifts of the Holy Spirit than was Smith. In 1974 he started a Bible study in Los Angeles where future Christian music star Keith Green became a Christian, as did Bob Dylan, at least for a time. Gulliksen eventually broke away from Calvary Chapel, and along with former director for the Institute of Church Growth and C. Peter Wagner associate John Wimber, formed the Vineyard Christian Fellowship. Lonnie Frisbee also participated in the founding of the Vineyard. There are currently fourteen Vineyard megachurches scattered throughout the country.²⁴

The Jesus Movement, according to the historian Larry Eskridge, helped young evangelicals “negotiate a truce between the demands of their own religious heritage and the allure of secular youth culture.” He even argues that “the much-discussed resurgence of evangelicalism that became apparent by the 1980s probably could not have occurred, had the movement not taken place.” Far from being confined to Southern California, the Jesus Movement had lasting impact among evangelical youth all over the country, especially in the Midwest. Surveys of former Jesus People from across America point to Chuck Smith as the most influential leader, Love Song as the most important band, and *Love Song* and *Everlastin’ Living Jesus Music Concert* as the two most important Jesus Movement albums.²⁵

²⁴ Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil*, 223-5. For an account of the Calvary Chapel church plants, see Chuck Smith and Tal Brooke, *Harvest* (Costa Mesa: The Word for Today, 1993).

²⁵ Larry Eskridge, *God’s Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8-9, 303-4.

Charles Jackson – Brookland Baptist Church, West Columbia, SC

Charles Jackson became the pastor of Brookland Baptist Church, an African American church founded in 1902, in 1971 when he was only eighteen. The church had approximately 150 members. By 1989, it had grown to about nine hundred. Jackson led the church through a building campaign that saw them move to an old grocery store in 1992 and then into a new forty thousand square foot building in 1999. By that time the church had grown to roughly four thousand members. By 2012, the congregation had grown to 8,340 members, making it the largest African American church in South Carolina and one of the largest in the Southeast.²⁶

Like most African American Baptist churches, Brookland holds its denominational affiliations lightly. Although Jackson cites Progressive National Baptist Convention founders Gardner C. Taylor, Benjamin E. Mays, and William Augustus Jones as primary influences, the church's website does not indicate any official ties to that denomination. Like Hyles' FBC Hammond, Brookland Baptist oversees a number of activities that render it a microdenomination of sorts. In addition to its fifty-eight ministries, it operates a foundation that supervises ministry to the homeless, HIV/AIDS patients, tutoring for school children, recreation ministries, and an annual conference for African American men. The church also operates a credit union.²⁷

Brookland Baptist provides social services that scholars such as Carter G. Woodson and E. Franklin Frazier long ago identified as a distinctive characteristic of African American churches in the United States. Brookland Baptist therefore resembles

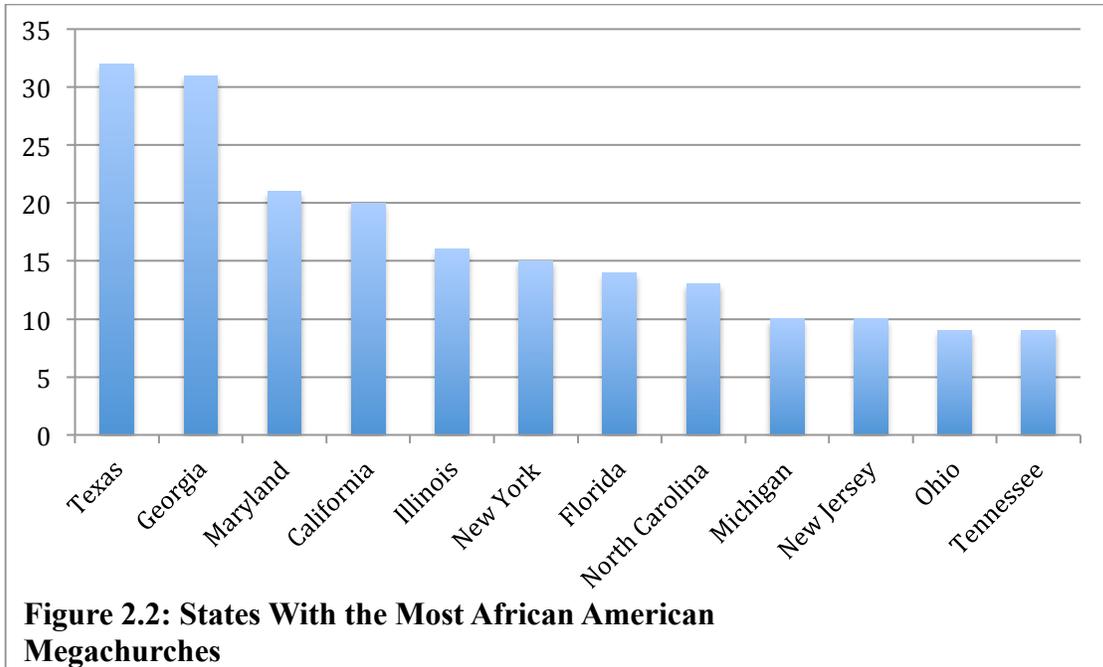
²⁶ Allison Askins, "Black Churches Try to Shape Community," *The State*, September 10, 2000.

²⁷ Ibid.

the Abyssinian Baptist Church and Floyd Flake's Great Allen AME Cathedral in New York, both of which emphasize economic development through subsidiary development corporations. Brookland Baptist also differs from its white megachurch counterparts in its politics. In 2003, for example, Democratic presidential candidate Al Sharpton preached a Sunday morning sermon in which he heavily criticized George W. Bush. At the same time, Jackson developed a friendship with conservative Southern Baptist Wendell Estep, pastor of the prominent FBC Columbia.²⁸

African American megachurches constitute an important segment of the modern megachurch phenomenon. There are approximately 260 predominantly African American megachurches, constituting 16.9% of all megachurches. African American churches are less evenly spread over the United States than white megachurches. Over half (51.5%) of them are located in twelve states along the eastern seaboard, with the mid-Atlantic region of the District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York having an especially high number. African American megachurches also tend to cluster in urban areas. Nine of the ten African American megachurches in Michigan are in Detroit. Every African American megachurch in Ohio is either in Akron, Cincinnati, Cleveland, or Columbus. Seven of the eight African American megachurches in Pennsylvania are in Pittsburgh or Philadelphia. Even in the sprawling Sun Belt metropolises of Texas, twenty-three of the state's thirty-two African American megachurches lie within the city limits of either Dallas or Houston.

²⁸ Sarah Sabalos, "Sharpton Surprises Church," *The State*, December 1, 2003; "Easter 2000 Should Be Uniting Experience," *The State*, April 21, 2000.



As the following table demonstrates, in some areas African American megachurches wield considerable influence over the local megachurch culture, and in the case of Maryland and the District of Columbia constitute over half of all megachurches. In fact, from Washington, D.C. to New England, African American megachurches represent 40.6% of all megachurches, compared to 14.1% for the rest of the country.

Table 2.1: The Concentration of African American Megachurches

State	Percentage of Megachurches that are Predominantly African America
District of Columbia	85.7%
Maryland	56.8%
New Jersey	43.5%
Georgia	40%
New York	39.5%
Illinois	29.6%
Michigan	25.6%
Massachusetts	25%
Pennsylvania	25%
North Carolina	23.6%

Like FBC Hammond, however, Brookland Baptist operates within a declining segment of the megachurch movement and represents an older type of African American

megachurch. Approximately 42.7% of African American megachurches are nondenominational. They now surpass the approximately 40% of African American megachurches that fall within the Baptist camp and the 4.6% that belong to the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The three African American Baptist denominations and the three African American Methodist denominations constitute the African American mainline. Most of the nondenominational churches, on the other hand, lean toward the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. Some churches within mainline denominations do as well, following a movement toward what the historians C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya calls neo-Pentecostalism and what the religious studies scholar Jonathan Walton calls the “Charismatic mainline.” Formal ecclesiastical structures, denominational membership, and observance of the ordinances ties Charismatic and non-Charismatic mainline churches together. Their shared belief in civic engagement and a focus on middle class respectability stands out as their most salient common feature, however. Brookland Baptist is a non-Charismatic mainline church, and like many others that fall within that same category, maintains a great deal of authority in the community even as their mainline white counterparts suffered dramatic decline. As nondenominational African American megachurches grow in prominence – especially those associated with the Word of Faith Movement – non-Charismatic mainline churches like Brookland Baptist might find themselves increasingly marginalized in the African American church world.²⁹

²⁹ Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 75, 78, 87, 92.

Frederick J. Eikerenkotter II – Christ Community United Church, New York City

While earlier scholars of African American religion like Woodson would no doubt be proud to include Charles Jackson and Brookland Baptist in “the black church,” they would probably be less inclined to extend the right hand of fellowship to Rev. Frederick J. Eikerenkotter II. Rev. Ike, as he was commonly known, represented another force within the African American megachurch movement. According to the religious studies scholar Stephanie Y. Mitchem, the prosperity gospel has a disproportionate influence on African American church life, and Rev. Ike stands out as one of its most visible early proponents. He was one of the first African American prosperity preachers to utilize television, and he pioneered a specific brand of prosperity preaching known as the Word of Faith Movement. Word of Faith theology teaches that believers can bring about physical healing and personal wealth by believing that God wills these good things for them and then verbally confessing their possession of these blessings even though they do not presently enjoy them. According to Walton, however, modern Word of Faith pastors distance themselves from Rev. Ike, choosing to identify other preachers as the inspiration behind their theology and personal style. Nevertheless, Rev. Ike stands firmly within the Word of Faith tradition with respect to both his teaching and his mentors in the ministry.³⁰

Rev. Ike was born in tiny Ridgeland, South Carolina in 1935. He claimed to have earned a degree at an unidentified theological school before joining the Air Force for two

³⁰ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), ix. For a comprehensive account of the history of the Word of Faith Movement, see Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

years. He founded the United Church of Jesus Christ for all People in Ridgeland. Desiring a bigger stage, he relocated to Boston in 1964 where he began a career as a faith healer at a church he started called the Miracle Temple. He moved to Harlem in 1966, where he switched tactics from laying his hands on the sick – in reminiscing about his early days jerking people out of wheelchairs he once admitted “it’s a wonder I didn’t kill somebody” –to selling prayer cloths and holy oils that ostensibly had healing powers. He moved to his more permanent home at the old Loews Theater at 175th St. and Broadway in 1969. This building would eventually become Palace Cathedral, home of Christ Community United Church.³¹

After relocating to Palace Cathedral, Rev. Ike more fully formulated his Science of Living. He taught that individuals have the power “to transform torment into joy” and “scarcity into abundance,” simply by changing their thought patterns. He wanted his followers to banish negative thoughts and instead “focus their individual attention on positive areas because that’s where one intersects the positive forces in the universe, the forces that make good things happen.” Followers could exercise their faith, understood as the believing power that God provides, by contributing to Rev. Ike’s ministry. Rev. Ike often told of those who received financial blessings after sending contributions. His creative catchphrases encapsulated much of his teaching. “The best thing you do for the poor,” he would say, “is not to be one of them.” He admonished his followers not to “wait for your pie in the sky by-and-by when you die,” but to “get [theirs] now with ice cream on top!”³²

³¹ Clayton Riley, “The Golden Gospel of Rev. Ike,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1975.

³² Riley, “The Golden Gospel of Rev. Ike”; Walton, *Watch This!*, 47.

By 1975, Christ Community United Church had five thousand worshippers. Rev. Ike broadcast his sermons on 1,770 radio stations nationwide. His *Action!* newsletter reached over a million people. He also broadcast his sermons in several major television markets. In 1974, twenty thousand people filled Madison Square Garden, and millions more tuned in on television, to watch Rev. Ike tell them that “if you want to experience the very best of life, you must believe that you deserve the best!” He encouraged them that “anything that you can actually think and feel that you are worthy of must come to you,” including a million dollars simply by getting “a million dollar feeling.” He taught that “your cursing or your blessing, your good or your evil comes to you out of your own inner consciousness.”³³

Rev. Ike did not study with Tulsa evangelist Kenneth Hagin, as did many of the leaders of the Word of Faith Movement, nor did he attend Oral Roberts University or Rhema Bible Training Center. He did however cite Oral Roberts as a major influence on his thinking and on his ministry strategy, going so far as to adopt some of the details of Roberts’s biography as his own. Although the religious studies scholar Stephanie Mitchem places Rev. Ike in a different category than Word of Faith preachers because of his adherence to mind science, Word of Faith pastors owe a similar debt to the New Thought tradition. As the Word of Faith critic D.R. McConnell amply demonstrated, Kenneth Hagin heavily plagiarized Pentecostal evangelist and New Thought practitioner E.W. Kenyon. The sociologist Milmon Harrison describes Rev. Ike’s Science of Living as a direct parallel to Kenyon’s higher life. Harrison does not go beyond the historical

³³ Riley, “The Golden Gospel of Rev. Ike”; “Rev Ike: ‘You Deserve the Best!’” YouTube Video, 5:18, posted by Reverend Ike Videos, May 23, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IE-dXg5fChI>.

evidence when he describes Rev. Ike. as a direct precursor of African American Word of Faith pastors Fred Price, Creflo Dollar, and T.D. Jakes.³⁴

That Rev. Ike operated in the same city as Abyssinian Baptist and the Greater Allen AME Cathedral reveals the extent to which “the black church” no longer serves as a beneficial category of analysis, if indeed it ever did. Scholars both white and African American have often seen the church as not simply an important institution in African American communities, but as *the* institution. They consequently judged these churches by a number of different standards, often charging them with failing to fulfill their duty if they did not call members to economic self-reliance or middle-class respectability. African Americans’ spiritual needs are just as multifaceted as those of whites, and different churches and preachers appeal to different people because they speak to different needs. History has demonstrated that the African American religious experience has room for both Daddy Grace and Jeremiah Wright.³⁵

Tommy Barnett – Phoenix First Assembly of God

The Word of Faith message has had considerable success in bridging racial divides within American Christianity. Although many in the Assemblies of God, a white Pentecostal denomination with 111 megachurches, reject Word of Faith teaching, both

³⁴ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 94-9; Walton, *Watch This!*, 65-6; D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Peabody: Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), 6-13; Milmon F. Harrison, *The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8-9, 12, 135-7.

³⁵ For scholars who question the usefulness of “the black church” as a category of analysis, see Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4-11; Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 9; Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 2.

Jim Bakker of PTL and Paul Crouch of TBN consistently proclaimed the Word of Faith message on their extensive cable networks, and both men started their careers within the Assemblies of God. Assemblies of God megachurch pastors such as Tommy Barnett, Dan Betzer, and Glen Berteau have frequently appeared on TBN, sometimes on the same television shows as Word of Faith pastors. These preachers do not technically fall within the Word of Faith camp, but their teachings on the relationship between faithfulness and prosperity are compatible with the message.

Barnett's words and actions carry significant weight as he leads the largest Assemblies of God church, and the sixth largest church overall, in the United States. Barnett claims that he did not set out to pastor such a colossal church. He entered the ministry at the age of sixteen and toured as an itinerant evangelist before settling down in 1970 to pastor Westside Assembly in Davenport, Iowa. His experience as an evangelist led to him to believe that "every Sunday morning could be like a Billy Graham crusade." Westside Assembly only had seventy-six members, and Barnett grew discouraged after he "preached for three weeks and not one person was saved." At the encouragement of a church member, Barnett decided to offer a Friday afternoon evangelism class. This class later became a thirteen-week course known as Barnett's "Saturday Soul-Winning Society."³⁶

With church members now equipped to witness to their friends and neighbors, Barnett had to find a way to get new converts to church. The sick, the elderly, the poor, and children seemed especially attracted to Westside Assembly. The church fixed up an

³⁶ *Celebrating 20 Years With Pastor Tommy and Marja Barnett* (Phoenix: Phoenix First Assembly of God, 1999), 8; Tommy Barnett, *Tommy Barnett's Saturday Soul Winning Society* (Phoenix: Soullwinner Press, n.d.), 40-1.

old bus to pick up people from surrounding neighborhoods. The response was phenomenal. Westside Assembly would eventually run forty bus routes on Sunday mornings and grow to approximately two thousand attenders in four years. Barnett was also not above using gimmicks to bring people to hear the gospel. One event featured a three-ton popsicle, dubbed the “world’s largest.” Barnett continued the “world’s largest” desert theme with events featuring a gargantuan banana split. He also invited fellow Pentecostal Johnny Cash to play a free concert in Davenport. Afterward, Barnett preached for ten minutes and five thousand people indicated that they had accepted Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.³⁷

As the 1970s drew to a close, Barnett felt he needed a fresh start. He no longer sensed the presence of God in Davenport as he once did. Growing and shepherding what was perhaps the fastest growing church in the country took its toll, and Barnett decided he needed a change of pace. In 1979, he accepted the call to pastor Phoenix First Assembly of God, a church with two hundred members in rapidly growing Maricopa County, Arizona. Barnett’s success continued. As in Davenport, Barnett combined aspects of Jack Hyles’ invasive evangelism with the attractional model. Barnett built Phoenix First Assembly with an extensive bus ministry, asking the church board to purchase four buses his first week on the job. He also began a number of outreach ministries to specific populations. The “Holy Rollers” ministry, for example, helped people in wheelchairs get to church. Associate Pastor Alvin Booher oversaw an extensive

³⁷ Tommy Barnett and Sarah Coleman, *Portraits of Vision* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 22-3; *Celebrating Twenty Years*, 18-9, 22.

hospital visitation ministry. Phoenix First Assembly was also one of the first large churches to have an extensive ministry to AIDS patients.³⁸

After the success of the Johnny Cash event in Davenport, Barnett realized that celebrity Christians, or celebrities who had become Christians, drew a crowd. Special events at Phoenix First Assembly featured Harlem Globetrotter Meadowlark Lemon, Bears linebacker Mike Singletary, Lions running back Barry Sanders, Spurs forward David Robinson, and boxer Evander Holyfield (who later became involved with the ministry of Atlanta megachurch pastor Creflo Dollar). Sounding a familiar note, Barnett also attracted local youth through special events such as building the “world’s largest snow cone.”³⁹

Phoenix First Assembly allowed Barnett to explore his dramatic side. Three weeks after arriving in Phoenix, Barnett insisted that his church choir perform a Living Christmas Tree concert. Drawing inspiration from Aimee Semple McPherson’s famous Sunday Night Illustrated Sermons, Barnett incorporated skits into a number of his sermons. One entitled “The Living Lord’s Supper” consisted of an elaborate tableau vivant recreating Da Vinci’s famous painting. Others involved smoke machines and angels flying into the rafters on wires.⁴⁰

Barnett also involved himself in local politics. He once proudly noted that his father kept the state of Kansas dry. Barnett himself met with Ronald Reagan several times over the years, and he visited George H.W. Bush in the oval office. While still in

³⁸ *Celebrating 20 Years*, 27; Barnett and Coleman, *Portraits of Vision*, 22-3, 25, 28-9, 134-5.

³⁹ *Celebrating 20 Years*, 68, 84-5.

⁴⁰ W. Keith Buchanan, *Tommy Barnett’s Soul-Winning Illustrated Sermons* (Phoenix: Phoenix First Assembly of God, n.d.).

Davenport, he successfully lobbied the city council of to shut down a number of so-called massage parlors. In Phoenix, he repeatedly lobbied against gay rights laws that came before the city council. He clashed with local citizens who claimed that a prayer chapel he was planning to build would obscure the view of Shadow Mountain. Barnett did not build the chapel, but his relationship with certain local citizens groups remained strained.⁴¹

Like Chuck Smith, Barnett has mentored other megachurch pastors. Barnett's assistant pastor in charge of church buses at Westside Assembly was Bill Wilson. Wilson moved to New York City in 1984 and built a twenty-thousand member Sunday School. Every Year Barnett sponsors a conference known as the Pastor's School in which thousands of church leaders from across the country come to Phoenix to learn about the ministries of First Assembly. Barnett's oldest son Luke built Beaver Creek Assembly in Ohio before joining his father on staff in Phoenix. Barnett expanded his reach in Maricopa County by founding Scottsdale First Assembly in 1994. In order to cater to this affluent neighborhood, Scottsdale First Assembly offered valet parking at its services.⁴²

Barnett's most successful protégé is his son Matthew. In 1991, leaders of the Assemblies of God asked Barnett to consider planting a church in Los Angeles. They enticed him with visions of a worldwide missionary outreach centered among the masses in Southern California. The vision did not take root until 1994, when Barnett opened Los Angeles International Church (LAIC) with a twenty-one-year-old Matthew as co-pastor. Because Tommy Barnett continued to lead Phoenix First Assembly, daily pastoral duties

⁴¹ *Celebrating 20 Years*, 20, 28, 101; Tommy Barnett, *There's A Miracle In Your House* (Orlando: Creation House, 1993), 93-5.

⁴² *Celebrating 20 Years*, 92-3, 109.

in Los Angeles fell to Matthew. He was a good student of his father's techniques, and Los Angeles International quickly grew into a megachurch. The centerpiece of LAIC was the old Queen of Angels Hospital. The Barnetts purchased the historic building and grounds for \$3.6 million and turned into the Dream Center, a recovery house for addicts, a hospital for AIDS patients, and a shelter for the homeless. In 2001, the struggling Angelus Temple called Matthew Barnett as their pastor. Barnett agreed and received credentials from the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, the denomination to which Angelus Temple Belonged. The LAIC in fact formally merged with Angelus Temple. Thus, one of America's first megachurches returned to prominence. The mother church of the Foursquare denomination was now formally connected to the largest Assemblies of God church in the country, and Tommy Barnett's son now pastored the church where Aimee Semple McPherson won fame for her own illustrated sermons.⁴³

Bill Hybels – Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, IL

During the early 1970s, when Tommy Barnett was building Westside Assembly to the west of Chicago and Jack Hyles was building FBC Hammond in an industrial Chicago suburb to the east, Bill Hybels was leading a successful youth ministry in the affluent Chicago suburb of Park Ridge. By 1975, the Son Company, as Hybels' ministry was known, drew thousands to its Wednesday night outreach services and Sunday night service aimed at attracting the unchurched. In August 1975, Hybels left South Park Church, home of the Son Company, to start a church in Palatine, a suburb approximately twenty miles to the west of Park Ridge. From October 1975 until February 1981, the

⁴³ Tommy Barnett and Sarah Coleman, *Enlarge Your Circle of Love*. (Phoenix: Tommy Barnett, 1996), 44-5, 67-70; <http://www.dreamcenter.org/about-us/founders/pastor-caroline-barnett/> (accessed April 14, 2014).

church met in the Willow Creek movie theater, a building that Hybels described as ideal “because its proximity to main roads gave it easy accessibility and because it had adequate parking.”⁴⁴

While still at Son City, Hybels developed the concept of a seeker service, a “high-quality, Spirit-empowered outreach service where irreligious people can come and discover that they matter to you and Christ died for them.” Hybels believe that for “anybody but the already convinced, the average church service seems grossly abnormal.” He preached short, practical messages. Willow Creek also featured skits and contemporary music, even using secular songs that “addressed the frustrations and longings of lost people.” Willow Creek also drew heavily on the new Christian music coming out of Chuck Smith’s Calvary Chapel. The formula worked well, with approximately two thousand attending by 1977.⁴⁵

Hybels forged friendships with other megachurch pastors. Robert Schuller preached at Willow Creek’s first building fundraiser in 1977. John MacArthur, another Orange County megachurch pastor, encouraged Hybels to preach systematically through passages of Scripture during Willow Creek’s mid-week New Community worship service, a gathering meant for believers who wanted a deeper understanding of the Bible. Hybels also credits Pentecostal Jack Hayford, yet another Southern California pastor, with encouraging him to be more open to movements of the Holy Spirit in worship.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Bill Hybels and Lynn Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 26-7, 51, 59.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27, 32, 40, 63.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 70, 76, 99.

After moving into its church building in South Barrington in 1981, Willow Creek continued to grow. It reached nine thousand in average attendance by 1987. Willow Creek, a nondenominational church from the beginning, formed its own association in 1992, and by 1994 a thousand churches had joined. These churches, many of which belong to denominations, pay a small annual fee to access Willow Creek resources. Hybels' influence extends far beyond the Willow Creek Association, however. Because Hybels did not have a television or radio ministry, he did not receive as much media attention as Schuller, Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell, and other megachurch pastors active during the 1980s. Nevertheless, the Willow Creek seeker service provided the paradigm for a new type of church, with most white megachurches now employing some form of the seeker service in their efforts to reach the unchurched in their communities.⁴⁷

Adrian Rogers – Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, TN

Even as Chuck Smith and Billy Hybels revolutionized Christian music and the worship service, and even as Rev. Ike challenged traditional Christian teachings with respect to money and possessions, the Southern Baptists continued to build more traditional megachurches. They nevertheless adapted their messages and styles so that they resonated with the suburban social religion, and so unlike their peers in the independent fundamental Baptist church movement, managed to maintain the right amount of tension with their wider communities.

Adrian Rogers fell squarely within the conservative camp with respect to his theology. In 1979, when Southern Baptist conservatives began their concerted campaign to reform their seminaries and missionary boards, they tapped Rogers as their presidential

⁴⁷ Ibid., 101, 125.

candidate. When the conservative gains needed shoring up, Rogers again presented himself as a candidate for the Convention presidency and served a second term beginning in 1987. Rogers had a national following through his radio and television sermons produced and distributed by his Love Worth Finding ministries. He was arguably the most revered Southern Baptist of the late twentieth century. Richard Land, former head of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, said of Rogers that “if [FBC Dallas] pastor Dr. W.A. Criswell is our Peter” then Rogers is “our apostle Paul.”⁴⁸

Rogers is somewhat unique among megachurch pastors in that Bellevue already had 8,739 members when he took the reigns in 1972. By the time he retired in 2005, the church attracted almost thirty thousand each week. He took over the pulpit from Robert G. Lee, a superstar among Southern Baptist preachers and himself a past president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Through his radio and television ministry, however, Rogers drew considerable attention to Bellevue. In 1989, Rogers further facilitated the church’s expansion by leading it from its Midtown Memphis location into the suburb of Cordova.⁴⁹

In many ways, Southern Baptist megachurch pastors are the least entrepreneurial. Sixty-seven of the 276 Southern Baptist megachurches carry the name “First Baptist,” and some have long histories of ministry in downtown areas. Unlike their mainline counterparts, established downtown Southern Baptist churches have maintained their

⁴⁸ James Dowd, “Praise God! Amen,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 7, 2005.

⁴⁹ Dowd, “Praise God! Amen”; Steve Maynard, “Rogers Senses Convention Coming Together,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 13, 1987; Karen Pulfer Focht, “Sale of Bellevue Property Official,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 12, 1992.

institutional strength by preserving their evangelistic zeal. More theologically liberal downtown Southern Baptist churches have lost members just like their mainline counterparts. For example, FBC San Antonio had nine thousand members when its more theologically liberal pastor, Jimmy Allen, assumed the presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1977. It now has less than fifteen hundred members. Large Southern Baptist churches like Bellevue and FBC Dallas – the only Southern Baptist church to appear on the 1969 list of ten largest Sunday Schools – have had to consolidate and capitalize on their gains rather than build their ministries from the ground up. It is worth noting that both Criswell and Rogers – the “Peter” and “Paul” of the Southern Baptist Convention – both found themselves assuming megachurch pulpits rather than building them.⁵⁰

Rogers and his fellow Southern Baptist megachurch pastors are important for another reason. Without their celebrity, conservatives would most likely not have succeeded in capturing the Southern Baptist Convention, beginning with the election of Rogers in 1979. Rogers and his conservative successors – Bailey Smith, Jimmy Draper, Charles Stanley, Jerry Vines, Morris Chapman, and Ed Young, Sr. – were all megachurch pastors, well-known in Southern Baptist circles. As the conservatives consolidated their gains, theological liberals in the SBC were reduced to supporting the candidacy of Richard Jackson of North Phoenix Baptist Church – a conservative megachurch pastor who remained open to working with them. Many of these pastors enjoyed nationwide distribution of their sermons on television and radio stations. Name recognition played an

⁵⁰ “Jimmy Allen Papers,” Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, accessed March 5, 2015, <http://www.sbhla.org/downloads/661.pdf>; Thom S. Rainer, “2013 Update: Largest Churches in the Southern Baptist Convention,” *Thom Rainer* (blog), August 3, 2013, <http://thomrainer.com/2013/08/03/2013-update-largest-churches-in-the-southern-baptist-convention>; Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes them Grow*, 11.

important role in propelling the conservatives to victory and thus in changing the course of the denomination.

Casey Treat – Christian Faith Center, Federal Way, WA

All but eighteen of the 276 Southern Baptist megachurches are in the sixteen Sunbelt states. Megachurches in other regions draw from different evangelical traditions. Of the twenty-one megachurches in King County, Washington, for example, twelve are nondenominational, four associate with smaller Baptist denominations, three belong to Pentecostal denominations, and two belong to the Presbyterian Church (USA). Nevertheless, megachurches from across the country tend to share similar architecture and their messages are remarkably similar. Casual viewers of TBN, for example, would hardly notice major differences in theology or denominational background between former Southern Baptist president Jack Graham, pastor of Houston's Prestonwood Baptist Church, and Seattle's charismatic nondenominational megachurch pastor Casey Treat.

Treat founded Christian Faith Center on January 6, 1980. He stands squarely within the Word of Faith tradition, having received ordination from Kenneth Hagin devotee and megachurch pastor Fred Price of Crenshaw Christian Center in Los Angeles. Treat expanded his ministry rapidly, beginning Christian Faith School in 1984 and broadcasting his sermons six days each week on local television. By 1990, over four thousand worshipped at Christian Faith Center weekly. Outside observers attributed Christian Faith Center's success to Treat's messages. Treat spoke about money and sex,

delivering his sermons in a style that one reporter called “more late-night TV monologue than sermon.” In true Word of Faith fashion, Treat promised followers that if they would “be like Jesus – it doesn’t matter what you do – you’ll succeed.” When asked about his Mercedes Benz, the symbol of God’s blessing for his faithfulness, Treat replied that he believed “God wants us to prosper.” Thousands in the Seattle-Tacoma area apparently found his teachings appealing.⁵¹

The relative predominance of nondenominational churches in Seattle as opposed to the Sun Belt indicates a more unsettled religious environment, one in which churches have constituted a less prominent part in the mundane experiences of local citizens. In 1990, only thirty percent of those in Seattle claimed a religious affiliation. Treat has had a more adversarial relationship with the surrounding culture than his colleagues in traditionally more churchied areas. Many communities around Seattle placed restrictions on the construction of tax exempt churches, with the Seattle suburb of Kirkland capping church land purchases at three acres. When the Christian Faith Center decided to relocate to Federal Way – in part because it could no longer expand its facilities at its current location and in part because it was drawing worshippers from the southern suburbs of Kent and Auburn – his new community welcomed him with less than open arms. In a telling statement, the Federal Way Planning Commission asserted that megachurches work better in business parks than in residential areas. Residents worried about losing the tax revenue from fifty acres of prime real estate, not to mention the traffic. Although the

⁵¹ <http://christianfaithcenter.org/about-cfc/history/> (accessed April 8, 2014). Mary Rothschild, “Ministers in Seattle Wonder if Electronic Empires Will Collapse,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 28, 1987; Joel Connelly, “Baby Boomers Lead Religious Revival,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 10, 1990; Steve Maynard, “Tongues of Fire – Churches Use ‘90s Glitz to Reach New Members,” *Tacoma News Tribune*, January 15, 1995; Steve Maynard, “Megachurches Wrap Religion in Big Package,” *Tacoma News Tribune*, March 31, 2002; Carol M. Ostrom, “Churches Not Entirely Agreed on Greed,” *Seattle Times*, December 30, 1989.

Federal Way City Council eventually approved the project in 2004, many residents were less than enthusiastic about sharing their community with Christian Faith Center.⁵²

Treat brought some opposition on himself. In a politically and socially liberal area, his frequent statements on politics stood out more than they would had he made them in Texas or Tennessee. Treat's views on the relationship between church and state reflect his adherence to dominionism, a broad movement among some conservative Protestants that seeks Christian control of the government. When Treat opened his aptly named Dominion College in 1990, he declared, "We're here to dominate, and we want to raise up people who can dominate their world." He warned that "[a]nyone who does not like righteousness" should be "nervous" because "we're definitely coming after you." Treat firmly backed both Bushes, claiming in 1991 that he supported the elder Bush "not for political reasons" but because Bush did "not allow evil or a secular, humanist press to dictate world policy." Treat's statements have not hurt Christian Faith Center too much, however. The church now includes three campuses in the Seattle area, with over ten thousand attending each week.⁵³

⁵² Steve Maynard and Barbara Clements, "Megachurch Planned for Federal Way," *Tacoma News Tribune*, September 30, 1999; Eric Payne, "Federal Way Wary of Megachurch," July 2, 2001; Steve Maynard, "Federal Way: City Council Approves 4,500-Seat Megachurch," *Tacoma News Tribune*, July 22, 2004.

⁵³ Carol M. Ostrom, "Treat's Dream College to Open," *Seattle Times*, August 25, 1980; Mary Rothschild, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 18, 1991; Brad Shannon, "Group Gathers at Capital to Pray," *The Olympian*, July 17, 2009. The exact definition of Dominionism, as well as the extent of the movement and its actual goals, remains a hotly debated topic, with some evening questioning the use of the term. Labeling a church leader a dominionist simply because they believe their values should prevail in the political arena seems unwarranted. Treat, however, has openly talked about controlling the apparatus of state, and his decision to name his college Dominion indicates that labeling him a dominionist is not out of place.

Conclusion

Casey Treat's ability to build a large church in a relatively unchurched area reveals the extent to which suburban social religion holds sway, and the rewards that await those pastors that can construct a brand of Protestantism that resonates with these suburbanites. Treat attracts those looking for a fulfilling marriage, help in managing their money, and support for conservative political principles. Tommy Barnett and Chuck Smith offer the same things. Bill Hybels has not been as politically active, but he has built his ministry on preaching therapeutic, self-help messages to suburbanites. Although Rev. Ike built his ministry in the urban north, the Word of Faith message has resonated with increasingly affluent African American suburbs in Sun Belt metropolises like Atlanta, Houston, and Dallas-Fort Worth. Although a Democrat, Charles Jackson does not question the prevailing economic or political order, choosing instead to start credit unions. Indeed, Houston mainline African American pastor Kirbyjon Caldwell has undertaken many of the same ministries and has evinced many of the same concerns as Jackson, but believes that his mixture of self-help ideology and social activism is more in line with Republican policies. Both Jackson and Caldwell hope to empower congregants to work within the American economic and political order to attain the fruits of American society for themselves. Jack Hyles and his independent fundamental Baptist colleagues declined at least in part because their authoritarianism, their rejection of some of the most salient aspects of modern consumer culture, and their refusal to preach therapeutic messages left them out-of-step with the suburban social religion.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Jenny Staff Johnson, "The Minister of 'Good Success,'" *Christianity Today*, October 1, 2001, 64.

Like the American civil religion, the suburban social religion is nonsectarian in that it is broadly theologically conservative. The move towards the downplaying of denominational distinctions constitutes one example of this conservative nonsectarianism. Approximately 29% of Southern Baptist megachurches do not include “Baptist” in their name. On the 1980 megachurch list, however, all of the twenty-six Southern Baptist churches openly identified themselves as Baptist. The Baptist General Conference, an association of western Baptist churches, has gone so far as to change its name to the almost completely nondescript “Converge Worldwide.” Thumma and Travis contend that this movement away from denominationalism does not entail a movement away from theology, stating that “the vast majority of megachurches have belief statements on paper and in practice that are clearly in line with orthodox Christian doctrine.” They admit “that some churches teach a prosperity gospel or kingdom theology or the acceptance of lifestyles and political positions with which many critics from different theological positions would find fault,” but they clearly think that such churches are in the minority.⁵⁵

However robust their own personal doctrinal statements, megachurch pastors do not seem to differentiate among themselves in practice. Mainstream evangelicals and prosperity preachers from a wide range of denominational backgrounds freely associate. Charlotte megachurch pastor and Southern Baptist Steven Furtick invited T.D. Jakes, an African American associated with the Word of Faith Movement and non-trinitarian Pentecostalism, to preach at his Code Orange Revival in 2012. Willow Creek pastor Bill Hybels spoke at one of Jakes' pastors conference, while Mark Driscoll of Seattle's Mars

⁵⁵ Frank S. Mead, Samuel S. Hill, and Craig D. Atwood, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 13th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 173-4; Thumma and Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, 100.

Hill Church and James McDonald of Chicago's Harvest Bible Chapel invited Jakes to participate in their Elephant Room discussion forum. They barely questioned Jakes' views on the trinity and did not question his place in the Word of Faith Movement at all. The loosely Southern Baptist megachurch pastor Perry Noble, a board member at Furtick's Elevation Church, invited Word of Faith megachurch pastor Robert Morris to speak at his Newspring Church (fourth largest in the country by 2014) in Anderson, South Carolina. Regular viewers of TBN would almost certainly recognize Morris from his weekly sermon broadcasts. TBN watchers would also see the televised sermons of Southern Baptist megachurch pastors such as David Jeremiah, not mention Adrian Rogers and Jack Graham. TBN has heavily promoted Word of Faith megachurch pastors Fred K.C. Price and Kenneth Copeland, and has since the early 1970s. Furtick and young Reformed Southern Baptist megachurch pastor Matt Chandler, who spoke at Furtick's church at the Code Orange Revival with T.D. Jakes, sometimes hosts TBN's flagship *Praise the Lord* broadcast. Chandler has also spoken at leadership conferences at Noble's church. Successful ministers develop networks to promote and cooperate with other successful ministers, regardless of denomination. Megachurch pastors almost never disagree with one another in public, much less call one another out for their doctrinal stances or for making public statements that seem out of step with traditional Christian ethics or doctrine. They see no problem associating with one another, and apparently have little problem with one another's theology.

This cooperative spirit reveals that, with few exceptions, megachurch pastors and churchgoers who listen to their sermons and attend star-studded conferences do not think in theological categories. Jack Hyles would almost certainly have balked at sharing the

stage with a Pentecostal pastor, and a ministerial conference during the 1920s featuring sometime Southern Baptist firebrand J. Frank Norris and Aimee Semple McPherson seems unthinkable. Because most megachurch pastors point towards numbers as the mark of God's blessing on their ministry, those who cast aspersions on other successful pastors would have to answer the question of why God was blessing the criticized ministry. Public criticism risks calling into question the criteria of size, and consequently, the claims of megachurch pastors to special spiritual authority or influence. In the new world of the megachurch, a large, well-known ministry covers a multitude of theological sins.

Only time will tell if these churches rest on the personalities of the entrepreneur or if the entrepreneurial pastor has built a lasting institution. Not only have the independent fundamental Baptist churches experienced a sharp decline, but Highland Park Baptist Church of Chattanooga and FBC Van Nuys – two churches on the 1969 top ten list – no longer exist in any recognizable form. After their pastors left, no leaders arose to maintain the growth they had started. Other megachurches, with more entrepreneurial pastors, arose in Chattanooga and Van Nuys. Of the twenty largest churches in the country in 1980, only Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church remains in the top twenty in 2013. Of the fifty largest in 1980, only Thomas Road and FBC Hammond remained in the top 50 thirty years later. As in the business world, some firms last and some disappear forever while innovative leaders take their place. In America's deregulated marketplace, the megachurch today might soon go the way of K-Mart, while the pastoral versions of Sam Walton build a better church that will dominate the suburban evangelicalism of tomorrow.

Chapter 3 Entertainers

Between 2006 and 2013, the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) aired a program called *Christian Celebrity Showcase*, “featuring interviews with your favorite Christian stars.” Each program contained three interviews, all recycled from other TBN programs and pasted together to form one half-hour show. A typical program might feature Dale Evans Rogers (a frequent TBN host from its earliest days) interviewing actors Jane Russell, Jane Meadows, Chuck Norris, Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., or Todd Bridges. Musicians figured prominently as well. Chaka Khan and M.C. Hammer appeared on one episode, and country stars Hoyt Axton and Jeannie C. Riley appeared on another. One football-themed episode featured coaches Joe Gibbs and Tom Landry along with running back Eric Dickerson. There was even a professional wrestling episode with Shawn Michaels, Steve “Sting” Borden, and “the Million Dollar Man” Ted DiBiase.¹

Christian Celebrity Showcase reveals just how comfortable conservative Protestants had become with the entertainment industry. In 1969, Dallas Billington of Akron Baptist Temple, which at that time had the largest Sunday School in the country,

¹ *Christian Celebrity Showcase*, iTBN video, 28:31, original air date June 8, 2006, [http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/J0MGtsMjojUATJW-h-Okm9coUqq6DD54](http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/J0MGtsMjojUATJW-h-Okm9coUqq6DD54;); *Christian Celebrity Showcase*, iTBN video, 28:38, original air date October 26, 2006, http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/EwMWtsMjra6Rz_2Jx3-nDjHThX4sC0Gs; *Christian Celebrity Showcase*, iTBN video, 27:51, original airdate July 27, 2006, http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/l2MGtsMjp2S_fiYFFOzQtryVG8PysupI; *Celebrity Christian Showcase*, iTBN, video 28:20, July 6, 2006, http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/wydHJuMjqpT1-xS_BPhdsi73_h2g369u; *Christian Celebrity Showcase*, iTBN video, 29:06, original air date February 15, 2007, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/pyZG1uMjqjTGQubMVYtfiKocvtJmdPlk>.

told Elmer Towns that he did not attend movies because by doing so he “might keep somebody from heaven.” Megachurches of the 1970s and 1980s were more likely to embrace movie and music stars that joined their congregations without asking them to give up their careers. When Tommy Barnett was building Westside Assembly of God, he invited a born-again Johnny Cash to give a concert in July, 1974 at the local baseball stadium. Barnett claimed five thousand salvations that night alone. Some megachurches have proven especially attractive to celebrities. On October 19, 1997, T.D. Jakes baptized Michael Irvin and Deion Sanders, at that time both of the Dallas Cowboys, at the same service. West Angeles Church of God in Christ counts Denzel Washington, Stevie Wonder, Angela Bassett, and Magic Johnson as members.²

The preaching service itself is often entertaining enough to attract a large audience even without the promise of celebrity appearances. With respect to at least some pastors and evangelists, the history of preaching belongs within the history of entertainment. David Garrick, a famous British actor of the eighteenth century, studied George Whitfield’s diction and delivery. Billy Sunday was so entertaining that vaudeville producers tried to lure him to their circuit during the 1920s. Enterprising pastors as well as itinerant evangelists might borrow techniques of the stage as a means of attracting and keeping a crowd. Aimee Semple McPherson often featured live animals during her Sunday night illustrated sermons, and once rode a motorcycle through the sanctuary and onto the stage while dressed as a police officer. Not all churches have gone to the

² Elmer Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 22; *Celebrating Twenty Years with Pastor Tommy and Marja Barnett* (Phoenix: Phoenix First Assembly of God, 1999), 22; “Johnny Cash Enlists in Sunday School Effort,” *Milwaukee Journal*, July 20, 1974; Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 69; Tanya Young Williams, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tanya-young-williams/bishop-charles-blake-shar_b_1852150.html (accessed June 17, 2014).

extremes of Houston's Second Baptist. In 1991, when it was perhaps the largest church in the Southern Baptist Convention, the church brought in professional wrestler Tugboat Taylor (Fred Ottman, aka "Typhoon," aka "the Shockmaster") to teach staff members how to maneuver in the ring without hurting each other. The church was concerned because attendance at Sunday night services had been lagging. They believed that a clerical battle royale might bring people back.³

The sociologist Mark Chaves argues that congregations engage in three main activities: corporate worship, religious education, and artistic expression. In terms of both time and resources, congregations put far more effort into these three areas than they do politics or social services. These three activities are the congregations' primary means of "transmitting religious meaning" to each other and to future generations. Chaves' survey data reveals that more Americans hear live music at a church than they do in any other venue. Drama and dance are also important worship activities that teach religious lessons through an entertaining medium. The centrality of preaching and artistic performance, and especially musical performance, creates a platform for talented speakers, singers, and musicians to attract attention, and in some cases, fans.⁴

This chapter focuses on megachurches' evolution as centers of entertainment. The frequent retail analogies aside, megachurches are sites for the consumption of experiences, entertainment, or leisure far more than they are places where worshippers

³ Joseph Beaumont Wakely, *The Prince of Pulpit Orators: A Portraiture of Rev. George Whitfield, M.A.* (New York: Carlton and Lanahan, 1871), 225-6; Lyle W. Dorsett, *Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 148; Matthew Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 72-3, 77; R. Gustav Niebhuur, "Mighty Fortresses: Megachurches Strive to be All Things to All People." *Wall Street Journal*, May 13, 1991.

⁴ Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America: Harvard University Press* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 5, 181, 188.

buy goods or even services. In 1969, Elmer Towns noted that FBC Van Nuys “comes closer than any other church in this study of being a typical American church,” in large part because of its extensive sports and recreation programs. In addition to wrestling pastors, by the early 1990s Second Baptist offered three gymnasiums, a bowling alley, game rooms, weights, a movie theater, and a snack bar. Second Baptist saw itself as “an ‘island’ that families can retreat to often for fellowship, learning, enrichment, service, and play.” Even Jack Hyles, the most fundamental of the independent fundamental Baptists, urged pastors to plan “Big Days and Special Occasions” to draw crowds. “Big Days” might include “Old-Fashioned Day” in which church members wore old clothes and the pastor led the congregation to a nearby creek for a mass baptism, or “Baby Day” in which new parents get to show off their children with a “Baby Parade.” Hyles hoped that congregations would allow “freedom of expression” on these days and encouraged pastors to use these fun activities as means of recruiting new members from other, less exciting or more theologically liberal churches. “If this is so successful commercially,” Hyles asked, “then certainly it could be used when carried into the life of the church.”⁵

This chapter focuses on how megachurches have created religious celebrities, participated in entertainment media such as television, and produced popular music. Celebrity pastors, Christian television that mimicked secular programs, and overtly Christian music that borrowed popular music styles eased the tension between evangelicals and their neighbors. Evangelicals could point to the guests on *Celebrity Christian Showcase* as proof that they were not, in fact, oddballs and could participate

⁵ Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow*, 89; Elmer L. Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches* (Ventura, California: Regal, 1990), 141; Jack Hyles, *How to Boost Your Church Attendance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 45-6, 56-7, 71, 74.

American popular culture along with their coworkers and classmates. Christian rock records helped young people prove to their friends that they were not unhip after all. These aspects of modern entertainment have in other words helped evangelicals downplay their peculiarity in an increasingly secular culture. At the same time, Christian entertainment helped win converts by acting as a bridge between the subculture of conservative Protestantism and the suburban social religion. Christian entertainment tapped into consumer culture, reinforced the idea of meritocracy by holding pastors and entertainers who had “earned” their places in the culture, and focused on therapeutic aspects of the Christian faith.

Celebrity Preachers

Daniel Boorstin, in a phrase that in itself has become famous, remarked that a celebrity “is a person who is known for his well-knownness.” The celebrity “is the human pseudo-event.” Celebrities are “neither good nor bad, great nor petty.” In earlier generations, Boorstin believed, great people won fame because of their exceptional deeds or talents. He lamented that “older forms of celebrity now survive in the shadow of this new form.” Referring to Shakespeare’s distinction between those born great, those who do great things, and those who “had greatness thrust upon them,” Boorstin remarked that it “never occurred to him to mention those who hired public relations experts and press agents to make themselves look great.”⁶

The celebrity studies scholar Joshua Gamson recognizes the tension between those who earn celebrity through achievement and those who manufacture it and

⁶ Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1987), 45, 57.

concedes that during the twentieth century “the balance between them has shifted dramatically” towards celebrity as a product of savvy public relations. He nevertheless challenges Boorstin by arguing that the two types of celebrity “have actually *coexisted*” for centuries. Leo Braudy argues even more forcefully that “such Golden Ages of true worth and justified fame never existed.” Even Alexander the Great, whose military accomplishments placed him in the category of those who won fame through achievement, literally crafted his public image by placing his likeness on coins. Before him, only the likenesses of gods appeared on coins. Like Gamson, however, Braudy points to a shift in the balance from fame as true greatness to fame as public image. Braudy believes that the Industrial Revolution both eroded existing hierarchies and created an environment conducive to the crafting of a public self that did not necessarily correspond to a private self.⁷

Megachurch pastors have undoubtedly accomplished something. Their large institutions, sometimes employing hundreds of people and encompassing acres of real estate and millions of dollars in assets, at the very least attest to their personal charisma and ability to hold an audience. At the same time, they use their “well-knownness” to gain even more attention for their churches or themselves, and either intentionally or not, to gain more social and cultural power. One way preachers do this is by crafting and presenting personal narratives of their humble beginnings, struggles, and accomplishments. The celebrity studies scholar Neil Gabler argues that celebrities are different from the accomplished because celebrities have stories in which the general

⁷ Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 15-6; Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 7-8, 17.

public takes an interest. In other words, the difference between George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton is a plotline. Not only do megachurch pastors win attention because of their achievements, but they also have compelling stories of building large institutions sometimes in the face of supernatural opposition. Megachurches are inherently dramatic.⁸

And megachurch pastors love to tell their stories through modern media. Hyles wanted pastors to know that he took Miller Road Baptist Church in Garland, Texas from ninety-two people to 3,400 in six years. He expanded the church budget from \$3,000 to \$182,000 and planted “thirteen mission points or branch churches.” Jerry Falwell wanted “to build the greatest church since Pentecost, not for personal fame, but for lost souls.” He went on to tell of humble beginnings – thirty-five at the church’s first meeting in June 1956. On June 25, 1972, Falwell saw his dream come true with 19,020 in Sunday School, an event he dubbed somewhat anachronistically “the largest Sunday School since Pentecost.” He also pointed to Thomas Road’s sixty-five school buses and \$12 million facility sitting on one hundred acres. In this same book, Elmer Towns presents a behind-the-scenes look at the four minutes between the end of Sunday School and Falwell’s ascension to the pulpit. Falwell is not simply preparing for a church service, but for the recording of the *Old Time Gospel Hour*. Falwell is the star of the show, and in feature worthy of *Entertainment Tonight*, Towns lets his many admirers catch a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the man himself in action.⁹

⁸ Neil Gabler, “Toward a New Definition of Celebrity,” The Norman Lear Center, www.learcenter.org/pdf/Gabler.pdf

⁹ Hyles, *How to Boost Your Church Attendance*, 8; Jack Hyles, *Kisses of Calvary and Other Sermons* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Sword of the Lord, 1965), 61; Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns, *Capturing a Town for Christ* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1973), 7, 10, 12, 20, 23.

Hyles and Falwell would never operate their churches in the same way as Bill Hybels and Rick Warren, but the two newer megachurch pastors demonstrate the same desire to dramatize their church's story. Hybels demurs that he "never set out to build a big church" or "to see how innovative I could be with drama or music, or how many cultural codes I could crack." Hybels tells a story of exciting beginnings, followed by financial setbacks and interpersonal conflict at Willow Creek. These hardships turned to triumph in the late 1980s, as Willow Creek saw nine thousand people in attendance by 1987 and received favorable coverage in *Time* and on *The Today Show*. By the early 1990s, Willow Creek opened a new church building, a major moment in almost every megachurch narrative. Rick Warren's Saddleback Church is the exception. For him, the lack of a building forms an important piece of his story. "Beginning with one family in 1980," he began, "I founded the Saddleback Valley Community Church in Mission Viejo, California. By December, 1992, the church had grown to over 6,000 attendance – without ever having built a building." Warren then tells the story of his decision to come to Saddleback Valley, one that involved him writing the Southern Baptist director of missions in that area about planting a church at the same time that the director of missions wrote him asking him to consider coming. This providential crossing of letters made Warren wonder if "God is in this." Warren then told the story of how his real estate agent became Saddleback's first church member and how the first service, on Easter Sunday 1980, drew 205 people.¹⁰

¹⁰ Billy Hybels and Lynn Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 13-4, 70-83, 124; Rick Warren, "New Churches for a New Generation: Planting Churches to Reach Baby Boomers," (D.Min. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1993), 1, 4, 5-6, 7.

Floyd Flake of the Greater Allen AME Church in New York arrived at his post in 1976 when the church had four hundred people. By 1999 it had eleven thousand. In 1985, however, the church's leadership challenged Flake because, he believes, they felt the church was growing too fast and he was becoming too famous. In 1987 he faced a harassment suit from a former secretary and charges of financial impropriety. Flake weathered the storm, and with the construction of a new \$23 million dollar church building in 1997, the Greater Allen AME Church became the Greater Allen Cathedral. Flake's narrative both enhanced his celebrity and his ability to identify with churchgoers. Like them, he faced adversity and he wanted them to know that they could overcome obstacles like he did.¹¹

Some pastoral narratives focus on a reversal of worldly values and the failure of those who live according to the world's standards to understand the pastor's motivation. Kirbyjon Caldwell graduated from the prestigious Wharton Business School and worked as an investment banker in Houston from 1978 until 1982. When he left his lucrative job to enter seminary and assume the pulpit of the twenty-five member Windsor Village United Methodist Church, his boss and coworkers "thought [he] was crazy." Caldwell said that friend who worked on Wall Street "called and literally cursed me out" because the decision made no sense to anybody but Caldwell, and God. Windsor Village grew to fourteen thousand in 2001, and Caldwell's decision was vindicated. What Caldwell left behind, as opposed to what he overcame, provided the added drama for the story of Windsor Village United Methodist Church.¹²

¹¹ Floyd Flake with Donna Marie Williams, *The Way of the Bootstrapper: Nine Action Steps for Achieving Your Dreams* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999), 31, 187, 196.

¹² Jenny Staff Johnson, "The Pastor of 'Good Success,'" *Christianity Today*, October 1, 2001.

Church growth literature celebrates the pastor as the agent responsible for growing a church. Towns stated baldly that the “primary reason Thomas Road Baptist Church may become the greatest church since Pentecost is Jerry Falwell.” He described Hyles and Lee Roberson as possessing “a tremendous gift of motivating people.” Emphasizing the charisma of these men, he told readers that the “ability to think big is not learned in Bible College or Seminary.” When describing Jack Hyles, Towns was smitten. “When Dr. Jack Hyles is welcoming guests in a Sunday morning service,” Towns mused, “you feel as though you are the only person out of the three thousand present.” The plotlines of megachurches are interchangeable with the plotlines of their pastors. C. Peter Wagner went so far as to claim that Jack Hayford spoke for God when he addressed his Church on the Way. The will of God, the will of the pastor, and the will of the congregation become one, but the name and plans of the pastor almost always overshadow those of his church.¹³

Actors and rock stars may not suffer should someone expose the publicity machinery undergirding their fame. Religious celebrities, on the other hand, presumably garner attention because of their accomplishments. Preachers have a special skill, or a special touch from God, that lets viewers and listeners know they are trustworthy. Without the record of achievement or evidence of an anointing from God, they would just be like any other preacher – unknown and unworthy of attention from those outside of their immediate circle. The general public therefore treats celebrity pastors differently than they do movie stars. Gamson explains that some Hollywood publicists fear

¹³ Falwell and Towns, *Capturing a Town for Christ*, 86; Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*, 7, 122; C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth: The Secret of Pastor / People Partnership in Dynamic Church Growth* (Ventura, California: Regal, 1984), 84-5.

audiences finding out about their role, while others think audiences are already in on the secret. Others think that audiences simply do not care. The revelation that a televangelist does not personally pray for every request mailed in – in fact, checks the envelopes for money before throwing the requests in the trash – can ruin a religious celebrity, however. The Dallas televangelist and megachurch pastor Robert Tilton learned this very lesson after a 1992 ABC *Prime Time Live* exposé. The revelation of promotional machinery has the potential to brand preachers not simply as disingenuous or undeserving of their fame, but as liars and scam artists.¹⁴

Like his taxonomy of audience types, Gamson's taxonomy of fan types is also more truncated when applied to the world of religious celebrity. Gamson describes some fans as "game players." They enjoy discussing whether certain rumors about a celebrity are really true, and often they do not care whether the celebrity's handlers attempt to deceive the public. They enjoy constructing celebrity texts with one another. Gamson places these more cynical fans in the "postmodernist" category because they are fully aware of publicity machinery and tend to see all celebrities as undeserving of their fame. Those in the "traditional" category often take media reports of celebrity at face value, although some are aware of a gap between mediated celebrity images and the human beings who project those images. Fans who consume religious celebrities tend to be more traditional. Widespread disbelief that a preacher is who he presents himself to be is not conducive to building a following among a group of people who ostensibly value

¹⁴ Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, 125. On the uses of prayer requests and special promotion as fundraising techniques, see Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 142-3. On Tilton, see Delia M. Rios, "Deliverance from Temptation Group Helps TV Get the Goods on Televangelist," *Wichita Eagle*, January 4, 1992; Jim W. Jones, "Inquiry Focuses on Tilton," *Forth Worth Star-Telegram*, January 23, 1992; For the *Primetime Live* special, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_yncWoylN0o.

honesty. As for gossips, religious consumers certainly spread rumors about religious celebrities among themselves or on the internet, but in the church world, gossip has more damaging consequence. Gamson notes that gossiping about a coworker can cause more personal trouble than gossiping about a movie star, and so the gossip game is more fun when it relates to celebrities. In the same way, openly discussing rumors about a pastor's extramarital dalliances can seriously damage that pastor's celebrity status or even kill a church. Religious celebrities are therefore more akin to professional athletes. The cyclist who uses steroids or the baseball manager who bets on games instantly becomes a persona non grata. Like sports, manufactured greatness is unwelcome in the world of religion.¹⁵

The Jimmy Swaggart scandal offers just one example of how secular fame and religious infamy can go hand-in-hand. Even more than a scandal about a sexually immoral pastor, it was the story of a rivalry between two powerful, famous Assemblies of God megachurch pastors with growing television ministries. In July 1986 Swaggart and other Assemblies of God pastors confronted Marvin Gorman, pastor of the four thousand-member New Orleans First Assembly of God, with evidence of adultery. Gorman confessed to one affair in 1980, but Swaggart thought there were more women. He relentlessly called on the denomination's hierarchy to defrock Gorman. He ultimately succeeded. Shortly afterward, Gorman received anonymous phone calls accusing Swaggart of meeting with a prostitute. In February 1987 Gorman photographed Swaggart entering Room 7 at the Travel Inn on Air Line Highway outside of New Orleans. While Swaggart was inside, Gorman and his son let the air out of Swaggart's tires. When

¹⁵ Gamson, *Claims to Fame*, 146.

Swaggart left the hotel room, Gorman confronted him with the evidence and told him to admit publicly to lying about Gorman having had more than one affair. Swaggart agreed, but after the meeting did nothing. A year later, Gorman went to the Assemblies of God hierarchy with his evidence and the scandal broke, resulting in a Swaggart's now famous "I have sinned" speech. Swaggart, the showman preacher and gospel singer/pianist stage-managed one final piece of television drama before his ministry collapsed. Neither Swaggart nor Gorman could overcome revelations of the seedy undersides to their ministries, even as millions outside of the Assemblies of God were hearing their names for the first time.¹⁶

Christian Television

The size of Swaggart's television ministry made his fall that much more dramatic. Radio and television allowed preachers to become famous throughout the country without hitting the revival circuit. They could be pastors and national religious celebrities at the same time. Print media had of course allowed an earlier generation of pastors to enjoy this dual status, but print could not replicate the oral and aural experience of watching and listening to Jimmy Swaggart. The cost of operating a radio station also necessitated more stable financial backing, usually from an institutional source. Some of the earliest successful radio preachers were pastors of large conservative Protestant churches that subsidized a radio ministry's startup costs. In addition to McPherson, who was one of the first women to own a radio station of any kind, Paul Rader at Chicago's Gospel Tabernacle built a nationwide following, as did John Roach Straton at New

¹⁶ Richard N. Ostling, "Now It's Jimmy's Turn," *Time*, March 7, 1988, 46-8; Joanne Kaufman, "The Fall of Jimmy Swaggart," *People*, March 7, 1988, 34-9; Doug LeBlanc, "Swaggart Confirms He Met with Gorman on Accusations," (Baton Rouge) *Advocate*, April 1, 1987.

York's Calvary Baptist Church. J. Frank Norris pastored two megachurches a thousand miles apart while building his radio empire. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the theologically liberal Federal Council of Churches persuaded both NBC and CBS to stop selling time to 'sectarian' fundamentalists, and to give free time to liberal mainline churches. This forced the conservatives to purchase time on independent stations or small networks, and in some cases buy their own stations. Because they had to pay for time using donations, they also had to craft more entertaining programs with popular appeal. Cutthroat competition on an uneven playing field facilitated the rise of charismatic personalities in a religious milieu that already placed a high value on the ability to spellbind an audience.¹⁷

Television provided new opportunities and challenges. Television stations had to serve some sort of vague public good in order to maintain their FCC licenses. Many of them fulfilled this requirement by donating time to religious groups. These donated program blocks were known as "sustaining time." Just as major radio networks did not grant time to "sectarian" groups, television networks only granted sustaining time to those who, in the words of the religious media scholar Peter G. Horsfield, preached "broad religious truth." The early sustaining time programs, some of which were very popular, were "low-key in their approach" and "moderate in their doctrine." The earliest national religious television star was not a fundamentalist shouter, but Catholic priest Father Fulton Sheen, and the most popular sustaining time programs were educational,

¹⁷ Joel R. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 128-31; "Preserved Preaching," *Time*, January 26, 1931.

ecumenical religious teaching programs such as *Lamp Unto My Feet* and *Look Up and Live*, both on CBS.¹⁸

Only local stations aired the programs of more theologically conservative Protestants. Even then, these Pentecostals and evangelicals had to pay for airtime while their mainline counterparts in the same town received sustaining time. Conservative religious groups therefore had to cultivate “the structure and charisma for attracting substantial financial support from the viewing audience.” Again, the uneven playing field forced conservatives to be better at their craft than their noncompetitive, theologically liberal peers who received free airtime. After a change in FCC rules in 1960 that allowed stations to count paid programming as fulfilling their obligation to promote the public good, conservative programming crowded out theologically liberal or ecumenical fare. Local stations no longer had an incentive to give free time to mainline religious programming that few people watched when they could now fulfill their FCC requirement by selling time to more exciting preachers with better programs.¹⁹

Some pastors built highly successful television ministries even under these constraints. Rex Humbard began broadcasting from his Cathedral of Tomorrow in Akron, Ohio in 1952. Humbard actually designed his church auditorium so that it would be conducive to the production of television programs, making the Cathedral of Tomorrow perhaps the first megachurch built for television. Oral Roberts started broadcasting his healing crusades in 1954, and aired his program *Abundant Life* until 1967. He returned to television in 1969, but this time his programs looked and felt more like Ed Sullivan than

¹⁸ Peter G. Horsfield, *Religious Television: An American Experience* (New York: Longman, 1984), 3-4, 6-8, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

a traditional teaching program. Lester Sumrall began purchasing stations throughout the nation in 1968, eventually building what would become the vast LeSEA broadcasting network.²⁰

At the same time that these evangelists were growing in popularity, changes in the ways that people watched television opened up more stations and time slots. The invention and marketing of the set-top converter box in the late 1960s initially added nine new channels by converting UHF signals to VHF signals. The year 1972 also witnessed the significant loosening of restrictions on signal importation between markets. Television preachers still mailed tapes from station to station, but they could now transmit UHF signals into larger markets, and more and more viewers had the capacity to pick up these UHF signals on their sets. The easing of UHF signal importation restrictions beginning in the early 1970s was also significant because there were no restrictions on how many low power UHF stations a single owner could purchase.²¹

Paul and Jan Crouch took advantage of these rules and built nation's the longest lasting, and perhaps furthest reaching, Christian cable network – Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). Crouch was a graduate of Central Bible College, an Assemblies of God school in Springfield, Missouri. He made his way to southern California in 1961, first working for the film and television division of the Assemblies of God before moving on to work for various radio and television stations. Crouch purchased weeknight timeslots

²⁰ Ben Armstrong, *The Electronic Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 83, 86, 103; Scott Billingsley, *It's a New Day: Race and Gender in the Modern Charismatic Movement* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 30.

²¹ Patrick R. Parsons, *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 238-9, 352-3; Megan Mullen, *Television in the Multichannel Age: A Brief History of Cable Television* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 115; Kenneth L. Woodward with Linda Wright, "The T Stands for Troubled," *Newsweek*, March 30, 1992, 60-1.

on KBSA channel 46 in San Bernardino County. The Crouches and their longtime friends and houseguests Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker hosted *Praise the Lord*, still TBN's flagship program, each night. After an agreement to purchase KBSA fell through, TBN moved to KLXA channel 40, where they purchased time from 10:30 PM until 12:30 AM.²²

Crouch purchased KLXA outright in August, 1974. At that time TBN's broadcast offerings expanded rapidly. The programs ranged from the talk show *Happiness Is* hosted by Jan Crouch, to children's shows like *Captain Andy* and *Tree House Club*, to a series of Bible lectures collectively known as the Trinity Bible School. Preaching programs by megachurch pastors figured prominently in the station's early schedule. Jerry Falwell's *Old Time Gospel Hour* aired multiple times each week, as did Robert Schuller's *Hour of Power* and services from Jimmy Swaggart's Family Worship Center. All of these programs supplemented broadcasts of services at Ralph Wilkerson's Melodyland Christian Center, a church that had appeared on TBN from the network's earliest days. Not all of the early personalities on TBN were megachurch pastors. The itinerant evangelist Dwight Thompson hosted *Praise the Lord* frequently, and Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International president Demos Shakarian was a TBN board member. Bible teachers like Charles Taylor and Paul Billheimer filled important programming slots as well. Megachurch pastors were however the most recognizable personalities and so provided TBN with an instant audience in its earliest days.²³

²² "TBN Television Log," *TBN News*, December 1973. These newsletters are in a published collection of TBN newsletters, printed by TBN sometime in 2003. The pages are not numbered. From this point forward, citations will follow the format that of magazines.

²³ "Channel 40 UHF – TV KLXA Program Log," *TBN News*, October, 1974; "Demos Shakarian Joins Our TBN Family," *TBN News*, January, 1975; "TBN Channel 40 Programs," *TBN News*, February, 1975.

Local megachurch support was crucial for TBN in other ways. In order to advertise and create a sense of excitement about their new station, the Crouches often held local rallies which they then broadcast. Schuller's Garden Grove Community Church and Wilkerson's Melodyland were frequent venues for these rallies. The Crouches also received support from Jack Hayford's Church on the Way in Van Nuys. They called Hayford their own pastor, and Hayford has developed various programs for TBN over the years. Crouch specifically identified these megachurch pastors, as well as Leroy Saunders of First Assembly of God, as instrumental in TBN's founding. TBN was in fact so attached to the southern California megachurch network that it actually had to fight to free itself from the influence of certain pastors, specifically Wilkerson at Melodyland and Syvelle Phillips at First Assembly of God, Santa Ana. The Crouches did not actually have any television cameras during their earliest days, so they borrowed some from Melodyland. Paul Crouch used Melodyland's television equipment as security for a loan used to purchase KLXA, and Wilkerson was on the Board of Directors for TBN. The relationship between Melodyland and TBN soured, when according to Crouch, Wilkerson demanded that Crouch fire one of his friends, asserted that Melodyland actually controlled TBN, and suddenly took back his cameras when Crouch refused to submit to his demands. Without his collateral, Crouch ultimately had to appeal to viewers to fund the purchase of KLXA. Despite these disagreements, TBN would never have made it onto the air without Melodyland's early support.²⁴

²⁴ Paul F. Crouch, Sr., *Hello World! A Personal Letter to the Body of Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), xi, 75, 78, 90-7.

As TBN's reach grew, they gave greater coverage to famous pastors. A single owner could purchase up to seven VHF and high-powered UHF television stations according to FCC rules at that time. After Crouch purchased KLXA, he next acquired Channel 21 in Phoenix, followed by Channel 22 in Seattle. TBN then expanded into Oklahoma City, Denver, and Hawaii. They purchased blocks of time on stations around the country, with *Praise the Lord* appearing on fifty stations in November, 1977. When TBN became a satellite cable network in May, 1978, it appeared on nearly two hundred cable systems. Crouch also took advantage of "must carry" laws. The loose restrictions on the number of low power stations a single owner might purchase meant that Crouch had an over-the-air station in markets around the country. Because cable carriers had to carry all over-the-air signals within a certain radius, even those systems that did not necessarily want to carry TBN's satellite feed still had to broadcast the network as part of their over-the-air offerings. That did not stop Crouch from lobbying for the carry of TBN's satellite feed. He even offered to buy satellite receivers for cable carriers that did not have one.²⁵

Now the entire nation saw a casual Chuck Smith teach on Genesis, a fatherly Jack Hayford teach on prayer, and even African American pastor Fred K.C. Price teach on attaining health and wealth through exercising the Word of Faith. They saw Jess Moody, who had taken over from Harold Fickett at FBC Van Nuys. They also heard Ken Foreman at the Cathedral of Faith in San Jose. Tim LaHaye of Scott Memorial Baptist Church in El Cajon reached a national audience with his talk show on politics and current events. These California megachurch pastors became household names among

²⁵ Parsons, *Blue Skies*, 211, 353, 365.

evangelicals. Syndicated preaching shows from pastors in other parts of the country, from many different denominations, gave TBN a broadly evangelical, national feel. TBN slowly grew into the media outlet on which pastors might reach the greatest audience. Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, who left TBN in 1974 to build a cable empire in Ft. Mill, South Carolina, may have garnered more headlines for a time, but by 1987 PTL was bankrupt. Pat Robertson's CBN did not offer explicitly Christian programming twenty-four hours a day, choosing to fill its timeslots with numerous "family friendly" television shows instead. In 1988 Robertson renamed his station as the Family Channel and in 1998 sold it to Rupert Murdoch, who rebranded it Fox Family. Robertson's *700 Club* is now syndicated, with TBN giving it its largest audience.

Robertson chose the nightly news show format for the *700 Club*, but the Crouches mimicked the talk and variety show. Megachurch pastors made appearances, and sometimes hosted. They shared the stage, however, with Christian singers, politicians, athletes, and the occasional genuine movie star. Jerry Barnard of Christian Faith Center in San Diego (and father of actress Crystal Bernard) appeared with former Los Angeles Rams defensive tackle Rosey Grier. John Wimber appeared with Dale Evans. Waymon Rodgers of Louisville, Kentucky, although a megachurch pastor, might not have made it onto *Praise the Lord* had his most famous church member, Col. Harland Sanders, not come along with him. Sometimes celebrities appeared on *Praise the Lord* to the exclusion of overtly religious personalities, as when Pat Boone hosted with special guest, Grammy-winning country-rock singer B. J. Thomas.²⁶

²⁶ *Praise the Lord*, iTBN video, 2:55:34, original air date March 9, 1981, http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/p3aWxsMjrEi4eyjGQv2pOPeId_dj323c; *Praise the Lord*, iTBN video, 1:56:37, original air date March 2, 1979, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/tmamFqMzq4nQYjoOQjeiTIM3xyRqRctb>.

Pastors were nevertheless frequent guests on *Praise the Lord*. While they sometimes preached, they usually sat in comfortable chairs around a coffee table talking with the Crouches. Like guests on a daytime talk show, they discussed their latest projects or advertised their most recent books. Robert Schuller had two new books to talk about when he sat down with Paul and Jan Crouch on May 10, 1984 – *Tough Times Never Last, but Tough People Do!* and *Tough-Minded Faith for Tender-Hearted People*. Paul Crouch asked Schuller some fairly easy and open-ended questions about his message. Schuller responded that he has seen “a high level of anxiety in America today, and people are afraid.” He wanted readers to know that “real strength comes when I know what I have to do as a divine calling.” This confidence would allow believers to make it through tough times. He then told the story of how he led famed Alabama football coach Bear Bryant to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He also told how John Wayne’s daughter approached him at a special luncheon honoring Queen Elizabeth II, who was visiting Los Angeles, and told him of how her father prayed to receive Christ after watching *Hour of Power*. Schuller then made the point that “the toughest of the tough aren’t tough enough without the strength of Jesus Christ.” Millions of people looked up to Bear Bryant and John Wayne, and Schuller wanted viewers to know that if their favorite celebrities needed Jesus, then of course they did too. Schuller’s stories also demonstrated that he moved in the highest circles of celebrity. He pointed out that Bryant recognized him even though he did not know who Bryant was, and that Wayne’s daughter approached him to let him know the effect he had on her father.²⁷

²⁷ *Praise the Lord*, iTBN video, 2:59:48, original air date May 10, 1984, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/Jybd1MjpwZ8ePtFkrePtncyQ3kpy4>.

When Vineyard Christian Fellowship pastor John Wimber appeared on *Praise the Lord* two weeks later he also dropped names. Before he became a Christian, Wimber worked with the Righteous Brothers, and made sure to let Paul and Jan know that Bill Medley attended his Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Anaheim when he was not on tour. The difference between TBN's style and that of older televangelists becomes evident in light of the subject matter of Wimber's interview. Wimber advocated the use of signs and wonders in evangelism. He believed that all Christians had the ability to heal the sick and cast out demons. These dramatic acts would convince unbelievers of God's existence. When talking to the Crouches, however, Wimber calmly discussed instances of healing as well as times when he failed to see God's healing power work through him. Two people who benefited from Wimber's ministry testified of God's power in their lives. Wimber did not have the sick line up so they he could place his hands on them, nor did he jump and shout as people threw away their crutches and danced across the stage. When Jack Hayford appeared on *Praise the Lord*, he gave a casual, almost academic treatise on tongue speaking and the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but no one spoke in tongues in the broadcast. Both Wimber and Hayford remained calm, and the studio audience listened attentively without any ecstatic outbursts.²⁸

Television had a calming effect on ecstatic worship in general. Parishioners shouting and dancing distracts television audiences from the sermon or musical performer, and the time constraints of a television schedule require that worship services follow a fairly strict order and do not allow distractions to get the pastor off track. The

²⁸ *Praise the Lord*, iTBN video, 2:59:45, original air date May 24, 1984, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/JiZWR0Mjp1N8o-uK9UMx5C40AT854iV8>; *Praise the Lord*, iTBN video, 2:59:54, original air date February 20, 1986, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/FvZmxsMjqIAcenpeKLB2LXJy1WJJqHkQ>.

religious studies scholar Stephanie Mitchem observed that at Word of Faith teacher Leroy Thompson's church, worshippers only spoke in tongues during a specified time before the beginning of the actual worship service. The sociologist Milmon Harrison observed ushers forcefully picking up and removing a woman who continued to yell "Hallelujah, thank you, Jesus" during a minister's welcome to the congregation after the music portion of the service ended. At the same time, television can push preachers to preach more topical sermons and employ more dramatic effects. The conservative Presbyterian megachurch pastor D. James Kennedy, for example, preached doctrinal sermons during the 1970s before focusing on the culture wars during the 1980s. He had a loyal following before, but new viewers tuned in to see what Kennedy might say each week on any number of hot topics. Although Jerry Falwell's sermons were always more revivalistic than Kennedy's, he made a similar transition with his increased political activism of the late 1970s.²⁹

Christian Music

Praise the Lord featured music on every episode. The vast majority of acts sang southern gospel music and sacred standards. Groups like the McDuff Brothers, the Happy Goodmans, Spirit Song, Donnie and Reba Rambo-McGuire, African American singer Sylvester Blue, and pastors Jerry and Sandi Bernard frequently sang old favorites for the Crouches on TBN. Sometimes classical musicians like violinist Shony Alex Braun and the Liberace-esque Dino Kartsonakis also made appearances. Secular musicians who had

²⁹ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 73; Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 92; Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 28-9, 175.

converted to Christianity such as Pat Boone and Las Vegas performer Chico Holiday sang more popular songs, but no viewer would have mistaken their music for anything currently on Top 40 or even adult-oriented rock stations. Andrae Crouch, an African American singer from Los Angeles, was perhaps the only frequent guest on *Praise the Lord* to sing more contemporary music. In the late 1980s, over 70% of those who donated to religious television were over the age of fifty. The Crouches understood that they needed to appeal to an older audience if they hoped to maximize contributions.³⁰

At the same time, churches were experimenting with new worship styles that incorporated rock and popular music. The Crouches' pastor Jack Hayford even called this shift another Reformation, one "that will transform the Church's outreach and growth." Not all megachurches use contemporary worship music. Robert Schuller made much of his purchase of an organ for his wife to play at their first worship service at the drive-in movie theater. Many large, "First Baptist" churches maintained a more traditional worship style. Homer Lindsay, a co-pastor at FBC Jacksonville along with former Southern Baptist Convention President Jerry Vines, flatly stated that "gospel rock is a contradiction of Christianity." Second Baptist of Houston boasted an organ with 10,473 pipes. Nevertheless some of the most visible and influential megachurches use contemporary worship music. In their 2005 study, Thumma and Travis found that 93% of megachurches use electric guitars during the worship service, 94% use drums, and 95%

³⁰ Robert Wuthnow, "The Social Significance of Religious Television," in *Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions*, ed. Robert Abelman and Stewart M. Hoover (Westport, Connecticut: Ablex, 1990), 98; Horsfield, *Religious Television*, 112; Randy Frame, "Surviving the Slump: Can Religious Broadcasters Overcome Rising Costs, Competition, and the Lingering Effects of Scandal?" *Christianity Today*, February 3, 1989. For an early Andrae Crouch video from TBN, see *Praise the Lord*, iTBN video, 2:56:29, original air date December 9, 1982, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/swdzRqMjqax1fZzyuwEopwMIWHc0D1xk>. For a Dino Kartsonakis video, see *Praise the Lord*, iTBN video, 2:58:48, original air date, July, 1987, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/14dzN2MjqyHVQFCngMLRCNLLjUQqGn5E>.

use visual projection equipment instead of hymnals. Only a third of smaller churches use electric guitars and drums. For Rick Warren, the evangelistic mandate dictates that “if you are trying to reach baby boomers, you must sing songs they understand.” He admonished pastors that most baby boomers “do not understand any music that was produced before 1960, much less the sixteenth century.” “Rock music,” on the other hand, “is universally accepted.” Bill and Lynn Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church described how the music of early contemporary Christian artists Michael Omartian, Larry Norman, and Chuck Girard “echoed the longings and beliefs” of the high school students to whom they ministered in the early 1970s. Sounding like old timers themselves, the Hybels asserted that children of the 1980s and 1990s “who have grown up with Christian contemporary music” simply cannot “appreciate what this meant to a generation of kids who had grown up without a music to call their own.”³¹

A large number of contemporary Christian music acts of the 1970s emanated from Chuck Smith’s Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California. The hippies flocking to Calvary Chapel Bible studies and satellite small groups around southern California brought their guitars. They often played new compositions for one another, with the most popular bands becoming regulars in the Calvary Chapel lineup. Calvary Chapel released a compilation album introducing its various bands, the groundbreaking *Everlastin’ Living*

³¹ Elmer L. Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today’s Most Innovative Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 60, 114, 138; Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America’s Largest Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 153; Rick Warren, “New Churches for a New Generation: Church Planting to Reach Baby Boomers” (D.Min. project, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1993), 276, 280; Bill Hybels and Lynn Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 27. Larry Norman and Chuck Girard were at the forefront of early contemporary Christian music. Michael Omartian, on the other hand, has had a long career in secular and Christian music. He was an in-demand session pianist in the 1970s, playing on several albums for Steely Dan. He won three Grammys as producer for Christopher Cross’s blockbuster 1978 debut. He also co-produced “We Are the World.” At the same time, he was active in Christian music, most visibly with pioneering trio 2nd Chapter of Acts. He and his wife Stormie have long attended Jack Hayford’s Church on the Way.

Jesus Music Concert, in 1971. Also in 1971, a Calvary Chapel band called Children of the Day released *Come to the Waters*, an album that included the still popular song “For Those Tears I Died.” Love Song, perhaps Calvary Chapel’s premier band, released their eponymous debut that same year. In 1972, Calvary Chapel released another compilation album, commonly known as *Maranatha! 2*.³²

Much contemporary Christian music of the 1980s had a polished pop sound. The music coming out of Calvary Chapel evinced a folk rock influence, with many compositions resembling something by Crosby, Stills, and Nash or America. The lyrics focused on having a personal relationship with Jesus. In “Little Country Church” the band Love Song sang “Preacher isn’t talkin’ ‘bout religion no more / He just wants to praise the Lord.” Along the same lines, Blessed Hope sang “We’ve got something more than just religion / We’ve got something more – it’s relation.” Some songs, like Gentle Faith’s “My Love for You,” with lyrics like “Stormy weather, or whatever / Well, nothing could separate you from me,” might easily pass for straightforward love songs. This new music reflected a disillusionment with formalism and a desire to connect with God through song on a more emotional level.³³

Although many of the musicians in these various bands continue to play and record, none of them are as well known in Christian circles as later acts like Amy Grant or Steven Curtis Chapman. The pop-oriented Christian music that came out in the 1980s swamped Christian radio and overshadowed the Calvary Chapel sound. The praise

³² “Maranatha” is an Aramaic word that appears in 1 Corinthians 16:22. Scholars dispute its translation, but many take it to mean “Come Lord” or some similar phrase.

³³ Love Song, “Little Country Church,” *Love Song*, Good News Records GNR-08100, 33 1/3 rpm, 1971; Blessed Hope, “Something More,” *The Everlastin’ Living Jesus Music Concert*, Maranatha! Records HS 777/1, 33 1/3 rpm, 1971; Gentle Faith, “My Love for You,” *Gentle Faith*, Maranatha! Records HS 027, 33 1/3 rpm, 1976.

choruses that came out of Calvary Chapel, sung by a choir known as the Maranatha! Singers, have however proven especially long-lived. By the time *The Praise Album* was released in 1974, Calvary Chapel had started its own record label, Maranatha! Records. The choruses on this album are all folk-tinged with sometimes complex harmonies, although they are lyrically repetitive. They often consist of nothing more than Bible verses set to music, with some such as “Seek Ye First,” taken directly from Matthew 6:33, remaining popular forty years later. As with the other Calvary Chapel music, the praise songs reflected a desire for an emotional connection to Jesus. In “Praise the Lord,” the choir sang “Let’s open up our hearts / Let the living water give our lives a start.” In “Heavenly Father,” the vocalist simply sings “Heavenly Father, I appreciate you,” moves on to “Son of God, what a wonder you are” in the second verse, before closing with “Holy Ghost, what a comfort you are” in the final verse.³⁴

Religious television and the new contemporary Christian music came together with Barry McGuire’s *Anyone But Jesus* show on TBN. In contrast to *Praise the Lord*, *Anyone But Jesus* offered music for a younger audience. McGuire was a minor celebrity of sorts outside the world of Christian music, having scored a number one single in 1966 with “Eve of Destruction.” After acting for a time, including a starring role in *Hair* on Broadway, McGuire grew increasingly disillusioned with fame. Like audiences who take a cynical view of celebrity, McGuire decided there was no substance to his life, and so he searched for more. Reflecting the same ethos of the Calvary Chapel music, McGuire “stopped looking at preachers and denominations, organizations, and I took a look at the

³⁴ The Maranatha! Singers, “Seek Ye First,” *The Praise Album*, Maranatha! Records HS 777/8, 33 1/3 rpm, 1974; The Maranatha! Singers, “Praise the Lord,” *The Praise Album*, Maranatha! Records HS 777/8 33 1/3 rpm, 1974; The Maranatha! Singers, “Heavenly Father,” *The Praise Album*, Maranatha! Records HS 777/8, 1974.

man Jesus and what he had to say.” He discovered that Jesus spoke directly to his “own life experiences” and gave him “the answer I’ve been looking for all these years.”³⁵

McGuire’s show featured some well-known bands, like Calvary Chapel’s Gentle Faith in addition to more obscure acts such as African American singer Dee Dee Gray. In a typical show, the band or singer performed a song to open, sat down for a conversation with McGuire in which the introduced the band and described their recent activities. McGuire might then play a song himself before inviting the band to play another one of their compositions. It resembled *American Bandstand* without the dancing. Again, the bands appearing on *Anyone But Jesus* performed songs that focused on a personal relationship with Jesus and a heartfelt connection to God. After hearing Parable’s song “Goodbye,” McGuire commented that it was “so tender” and “really made me feel comfortable inside.” He then shares part of his own testimony of coming to faith and how he once knew a woman who talked about Jesus like “he was her best friend.” At the end of the show, he told the audience of his conversion, “when Jesus touched me from the inside,” and urged them to seek “a personal experience” with Jesus.³⁶

“Goodbye” could have been a song by seventies soft rock band Bread. Gentle Faith’s “Livin’ in the Sonshine” sounded more like the Doobie Brothers, but the message was the same. “And you know that Jesus loves you,” belted singer and harmonica virtuoso Darrell Mansfield, “and you know that Jesus cares.” In the interview portion of

³⁵ David W. Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil: Christian Pop Music and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 77.

³⁶ For the episode featuring Dee Dee Gray, see *Anyone But Jesus*, iTBN video, 27:35, original air date March 3, 1976, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/x0bTN1MjobbeMzFrdw0GQgipca2zCAJv>. For the episode featuring Parable, see *Anyone But Jesus*, iTBN video, 27:31, original air date January 1, 1976, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/xic2dnMzqnwqRruA3oQX8M1qDjuPTYq>.

the show, Mansfield told McGuire that people responded to Gentle Faith's music and message because they saw that "this guy is just like us" and that he's "not coming to them representing some denomination." He explained that people are tired of "churchianity," but they do want a real relationship with Jesus. The entire show is informal, with a bare set and a heavily bearded McGuire wearing jeans and a t-shirt, holding his guitar and talking about life and faith with his guests.³⁷

Anyone But Jesus in many ways exemplified the suburban social religion. The music catered to modern tastes, and hence to modern consumerism, rather than forcing young people to go against the grain of the wider culture and listen to music with no backbeat sung by transplanted southern septuagenarians. It also highlighted relational and emotional aspects of the faith rather than propositional truths. Finally, the show implicitly reinforced a belief in meritocracy through presence of a "legitimate" celebrity host who had achieved fame in the form of a starring role on Broadway and a number one single. Megachurch pastors ignored the popularity of the new Christian music and the aesthetics of programs like *Praise the Lord* to their peril.

Conclusion

In late 2013 and early 2014, a minor controversy stirred the evangelical megachurch world. Steven Furtick, pastor of Elevation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, began construction of a more than eight thousand square foot mansion on nineteen acres in a gated community. The land and house together cost just over \$1.7 million. Furtick claimed that he did not use tithe money to build the house. He instead

³⁷ *Anyone But Jesus*, iTBN video, 28:48, original air date August 20, 1976, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/owZDImMzoO01sM6uC2cHIRDkCBsISUih>.

used book royalties and speaking fees. James Duncan in the conservative journal *First Things* pointed out that Furtick would have had to have sold well over a million copies of his first book for such a claim to be true, and the best estimates place book sales at 350,000. To confuse matters further, Elevation Church bought thousands of copies of Furtick's second book, a move that some saw as an effort to ensure its appearance on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The church then claimed that Furtick did not receive any proceeds from sales to Elevation Church, yet somehow Furtick has made enough money from his book sales in order to pay for his new house without having to draw on his church salary.³⁸

Around the same time, sources revealed that Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church in Seattle and Perry Noble of Newspring Church in Anderson, South Carolina authorized their churches to spend around \$100,000 to purchase copies of their books. This tactic pushed their books to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list for one week before quickly falling out altogether. These pastors can however market themselves as number one *New York Times* bestsellers when they appear on the increasingly incestuous megachurch conference speaking circuit. Driscoll has publicly apologized for manipulating book sales figures, and says that he will not refer to himself as a *New York Times* bestselling author in the future. He has even asked his publisher not refer to him as such. Driscoll went so far as to declare that he will take a step back from the megachurch

³⁸ James Duncan, "Celebrity Pastor's Walter White Problem," *First Things* <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2014/03/celebrity-pastors-walter-white-problem>; Warren Cole Smith, "The House that Steven Built," *World*, December 13, 2013; Stewart Watson, "I-Team: How a Pastor Built a Multi-Million Dollar Home," WCNC, <http://www.wcnc.com/news/iteam/I-Team-How-a-pastor-paid-for-his-multi-million-dollar-home-228870731.html>; Jeff Schapiro, "Elevation Church CFO Answers Questions About Sale of Steven Furtick's Newest Book," *Christian Post*, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/elevation-church-cfo-answers-questions-about-sale-of-steven-furticks-newest-book-114419>.

conference speaking circuit because he does not “see how [he] can be both a celebrity and a pastor,” and he has decided that he would rather be the latter.³⁹

Furtick and Noble have made no such apologies, nor have their many friends in the megachurch world publicly called for him to do so. Furtick has also remained defiant in the face of revelations that he stage-managed the altar calls at his worship services. Furtick planted people in the audience to respond to his call to come forward for baptism, hoping that when these plants arose to come to the waters others would overcome their shyness and do so as well. Furtick seems comfortable with being a celebrity pastor and the publicity machinery that goes along with that status, believing that planting fake converts in the audience was just one way “we activated our faith to pull off our part in God’s miracle.”⁴⁰

Revelations of the publicity machinery underlying these ministries do not seem to have hurt attendance at their churches. Even as revelations about Furtick’s book sales and altar calls hit the presses, he launched a new preaching program on TBN, *The Elevation Experience*. Either their parishioners do not believe the reports or do not see anything wrong with employing these tactics to boost their pastors’ profiles. They almost certainly would not welcome other image-building or image-protecting strategies such as covering immoral behavior, although even recovery from moral failure can become part of a celebrity pastor’s plotline. Churchgoers have perhaps become comfortable playing the

³⁹ Ken Walker, “Is Buying Your Way Onto the Bestseller List Wrong?” *Christianity Today*, January 20, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/januaryfebruary/buying-best-sellers-results.html>; Jeremy Weber, “Mark Driscoll Retracts Bestseller Book Status, Resets Life,” *Christianity Today*, March 17, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/march/mark-driscoll-retracts-best-seller-status-resets-life.html?paging=off>.

⁴⁰ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Megachurch Pastor Steven Furtick’s ‘Spontaneous Baptisms’ Not So Spontaneous,” *Religion News Service* <http://www.religionnews.com/2014/02/24/megachurch-pastor-steven-furticks-spontaneous-baptisms-spontaneous>.

celebrity game with respect to their own pastors, recognizing that fame as accomplishment and fame as manufactured image are indistinguishable in the church world just as often as in the world of entertainment, and that a few peccadilloes or staged scenarios here and there actually add to the fun of going to church in suburban America.

Chapter 4 Therapists

A 1974 special report on the ten largest churches in the Assemblies of God featured Glen Cole, pastor of Evergreen Christian Center in Olympia, Washington. Cole believed that his congregation grew because he taught them “to relate Jesus to their fourfold need: spiritual, mental, physical and social.” He wanted the unchurched in Olympia to see Evergreen as “a church that cares” and as “a place where their needs can be met.” Worshippers heard sermons entitled “What to Do with Pressure,” “Inferiority,” “The Dangers of Discontent,” and “What Good Would it Do to Worry.” Cole’s messages drew a crowd. After he built Evergreen Christian Center into a megachurch, he moved to Capital Christian Center in Sacramento in 1978. By the time he left Capital in 1995, he had built that congregation into a megachurch of over four thousand. He was in the process of building another church, Sacramento’s Trinity Christian Center, when he died in 2012 at age 78.¹

Other pastors followed a similar path to ministry success. Bob Russell of Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky claimed his congregation grew from 125 in 1966 to 13,500 in 2000 in part because he applied “the Scripture to Monday.” He did not so much focus on explaining biblical texts as he did helping church members navigate their jobs or build stable families. Bill Hybels’s 1975 survey undertaken when

¹ Lee Lebsack, *10 at the Top: How 10 of America’s Largest Assemblies of God Churches Grow* (Stow, Ohio: New Hope Press, 1974), 12, 18, 20; Robert D. Daville and Jennifer Garz, “Influential Sacramento-Area Pastor Glen Cole Dies,” *The Modesto Bee*, February 15, 2012, accessed December 26, 2013, http://www.modbee.com/2012/02/15/2070044_influential-sacramento-area-pastor.html.

he founded Willow Creek revealed irrelevant sermons to be one of the four primary reasons people did not attend church. When Rick Warren conducted a similar survey before beginning Saddleback, he found that “the number one reason [people] said they did not go to church was that ‘the sermons are boring, they don’t relate to my life.’” Lee Strobel, a staff member at Willow Creek, concluded that sermons must have a “high user-value” and that they must “address [attenders’] felt needs” or visitors would not return for another visit, much less make church an important part of their lives.²

Megachurch pastors were not the only ones to preach therapeutic messages, nor was this a new development in American homiletics. By the mid-1960s the cultural critic Philip Rieff had already identified a general trend in Western culture away from transcendent, communal values. Those who lived according to instinct or sought personal happiness above all else became cultural heroes. Mainline Protestant clergymen adopted what Reiff called a therapeutic message. They called parishioners to strive for self-fulfillment above all else. In the early 1980s, the historian Jackson Lears refined Reiff’s analysis, dating the triumph of therapeutic religion to the 1880s, thus disconnecting it from the advent of Freudian psychoanalysis. Therapeutic preaching therefore began long before Norman Vincent Peale.³

² Bob Russell with Rusty Russell, *When God Builds a Church: 10 Principles for Growing a Dynamic Church* (West Monroe, Louisiana: Howard Publishing, 2000), 31; Bill Hybels and Lynn Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 57-8; Rick Warren, “New Churches for a New Generation: Church Planting to Reach Baby Boomers” (doctor of ministry dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1993), 184, 187-8; Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 213-4.

³ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: The Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1966), 13, 251; T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 55-6, 304.

Megachurch pastors nevertheless saw themselves as pioneers. They identified their preaching style as one thing that separated their growing congregations from more traditional churches with declining attendance. Hybels made fun of the “preseminarians” he knew in college because they thought about the Christian faith in terms of doctrine rather than “a relationship with a living person.” Warren claimed that traditional preachers erroneously believed their worshippers were “desperately interested in knowing about the Jebusites.” He admonished preachers to treat the Bible not as a book of history or theology, but as a tool for shaping character. He encouraged them to write their sermons with the felt needs of the audience as their foremost concern, rather than the message of the biblical text, arguing that “[e]very salesman knows that you start with your customer’s desire, not your product.” In fact, he claimed, “this principle is used by everybody – except preachers.” Robert Schuller attacked the myth that pastors “can communicate effectively through preachments, commandments, orders, and pronouncements.” Schuller taught that in post-1960s America “this form of communication is essentially insulting.” He warned pastors in training that they “cannot expect people to rush to overflow the churches that germinate fear and anger.” Churches that preach the historic doctrines of the Christian faith instead of focusing on felt needs “will remain what they are – dying churches.”⁴

This shift in preaching style resonated with the suburban social religion. Therapeutic preaching was therefore one of the most important reasons evangelical

⁴ Bill Hybels and Jay Caress, *Caution: Christians Under Construction* (Fullerton, California: Victor, 1978), 11; Rick Warren, dissertation, 184, 187-8; Warren, “New Churches for a New Generation,” 187; Robert H. Schuller, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities!* Glendale, California: G/L Regal Books, 1974), 13, 40; Robert H. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Waco: Word, 1982), 13.

churches grew. Preachers concluded that straightforward evangelistic messages or discourses on esoteric doctrines (unless those esoteric doctrines dealt with the Second Coming of Christ) no longer resonated with unchurched people. Continuing to focus on these topics might create too much cultural or intellectual distance between the church and those they were trying to reach. Like the many non-Christian movements that were part of what Tom Wolfe called “the Third Great Awakening,” megachurches offered help in dealing with anxiety and loneliness while also facilitating small support groups or Bible studies to assist members on their journeys to wholeness.

But megachurches differed from other strands of the self-help movement in that sermons still pointed to the Bible as the ultimate source of authority. Just as communal houses and Christian rock clubs facilitated the induction of hippies into the Jesus Movement, therapeutic sermons and Christian support groups helped bring suburbanites already looking for help with anxiety and feelings of emptiness into evangelical churches. These churches did not give up their belief in hell or more traditional sexual ethics. They simply did not talk about them quite as much, and when they did, they often focused on remedies rather than retribution.

This chapter examines the teachings of a number of megachurch pastors. These preachers still fell within the long tradition of revivalistic Protestantism. Instead of attracting converts with warnings about hell or promises of physical healing, they held out to their listeners Christ’s power to bring emotional wholeness and to ease their loneliness. Schuller is perhaps the most famous of the therapeutic preachers. He believed that his “possibility thinking” would cause a new Reformation in American Christianity. Schuller influenced a number of young pastor, including Hybels. Word of Faith preacher

Marilyn Hickey built a television career, and a megachurch, on helping readers and conference attenders deal with the stresses of modern family life. Cole's colleagues in the Assemblies of God such as radio preachers Jimmy Swaggart and Dan Betzer also taught on anxiety and depression. Even independent evangelical John MacArthur, who took pride in preaching verse-by-verse through the Bible, built an extensive counseling center at his eight thousand-member Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California.

After looking at broad trends in Americans' attitudes toward mental health, this chapter examines megachurch pastors' teachings as they related to anxiety and depression. The next section explores pastors' attempts to help worshippers navigate interpersonal relationships. The final section examines megachurch pastors' belief that each individual is special and has a unique purpose in God's plan. This sense of purpose helped churchgoers overcome the boredom supposedly associated with modern suburban life. For their many admirers and worshippers, megachurch pastors effectively explained the most efficient route to a happy life. In the process, whether they realized it or not, they also effectively translated evangelical religion into an idiom that followers of the suburban social religion could understand.

American Views of Mental Health

Therapeutic preachers were not alone in their contention that all was not well in suburbia. University-based cultural critics gained a wide hearing for their belief that affluent suburban culture had a dark side that could lead to depression, anxiety, loneliness, and a sense of emptiness. David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* (1951) questioned whether the advanced capitalism of the post-war economy fostered self-knowledge and depth of thought or superficial

relationships and emotional distance. William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) also described suburban life as devoid of real creativity and stifling to individual dreams. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan argued that for suburban women the America Dream was a disappointment, and that suburban consumerism only exacerbated housewives' feelings of emptiness.⁵

Megachurch preachers echoed many of these same critiques in their sermons. Although both the scholarly critiques and the sermons rarely offered empirical evidence, several statistical studies indicate that Baby Boomers in particular increasingly suffered from depression and anxiety. These same studies reveal that they dealt with their problematic emotions differently than had previous generations. The field of mental health witnessed significant changes after World War II. Between 1955 and 1984, the number of patients in state mental hospitals dropped from 559,000 to 114,000 even as outpatient care for mental disorders increased. In 1969, approximately 1.1 million people received outpatient care for mental disorders, while in 1981 2.5 million received outpatient treatment. This shift in patient care partially resulted from the increased use of pharmaceuticals. Prescription medication eased the trauma of a diagnosis of mental illness. With the help of pharmaceuticals, Americans could deal with anxiety or depression while still living a somewhat normal suburban life.⁶

Mental illness still caused much personal distress. As Peter Stearns argues, the classification of mental illness, and addiction in particular, as a disease rather than a

⁵ For a full treatment of these critiques, see Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

⁶ Ronald W. Manderscheid, Michael J. Witkin, Marilyn J. Rosenstein, and Rosalyn Bass, "The National Reporting Program for Mental Health Statistics: History and Findings," *Public Health Reports* 101 (Sept.-Oct. 1986), 537.

character defect or a behavioral choice mitigated the pressures of living in a modern American society that increasingly demanded self-control. At the same time, widespread cultural assumptions held that “the mentally troubled were really not sick but could pull themselves together without the same dependence on a professional apparatus that a ‘real’ physical disease required.” Although forces beyond an individuals’ control perhaps caused a mental illness or an addiction, the individual still had the responsibility to seek and implement a course of treatment that would lead to a restoration of self-control.⁷

Long-term statistical data reflects this emphasis on self-efficacy as it relates to affective disorders. A study entitled *Americans’ Views of Mental Health* surveyed adults in 1957, 1976, and 1996 concerning their attitudes toward mental illness. The studies found that in 1957 most Americans viewed “mental illness” as synonymous with mood disorders, but by 1996 they had come to define “mental illness” in terms of more serious conditions like schizophrenia, mental retardation, and psychosis. Furthermore, the percentage of Americans who reported having felt that they were going to have a nervous breakdown increased from 17% in 1957, to 19.6% in 1976, to 24.3% in 1996. Data collected during the 1980s revealed that those born between 1945 and 1964 reported feeling depressed more than older age cohorts. A 1989 study indicated that 40% of those born since 1955 reported dealing with depression. Furthermore, those in rural areas were depressed at lower rates than those in suburban and urban areas. The increase in rates in depression and anxiety, especially for Baby Boomers, indicates that these types of disorders had in a sense become more normal. Many did not even see them as belonging

⁷ Peter N. Stearns, *Battleground of Desire: The Struggle for Self-Control in Modern America* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 310.

within the category of mental illness, although they did view them as a problem that they would like solved.⁸

Popular perceptions of the causes of mental disorders also differ across the three surveys. In 1957, health concerns stood out as the most common reason for feelings of anxiety or depression. By 1976, reasons related to “network events” (problems with a spouse, other family members, or friends) dwarfed other perceived causes, with 30.2% reporting interpersonal problems as causing their anxiety. In 1996, network events still constituted the most widely reported cause of anxiety and depression (24.2%), but the percentage reporting financial troubles as an important factor more than doubled from 4.5% in 1976 to 11% in 1996. The rise of the Baby Boom generation and advances in medicine perhaps led to the diminution of health concerns among American adults. As this large generation came of age, they worried more about starting and maintaining a family amidst decreased economic expectations than they did about their own mortality.⁹

Therapeutic preachers also took advantage of a more open market for those seeking help with mental problems. As the percentage of adults reporting anxiety and depression increased, Americans sought trained medical professionals less frequently. The percentage of those suffering from a mental illness who reported taking prescription medication jumped from just over 34% in the 1957 and 1976 surveys to 56.9% in the

⁸ The MacArthur Mental Health Module Team, *American Views of Mental Health and Illness at Century's End: Continuity and Change* (The Indiana Consortium of Mental Health Services Research, Indiana University, and Columbia University, 1996), 6-8, 17; Gerald L. Klerman and Myrna M. Weissman, “Increasing Rates of Depression,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 261 (April 21, 1989): 2231-2; Ralph Swindle, Jr., Kenneth Heller, Bernice Pescosolido, Saeko Kikuawa, “Responses to Mental Breakdowns in America Over a Forty Year Period: Mental Health Policy Implications,” *American Psychologist* 55 (July 2000): 745.

⁹ The MacArthur Mental Health Module Team, *American Views of Mental Health and Illness and Century's End*, 19.

1996 survey. At the same time, the percentage reporting that they talked to a medical doctor fell from 44.4% in 1957 to 17.9% in 1996. Those reporting they had seen a psychiatrist fell from 8% in 1976 to 3.6% in 1996. The percentage of adults who had seen a counselor of some kind jumped from 3.8% in 1976 to 15.4% in 1996. The surveys reveal, however, that the majority of people chose to deal with their anxiety or depression through informal channels, with only 42% seeking formal support or treatment. As for other these informal strategies, 31.6% thought through their problems themselves, while 28.3% simply talked to a friend. According to the 1957 survey, only 12.5% attempted to work out their problems alone and only 6.5% sought informal support. The earlier survey also found that 48%, sought professional help. As anxiety and depression became more generally acknowledged in society, fewer Americans saw it as a cause to seek professional help beyond asking their doctor for a prescription.¹⁰

As contemporary megachurch websites almost universally proclaim, they offer a community for the lonely, anxious, and depressed who need spiritual support. They have positioned themselves to meet a need. Beginning in the 1970s, Americans seem to have preferred the care of a support group over that of a doctor. Stearns argues that, after the repeal of Prohibition, Americans concluded that alcohol was safe for some people but not for others. The difference between a social drinker and an alcoholic stemmed from the individual personality of the drinker rather than the alcohol itself. Founded in 1935, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) became the model for treating whatever personality disorders led to alcohol addiction while also facilitating the individuals' reconstruction of their own faculties of self-control and sense of wholeness. The ideology behind AA in

¹⁰ Ibid., 20-1.

fact derived from the Keswick Movement, a British holiness movement that heavily influenced American fundamentalism during the twentieth century. Both megachurches and AA therefore descended from common ancestor. Secular therapists from various schools saw the success of AA and applied its concept of addiction and its treatment methods to a host of destructive behaviors. After World War II, support groups for gamblers sprung up, followed by support groups for sex addicts in the 1970s, food addicts in the 1980s and eventually internet addicts in the 1990s. Schuller's Crystal Cathedral sponsored support groups for all of these addictions and more.¹¹

Americans who chose to treat their negative emotions themselves were not necessarily alone in their efforts. The self-help book industry expanded dramatically beginning in the 1960s. Between 1972 and 2000, the proportion of all books in print that fell within the self-help category expanded from 1.1% to 2.4%. A 1988 Gallup survey revealed that anywhere between one-third and one-half of all American adults had purchased a self-help book of some kind. Religious titles constitute an important portion of the self-help book industry. By the early 1990s, the minister Norman Vincent Peale had sold twenty million copies of his 1952 blockbuster *The Power of Positive Thinking*. It spent 186 weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list when it was first released, including forty-eight weeks atop the non-fiction list. Peale was perhaps the first megachurch pastor to parlay his sermons into a mega bestseller. He would not be the last.¹²

¹¹ Stearns, *Battleground of Desire*, 308-9, 318.

¹² Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 11-2; Ron Alexander, "Chronicle," *New York Times*, May 31, 1994. The cover of the current edition of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, published by Simon and Schuster, claims that the book has sold five million copies.

According to the historian David Herzberg, Baby Boomers recuperating from the 1960s ran headlong into “an age of anxiety” in the 1970s compounded by an “age of depression” in the 1980s. Americans beginning families in the 1970s and 1980s were more likely than their parents to view their negative emotions as a relatively normal part of life. Moreover, they attributed their anxiety and depression less to concerns over survival and mortality and more to causes stemming from social status and personal relationships. Lack of security in the areas of job and family, especially after 1973, led the philosopher Jerald Wallulis to coin the phrase “the new insecurity” to describe the situation in which Baby Boomers found themselves. As problematic emotions surrounding work and family became more general, Americans looked to a wide array of remedies to treat their problems. Some simply chose to ignore their feelings. Others attempted to solve their problems by talking with friends or consulting self-help books. When the anxious and depressed did seek treatment, they often took medication, joined a support group, or talked to a pastor or other counselor not directly associated with the medical profession. Americans felt like they needed help, but not so desperately that they needed to enter a hospital or even talk to a doctor. The market for anyone who believed they had a message that could help anxious and lonely Americans was therefore wide open.¹³

Fear, Anxiety, and Depression

Although the disease model of mental illness grew in part from a desire to explain human frailty and loss of control without reference to original sin, those who still held to

¹³ David Herzberg, *Happy Pills: From Miltown to Prozac* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 151; Jerald Wallulis, *The New Insecurity: The End of the Standard Job and Family* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), xiv.

the doctrine had spectacular success in translating the insights of modern psychology into terms evangelicals could accept. The Dutch Reformed Church, a denomination that during the early twentieth century was not known for its willingness to downplay Calvin's teachings on human depravity, was home to Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller, the two pastors perhaps most responsible for the therapeutic turn in evangelical preaching. The tension that Stearns identifies within the American understanding of mental illness – the belief that its causes are beyond human control yet sufferers are responsible for the rehabilitation of their own thoughts and actions – fits well within an evangelical framework that sees all people as born sinners who nevertheless must answer for their sins. Furthermore, small prayer groups, Bible studies, and discipleship groups have long been a part of American evangelicalism. During the early nineteenth century, Methodist circuit riders left behind twelve-person classes everywhere they went. These classes required members to confess their sins and to seek help in overcoming them. The evangelical understanding of sin dovetailed with cultural beliefs regarding mental illness, and evangelical methods of dealing with personal problems resonated with the unchurched looking for a support group to assist them in overcoming whatever emotional issues they faced.¹⁴

Megachurch pastors had little trouble in targeting their messages at the afraid, anxious, and depressed unchurched masses of the 1970s and 1980s. Just as financial and status concerns trumped poor health as the primary cause of anxiety during the 1970s and beyond, the healing revivalists of the 1950s and 1960s turned their attention to psychological diseases. Instead of positing poor health as a cause of anxiety, they focused

¹⁴ Stearns, *Battleground of Desire*, 293.

on anxiety as a cause of poor health. Marilyn Hickey led the cheerfully named Happy Church in Denver with her husband Wallace. She asserted that “doctors say eighty percent of all illness is caused by fear.” She also taught that “some people are always sick because they are wounded emotionally.” The Assemblies of God radio preacher and Florida megachurch pastor Dan Betzer stated that some doctors “believe that worry kills.” Jimmy Swaggart declared that “anxiety, stress, and worry are considered by the medical profession to be the number one cause of heart attacks, strokes, and all other conditions.” Robert Schuller preached that “[b]eyond a doubt, deep-seated grief is a main cause of illness in America today.” None of these pastors cite any sources to support their assertions. Whether they contain an element of truth or not, the frequency with which they appear reveals that emotional problems, rather than physical sickness, were foremost in the minds of preachers attempting to build an audience.¹⁵

These pastors identified the underlying causes of fear and anxiety as spiritual rather than chemical or circumstantial. Their proposed remedy was therefore spiritual as opposed to medical or behavioral. Hickey claimed that “[f]ear is Satan’s number one weapon against the Christian.” Betzer explained that Americans have numerous circumstantial reasons to be afraid, including “inflation, insecurity, the threat of war, constant change, approaching old age, rejection, loss of friends, unwanted retirement, failure in school, shaky marriages, [and] doubt about their worth on the job.” Christians, however, should not let these circumstances lead them into fear and anxiety in the same

¹⁵ Marilyn Hickey, *Fear Free, Faith Filled* (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1982), 45; Marilyn Hickey, *God’s Rx for a Hurting Heart* (Denver: Marilyn Hickey Ministries, 1984), 13; Dan Betzer, *Freedom from Fear, Worry and Depression* (Springfield, MO: The General Council of the Assemblies of God, 1979), 27; Jimmy Swaggart, *God’s Answer to Fear, Depression, and Discouragement* (Baton Rouge: Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, 1978), 55; Robert H. Schuller, *The 10 Best Messages* (Garden Grove: Hour of Power, 1980), 21.

way that non-Christians do. Otherwise, Betzer asked, “where is the testimony?” Swaggart railed against “a demon spirit” that is “involved with the spirit of fear” and claimed that medications did more harm than good. He indicts “the harried businessman who can’t face the day without his valium.” Reflecting what Herzberg calls the “valium panic” that swept suburbia in the late 1970s, Swaggart warned that, despite appearances, “the well-thought of executive, the socially acceptable suburbanite, the loving wife and mother” were likely addicted to psychoactive drugs. Only Jesus could truly cure anxiety. Hickey affirmed that the “first step to overcoming fear is to rebuke it every time it comes to us.” As for depression, she believed that “depression is unbelief, and unbelief is sin!” Even Schuller, the most positive of the positive thinkers, admitted that he suffered from fear and anxiety until he “cried out to God.” Faith cured his anxiety when all else failed. Schuller’s protégé Bill Hybels counseled his readers that if they “have problems and anxieties and tensions, the best thing [they] can do is firm up [their] commitment to Jesus Christ.”¹⁶

John MacArthur of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California has long been a staunch critic of the uses to which many pastors have put modern psychology. At the same time, he built a large counseling center on the basis of what is known as nouthetic counseling, a form of biblical counseling that derives its name from the Greek verb *noutheteo*, “to admonish.” The pastor and seminary professor Jay Adams, the father of nouthetic counseling, identified three central tasks of true biblical counseling in his seminal 1970 book *Competent to Counsel*. First, he asserted that true biblical counseling

¹⁶ David Herzberg, *Happy Pills*, 123-4; Hickey, *Fear Free, Faith Filled*, 7, 51; Robert H. Schuller, *The Be-Happy Attitudes: Eight Attitudes that Can Transform Your Life* (Waco: Word, 1985), 151; Marilyn Hickey, *Break the Generation Curse* (Denver: Marilyn Hickey Ministries, 1988), 84.

involves confronting Christians with scriptural teaching about their sin or problem. Second, he stated that this confrontation must center on “personal conference and discussion (counseling) directed toward bringing about change in the direction of greater conformity to biblical principles and practices.” Third, nouthetic counseling involved genuine concern, as opposed to condemnation, for the counselee. Pastoral counseling and teaching began “with scriptural presuppositions” and refused “to baptize Freud.” The Bible served as the primary, and sometimes the only, tool for helping patients overcome problematic emotions.¹⁷

Adams believed that counselors should focus on behaviors rather than feelings. He argued that “[p]eople feel bad because of bad behavior; feelings flow from actions.” Nouthetic counselors did not focus on reasons why counselees feel a certain way or how their present emotional state came about, but on what behaviors must change. In his discussion of depression, for example, Adams argued that “[s]in leads to guilt and depression, sinful handling of sin further complicates matters leading to greater guilt and deeper depression, *ad infinitum*.” Adams told the story of Millie, a depressed housewife who completely gave up on household chores, never left the house, and ignored her children. After years of ineffective Rogerian counseling, a nouthetic counselor told her that she was lazy and needed to get up, clean the house, and go to church. She complied and was cured of her depression. Adams believed that those like Millie who were facing nervous breakdowns were the most promising counseling patients because their

¹⁷ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 19, 44-5, 49-50.

overwhelming problems destroyed old routines and patterns of behavior. The counselor could at that point help them replace destructive behaviors with healthy ones.¹⁸

Nouthetic counseling has been influential among Calvinistic Baptists, including MacArthur and the enormously popular Minneapolis author and theologian John Piper, as well as conservative Presbyterians. This group constitutes a relatively small slice of American evangelicalism, however. Most megachurch pastors continued to focus on feelings and attitudes rather than behaviors. Hybels, for example, encouraged the anxious to ponder certain “peace principles” such as “decide what’s worth worrying about” and “concentrate on today’s problems.” Schuller characterized Jesus’s teaching as “a therapeutic exercise in replacing negative attitudes with positive attitudes.” Whether they believed that modern psychology could inform pastoral ministry or they called ministers to abandon Freud, Jung, and Rogers, successful pastors recognized that church members and potential church members increasingly looked to them to deal with pervasive anxiety and depression. If they chose not to address these problems, then churchgoers would look for a pastor who did.¹⁹

Friends and Family

Some Christian counselors have criticized Adams and his nouthetic approach for his failure to understand the communal aspects of problematic emotions. Pastors seeking to build large ministries during the 1970s did well if they provided help in dealing with interpersonal problems as well as maladaptive emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.

¹⁸ Ibid., 93, 141, 148, 170.

¹⁹ Hybels and Caress, *Caution: Christians Under Construction*, 98, 106; Schuller, *The Be-Happy Attitudes*, 16.

Reflecting the increased prominence of “network events” as sources of anxiety, evangelicals in the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated a marked concern over tensions within the American family. The historian Stephanie Coontz persuasively argues that much demographic data on the family is ambiguous. For example, despite popular consternation over divorce, the percentage of children between 1930 and 1980 who lived with both biological parents at age sixteen remained remarkably stable at roughly 78%. Furthermore, because of declining death rates, couples marrying at the end of the twentieth century were more likely to celebrate their fortieth anniversary than those marrying at the beginning of the century.²⁰

Those lamenting the decline of the family did have some data to bolster their argument, however. During the Great Depression, 80% of one-parent households came about because of death. By 1980, 40% of one-parent households were the result of death. The other 60% resulted from either divorce or the separation of parents who had never married. Furthermore, marriage as an institution seemed to decline in importance for the society at large. The number of unmarried people cohabiting increased 80% during the 1980s, and the proportion of those age 25-34 who began their own household with a partner declined from 83% in 1960 to 65% in 1990. The decline in marriage meant that the proportion of those divorced to those married tripled between 1970 and 1990, resulting in 142 divorced people for every 1,000 married people. Children growing up with both biological parents experienced changes as well. In 1975, 44% lived in homes where only the father worked. By 1988, this number had dropped to 25%. Although the

²⁰ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 16-18; Dorrian Apple Sweetser, “Broken Homes: Stable Risk, Changing Reason, Changing Forms,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* August 1985 (34): 711-2.

opportunity for a career perhaps alleviated some anxieties that Friedan identified in *The Feminine Mystique*, other anxieties took their place. Between 1986 and 1990, the percentage of women stating that they would stay at home with their children if financially able jumped from 33% to 56%.²¹

Pastor, author, international speaker, television preacher, wife, and mother Marilyn Hickey had no problem with women working outside the house. Like most evangelical preachers who spoke on the subject of the family, however, she ignored those statistics that pointed toward long-term stability and focused on those that seemed to indicate trouble in the American home. Hickey in fact made a career attempting to stop what she called the “‘the failure of the family’ phenomenon.” Families of all races and socioeconomic levels were disintegrating, Hickey believed, because “powerful, demonic forces” arrayed themselves against the oldest human institution. Even as all of these enemies threatened the family, Hickey reassured her readers that “God has lots of good things for you and your family” as a result of “His covenant with you as His child.”²²

Hickey directed much of her advice at women concerned for the spiritual health of their families. She called on Christians to “Satan-proof” their homes by anointing the doorposts and windows with oil. In order to protect their sexual relationship from impurity, she instructed husbands and wives to “pray over the bed together.” Hickey discussed the importance of the sexual relationship in detail, stressing that a good sex life “is vital to achieving a happy, healthy family home.” She exclaimed that having “a good

²¹ Felicity Barringer, “Changes in Family Patterns: Solitude and Single Parents,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1991.

²² Marilyn Hickey, *God’s Covenant For Your Family* (Denver: Marilyn Hickey Ministries, 1982), 9; Marilyn Hickey, *Satan-Proof Your Home* (Denver: Marilyn Hickey Ministries, 1991), 7.

strong physical relationship – one that is refreshing, one that is continuing – is wisdom!” Furthermore, the wife “should be just as delighted in physical love as her husband” and that both spouses “should be concerned that the other is fully and totally satisfied.” Hickey warned that “the results of sex outside of marriage are tragic,” so both spouses must guard against temptation by making sure that the other is happy at home.²³

Beyond the development of a healthy sex life, Hickey said little about protecting the husband-wife relationship. She was more concerned with protecting children from Satan and the world. Biblical truth and the filling of the Holy Spirit were the only safeguards against demonic schemes. Parents of children who attended public school had to maintain vigilance because all day their children’s “minds are being filled with death” in the form of “evolution, materialism” and lessons on “how to participate in ‘safe sex.’” Parents also had to speak positively to and about their children because of the supernatural power of words. Harsh words could destroy a child’s self-esteem and plant the seeds of rebellion. As much as churches worried about their failure to evangelize young people, they still saw the home as the most important front in the culture war. Thus, the same concerns over the loss of the next generation of church members that motivated the Church Growth Movement also provided fertile material for books and sermons on the state of the family.²⁴

All of the anointing with oil and positive confession did not seem to prevent the breakup of the family. Rising divorce rates among evangelical Christians sent preachers

²³ Hickey, *Satan-Proof Your Home*, 40, 55; Hickey, *God’s Covenant For Your Family*, 35, 41, 43-4, 46.

²⁴ Hickey, *God’s Covenant for Your Family*, 29; Marilyn Hickey, *Dear Marilyn* (Denver: Marilyn Hickey Ministries, 1985), 23; Hickey, *Satan-Proof Your Home*, 40.

scrambling to find the reasons why so many apparently happy couples ended up in court. The radio preacher and Southern Baptist megachurch pastor David Jeremiah settled on loneliness as the primary threat to the marriage relationship. He stated that “as many as ninety percent of those who get divorced confess that one reason for the breakup of their marriage was the unbearable loneliness of living together but being far apart.” He went so far as to call “married loneliness” the “best kept secret in the Christian church.” Married couples needed to turn to Jesus as the “Master Companion” so that they could be free to love each other unconditionally.²⁵

Jeremiah expanded his analysis of the pernicious effects of loneliness, calling it a “modern day epidemic,” one that had crept not only into the family but also the church, the workplace, and all other social settings. The church growth consultant Craig Kennet Miller believed that this “breakdown of meaningful relationships” provided an open door for churches. The influential church marketing expert George Barna, recognizing this sense of loneliness among the general public, taught that the product that churches offered an unchurched public was not salvation or connection to the divine, but relationships. Lee Strobel, a lead pastor at Willow Creek, believed that the key to convincing “unchurched Harry” to attend was to help him see “the church not as an institution but as a caring community where relational longings can be fulfilled.”²⁶

Megachurch preachers, not surprisingly, often spoke on the topic of friendship. Most pastors’ advice for the lonely was fairly straightforward, even trite. Hybels taught

²⁵ David Jeremiah, *Overcoming Loneliness*, rev.ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 20, 47, 50.

²⁶ Jeremiah, *Overcoming Loneliness*, 4; Craig Kennet Miller, *Baby Boomer Spirituality: The Essential Values of a Generation*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992), 18; George Barna, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 50; Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, 63.

his audience that if they will “learn to *be* a friend” then they will “have friends.” He admonished them to “be honest” and “be loyal.” His advice to “be comfortable” probably would not help someone already dealing with social anxiety, however. Hickey counseled a lonely divorced single mother to “start seeking opportunities for ministering to others” rather than “seeking others who can minister to you.” For the most part, though, Hickey encouraged the hurting to “take [their] feelings of rejection to God” and have him remove the fear “that people won’t like us.” Overcoming the fear of others, Hickey believed, was the best way to make friends.²⁷

Schuller even reinterpreted the sixth commandment (“thou shalt not kill”) so that it promised “the person who falls in love with life” that she will discover “that living can be an inspiring experience” and will lead to “a heart full of love for others.” Those who want this kind of love could make friends by visualizing themselves as “relaxed, charming, confident,” and “poised” in social situations. Schuller then made the somewhat startling statement that “[y]ou can actually change the personalities of other people through the power of your own imagination.” If self-consciousness about personal appearance made social situations awkward, Schuller informed readers that “[i]magination can change [their] physical appearance” as well. Schuller also rewrote the Beatitudes, boiling down the essence of “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt 5:7) to “[i]f you want to be happy, treat people right.”²⁸

²⁷ Hybels and Caress, *Caution: Christians Under Construction*, 76, 82, 84; Hickey, *Dear Marilyn*, 113; Marilyn Hickey, *Keys to Healing Rejection*, 2nd ed. (Denver: Marilyn Hickey Ministries, 1982), 13; Hickey, *Fear Free, Faith Filled*, 173.

²⁸ Robert H. Schuller, *God’s Way to the Good Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 68; Robert H. Schuller, *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967), 40-1, 45; Schuller, *The Be-Happy Attitudes*, 132.

The most successful megachurch pastors embedded within the structure of their churches processes to help churchgoers make friends. As political scientist Robert Putnam demonstrates, connecting people to one another in the late twentieth century was both a much-needed service and not at all easy. Beginning in the mid-1960s, participation in community organizations declined dramatically. The decline occurred at different rates in different types of organizations, but an undeniable general trend has given pause to those who see community ties as integral to participatory democracy. The decline in community connections, what Putnam calls “social capital,” is also evident in informal community interaction. Between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s, the percentage of those reporting that they had friends over to their house declined from approximately 48% to approximately 38% percent. During that same period, the average number of times per year a person entertained in the home declined from just over fourteen to just over eight. The scene of these informal gatherings did not shift to another location, as the frequency of visiting restaurants with friends remained steady. Furthermore, between 1970 and 1998, the per capita number of all types of restaurants declined while the per capita number of fast-food restaurants doubled.²⁹

Megachurches of the 1970s and 1980s in particular faced a hurdle that churches operating during the 1950s and early 1960s did not. Putnam notes that attendance at major sporting events doubled between 1960 and 1997. At the same time, participation on sports teams plummeted. Participants became spectators. Putnam observed similar trends in the church world. Amidst an overall decline in church attendance, he found an even greater decline in church participation. In the 1950s, approximately 25% of

²⁹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 15-8, 99, 102.

Americans reported participating in church activities other than the worship service. By the 1990s, this percentage had dropped by half to approximately one in eight. In the same way that athletes became fans, active church members became occasional church attenders.³⁰

The Sunday morning spectacular that most megachurches used to attract worshippers could therefore be a double-edged sword. Once people came for the show, they might be less likely to join and become involved in church life. Nevertheless, Lee Strobel, a lead pastor at Willow Creek, saw the large worship service as an asset for attracting and keeping the unchurched. He claimed that for first-time visitors “their number-one value is anonymity.” Anonymity gave the visitor time to acclimate themselves to the church culture and allowed them to maintain some control over their church experience. Strobel went so far as to warn that “[t]he more unchurched visitors’ anonymity is violated, the more likely that his first visit will be his last.”³¹

Strobel recognized that at some point visitors would have to become invested members of the church. The facilitation of friendships might take place on several levels at a given church. Bob Roberts believed that church architecture could help the relationship building process. The large atrium at Southeast Christian Church allowed guests and members to mingle. Passing conversations over coffee in the atrium were however insufficient in building authentic communities. Strobel recommended that churches have Bible studies for spiritual seekers so that non-Christians might have a safe place to ask questions and build relationships. Roberts believed that large Sunday School

³⁰ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 71-72, 113-4.

³¹ Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, 171-5.

classes would also help visitors remain somewhat anonymous while also slowly moving them into a circle of friends. At Saddleback, Warren devised a series of four classes, the first of which introduced prospective members to “our salvation, our statement, our strategy, and our structure.” He wanted to move people from the crowd (made up of all those who attend) to the congregation (made up all those who are members) to the core group of volunteers and ministry leaders.³²

Whatever specific form small groups took, megachurch pastors believed them to be vital to the church’s success. Writing about changes in Willow Creek’s structure during the late 1980s, Lynn Hybels stated that “in order for Willow Creek to grow larger, it had to grow smaller.” She asserted that “without a pervasive structure of small groups, the megachurch model is vulnerable and limited.” Schuller set out to build a large church because he thought that if “we only had several thousand members” then “we could have large and effective groups for every type of human being.” Putnam notes that the January 1991 meeting calendar at Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral included groups such as Conquering Compulsive Behaviors, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Cancer Conquerors, and Women Who Love Too Much. Tommy Barnett at the twenty-thousand member Phoenix First Assembly developed one hundred eighty different ministries targeted at people of all walks of life, from AIDS patients to the handicapped to the divorced to the depressed.³³

³² Russell with Russell, *When God Builds a Church*, 212; Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, 175-6, 207; Warren “New Churches for a New Generation,” 228-9.

³³ Hybels and Hybels, *Rediscovering Church*, 104, 130; Schuller, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities*, 10; Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 66; Tommy Barnett with Bobbie Stottlemeyer, *There’s a Miracle in Your House* (Orlando: Creation House, 1993), 145; Tommy Barnett with Sarah Coleman, *Portraits of Vision* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 25.

Putnam describes one way that small groups at Saddleback have created social capital where none existed before. Saddleback occasionally hands out lawn signs for members. These lawn signs facilitate meetings between residents of a neighborhood who may have attended church together for years but never knew one another. These neighbors might then form a neighborhood small group or a targeted ministry group, such as groups for those facing cancer, groups for those who like to play volleyball, or even “a ‘Geeks for God Ministry’ for Cisco-certified network professionals.” At the same time, the need for lawn signs to help identify fellow church members in the same neighborhood hints that the megachurch goal of overcoming loneliness and pastoring members through small groups might not be all that successful. Of the tens of thousands of people who attended Saddleback by the early 1990s, only about a thousand people had entered the core group. Just under two thousand attended a weekly small group. By 1994, Willow Creek had over sixteen thousand in attendance each week, but only 7,500 participating in small groups. Thumma and Travis estimate that between 40% and 50% of all those who attend a megachurch on any given Sunday are not committed members and do not belong to a small group. Churches of all sizes deal with moving those who attend worship services into Bible studies. In smaller churches, however, the pastor or another staff members is more likely to know the names of those who remain outside of the small group structure. Megachurches pour an enormous amount of energy, and employ a great deal of rhetoric, in attempting to alleviate loneliness. They have nevertheless wrestled with the same trend toward spectatorship and away from participation that has marked the rest of American society.³⁴

³⁴ Robert D. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein with Don Cohen, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 128-9; Hybels and Hybels, *Rediscovering*

Self-Esteem

Pastors also taught the lonely that they could make friends by somewhat paradoxically focusing more on themselves. Schuller wrote that those who “lack a deep inner sense of self-esteem and self-worth” will “constantly have problems with other people.” On the other hand, those who “affirm the dignity of [their] fellow human beings” feel a wonderful sense of self-respect. The path to self-esteem is circular. Those who love others and treated them with respect feel better about themselves, have more confidence, and make more friends. Those who lack self-esteem unintentionally distort interpersonal relationships, lose friends, and lose confidence. Loneliness results in more feelings of failure and harsher self-condemnation. No wonder Schuller identified low self-esteem as one of the “most common failure-producing factors that must be overcome if you hope to become the person you want to be.”³⁵

Given the vicious circle of low self-esteem, and the importance of healthy self-confidence in achieving personal dreams, the situation for those prone to self-criticism appears hopeless. Hybels warned, however, that “[i]t is destructive to attack yourself and dwell on your weaknesses.” He believed that “[r]emorse, regret, guilt, and alienation” all resulted “when you turn your back on God.” Thus, self-esteem comes about through repentance, or returning to God. For Schuller, repentance was little more than positive thinking. He believed that “seeing the lovely in the unlovely” and “spotting the rose in

Church, 123, 130; Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 103.

³⁵ Schuller, *The Be-Happy Attitudes*, 139; Robert H. Schuller, *Success is Never Ending, Failure is Never Final* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988) 21; Robert H. Schuller, *You Can Become the Person You Want to Be* (New York: W. Clement Stone, 1973), 39.

the desert” were in fact “the secret to self-esteem.” He also encouraged people to repeat to themselves certain mantras, such as “I’ve been too self-critical” and “I’ve been my own worst enemy.” Hickey reassured Christians who might be wary of such self-talk that it “isn’t prideful to say good things about yourself” because “according to God’s Word” you “*are* a giant.” The Christian’s birthright included experiencing this reality daily. According to Hickey, “Christians are supposed to look and perform better than non-Christians.” Christian should strive to “be the very best in every area of your life – the best dressed, the best looking, the most intelligent of any group you are a part of.”³⁶

The focus on self-esteem related directly to one overarching theme in a great deal of megachurch preaching. To paraphrase a Campus Crusade for Christ tract, megachurch preachers wanted worshippers to know that God loved them and had a wonderful plan for their lives. Megachurch Christianity offered bored suburbanites a way to break out of the mundane. Schuller believed that “[n]othing leads to more despair and frustration than the gnawing feeling that something’s missing from your life.” He claimed that “following God’s plan for your life is the soundest, surest way to self-confidence.” Schuller and others like him preached that their hearers were important to God and that excitement awaited those who followed Jesus. People were more than their social security numbers. They had talents and purpose. In a bureaucratized and highly specialized economic system, where people lived in homogenous neighborhoods that increasingly looked the

³⁶ Hybels and Caress, *Christians Under Construction*, 62, 115; Schuller, *God’s Way to the Good Life*, 96; Hickey, *Fear Free, Faith Failed*, 110, 115, 134.

same from coast to coast, churchgoers found the message of a unique plan for each unique individual refreshing.³⁷

Pastors repeatedly affirmed that individual Christians were important to God. Hybels told worshipers that they “must be worth *something*” because “God wouldn’t allow His own Son Jesus to die for you if you were just a worthless individual.” Hybels even told worshippers that God was “hopelessly in love” with them. He wanted members at Willow Creek to believe that “God thinks I’m special” and “God thinks I’m pretty important.” Betzer also affirmed a belief in God’s intense interest in individuals, telling depressed Christians that they should take heart from the knowledge that “the angels of heaven are watching you” and that “[e]ternity is focusing on you.” The need to convince the unchurched that Jesus loved them led Schuller to conclude that he should not talk about sin and judgment. He argued that the unchurched “have no trouble believing they’re sinners” and that “the most difficult task is to help people believe how beautiful they can become if they will allow the love of Christ to fill their lives.” Schuller taught that Jesus treated “every person as if he or she were a beautiful gem of infinite worth and irreplaceable value.” Although Betzer, Hybels, Schuller, and other megachurch pastors almost certainly did not know the names of the vast majority of people who attended their churches, they wanted them to take heart from the fact that God did. In fact, in the words of Schuller, God wanted to be “the best friend you’ll ever have in life or eternity.”³⁸

³⁷ Schuller, *The Be-Happy Attitudes*, 101; Schuller *You Can Become the Person You Want to Be*, 55.

³⁸ Schuller, *Success is Never Ending, Failure is Never Final*, 100; Schuller *The 10 Best Messages*, 37, 42; Schuller *You Can Become the Person You Want to Be*, 30.

Hybels in particular hoped that his teaching on the individual's worth would serve to combat the misconception that "Christianity is boring." Based upon God's love for individuals, Hybels concluded that there is "adventure in knowing your life is *worth something* in God's eternal plan." Jesus "offers [believers] a life that will be full and meaningful in a way [they] never dreamed possible." He believed that "God has power to make beautiful things happen" in the lives of Christians. Hybels specifically claimed that "God the Father has a special mission for each of us" and "a plan for us that takes into account our unique talents and gifts." These positive affirmations carried a warning, however. He admonished his congregation that if they "settle for less than the exciting life of faith God has for us, we hurt Him deeply."³⁹

Hybels' focus on God's plan for believers grew in part out of his early relationship with Robert Schuller. Hybels described Schuller as "the only credible adult who had given us any encouragement" during the early days of Willow Creek. Schuller built his entire career expounding what he called "Possibility Thinking," a slight reformulation of ideas derived from Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Peale actually preached at Garden Grove during its early days when it met in a drive-in movie theater, and Peale was there and again when the church dedicated its first building in 1961. Schuller translated Peale's belief in the power of words and thoughts to propel Christians toward success for the 1960s and beyond, and gained personal fame and a wide hearing for his life philosophy through his well-produced *Hour of Power* television program that began broadcasting in 1970.⁴⁰

³⁹ Hybels and Caress, *Caution: Christians Under Construction*, 12-3, 24, 36, 39, 41, 46, 51, 125.

⁴⁰ Roy M. Anker, *Self-Help and Popular Religion in Modern American Culture* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 148-9.

Schuller's message has never waivered since the publication of *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking* in 1967. He summarized his entire teaching focus in the Positive Thinkers Creed:

“When faced with a mountain I will not quit. I will keep on striving until I climb over, find a pass through, tunnel underneath, or stay and turn the mountain into a goldmine with God's help.”

Schuller believed that, armed with this outlook on life, depressed and disappointed Americans could achieve their dreams and find happiness. They had to remain vigilant lest Impossibility Thinkers, or those who abandon dreams at the first sign of difficulty, influence their beliefs. Schuller even admonished his hearers to “never verbalize a negative emotion.” The Possibility Thinker was aware of problems but “assumes there must be a way to separate, insulate, eliminate, or sublimate the negative aspect in the situation.” Possibility Thinking must become a way of life for Christians in particular. Jesus bore a cross that resulted in glory for him and his followers. He faced a tremendous obstacle that he turned to his advantage. Schuller therefore concluded that “Jesus is the greatest possibility thinker who ever lived.” Being like Jesus means being a Possibility Thinker.⁴¹

For Impossibility Thinkers obstacles and hardship lead to anxiety, fear, and depression. For Possibility Thinkers, obstacles produce excitement because they remind them of “the risks necessary to accomplish great deeds.” Schuller, in his ever alliterative manner, reminded his flock that an “obstacle becomes an opportunity” and a “problem becomes a possibility.” The only way to avoid problems was to “live a cautious life,” but

⁴¹ Schuller, *You Can Become the Person You Want to Be*, 3; Robert H. Schuller *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967), 184.

Schuller warned that such problem-free living results in boredom. Boredom leads to fatigue, and fatigue prevents individuals from ever attempting to accomplish anything of importance. Taking risks and employing Possibility Thinking are the only ways to escape this downward spiral.⁴²

Schuller told his listeners that, if they wanted to realize their dreams, they had to “[f]ocus clearly on the screen of your mind the image of the kind of person you want to be and let your God-sparked imagination work its miracles.” According to Schuller, “[t]he dream actually begins in the mind of God” and then “God matches the dream to the dreamer.” Real excitement came when Christians “dream the impossible dream with God.” Borrowing directly from Abraham Maslow, Schuller taught that after struggling through problems and remembering the Positive Thinkers Creed, the dreamer enjoyed a Peak Experience, which Schuller defined as “a positive experience that affirms to you who you are and leaves you with an awareness that you are more than you ever thought you were.” Once on the path to success, the Possibility Thinker ascends to greater heights and reaches their full human potential.⁴³

For self-esteem preachers and Possibility Thinkers, individuals achieved a healthy sense of self not through accomplishing something worthwhile or achieving personal financial security, but through altering thought and speech patterns. Financial security and healthy relationship were effects, not causes. For a generation of Americans coming of age dealing with “the new insecurity,” thinking positively was easier than finding a

⁴² Schuller, *The 10 Best Messages*, 9, 66; Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, 66, 118.

⁴³ Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking*, 45; Schuller *Success is Never Ending, Failure is Never Final*, 27, 36-7; Schuller, *The 10 Best Messages*, 79.

stable career or a compatible mate. Possibility thinking and self-esteem preaching also shifted the locus of control to the individual rather than social structures. As so much seemed out of joint in post-1960s America, individual thoughts seemed to be one of the few realms in which a person might appear to have some authority. It is impossible to know if Schuller's positive messages actually helped large numbers of people, but enough Americans felt that his teachings were key in helping them overcome their anxiety to keep his ministry going into the twenty-first century.

Schuller has even seen his possibility thinking gain a hearing in the African American megachurch world. Floyd Flake of the Greater Allen AME Church recast possibility thinking as "bootstrapping." He defines the term as:

"The *process* of achieving success by willing it, against the odds through self directed action. It is a *mindset* that allows you to rise over and above the ordinary and become an extraordinary person by taking responsibility for your own thoughts, feelings, words, actions, and life circumstances. It is a *value system* that directs your relationship with yourself, your neighbors, and your environment."

In words that could easily appear in a Schuller book, Flake wrote that bootstrapping is about "bringing reality to your dreams" and that "bootstrappers do not see themselves as victims but have confidence in their ability to rise beyond the limited expectations others have imposed on them." Although Schuller drew his ideas from Peale, and through Peale the tradition of New England New Thought, Flake understood bootstrapping as deriving from his African American heritage, and lauds his teachers and relatives who "taught me to expunge words like *can't*, *inferior*, and *second class* from my vocabulary."⁴⁴

Perhaps more than any other African American preacher, T.D. Jakes has parlayed a message of self-esteem and emotional wholeness into a successful megachurch and

⁴⁴ Floyd Flake with Donna Marie Williams, *The Way of the Bootstrapper: Nine Action Steps for Achieving Your Dreams* (Harper: San Francisco, 1999), 3, 7.

megaministry. In answering critics in the African American church who charged him with abandoning the social activism that has defined much of his tradition, Jakes responded that “[o]ur issues are evolving, our problems are evolving, and our leadership is evolving.” He stated that “[t]he idea we are monolithic is antiquated” and that African Americans constitute “a very diverse community and the idea that we have just one kind of problem is antiquated.” Jakes instead wanted African Americans to overcome a victim mentality and grow into emotional wholeness. African American women in particular have responded to Jakes’ message. He originally published his book *Woman, Thou Art Loosed!* in 1993, and for many years conducted an annual conference with same title. African American suburbanites, like their white counterparts, adhere to the suburban social religion, rendering Flake’s and Jakes’ message just as attractive to them as Peale and Schuller has been to whites.⁴⁵

In analyzing conversion narratives among attendees at various Vineyard churches, the anthropologist T. M. Luhrmann notes that converts “almost always . . . talk about wanting ‘more,’ as if the volume control of their life is set too low and the sound is weak and tinny.” These converts have come to evangelicalism at a time when evangelicals have emphasized “a deeply human, even vulnerable God who loves us unconditionally and wants nothing more than to be our friend, our best friend.” Lurhman claims that this shift toward “a more intimate, personal, and supernaturally representative divine” is “the

⁴⁵ Jakes made this statement on BET’s *Meet the Faith* program in 2006. It is quoted in Shayne Lee and Philip Luke Sinitiere *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 59, 66.

dominant shift in American spirituality of the last forty years.” Protestant megachurch pastors have simultaneously responded to, benefited from, and helped cause this shift.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Exactly fifty years after Peale released his blockbuster, Rick Warren published *The Purpose Driven Life*. The website for the book asserts that “[s]elf-help books suggest that people should look within, at their own desires and dreams, but Rick Warren says the starting place must be with God and his eternal purposes for each life.” This statement reveals the ambivalence at the heart of therapeutic preaching. Warren ostensibly built his church by preaching messages that began by addressing the felt needs of the unchurched rather than “God and his eternal purposes.” At the same time, Warren and his publishers sense that focusing on the “desires and dreams” of those who do not know Christ might cater to selfishness. When Americans’ foremost concerns center on psychological wholeness and freedom from maladaptive behaviors or emotions, then innovative pastors can apply spiritual answers to the questions that people are asking. Those pastors who most effectively market their spiritual answers achieve wild success. *The Purpose Drive Life* sold thirty million copies in only five years, with *Publisher’s Weekly* declaring it “the bestselling non-fiction hardback book in history.”⁴⁷

Warren’s publishers draw a false dichotomy between self-help books “that suggest people should look within” and religiously oriented books like *The Purpose Driven Life*. The most successful titles in the entire self-help corpus have come from

⁴⁶ T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 13, 35, 43.

⁴⁷ “The New Purpose Driven Life “ accessed December 27, 2013, <http://purposedriven.com/books/pdlbook/#purpose>.

Christian writers. In addition to Peale, Dale Carnegie, author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) was a professing Christian whose dictum about making lemons from lemonade almost certainly inspired Schuller's analogy about making goldmines out of mountains. Although not a Christian at the time he published *The Road Less Traveled* in 1978, M. Scott Peck was born again in 1980 and referenced his beliefs in subsequent books. According to the cover of his most popular book, devout Mormon Stephen Covey has sold fifteen million copies of his *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* since its publication in 1989. Houston megachurch pastor Joel Osteen found tremendous success with his 2004 book *Your Best Life Now*. The most recognizable titles in the self-help corpus of the twentieth century have come from the pens of Christian authors. Warren's focus on God in *The Purpose Driven Life* is not unique.

The same self-help message that earned megachurch pastors millions of dollars in book sales also brought them thousands of worshippers. Church growth experts and preachers like Schuller not only found a public ready and willing to listen to their sermons, but a whole generation of pastors like Hybels and Warren who wanted to revolutionize the Sunday morning sermon. Therapy replaced moralism and evangelism. As sales of Valium and then Prozac spiked, as graduating seniors received multiple copies of M. Scott Peck and Stephen Covey books, and as addicts of all kinds flocked to support groups, pastors provided seven steps to dealing with anxiety or forty days to finding life's purpose. The suburban social religion held out a sense of personal satisfaction and happiness as the highest goals. Pastors who most effectively embraced rather than challenged that idea often found themselves pastoring enormous churches.

They in effect became object lessons showing the power of positive thinking, and their public lives ostensibly substantiated the messages they expounded.

Chapter 5 Politicians

On February 13, 2001, news cameras captured federal marshals wheeling pastor Greg Dixon out of Indianapolis Baptist Temple on a gurney. The previous September, a federal court ordered the church to leave its building by November 14. Indianapolis Baptist Temple owed the IRS \$6 million in unpaid Social Security and Medicare taxes. To pay the bill, the court appointed a receiver to sell the church's twenty-two acre property. Church members responded by holding a non-stop vigil in the locked church building as they waited for authorities to arrive. They declared that they would not resist the marshals, but would allow them to smash doors and windows to enter the building and then carry them out to the street. Neither Dixon nor his followers sustained injuries during the eviction. After the federal seizure, Indianapolis Baptist Temple began meeting in Manual High School, agreeing to pay rent to the school district for the use of their facilities.¹

The fight between Indianapolis Baptist Temple and the IRS began long before 2000. The IRS originally revoked the church's tax-exempt status in 1995, although the church ceased deducting Social Security and Medicare taxes from employee paychecks in 1984 and voluntarily renounced its tax-exempt status in 1986. The church had actually disbanded as an organization in 1983 so that it would no longer have to deal with the federal government, or so it thought. Dixon conducted church business through a

¹ "Indianapolis Church Seized by IRS," *Christian Century*, February 28, 2001, 11; "Security Guards Take Over," *Indiana Post-Tribune*, February 16, 2001.

corporation he set up, the aptly named Not a Church, Inc. This long-running and convoluted effort to evade IRS oversight attracted other anti-government groups. David Duke running mate and Patriot Movement leader Bo Gritz once broadcast his radio show from the Indianapolis Baptist Temple sanctuary. Dixon had also spoken at a white supremacist rally in Colorado in 1992. Although the members of the church pledged that they would not violently resist the seizure of church property, militia members from around the country came to Indianapolis to defend Dixon and his followers. The tense situation nevertheless ended without incident.²

Dixon was not a fringe figure among evangelical Christians, at least not initially. He had been involved in local politics since founding the church in 1950. Over the next decades he did not simply build a megachurch, but a quasi-denomination centered on the eight thousand-member Indianapolis Baptist Temple. He was also a leader among independent fundamental Baptists nationally, receiving honorary doctorates from Bob Jones University and Baptist Bible College. Dixon entered the national political scene in 1979 when he became the first national secretary for, and a founding member of, Moral Majority. The relationship did not last long, however. In 1983 Dixon broke with Jerry Falwell, declaring that he could not endorse Ronald Reagan's reelection bid because the Republican champion had not protected religious liberty. Cal Thomas had to disavow Dixon's statements publically and declare him out of step with Moral Majority. Dixon's political activism ultimately took its toll on church membership, so much so that by the

² Rex W. Huppke, "Church Holds 24-Hour Vigil in Federal Tax Seizure," *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, December 10, 2000; "Indianapolis Church Rallies Over Dispute with IRS," *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, March 5, 2000; "IRS, State Yank Indianapolis Church's Tax Exempt Status," *Indiana Post-Tribune*, July 9, 1995.

time of the standoff Indianapolis Baptist Temple had dwindled to under a thousand people.³

Dixon's church declined and his cause found little support because he adopted a more prophetic stance toward the suburban social religion. Although politically conservative, he questioned the goodness of the United States government – including the Republican Party – and advocated civil disobedience far more than the suburban social religion allowed. His pronouncements that the raid on his church signaled that “the experiment in religious liberty that began in 1791 is effectively over” and that tax exemption is part of Satan's plan to destroy the New Testament Church were a little much for those who still stood in a nonsectarian way for God and Country. Several families, including some of Dixon's relatives, transferred to suburban Emmanuel Baptist Church because, according to Emmanuel pastor Duane Schnelle, they wanted “to hear a message from the Bible, how to be a better husband or father, and not get so caught up in the political arena.” Dixon's choice to entitle his guide to the “underground church” *The Trail of Blood Revisited* reflects his adversarial stance toward culture. The original *Trail of Blood*, a pamphlet published by Texas Baptist J.M. Carroll in 1931, is a reconstruction of church history that casts Baptists in particular as a persecuted remnant of steadfast believers who for two thousand years fought against an apostate, compromised, state-supported religious establishment.⁴

³ “Bio-Dr. Greg Dixon,” Biblical Law Center, accessed July 23, 2014; <http://biblicallawcenter.com/dr-dixon>; Jeff Glasser, “A Flat Refusal to Render Unto Caesar,” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 29, 2000, 22; “Won't Be Prosecuted,” *Indiana Post-Tribune*, June 11, 1987; “Ministers: Falwell to Fail at PTL,” *Indiana Post-Tribune*, March 30, 1987; Bill Zlatos, “Support in Flux, State Fundamentalists Won't Back Reagan,” *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel*, May 23, 1984.

⁴ Greg Dixon, *The Trail of Blood Revisited: Christ's True Church, Its Past, Present and Future* (Indianapolis: Temple Books, 2005), 19, 125; Glasser, “A Flat Refusal to Render Unto Caesar,” 22.

This chapter focuses on the political leanings of megachurch pastors. Although white and African American megachurch pastors differ with respect to electoral politics, they generally affirm the suburban social religion and avoid prophetic pronouncements that might call into question the American Dream of personal fulfillment and security based on meritocratic consumerism. White megachurch pastors focus on self-reliance and self-determination. They espouse a kind of moral meritocracy, one that holds out hope of personal and national success as a reward for sexual and financial self-control. African American churches have generally been more positive about the federal government's role in the economy, but they too focus on self-control and self-discipline as pathways to success within the system rather than question the system itself. Jeremiah Wright is just as unique among African American megachurch pastors as Greg Dixon is among whites.

The jeremiads from megachurch pastors both black and white repeatedly sounded the familiar theme of the demise of the country because of both the absence of republican virtue among the citizenry and the imposing presence of power-hungry federal government that stifled free enterprise through excessive taxation. Nations and individuals cannot survive, they believed, without cultivating an ethics of personal restraint, hard work, and self-reliance. After looking at these pastors' sexual ethics, the chapter moves on to look at their beliefs regarding the free market. Even their pronouncements on foreign policy – most of which reflect a virulent anticommunism reminiscent of the 1950s – reflect this focus on self-reliance and meritocracy. African American megachurches have most often supported Democratic candidates. Some, such as Floyd Flake of New York's Greater Allen Cathedral, have even held public office as Democrats. There is however a noticeable trend toward conservative politics among

African American megachurch pastors, especially those in the South. Thus, both black and white megachurch pastors assume the truth of the tenets of the suburban social religion, regardless of their formal political affiliations.

White Megachurches and the New Christian Right

Moral Majority is perhaps the most visible modern example of the power of America's civil religion. The pastors involved in the group's founding saw almost no difference between their faith and their citizenship. When faced with the specter of a populous that did not at least pay lip service to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they believed that the collapse of America's civil religion would have dire consequences for their place in American society. Megachurch pastors felt this danger more acutely than their colleagues at smaller churches. Their institutions dealt with the government on questions of taxation, land use, and educational standards simply because they employed more people in a wider array of occupations and owned more property. If the government should become unfriendly towards them and, for example, repeal blue laws, allow a strip club to move in across the street, or threaten their tax-exempt status, church membership roles and tithing receipts, not to mention their standing in their local communities, might suffer.

White megachurch pastors found an audience ready to hear their political messages. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Republican Party emerged as a truly national party. Overtly racist politics no longer appealed to an electorate increasingly concentrated in the South's metropolitan areas as opposed to the Black Belt counties that dominated southern politics until the 1960s. A new urban and suburban white middle class led this new electorate. Race-baiting was now bad for business. At the same time, they opposed

high taxes and government regulation that might retard economic expansion. They therefore did not support expenditures for what the political scientists Earl Black and Merle Black call “the have littles and have nots” who benefited most from Medicaid, food stamps, and income assistance. This new middle class was thoroughly in line with the ideals of the suburban meritocracy. Reagan was so successful among this group because, according to the Blacks, he successfully blended “themes from the entrepreneurial individualistic culture and the traditionalist heritage.” Reagan was in a sense more southern than Lyndon Johnson or Jimmy Carter. Internal ideological shifts within the Democratic Party also alienated those in the emerging Sun Belt from the Party of the Fathers. As the Republican Party came to reflect the political philosophy of the New South, Republican fortunes in national elections turned dramatically.⁵

That a Californian from Illinois could win over the South and the nation reveals that the conservative ideals of the Reagan Revolution now had national appeal, a trend that the Blacks believe culminated in the 1994 mid-term elections. With their stress on these “Republican” values of entrepreneurial success, personal responsibility, and traditional values, white megachurches tend to be associated with Republican politics. One survey of members of Calvary Chapel, Vineyard, and some Foursquare churches found that 62% of attenders described themselves as Republicans, while only 16% described themselves as Democrats. Furthermore 68% described themselves as in some way conservative while only 6% described themselves as liberal. The divide is even more striking with respect to the pastors of these churches. An amazing 96% of Calvary Chapel pastors described themselves as conservative and none called themselves even slightly

⁵ Earl Black and Merle Black, *Politics and Society in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 48, 49, 315.

liberal. In the 1992 election, 93% of Calvary Chapel pastors and 87% of Vineyard pastors voted for George H. W. Bush. No Calvary Chapel pastors voted for Clinton, and only 1% of Vineyard pastors did so.⁶

These heavy conservative leanings should not be surprising given that white megachurches found, and continue to find, themselves in a conservative milieu regardless of their region. Black and Black define a county as “partisan” if a majority of its citizens voted for the same party in three of the four elections between 1968 and 1980. We can expand their analysis to include the eight elections from 1968 until 1996 and identify a county as partisan if it supported the same party in six of those eight elections. Counties supporting the same party in less than six of those elections are “mixed.”⁷

This analysis focuses on those counties within the thirty metropolitan statistical areas listed Table 1. These metropolitan areas with the highest concentration of megachurches encompass 167 counties, 75 of which contain megachurches. Of these, seventy-five counties, forty-seven of them are partisan Republican counties, while only three are partisan Democratic. Furthermore, the list includes fifteen mixed counties that lean Republican in that they saw a Republican majority in five of the eight elections. Seven of these fifteen counties are in Georgia and voted for Carter twice before becoming solidly Republican in the next five elections. Even counting George Wallace as Democrat in 1968, only six of the mixed counties lean toward the Democrats. Four counties

⁶ Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 209, 223.

⁷ Black and Black, *Politics and Society in the South*, 267;

(Rutherford and Sumner in Tennessee, Stanislaus in California, and Clayton in Georgia) did not lean in any direction.⁸

Thus, approximately 83% of those counties with the highest concentration of megachurches were either solidly Republican or leaned Republican. The solidly partisan Republican counties included thirty-four in the Sun Belt states, but also included counties like Kent in Michigan, Sangamon in Illinois, Hamilton in Indiana, and Larimer in Colorado. Those mixed counties that leaned Republican were almost all in the Sun Belt, but did include Whatcom in Washington, Boulder in Colorado, and Shasta in far northern California. A new Republican consensus began uniting suburban counties in all regions of the country. Megachurches of course did not cause this political shift, nor did the political shift cause the megachurch phenomenon. White megachurches did however operate in an economically and politically conservative environment, and their messages and methods had to accord with that culture if they wanted to avoid alienating potential worshippers.

The Family, Secular Humanism, and the Next Generation

Because of their status as religious institutions, conservative activist megachurches embodied a particular brand of conservatism, one that more libertarian-minded conservatives rejected. Following George H. Nash's taxonomy, the New Christian Right was traditionalist and virulently, even anachronistically, anticommunist. They were republicans in a more classical sense. Those associated with the Moral Majority constantly asserted that the virtue of the people was the only force that could save America from decline and judgment. Their republicanism, however, focused on not

⁸ County-level voting data for these elections is derived from Dave Leip, "Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections," accessed July-August, 2014, <http://uselectionatlas.org>.

on breeding or education or even wealth as the basis for leadership, but on a Christian character and a commitment to hard work and personal responsibility. According to D. James Kennedy, the United States “can never have good government without godly people.” Falwell summed up his view of the relationship between society and morality with a quote from, of all people, José Ortega y Gasset: “Men are qualified for civil liberties in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains up on their own appetites.”⁹

Falwell and his friends focused on the family because they believed “America’s families are her strength, and they symbolize the miracle of America.” In a sometimes shockingly explicit handbook on sexual intercourse, LaHaye argued that families encourage men to cultivate self-control and responsibility by forcing them to restrain and channel their powerful sexual urges. Those who eschew family life, and in particular engage in sex outside of marriage, do not just break God’s law but display their lack of self-restraint and unwillingness to take on responsibility. Kennedy lamented that “bizarre sexual practices” were “now protected as ‘rights,’” while “high courts” voided “laws that once provided order and restraint.” He described the family as “the essential basic unit of civilization, while promiscuity and aberrant sexual behavior destroy lives.”¹⁰

This theme of self-restraint and personal responsibility colored all discussions of sexual ethics. Moral Majority co-founder and FBC Atlanta pastor Charles Stanley

⁹ D. James Kennedy, *A Nation in Shame: Ample Evidence of America’s Continuing Drift Toward Godlessness* (Ft. Lauderdale: Coral Ridge Ministries, 1987), 86. Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America!* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 14.

¹⁰ Falwell, *Listen, America!*, 121; Michael Lienesch, *Redeeming America: Piety and Polity in the New Christian Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 56-7; D. James Kennedy with Nelson Black, *Character and Destiny: A Nation in Search of its Soul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 13, 25.

preached that “pornography, drugs, and the occult all destroy man’s resistance and divide his mind,” to the extent that his “total concern becomes self-satisfaction.” The person addicted to pornography becomes apathetic about everything else. Falwell associate Ron Godwin wrote that pornographers are “put off by accountability and responsibility.” David Jeremiah, who succeeded LaHaye as pastor of Scott Memorial Baptist Church in El Cajon, California, attacked pornography because it “teaches that sex is divorced from love, commitment, morality and responsibility.” He goes on to state, without citing any evidence, that “every communist state has virtually outlawed the trade in pornographic magazines, books, and films” because they understand that these things destroy personal character. Another Falwell associate, Charles Keating of later “Keating Five” infamy, called for the election of men of “strong character” because men of “weak character” will not want to do anything to curb the consumption of pornography.¹¹

Homosexuality is also the result of fathers failing to live up to their responsibilities. Falwell claimed that “[t]he homosexual crisis is really spawned by the family crisis that is going on.” According to Falwell, “male leadership in the family falters and as female leadership takes over out of desperation, young people will gain a sense of security from their mother rather than from their father.” Sounding a familiar refrain, Jeremiah believed that homosexuals come from homes with absent fathers and overbearing mothers. He went further and claimed that “[c]hildren raised in loving, well-disciplined homes where mother and father are good role models for their children, rarely become homosexuals.” Because fathers do not restrain their desire for leisure or sex with

¹¹ Charles Stanley, *Stand Up, America!* (Atlanta: In Touch Ministries, 1980), 41-2; Jerry Falwell, ed. *How You Can Help Clean Up America* (Washington: Moral Majority, 1981), 21, 52; David Jeremiah, *Before Its Too Late* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 69.

women other than their wives, children grow up confused about gender. The republic again crumbles because of lack of virtue.¹²

A philosophy that these pastors identified as secular humanism lurks behind the permissiveness that destroys good character. Kennedy charged that “[a]bortion, infanticide, homosexuality, divorce, euthanasia, gambling, pornography, and suicide are simply a portion of the ethical agenda of secular humanists.” Secular humanism is an amorphous term, often standing in for anything that opposes conservative Protestantism. When they described secular humanism, those associated with the Moral Majority had in mind the definitions and polemical literature of the wildly influential Presbyterian missionary and theologian Francis Schaeffer. Schaeffer was born in Pennsylvania and attended Presbyterian seminaries before moving to Switzerland as a missionary in 1948. In 1955, He established a religious commune there known as L’Abri. Schaeffer had been publishing his views on the clash between Christianity and secular humanism since the 1960s, but he most clearly defined the term in his monumental 1981 work *A Christian Manifesto*.¹³

According to Schaeffer, humanism is “the placing of Man at the center of all things, and making him the measure of all things.” It also means “Man beginning from himself, with no knowledge except what he himself can discover and no standards outside of himself.” He calls Christians’ failure to see the growth of this worldview as “the basic problem of the Christians in this country in the last eighty years or so.” The Christian and humanist worldviews differ at the most basic levels, “in how they

¹² Falwell, *Listen, America!*, 184; Jeremiah, *Before Its Too Late*, 46.

¹³ D. James Kennedy with Norman R. Wise, *Defending the First Amendment* (Ft. Lauderdale: Coral Ridge Ministries, 1989), 35.

understand the nature of reality and existence,” and so the two philosophies “inevitably produce totally different results.” “There is no way to mix these two worldviews,” Schaeffer concluded. The humanist worldview leads only to moral degradation. Christians had of late rallied against “permissiveness, pornography, the public schools, the breakdown of the family, and finally abortion,” but Shaeffer believed they would make no headway until they recognized each of these as “a symptom” of “a fundamental change in the way people think and view the world and life as a whole.” Schaeffer challenged Christians to understand the true nature of their enemy.¹⁴

Schaeffer believed that “[n]owhere have the divergent results of the two total concepts of reality, the Judeo-Christian and the humanist world view, been more open to observation than in government and law.” Because humanism lacks “*any* fundamental base for values or law,” it always leads to societal chaos followed by “some form of authoritarianism to control the chaos.” Shaeffer not surprisingly had high praise for Moral Majority. He wrote that “we must realize that regardless of whether we think the Moral Majority has always said the right things,” Christians should admire them because “they have used the freedom we still have in the political arena to stand against the other total entity.” Schaeffer espoused a thoroughgoing dualism. Those opposed to secular humanism were by definition on the side of right and good. On the other hand, Christians could not trust humanists. Thus, they should avoid getting their information about Moral Majority from “the secular media, which so largely have the same humanistic perspective

¹⁴ Francis Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1985), 5:423-7, 430.

as the rest of culture has today.” Moral Majority cofounder LaHaye returned the compliment, dedicating his book *The Battle for the Mind* to Schaeffer.¹⁵

Schaeffer’s followers in the Moral Majority viewed the public schools as both the most outstanding examples of secular humanism’s grip on American society and, because of their influence on the young, the most important battleground in the war of worldviews. Kennedy went so far as to call secular humanism “the official religion of the public school system.” The clash between Christian schools – many of which were associated with well-funded and well-staffed megachurches – and the IRS precipitated the rise of the New Christian Right. Although the IRS went after these schools because they allegedly attempted to circumvent mandatory integration laws, the sociologists Robert Liebman and Robert Wuthnow point to landmark Supreme Court cases of *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963) as the primary catalyst for churches’ decision to start their own schools. These cases banned school-sponsored prayer and Bible reading, respectively. Falwell himself pointed to these decisions as landmarks in the political awakening of conservative Christians.¹⁶

In an allusion to the *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971) decision, LaHaye lamented that Christians “must pay tuition to send [their children] to a Christian school or other private school – while paying taxes to subsidize the religion of humanism in our public schools.” John Dewey, “the most influential educator of the twentieth century,” came in for the greatest criticism from LaHaye. LaHaye charged that Dewey’s philosophy leads to “self-addiction and rebellion.” Moreover, humanist takeover of public education was

¹⁵ Ibid., 427, 447, 450.

¹⁶ Kennedy with Wise, *Defending the First Amendment*, 33; Falwell, *Listen America!*, 211.

intentional. LaHaye believed that English teachers assign “pornographic literature in place of the classics” and that teachers pushed their students to use marijuana and ridiculed “the values of their parents and the free enterprise system” because they want to destroy Christianity in America. He warned that “America in the twenty-first century will be a humanist country, for the morals and philosophy of the public-school system of today will be the moral philosophy of our nation, in twenty to thirty years.” For LaHaye, this humanist moral philosophy is really no moral philosophy because it places no bounds on human desires and does not encourage self-restraint in pursuit of higher goals. Humanism, he believed, offered no incentive for personal discipline.¹⁷

American history had an important place in the civil religion, and consequently, in the New Christian Right jeremiad. Pastors active in the movement upheld the heroes of America’s past as paragons of virtuous republicanism, object lessons teaching students what made America great and what can make her great again. The public schools have unfortunately failed to teach American history in this way. Kennedy claimed that “the campuses have become virtual concentration camps, intellectual gulags for indoctrinating destructive ideas of political correctness and historical revisionism.” He believed that “[t]he founders were committed to strong principles based on individual liberty and personal responsibility” and that they “believed in honesty, integrity, and fair dealing.” Humanists “want to rewrite that history and revise the facts of our cultural and moral character to a more modern politically correct view.” Falwell preached that “modern-day

¹⁷ Tim LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind: A Subtle Warfare* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1980), 43-4, 46, 64, 136.

textbook writers have done a pretty good job of brainwashing this young generation by belittling and defaming our founding fathers.”¹⁸

In Defense of Free Enterprise

Government interference in education might have sparked the New Christian Right, but their writings reveal that they saw government interference in the economy as representing just as great a threat to the national character. Falwell attacked school textbooks largely because “the benefits of the free-enterprise system have, for the most part, been censored.” As for the imperiled integrity of the American family unit, he asserted that “[f]amilies are overburdened because of our system of taxation.” Women must work outside of the home, and fathers and mothers must work longer hours, just to make ends meet. This time spent at work takes away from time spent with children and allows them too much freedom without guidance – an environment certainly not conducive to the formation of the next generation of virtuous citizens.¹⁹

LaHaye argued that “[h]umanists have a running romance with big government” and “consistent hostility toward Americanism, capitalism, and free enterprise.” “Government,” according to Kennedy, “wastes money.” Government “does not create jobs or improve the economy.” Kennedy called the idea “that only the rich made money in the eighties a myth” and asserted that “the success of ‘Reaganomics’ and the stimulus engendered by twelve years of Republican leadership are easy to find.” Were it not for “the Keynesians, socialists, university intellectuals, government bureaucrats, and others

¹⁸ Kennedy with Black, *Character and Destiny*, 11-2, 27; Falwell, *America Can Be Saved!*, 23.

¹⁹ Falwell, *Listen America!*, 206; Jerry Falwell, *The New American Family* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 110.

who harbor anti-American sentiments,” the people would demand that all future presidents adopt Reagan’s economic policies. According to LaHaye, “freedom has always been in inverse proportion to the size and power of government,” but secular humanists rejected this supposedly self-evident premise out of a desire to rule over the economic activities of private citizens.²⁰

An unhindered free enterprise system was for the New Christian Right an issue of morality, not just policy. In the same way that LaHaye saw a proportional relationship between the size of government and individual freedom, Falwell argued that “freedom is directly related to our free enterprise system.” He went beyond channeling von Hayek to baptizing him. Falwell claimed that “the free-enterprise system is clearly outlined in the Book of Proverbs in the Bible” and that “Jesus Christ made it clear that the work was part of His plan for men.” Furthermore, “[o]newrship of property is biblical,” as is “competition in business.” Going further, Falwell concluded that “[a]mbitious and successful business management is clearly outlined as a part of God’s plan for his people.”²¹

If free enterprise is antithetical to big government, and free enterprise is biblical, then big government must be evil. “Government intrusion,” Falwell claimed, has “reduced the sense of responsibility and initiative in her citizens.” He believed that “[w]elfare programs tend to destroy one’s initiative, skill, work habits, and productivity.” Furthermore, welfare recipients were not passive victims of a system. Falwell did not want “to feed that lazy trifling bunch lined up at the unemployment office who would not

²⁰ LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind*, 72-3; Kennedy and Black, *Character and Destiny*, 32.

²¹ Falwell, *Listen America!*, 12-3.

work in a pishop eating the holes out of donuts.” He wanted to “let them starve” because then they might “find a job” and “go to work and become productive citizens.” Kennedy railed against the government because it “takes the hard-earned wealth of citizens and gives it to those with their hands out,” and Falwell resented that he had to work so hard to “feed all the bums.” Addressing African American economic problems, Kennedy stated that “[r]eligious values and family ties used to be the bastion of black society, but today government is destroying black families because the liberal giveaway schemes changed the balance of nature and created a ‘culture of dependency.’” The social safety net leaves Americans free to be lazy, and African Americans in particular free to indulge in sexual license.²²

The Morality of Foreign Policy

Even more ominously, big government and welfare programs prevented the United States from devoting as much money as it needed to defense. Falwell hoped Congress could somehow balance the budget while at the same time “increasing our defense budget to whatever it takes to put us solidly back to No. 1 for good.” Congress could do this, he believed, if they simply cut out “unnecessary welfare spending at home and abroad.” Shrinking defense budgets instead demonstrated that the United States was “not committed to victory” and “not committed to greatness.” The government, like many individual Americans, had failed to exercise self-discipline and eschewed personal sacrifice in favor of decadence. Falwell feared that disarmament and “[o]ur unwillingness to pay the price of a nuclear conflict might well force our leadership into lowering our

²² Falwell, *Listen, America!*, 73, 78; Jerry Falwell, *American Can Be Saved! Jerry Fall Preaches on Revival* (Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Sword of the Lord, 1979), 35-6, 49; Kennedy with Black, *Character and Destiny*, 120, 123.

flag and surrendering the American people to the will of the Communist Party in Moscow.”²³

New Christian Right fears of communism seemed out of proportion to the actual communist threat of the 1970s and 1980s. Communism nevertheless served as the ideal foil because it combined the two things that Falwell and friends saw as most destructive of individual responsibility and self-discipline – big government and a socialistic economy. At times communism rivaled secular humanism as the force behind the undoing of America’s morals, probably because those on the New Christian Right did not see any difference between the two. Humanists believed that they could not achieve their goal of world peace without equality of wealth. Thus communism, or what LaHaye called socialism implemented “by force and violence,” was allegedly the primary humanist mechanism for achieving the ultimate in big government – the One World Government.²⁴

Stanley claimed that “[o]ne of the communist tactics for overcoming a nation is to get that nation to have a voluntary army.” He did not elaborate, but seemed to suggest that a military draft would keep the government on high alert and instill within the populous a willingness to sacrifice their selfish desires for the good of the nation. Jeremiah likewise taught that the United States should “reinstigate the draft.” The volunteer army was just one more sign that, like fathers abdicating their responsibilities at home, the United States had gotten lazy and abdicated its responsibility to protect the rest of the world from communism. Stanley and LaHaye were both incensed that the United States would give up the Panama Canal to what they saw as a communist government.

²³ Falwell, *American Can Be Saved!*, 35; Falwell, *Listen America!*, 10-1.

²⁴ LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind*, 73.

Kennedy wanted all-out military aid for the non-communist backed factions in Nicaragua, Mozambique, Laos, Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan, regardless of what these factions might actually be doing on the ground in those countries. LaHaye even supported Rhodesia's apartheid government because the Africans fighting against it were communists. When it came to foreign policy, then, communism was such a terrible enemy that anyone opposing it, no matter how reprehensible, was a friend.²⁵

Support for Israel constitutes the other guiding principle behind these pastors' opinions on American foreign policy. Some preachers did replace Israel with the United States as God's chosen nation, an idea that goes back to the very founding of the country. Stanley, for example, believed that the United States in the late 1970s faced "a situation in our country not unlike that of the nation of Israel during the period recorded in the book of Numbers." He warned that "it cost the nation of Israel a great deal to sin against God and it is costing us." As much as these preachers might want to read the United States into the Torah, most of them focused on the modern nation-state of Israel as a sign of God's providential role in history. The first reason that Falwell gave for his belief that God has a future for America centered on the alliance between the United States and Israel. Jeremiah went so far as to say that "America is instructed by the Word of God to be a friend of Israel."²⁶

Moral Majority support for Israel derived in part from the pastors' commitment to premillennial dispensationalism. Dispensationalism grew out of the teaching of English

²⁵ Charles F. Stanley, *Stand Up, America!* (Atlanta: In Touch Ministries, 1980), 44; Jeremiah, *Before Its Too Late*, 149; LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind*, 78; D. James Kennedy, *The Great Deception* (Ft. Lauderdale: Coral Ridge Ministries, 1985) 63.

²⁶ Stanley, *Stand Up, America!*, 23, 29; Falwell, *America Can Be Saved!*, 113; Jeremiah, *Before Its Too Late*, 121.

preacher John Nelson Darby, but gained popularity in the United States primarily through the notes in the Scofield Reference Bible and the graduates of Dallas Theological Seminary. The most well-known dispensationalist doctrine is the rapture of the saints before the Great Tribulation, but its most important hermeneutical tenant involves the literalness of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis. According to the dispensationalist theologian Charles Ryrie, the distinction between Israel and the Church is "the most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist." Dispensationists teach "that when the church was introduced God did not abrogate His Promises to Israel or enmesh them into the church." Ethnic Israel still has a divinely ordained claim to the Promised Land, and the Abrahamic promise that God "will bless those who bless" Abraham still applies to the heirs of the covenant. Finally, when Christ returns he will assume the Davidic throne and rule from Jerusalem.²⁷

Dispensationalism's view of the Soviet Union dovetails with Moral Majorities hatred of communism. John Hagee, pastor of the seventeen thousand-member Cornerstone Church of San Antonio and a staunch supporter of Israel, explained that the names Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38 in fact refer to Russia, a claim he supported by noting the similarity between the word "Rosh," one of the lands that Gog controls, and Russia. This equation of Gog and Magog with Russia goes back to the notes in the 1909 Scofield Reference Bible, although Hagee's source appears to be deceased radio preacher and megachurch pastor J. Vernon McGee. The prophecy, as Hagee and other dispensationalists interpret it, involves Russia invading Israel during the Great Tribulation, after the Rapture of the Saints but before the return of Christ. George

²⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 39, 85, 167-60; John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 142.

Marsden notes that dispensationalists cast Russia as a potential ally of the Antichrist even before the Bolshevik Revolution. The October Revolution and its aftermath gave dispensationalism an unexpected boost in credibility. This prophecy seemed even more on target after 1948, and despite the fall of communism, still carries weight in dispensationalist circles.²⁸

Except for Kennedy, every person involved with Moral Majority, not to mention every major television preacher except for Kennedy and Robert Schuller, was a dispensationalist. Dispensationalism was also more pervasive among large churches of the 1960s and 1970s than those founded later. White independent fundamental Baptist churches – churches like FBC Hammond, Highland Park in Chattanooga, Akron Baptist Temple, etc. – hold dispensationalism as a test of fellowship. The pastors of the largest Southern Baptist Churches, including Criswell at FBC Dallas and Rogers at Bellevue Baptist, were also dispensationalists. Dispensationalism pervaded TBN broadcasts. On April 30, 1978, Paul and Jan Crouch hosted *Praise the Lord* live from the Mt. of Olives, with Paul Crouch reading from the story of the Ascension in Acts 1 and laying special emphasis on Christ’s promise to return to the very spot where Crouch was standing at that moment. He then read from Isa 11:11-2 to show the importance of the reconstitution of Israel as a nation-state in God’s prophetic plan. Jan Crouch brought back rocks from the Holy Land to bury at the base of TBN’s satellite dish in Tustin, “another link of love in the chain of unity that joins the Trinity family to the beloved land of the Bible.”

²⁸ John Hagee, *From Daniel to Doomsday: The Countdown Has Begun* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 121-3.

Donations from Trinity to Israel’s Department of the Interior “for refurbishing old landmarks” was another gesture meant to “express our love for His chosen people.”²⁹

The New Christian Right in the 1980s

Free market economics, small government, aggressive foreign policy, and social conservatism were the pillars of the Reagan Revolution. The Washington for Jesus Rally of April 29-30, 1980 stands out as one of the most important public venues in which evangelicals voiced their support for this platform. Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker, and Paul Crouch – the Big Three of Christian broadcasting – were all there. John Giminez, pastor of the Rock Church in Virginia Beach, organized the rally under the umbrella of his One Nation Under God lobbying group. The rally featured dozens of evangelical stars, including Giminez’s fellow megachurch pastors D. James Kennedy, Charles Stanley, Adrian Rogers (then president of the Southern Baptist Convention), the Crouches’ pastor Jack Hayford, Rex Humbard of Akron’s Cathedral of Tomorrow, and Texas firebrand James Robison. Even Robert Schuller, who more than once over the years touted his friendship with Democrat Hubert Humphrey, made an appearance. President Jimmy Carter declined to attend, and also said that he would be unavailable to address the crowd by phone.³⁰

²⁹ *Praise the Lord*, iTBN video, 1:56:32, original aid date April 30, 1978, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/tkNWtwMzqDVJDT2JoHm15o10nP527NtK> “Live for Jerusalem Israel via Satellite to Your Home,” *Praise the Lord*, June 1978.

³⁰ Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the New Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 182; “Religious Rally on the Mall in the Capital Draws Support and Critics,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1980; William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 212; Henry J. Perkinson, *Getting Better: Television and Moral Progress* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction, 1996), 272.

When Giminez appeared on *Praise the Lord* after the 1980 presidential election, he and Paul Crouch reminisced about the rally back in April. He reminded Crouch of *700 Club* co-host Ben Kinchlow's speech in which he directed listeners to stretch out their hands toward the White House and "pray God will loose that place." Giminez then declared that "it's been loosed!" Later in the program, the evangelist Dwight Thompson told Crouch that he saw "something providential in the election" and "something providential in the turnaround of the country." Thompson then called on the "born-again, flag-waving, Americans to get out there." Crouch and his guests spoke triumphantly, believing that Reagan's election had brought the country back from the brink. Giminez had more rallies planned for the coming months, starting with an "America for Jesus" rally in Miami in March, 1981. The Big Three Christian broadcasters joined forces again to televise that one, as well as the "American for Jesus" rally at the Rose Bowl in October, 1981. That rally featured megachurch pastors Jess Moody of FBC Van Nuys, Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel, Ray Ortlund of Lake Avenue Congregational Church (where C. Peter Wagner attended), and Ralph Wilkerson of Melodyland Christian Center.³¹

The early 1980s proved to be the high point of conservative evangelical political visibility. By early 1986, Falwell was attempting to rebrand Moral Majority as the Liberty Federation. He resigned from the group in 1987, and the Liberty Federation struggled on until 1989. When Falwell left in 1987, he told reporters that he had to follow his "first love" and go "back to the pulpit, back to preaching, back to winning souls, back

³¹ *Praise the Lord*, iTBN video, 59:52, original air date November 21, 1980, http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/dsN2h4ODr1bbehS_aviHsmcEj2IdULgy; *Praise the Lord*, iTBN video, 2:14:08, original air date October 4, 1981, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/1kdTNsMjpVXP1igiq3Bgz9GJ24kAPOVV>.

to reaching spiritual needs.” His *Old-Time Gospel Hour* was suffering financially, with donations dropping by \$5.3 million after his failed attempt to save Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s PTL network. Thomas Road Baptist Church was the solid base that supported Falwell’s forays into politics. If the church and television ministry suffered, then he could not hope to move forward with his political activism.³²

Donations to Moral Majority also plummeted, but not because of PTL. Early in Reagan’s second term, Falwell unexpectedly backed George H.W. Bush for president. Falwell faced backlash from his followers and failed to convince fellow megachurch pastors to jump on board. Charles Stanley leaned towards Pat Robertson, and Adrian Rogers avoided Bush’s phone calls. Falwell and Bush both expected Jimmy Swaggart to endorse Bush on the *CBS Morning News*, but at the last minute Swaggart switched to Robertson. Denominational leaders with television ministries commanded large audiences representing approximately twenty-two million votes, and Bush could not seem to win them over. Even Falwell defected to Robertson in late 1986.³³

Bush’s victory over Robertson was perhaps a defeat for the New Christian Right. The years 1987-1988 were certainly not the best for famous preachers, with Oral Roberts facing ridicule for his declaration that God would strike him dead if he did not raise \$8 million, PTL falling to scandal, and Jimmy Swaggart blubbering “I have sinned” before a national audience. Robertson’s loss added insult to injury. Even so, Bush’s feverish quest for evangelical endorsements reveals that conservative Protestantism had proven itself a

³² David Snowball, *Continuity and Change in the Rhetoric of the Moral Majority* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1991), 151-2; Wayne King, “Falwell Quits as Moral Majority Head,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1987; “Scrapping the Moral Majority,” *Time*, June 26, 1989.

³³ Malcolm Gladwell, “Jerry Dumps George,” *The New Republic*, November 26, 1986, 15-6.

force in electoral politics. Bush even found it necessary to appoint a liaison to evangelicals. Doug Wead immediately saw the importance of working through the churches. Wead identified 160 “super-churches” throughout the South. Wead explained that by a “super-church” he meant “a large congregation that had a television ministry, schools, staff, a huge budget in the millions of dollars.” By identifying one prominent member of the church or staff who supported Bush, Wead believed that the vice president’s campaign could eventually gain a hearing and win over the whole congregation. The strategy worked in the pivotal South Carolina primary. Even though the New Christian Right candidate lost the primary, large churches now played a central role in Republican campaigns.³⁴

The Changing Political Landscape of African American Megachurches

E.V. Hill of Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles was also at the Washington for Jesus Rally and later spoke at the America For Jesus Rally at the Rose Bowl. Hill was an African American pastor who started his career as a civil rights activist and self-described “very liberal Democrat” before gradually moving to the right after the Watts Riots. By the time of Nixon’s reelection campaign, Hill was firmly within the Republican camp, actively campaigning for his fellow Southern Californian. Hill frequently appeared on TBN. He rallied local clergy for Reagan and in the 1990s became a mainstay at Promise Keepers events. Hill felt right at home in the New Christian Right of the 1970s.³⁵

³⁴ Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 289.

³⁵ Darren Dochuck, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 287, 288, 334-5; Larry B. Stammer,

Some of the most prominent African American megachurch pastors have however leaned towards the Democrats. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and Floyd Flake, both of New York, are among the few megachurch pastors white or black to have served in Congress. Both were Democrats. The *Los Angeles Times* called First African Methodist Episcopal (AME) of Los Angeles, a church with roughly ten thousand regular attenders, “a de rigeuer stop for Democratic presidential candidates over the years.” African American clergy as a whole lean heavily towards the Democrats, and this trend crosses denominational lines. In a comparison of the political leanings of clergy in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the sociologist Eric McDaniel found that “black clergy tend to be right of center on policy-based moral issues.” They support school prayer, oppose homosexuality, and advocate abstinence-only sex education. Although these positions translate into strong support for Republicans among whites, African Americans have remained wary of the GOP. African American clergy do not oppose big government or the expansion of the welfare state. Only 1% of AME and COGIC clergy lean strongly towards the Republicans, with 3% leaning weakly towards the GOP. On the other hand, 58% report leaning strongly towards the Democrats, and another 9% lean weakly. In the 2000 election, 85% reported voting for Gore, while only 9% voted for Bush. Furthermore, as the sociologist Mark Chaves demonstrates, African American congregations are in many ways more politically active than white ones. Conservative Protestants are more likely to distribute voter guides, while African American congregations are more likely to register voters and invite candidates or elected officials to speak. Democrats have not had to work quite as

“E.V. Hill, 69: Longtime L.A. Pastor was National Civil Rights, Religious Leader,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 2003.

hard to mobilize African American congregations as, say, Bush did to win over white ones in 1988.³⁶

According to Chaves, African American churches are more likely than white ones to have social service programs centering on “education, mentoring, substance abuse prevention, and job training or employment assistance programs.” Churches managing these programs collaborate with the government more than those operating a soup kitchen or some other emergency relief agency. African American churches have therefore operated within the government social welfare system more than have white churches. Harlem’s Abyssinian Baptist Church (the former church of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.), founded the Abyssinian Development Corporation in 1989. The Corporation has worked closely with all levels of government to build low-income housing, bring in national retailers, and even start a public school. Flake’s Greater Allen Cathedral also has its own Neighborhood Preservation and Development Corporation. In Dallas, T.D. Jakes of the Potter’s House has followed a similar model, combining entrepreneurial ventures with a social service center known as the City of Refuge. These pastors’ ties to government grants have required them to temper harsh words for the powers that be, and so they generally cooperate with whomever happens to be in power at the moment. Partisan bickering threatens budget items such as community development grants. Democrat Flake had high praise for the “comity among members of the two political parties” under Reagan and Bush. He blamed Clinton for the rise in partisanship in Washington. Rev. Calvin Butts of Abyssinian Baptist cultivated friendships with George Pataki and Rudy

³⁶ Teresa Watanabe, “First AME Pastor’s Spending Examined,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 2008; Eric McDaniel, “Black Clergy in the 2000 Election,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42 (Dec. 2003): 539, 545; Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 117.

Gulianai while declining to endorse Bill Clinton in 1992. Adam Clayton Powell IV perhaps summed up the attitude best: “I don’t care if its Democratic money or Republican money, as long as it rebuilds our community.”³⁷

Political alliances and funding issues aside, areas with higher concentrations of African American megachurches do tend to vote Democratic. Three counties in high concentration megachurch areas were solidly Democratic between 1968 and 1996, with six more leaning towards the Democrats. These nine counties include twenty-nine megachurches. Approximately 37% of the megachurches in the nine Democratic or Democratic leaning counties are African American. Fulton and DeKalb Counties (Atlanta) in Georgia and Shelby County (Memphis) in Tennessee are the most important examples. In fact, 59% the megachurches of the two heavily Democratic counties around Atlanta are African American megachurches. Seven of the sixteen megachurches in Shelby County, Tennessee are African American, with all seven of these lying within the city of Memphis. Given the urban concentration of these African American megachurches, it is not surprising that they do not seem to have bought into the political positions of the suburban social religion.

A closer look at the twenty-nine African American megachurches in Democratic counties with high megachurch concentration reveals a more nuanced picture. All of these are in the Sun Belt, with twenty of them in Georgia alone, and only six of them appear to have a denominational affiliation. Twelve of them are unaffiliated Baptist

³⁷ Chaves, *Congregations in America*, 54, 82-3; Timothy Williams, “Powerful Harlem Church is Also a Powerful Harlem Developer,” *New York Times*, August 17, 2008; Floyd Flake with Donna Marie Williams, *The Way of the Bootstrapper: Nine Action Steps for Achieving Your Dreams* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1999), 147-8, 186; Scott Billingsley, *It’s a New Day: Race and Gender in the Modern Charismatic Movement* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 122; Robin Pogrebin, “New Yorkers and Co.: The Political Dance of Calvin Butts,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1995.

churches and eleven are nondenominational. The pastors of these churches do not appear to be quite as heavily involved with politics as their white counterparts in the New Christian Right, and some are not overtly political at all. The AME Church, long the most politically active of the African American denominations, has only one church in this group. The Progressive National Baptist Convention has no churches in these areas. Two of the twenty-nine churches are Seventh-Day Adventist, a denomination not normally represented in New Christian Right circles, nor one that has been heavily involved in Democratic Party politics.

Some very prominent African American pastors in these megachurch centers have cast their lot with the Republicans. Sounding like a member of Moral Majority, one proclaimed that “God chose God-fearing men and women to establish this nation,” but “because of the failures of the Supreme Court and the executive branch, we have pushed God away.” Americans have “refused to inherit the hearts of our forefathers” and “have redrafted this nation into something other than what God ordained it to be.” This same pastor invited Steve Forbes to speak at a men’s gathering in 1999, and the audience gave a “rousing ovation” when Forbes’ called for more entrepreneurs, lower taxes, and school choice. The pastor then joked that African Americans believe that somewhere the Bible teaches that “Black people, thou shalt not vote for Republicans.” The pastor encouraged his congregation to have an open mind and to “vote for change.”³⁸

This pastor was Bishop Eddie Long, and the venue was his New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in heavily Democratic DeKalb County. Before 2010, when several young

³⁸ Eddie Long, *Taking Over: Seizing Your City for God in the New Millennium* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma Media, 1998), 154; Ernest Holsendolph, “Praying for the Flat Tax,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, March 14, 1999.

men came forward and accused Long of coercing them into sexual relationships, New Birth was probably the largest African American church in Georgia. Bernice King, daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr., is also an elder at the church, and Long presided over Coretta Scott King's funeral at New Birth. Long also supported the Iraq War and in 2004 led a march from King's grave to the Georgia state house in support of a proposed constitutional amendment defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman. Bernice King's literal passing of a torch lit at King's grave to Long symbolized that at least she saw him as the successor to her father. Long has therefore appropriated King's legacy in much more conservative way than have his colleagues among the African American clergy.³⁹

World Changers International took the mantle of Georgia's largest African American church in the aftermath of the Long scandal, and its pastor has also shied away from Democratic policies and politicians. Creflo Dollar has in fact shied away from most issues. In 2004, he did call on his followers to repent of criticizing President Bush and the War on Terror. The religious studies scholar Stephanie Y. Mitchem reports that when she visited World Changers, Dollar's wife Taffi prayed for the health of "our friend" Dick Cheney. Because Word of Faith pastors like Dollar emphasize the power of personal faith to alter individual circumstances, calling for government intervention to alleviate poverty seems unnecessary. Dollar in fact says little about racism. The individual should call upon the Lord in faith and claim deliverance from oppression. Racism and poverty become purely individual problems. Radical individualism comports more with the

³⁹ Jonathan Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 125-6, 139.

avowed free market economics of Republicanism than the Democrats' welfare state and more aggressively redistributive tax code.⁴⁰

Fred K. C. Price of Crenshaw Christian Center in Los Angeles shares Dollar's Word of Faith theology. He has however been one of the few Word of Faith pastors to speak out on racism. He took on the topic after two important, personal events – the Los Angeles riots that erupted in his community and a sermon by Kenneth Hagin, Jr., the son of his former mentor, in which he claimed that opposition to interracial dating did not constitute racism. Most recognize Kenneth Hagin, Sr. as the godfather of the Word of Faith movement, so much so that everyone on TBN called him Dad Hagin. Price broke with the Hagin family and vehemently attacked racism in the church in a series of television sermons on his *Ever Increasing Faith* broadcast. He then published these messages as a three-volume work entitled *Race, Religion, and Racism*. Despite his falling out with the Hagin family, Price and his son continued to appear on TBN and after the series of race sermons kept to their message of health and wealth.

Price's race sermons did not fit neatly with conservatism or liberalism. He called for reparations for African Americans, noting that the United States government compensated the Japanese Americans interned during World War II and even paid to rebuild Japan and Germany. He states provocatively that “[m]aybe we Blacks ought to declare war on the United States” because “that will get our country to give us reparations.” He also approvingly quoted a 1997 speech by Bill Clinton in which the President called graduates at San Diego State to tackle the race problem, “the greatest challenge we face.” At the same time, he defended former Reagan cabinet member

⁴⁰ Walton, *Watch This!*, 158-60; Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 80, 82.

William J. Bennet's statement that "there's a blind, unconscious, beneath-the-surface racism in liberalism that tolerates drug abuse and crime instead of perpetuating the system that perpetuates the breakdown." He also commended conservative South Carolina governor David Beasley for calling for the removal the Confederate flag from the top of the State House. Price appeared to accept the idea of the United States as a meritocracy as well as the idea that the government can do more harm than good. At the same time, he confronts racism in ways opposed to the color-blind rhetoric of modern conservatism. Price does not reveal his political leanings in other writings. He and his son remain an enigma among African American megachurch pastors in general and Word of Faith megachurch pastors in particular.⁴¹

Other megachurch pastors have been less ambivalent in their support of conservative politics. The Word of Faith preacher Keith Butler, pastor of the largest African American church in Michigan, ran for Senate as a Republican and served as Republican National Committeeman from Michigan. Charles Blake of West Angeles Church of God in Christ, the largest African American church in California, usually does not discuss politics, stating that he is a registered Democrat but is also pro-life. Blake has however partnered with the overtly partisan TBN from its earliest days, with the Crouches occasionally hosting *Praise the Lord* from his sanctuary. When George W. Bush held a meeting with African American pastors at the White House, he included friends and supporters such as Dallas pastor Tony Evans and Houston pastor Kirbyjon Caldwell, who incidentally heads the only African American megachurch in the United Methodist Church. Caldwell even prayed at the 2001 and 2005 inaugural ceremonies.

⁴¹ Frederick K.C. Price, *Race, Religion and Racism, Volume 1: A Bold Encounter with Division in the Body of Christ* (Los Angeles: Faith One Publishing, 1999), 211-2, 219, 220, 226.

Jakes, perhaps the most famous African American pastor in the country, was also at the meeting and reportedly asked Bush some tough questions. His willingness to confront the President may have arisen more from a sense of comfort and familiarity than antagonism. Jakes had known Bush when he was governor of Texas, and the President sought out Jakes after September 11. Bush would later invite Jakes to pray at a Hurricane Katrina memorial service. These churches may continue to be exceptional in the African American church world or they may constitute the beginning of a trend among African American megachurch pastors. More liberal African American clergy have been worried enough that they have held conventions to find ways of convincing their conservative colleagues to, in the words of Jacksonville megachurch pastor Rudolph McKissick, Jr., stop focusing on “prosperity and crowds.” That cracks are appearing in the solidly Democratic world of the African American clergy, especially among those leading nondenominational churches in the suburban Sun Belt, indicates that the suburban social religion might be effecting African American politics in the same ways it has effected whites.⁴²

Conclusion

The very formation of Moral Majority in 1979 actually points toward the decreasing power of fundamentalism and an increased focus on a suburban social religion. Both Dixon and Falwell were members of the Baptist Bible Fellowship, a loose

⁴² Associated Press, “Michigan RNC Member Chuck Yob May Run for RNC Post,” WNDU, November 13, 2008, <http://www.wndu.com/news/michigan/headlines/34387499.html>; For an example of the partnership between TBN and West Angeles Church of God in Christ, see *Praise the Lord*, iTBN video, 2:30:01, original air date January 22, 2004, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/F4N2xmNdrzfhlfldCE85qc0cqek2p-dH>. Shayne Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 74, 78-9; Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 57, 61; Jeff Brumley, “Faithful Work to Affect Policy,” *Florida Times-Union*, February 9, 2006;

association independent fundamental Baptist churches that sometimes cooperated for missions and educational purposes. These churches held the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in contempt as hopelessly corrupted with liberalism in its seminaries and mission boards. This belief did not prevent Dixon and Falwell from joining forces with future SBC president Charles Stanley, as well as Southern Baptist Tim LaHaye. Perhaps most striking, Falwell and Dixon included D. James Kennedy, pastor of Coral Ridge *Presbyterian* Church. If independent fundamental Baptists were appalled at theological impurities within the SBC, they were absolutely convinced that mainline denominations such as the Presbyterian Church in the United States were no less than tools of Satan. Falwell, who once described the Charismatic Movement as a “detour” and “counterfeit” work of Satan, came under fire in 1987 first for attempting to rescue the PTL network, a business owned and operated by Pentecostals, and then for supporting Charismatic Pat Robertson in his presidential bid. Outsiders might not see many differences between these conservative Protestants, but a newfound sense of cooperation between independent fundamental Baptists, Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, and even Presbyterians was big news among believers who had eyed one another with suspicion for decades.⁴³

At the same time, Dixon’s story reveals some internal instabilities within the New Christian Right. Falwell never opposed rendering unto Caesar the things of Caesar. He feared the expulsion of the church from the state more than he did the infiltration of the state into the church. Thomas Road Baptist Church moderated its fundamentalism to the point that it actually joined the SBC in 1995. As for LaHaye, after conservative politicians discovered his beliefs regarding the role of the Catholic Church in facilitating

⁴³ Falwell, *American Can Be Saved!*, 82.

the rise of the Antichrist they could no longer afford to associate with him. LaHaye instead became a wildly successful fiction writer. Stanley largely avoided national politics for the rest of his career. He became involved in denominational politics, and his preaching and writings took a decidedly therapeutic turn, so much so that *Christianity Today* once ran a feature article that called him “The Mystic Baptist.” For all the apparent unity in their message, these founders of the Moral Majority focused their ministries toward different aspects of the suburban social religion, with Dixon the only one who questioned its tenets.⁴⁴

The most prominent African American megachurch pastors have also converged toward a message emphasizing personal fulfillment, pride in individual accomplishment, and prosperity. The sociologist Shayne Lee has even called T.D. Jakes “Booker T. Washington reinvented for the twenty-first century.” He writes that Jakes’ “brand of personal empowerment promotes the bourgeois conservatism of the new black church.” Bourgeois conservatism has however always been prevalent in certain segments of the African American church in America. A prophetic call to reform society nevertheless does appear less welcome in the public square. President Obama invited several megachurch pastors to his 2011 Easter Prayer breakfast, including Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian in New York; Mark Batterson of National Community Church in Washington, D.C.; Charles Stanley’s son Andy of North Point Community Church outside of Atlanta; Joel Hunter of Northland Church in Longwood, Florida; Dave Gibbons of NewSong Church in Irvine, California; and T.D. Jakes. Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago did not attend. After his strident criticisms of

⁴⁴ Mark Galli, “The Mystic Baptist,” *Christianity Today*, November 2012, 52-4

the United States surfaced during the 2008 campaign, Wright proved to be a political liability. His harangues questioning the American dream marked him, like Greg Dixon, as an adversary of the new suburban social religion, and consequently a political liability.⁴⁵

These shifts in megachurch politics actually pointed toward a decrease in Christian political activism, and a sign of secularization. The pastors who founded the Moral Majority retreated after they realized that only a minority of Americans agreed with their rhetoric or agenda. Most Americans, it seems, believed that small government also meant that private sexual matters remained outside of government control. Pastors of megachurches founded since the 1980s, as well as most “new paradigm churches” like Calvary Chapel and Willow Creek, rarely discuss politics. Many African American churches have decided to focus on individual empowerment and remain ambivalent about the political involvement. Old white and black denominational megachurches that were apoplectic about their loss of influence during the 1970s appear to have accepted their place within the modern suburban milieu and have, with a few exceptions, moved on to other, more personal issues. These churches no longer assume they have a voice in public policy issues simply because they are prominent churches. The rise of the suburban social religion is therefore, perhaps paradoxically, a sign of increasing secularization.

⁴⁵ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 58.

Chapter 6 Critics

The number of megachurches tripled between 1980 and 1990. Most generally followed the advice of Wagner and his colleagues within the Church Growth Movement to operate their churches as they would a business, and to set goals and create action plans to meet those goals. Moreover, the contemporary worship music that grew out of Chuck Smith's Calvary Chapel was now the predominant style in most large "seeker" churches. The megachurch pastor Robert Schuller's *Your Church Has Real Possibilities* (1974) and his pastors' training conferences at Garden Grove Community Church encouraged a generation of church planters to preach uplifting sermons that focused on emotional health and self-esteem. Each megachurch, whether an older denominational church or a "new paradigm" church, typically had an identifiable brand in a local community and marketed its wide variety of services to potential worshippers. Although smaller churches also displayed some of these characteristics, megachurches were the most visible examples of evangelicals' attempts to win converts by accommodating, at least to some degree, the suburban social religion.¹

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a number of evangelical cultural critics began arguing that perhaps evangelicals had been too accommodating. They argued that churches employing the language and methods of business might count people as they would profits, and consequently display little care for their souls. Critics

¹ Ed Stetzer, "The Explosive Growth of U.S. Megachurches, Even While Many Say Their Day is Done," *The Exchange* (blog), *Christianity Today*, February 22, 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/february/explosive-growth-of-us-megachurches-even-while-many-say.html>.

wondered if contemporary worship truly inspired reverence and awe to the same extent as older hymns. Therapeutic sermons seemed to downplay human sinfulness and treat the Bible like a self-help book. Because megachurches demonstrated these many evangelical cultural trends prominently on a weekly basis, they became a special target for those who wanted American evangelicalism to return to more traditional, and sometimes more radical, ways of doing church.

Some megachurch critics focused on celebrity pastors, while others took on self-help or church marketing. Still others attacked the Word of Faith Movement. What tied all of these criticisms together, however, was the belief that megachurches in general had given in to the consumerism of the suburban social religion. In an extensive 1990 article in *Christianity Today*, the church growth expert Lyle Schaller wrote that megachurches tend “to depend more on the market than on the mission.” Although the critics talked at great length about consumerism, few actually defined what they meant by the term. The evangelical author Craig Gay described it as “an inordinate concern – some might even say addiction – with the acquisition, possession, and consumption of material goods and services.” Most of the critics would agree. When they actually used the word, however, its meaning expanded to include anything that involved shaping the church’s methods or message to appeal to the tastes and desires of the non-church attending public. Although secular consumer activists such as Stuart Chase, Vance Packard, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Ralph Nader have generally viewed modern American consumerism as a structural problem requiring fundamental reorganization of government and society, evangelical critics saw it as a particularly salient byproduct of original sin. Consequently, the

evangelical critics believed that churches that work within consumer culture to attract more members risk a fatal compromise.²

This belief in the evils of consumerism separates the megachurch critics from the seeker-friendly megachurch pastors. The verse 1 Corinthians 9:22 is ubiquitous in church growth literature. Paul's assertion that he had "become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" is the mantra of the Church Growth Movement and appears frequently in megachurch mission statements. Marketing, business strategies, upbeat messages, and rock music are all ostensibly aimed at attracting those who do not attend church. The megachurch critics had a more restrictive understanding of what Paul meant by "all means." Any means that involve catering to the tastes or felt needs of the unbelieving masses are automatically out of bounds, the critics argued, because unbelievers' desires are inherently wicked and self-centered, and in their fallen condition they do not know what they really need.

In decrying the consumerism at the heart of most megachurches, the critics continued a twentieth-century tradition of both secular and religious attacks on consumer behavior. Indeed, secular critics often come across as evangelists. The cultural studies scholar James Twitchell refers to Veblen, Galbraith, Packard, and Nader as "the four most famous" of an "evangelical clergy" who constantly attack consumer behavior. Twitchell summarizes their message to consumers as "you have sinned by following the demands of your flesh, you have fallen from grace, you have bought the wrong stuff." The critics of megachurches preach largely the same message, but instead of upbraiding

² Lyle Schaller, "Megachurch!" *Christianity Today*, March 5, 1990, 22; Craig M. Gay, "Sensualist Without Heart: Contemporary Consumerism in Light of the Modern Project," in Rodney Clapp, ed. *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1998), 21.

megachurches because they “have brought the wrong stuff,” they chastise them for preaching the wrong message, following the wrong models for ministry, or appealing to the wrong desires.³

This chapter explores the thought of a number of megachurch critics. These critics are far from marginal figures. They include the Watergate-conspirator-turned-evangelical-leader Chuck Colson, whose 1993 book *The Body* criticized a wide array of trends in modern evangelicalism. The evangelical cultural critic Os Guinness made his views clear with the title of his 1993 critique of church growth principles, *Dining with the Devil*. That same year the megachurch pastor, prolific author, and radio preacher John MacArthur published his own attack on church growth, *Ashamed of the Gospel*. MacArthur is especially popular in the evangelical world. He has sold a million copies of his *MacArthur Study Bible* and his Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California has approximately eight thousand members. The comic book artist Jack Chick has printed perhaps one billion tracts and comic books since the mid-1960s, many of which criticize the celebrity pastors and contemporary worship music that drive most megachurches. Perhaps the most strident criticisms of suburban Christian culture come from the left-leaning evangelical seminary professor Ron Sider, who has sold nearly half a million copies of his *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (1977). Using these writings as the basis for discussion, the chapter first explores how megachurch critics viewed the infusion of ideas from the world of business into ministry. Next, we turn to the megachurch critics’ opinions regarding the use of popular music and entertainment to appeal to the unchurched. Then, the chapter looks at exactly why therapeutic preaching

³ James Twitchell, *Lead Us Into to Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 15, 36.

represents a compromise with consumerism. Finally, we examine how megachurch critics view consumer culture as well as the suburbanization of American church life.

Church Growth Methods

In her 1995 history of Willow Creek, Lynn Hybels admitted that she did not look forward to reading newspaper stories about the church. She wished that reporters would not employ “the language of business to describe what was happening at Willow Creek.” She would also have appreciated it if reporters would stop calling spiritual seekers “potential customers” and would cease referring to Bill Hybels’s 1975 door-to-door spiritual survey as a “demographic analysis.” As she saw it, Willow Creek met people’s needs and addressed their hurts. The newspapers instead described their efforts as a display of “marketing savvy.”⁴

The Hybels’ intuitively reacted against business language because they believed it cheapened their ministry. Willow Creek has nevertheless been at the forefront of applying marketing techniques and business structures to the church. Even as Lynn lamented newspaper reporters’ application of marketing terminology to Willow Creek, she described the early 1990s as a period of “major department and management restructuring.” In order to make Willow Creek run more smoothly, Bill changed “reporting structures” and engaged in “vision-casting.” Even the titles of Willow Creek’s pastors reflected the world of business. The best-selling author and Christian apologist

⁴ Lynne Hybels and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 103.

Lee Strobel's official title at Willow Creek was "management team member and director of communications."⁵

The Church Growth Movement encouraged pastors to incorporate insights from the world of business, but megachurch critics saw such a move as compromising the Christian faith, or even usurping the place of God in evangelism. These critics believed that methods are not value neutral, and that how churches go about preaching the gospel and gaining members could irredeemably cloud the message they preach.

Critics frequently charged megachurch pastors with focusing on the social and behavioral sciences and neglecting doctrine. Guinness described "the lemming-like rush of church leaders who forget theology in the charge after the latest insights of sociology." MacArthur decried those who "dismiss doctrine as abstract, sterile, threatening, or simply impractical." He bemoaned the trend among young pastors of making role models out of "the corporate executive, the politician, or worst of all, the talk-show host" rather than "the prophet or the shepherd." MacArthur admitted that most megachurch pastors did not intentionally water down the historic doctrines of the Christian faith. He nevertheless asserted that "it wouldn't matter *what* doctrinal position some of these churches took because doctrine is simply not an issue with them." A Baptist church and an Assemblies of God church that employ marketing and business strategies have more in common with each other than they do with more traditional churches in their own denominations. When churches look to the world of business to find methods and structures that will draw large crowds, Guinness believed that they would end up concocting "a methodology only

⁵ Ibid., 105, 106, 123, 128.

occasionally in search of a theology.” The result is what he called “streamlined humanistic engineering” rather than true spiritual transformation.⁶

According to MacArthur, church growth principles are “man-centered, not God-centered.” He asserted that pastors “who trust worldly devices ... automatically relinquish the power of the Holy Spirit.” He stood firmly against “those who believe that salesmanship can bring people into the kingdom more efficiently than a sovereign God.” Guinness concurred. He charged that managerial science “undercuts true dependence on God’s sovereign awakening by fostering the notion that we can effect revival by human means.” Chuck Colson asserted that authentic church growth “has little to do with slick marketing or fancy facilities” but “has everything to do with the people and the Spirit of God in their midst.” Colson called church leaders to return to “what matters,” which is “the *character* of the community of faith.”⁷

In a 1990 *Christianity Today* story, the journalist David Neff listed “running on hunches” as one problem that megachurches face. They did not ground their practices in a solid theory. MacArthur disagreed. He believed that megachurches are firmly grounded in pragmatism, and saw that philosophy as the worldview that guided those associated with the Church Growth Movement. He defined pragmatism as “rejecting the notion of absolute right and wrong, good and evil, truth and error.” What is right is what works. He believed that “[p]ragmatism as a guiding philosophy of ministry is inherently flawed,” and “as a test of truth is nothing short of Satanic.” Unfortunately for the megachurches,

⁶ Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 26-7, 29; John F. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), 80-1, 192.

⁷ MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, xvi, xix; Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 20; Charles Colson and Ellen Santelli Vaughn, *The Body* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 49.

“affluence, numbers, money, or positive response have never been the biblical measure of success in ministry.” Guinness agreed that pragmatism in church growth leaves no room for theology. He wrote that “[a]nyone receiving a dime for every negative reference to theology” made by megachurch pastors “would soon be a millionaire.” For the megachurches, theology is “cerebral, wordy, divisive, specialized, remote – an obviously unwelcome intruder to the Holy Family of the spiritual, the relational, the practical.” According to a 1986 article in *Christianity Today*, C. Peter Wagner and his colleagues in the Church Growth Movement focused on finding “what is good in growing churches, and affirming it – without asking many critical questions.” Wagner therefore held “up as models of church life not only Wimber’s Vineyard, but Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral, the entire Southern Baptist denomination, and just about any other church that is growing.” Whoever draws a crowd must be doing something right, regardless of their theological viewpoint.⁸

Entertainment and Worship

Critics may have questioned the wisdom of appropriating insights from the world of business, but they were apoplectic over the intrusion of worldly entertainments into the worship service. In their quest for larger and larger audiences, Guinness wrote that megachurches subordinated “worship and discipleship to evangelism, and all these to entertainment.” MacArthur lamented that “[n]othing is dismissed as inappropriate.” A worship service might include “rock ‘n’ roll, oldies, disco tunes, heavy metal, rap, dancing, comedy, clowns, mime artists, and stage music.” These worship services

⁸ Neff, “Home of the Whopper,” 10; MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, xii-xiii, 28; Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 84; Tim Stafford, “Testing the Wine from John Wimber’s Vineyard,” *Christianity Today*, August 8, 1986, 18.

become, in MacArthur's words, "more rollicking than reverent." The real problem for MacArthur was that these churches "elevate entertainment over biblical preaching and worship." For the modern megachurch, "bad doctrine is tolerable; a boring sermon most certainly is not."⁹

MacArthur described but did not name an entertainment-minded pastor who once employed a smoke machine in his message about hell. At the conclusion of his message this pastor suddenly ascended into the rafters with the help of a harness and stage wires. A check of MacArthur's source further revealed that this church had a "\$500,000 special effects system" and that the associate pastor in charge of staging the elaborate sermons learned his trade at "Bally's casino in Las Vegas." Exactly why MacArthur declined to identify the pastor in question as Tommy Barnett remains unclear, but given the size of Phoenix First Assembly of God, the smoke machine and stage wiring apparently did their part in drawing and keeping a crowd.¹⁰

Joe Horness, the worship leader at Willow Creek from 1981 until 2006, admitted that contemporary worship music in particular, "seems very consumer oriented." Younger generations wanted to sing worship songs whose style mirrored what they heard on secular radio. Horness countered, however, that spiritual renewal within contemporary churches "is not occurring because churches are suddenly giving people what they want." The church worship consultant Sally Morgenthaller disagreed. She believed that most churches that use contemporary music do so out of "church envy." Worship leaders and

⁹ Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 27; MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, xii, xiii, xix, 46; Robert Johnson, "Heavenly Gifts: Preaching a Gospel of Acquisitiveness," *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 1990.

¹⁰ MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 70; Robert Johnson, "Heavenly Gifts: Preaching a Gospel of Acquisitiveness," *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 1990.

pastors notice that other churches attract large numbers of younger people and all too often switch their musical styles in order to draw a bigger crowd and boost their own egos. Morgenthaller believed that countless pastors have ruined their congregations because they use contemporary music as a tool to gain “the perks derived from growth (status, fame, identity, money).” Such pastors often ignore a particular congregation’s preferences and overhaul the entire worship service in order to attract seeking baby boomers.¹¹

The seminary professor Marva J. Dawn decried the “worship wars” that resulted when those who preferred contemporary worship clashed with those who resisted change. She lays the blame squarely at the feet of advocates of contemporary worship, however. She sees contemporary worship music as “dumbing down” the faith for modern Americans who can no longer “think, talk, and listen” at the same level as previous generations. She called “the idea that we should change our worship patterns to attract people to Christ” a “mistaken notion.” She charged that “if, in their attempts to revitalize worship, churches merely speed it up and lower the substance, then they trivialize both God and the neighbor.” In the same way that too much television leads to smaller brains in children, Dawn believed that dumbed down worship leads to “smaller faiths.” Those exposed “to only a Christianity of happiness and good feelings” will not stay with the faith “when chronic illness, family instability, or unemployment threaten.” For Dawn,

¹¹ Joe Horness, “Contemporary Music-Driven Worship,” in Paul E. Engle and Paul A. Basden, eds., *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 110; Sally Morgenthaller, “Contemporary Music-Driven Worship: An Emerging Worship Response,” in Paul E. Engle and Paul A. Basden, eds., *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 132-2.

contemporary worship music belies not only seriousness and substance of the Christian message, but fails to equip parishioners to handle the challenges of modern life.¹²

Some critics of contemporary worship saw even more sinister forces at work. The Episcopal priest Paul Zahl worried about what he calls “libidinal interference.” Zahl thought that the eroticism associated with popular music might bleed over into similarly-styled contemporary worship music. Parishioners might actually become sexually aroused during worship. Former contemporary worship leader Dan Lucarini believed that coed worship bands “facilitate an atmosphere where a female’s innate desire for emotional intimacy with a man can easily be achieved.” Unfortunately, Lucarini continued, “most of the time that man is not her husband.” The comic book artist and tract publisher Jack T. Chick went even further. Scholars might dismiss Chick’s work as marginal or idiosyncratic, but his long career and prolific output indicate that he is an influential commentator rather than a simple crank. Chick’s enemies list is long and includes the Roman Catholic Church, the Freemasons, Rupert Murdoch, homosexuals, anyone who participates in Halloween festivities, and those who play Dungeons and Dragons. Christian rock music, however, has a special role in Satan’s plan, Chick believed, and so it has a special place in his tracts and comic books.¹³

According to the Chick comic *Spellbound?* (1978), the lyrics of every rock record contain “coded spells or incantations.” After musicians complete the master recording, a

¹² Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 3, 6-7, 279-81.

¹³ Paul Zahl, “Contemporary Music-Driven Worship: A Liturgical Worship Response,” in Paul E. Engle and Paul A. Basden, eds. *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 118; Dan Lucarini, *Why I Left the Contemporary Christian Worship Movement* (Carlisle, PA: EP Books, 2002), 71.

group of nude witches casts a spell over the record. Even in Christian rock records, “the beat belongs to Satan.” Chick traces the specific dangers of Christian rock in the 1989 tract “Angels?” The story opens with a Christian rock group known as the Green Angels complaining about their pay after performing at a church. They were especially angry because the pastor would not allow them to play harder rock music during the service. Next, a shadowy figure named Lew Siffer (Lucifer) enters the restaurant where the Green Angels are eating and makes them an offer they cannot refuse. He will make them “rich and famous” and they will have all the “groupies, booze, drugs, money” they want. All they have to do is sign their names (in blood) on the dotted line.¹⁴

After signing the contract, Lew Siffer lets the Green Angels in on his master plan. Siffer actually controls a worldwide organization called “Killer Rock” that began to infiltrate popular music in the 1950s. He gradually increased the beat until the 1970s when he “gave the world KISS, Black Sabbath, Motley Crue, etc.” He then “started invading country, classical, soul, and Christian music.” He tells the Green Angels that he in fact started Christian rock. He has his “wolves in the churches” and that “pastors didn’t have the guts to keep my music out.” Pastors thought that “as long as it’s in the church, it’s okay because God will bless it.” The pastors were wrong. Christian rock is Satan’s tool to steal away youth to a wasted life of debauchery. The Green Angels find out all too late that Christian rock, no less than secular rock, constitutes a highway to hell. One member of the band contracts AIDS, another overdoses on stage, and one becomes a vampire. Only one repents of his association with Killer Rock. He becomes a Christian

¹⁴ Jack T. Chick, *Spellbound?* (Chino, California: Chick Publications, 1978); Jack T. Chick, “Angels?” (Chino, California: Chick Publications, 1989).

after reading a Chick tract and goes on a speaking tour to warn congregations about allowing contemporary worship music and Christian rock into the churches.¹⁵

In Chick's mind, the use of rock music in churches stands as a deadly compromise with the world in an effort to attract more people. It also exalts human leadership and human talent over the power of God. The combination of a business model for ministry and the worship service as an entertainment event results in still another danger – the exaltation of omniscient celebrity pastors. Guinness believed that the managerial trend in the megachurch world engendered a “punditocracy.” Lay members who formerly might have had a hand in running the affairs of the church find themselves alienated from the halls of power by a massive bureaucracy with a CEO pastor at the top. Guinness concluded that “the dominance of the expert means the dependency of the client.” The masses look to the expert to solve their problems and consequently abrogate their powers of critical thought. Colson criticized those parishioners who “sit passively in [their] pews, paying some charismatic leader to do [their] jobs for [them].” Guinness concluded that “[t]he only thing worse than a gullible public is a cocky emperor whose self-importance and passion for novelty blinds him to his own nakedness.”¹⁶

Colson called the tendency to idolize charismatic pastors “the pedestal complex.” He contrasted the sacrificial devotion of Eastern European pastors, both Catholic and Protestant, during the Cold War with “the demeanor of today's self-important spiritual

¹⁵ Ibid. “Lew Siffer” is of course “Lucifer.” Chick's anti-Catholicism comes to the fore here again this tract. In another panel Siffer says “we in the occult control it all . . . from *my* church [meaning Satanists] to the throne of Rome.”

¹⁶ Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 70-1, 74; Colson, *The Body*, 305.

superstars, who strut across the stage so proud and confident.” Colson believed that Christians elevate “honey-tongued preachers, World Series heroes, converted rock stars, and yes – sometimes even former White House aids” because they “want to be like the world.” In a thinly-veiled swipe at TBN, Colson claimed that the pedestal complex resulted in the “blind devotion of thousands of Christians who continue to send their hard-earned ten- and twenty-dollar checks to televangelists who wear Rolex watches and live in palatial ministry-provided homes.” Colson also pointed out the danger of the pedestal complex for megaministers. He believed that Jim Bakker fell in large part because no one on his board of directors dared question his spending. According to Colson, pastors who are “constantly the object of adoring crowds soon can’t live without it.”¹⁷

Guinness saw this situation as ideal for the rise of “false prophets,” a warning that has special currency given that some Charismatics and Pentecostals claim God has restored the offices of prophet and apostle in preparation for the Second Coming. Stephen Strang, who through his *Charisma* magazine functions as a publicist of sorts for the entire Charismatic movement, warned against trusting any pastor who claims a word from God. The danger arises because “there is an element of control involved when one individual is able to speak for God to a group of individuals.” He even admitted that some prophets “actually get their unusual ability to know the future, not from the Holy Spirit, but from the Spirit of divination.” Because their authority derives from their ability to draw a

¹⁷ Colson, *The Body*, 123, 301, 305.

crowd, and doctrinal matters are of little importance, the prophets' opinions become almost unassailable once they reach a certain level of popularity.¹⁸

The megachurch pastor Tom Sipe confessed that in the past he was all too willing to allow celebrity prophets to influence his church. Sipe was a leader in John Wimber's Association of Vineyard Churches. In the late 1980s, he opened his doors to the Kansas City Prophets, a group associated with Mike Bickle's Metro Vineyard Fellowship in Kansas City, Missouri. This group gained power within the Vineyard because they foretold that the Vineyard churches would lead an End Times revival and experience a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Soon, however, Sipe turned over decision-making at his church to these new celebrity seers. Sipe explained that "prophets began telephoning [Vineyard] pastors with words straight from God directing staff changes and adjustments to church polity and practice." Vineyard pastors even "began calling the prophets for predictions, instruction, and advice" instead of waiting for them to call. The prophets encouraged "[s]haking, laughing, weeping, and eye twitching" as manifestations of the Holy Spirit's filling. Sipe lamented that "chaos reigned in my church" and that he forfeited his "duty to maintain order" because he dared not oppose the prophets. In 1994, Sipe's dismay over the condition of his church led him to retake control of his congregation and kick out the prophets. The prophets responded by proclaiming that God would kill Sipe. Instead, Sipe's Crossroads Church of Denver has recovered and now boasts over six thousand members. The Kansas City Prophets have faced little fallout from their actions. Mike Bickle now leads two thousand-member Forerunner Christian Fellowship, another megachurch in Kansas City. Kansas City Prophet Rick Joyner

¹⁸ Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 72; John F. MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 84-5.

pastors a 2,500-member church known as MorningStar Fellowship in Fort Mill, South Carolina. Kansas City Prophet Lou Engle has become embroiled in Ugandan politics and is good friends with Kansas Governor and former United States Senator Sam Brownback.¹⁹

Therapeutic Preaching

The focus on therapeutic preaching and meeting emotional needs has only enhanced the status of megachurch pastors. Guinness believed that megachurch preachers had in fact become stage psychologists who added “the authority to describe and prescribe” to their authority as CEOs or entertainers. Here again, megachurch pastors appeared caught in the vicious circle of Colson’s pedestal complex. Pastors who want to win an audience stop teaching about difficult subjects like sin and judgment and instead “shade the message, subtly equaling the ‘abundant ‘ life with middle-class affluence.” As one 1990 *Newsweek* article put it, for baby boomers returning to church “the affirmation of self is at the top of the agenda, which is why some of the least demanding churches are now in greatest demand.” As pastors preached more self-centered sermons, they gained larger audiences but also make it more difficult to confront worshippers regarding their own self-centeredness.²⁰

The *Newsweek* article also pointed out that many growing churches focused on “support rather than salvation.” According to the critics, however, salvation and

¹⁹ Tom Sipe, “Forward,” in Hank Hanegraaff, *Counterfeit Revival*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2001), x-xi, xiii, xv; Hank Hanegraaff, *Counterfeit Revival*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2001), 165. According to Hartford Seminary figures, Sipe’s Crossroads Church has approximately 4,500 members.

²⁰ Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 66; Colson, *The Body*, 240; Kenneth L. Woodward, et. al., “A Time to Seek,” *Newsweek*, December 17, 1990, 50.

sanctification are the mission of the church. As Colson stated, the church should aim at making people “holy,” not “happy.” He believed that the affluent suburbanites attending megachurches abandon “a search for truth” and instead settle for “the ‘warm fuzzies’ of the support movement as they splash around together in their suburban hot tubs.” All critics agreed that the church should help the hurting and the needy. Colson nevertheless drew a line between “ministering to the afflicted” and “the self-realization therapy that teaches us to look within to discover and heal our wounded psyche.” MacArthur summarized the general discomfort with therapeutic messages, writing that “the truth of God does not tickle ears; it boxes them.”²¹

The critics went so far as to claim that most people do not even know what they really need. Building a ministry around appealing to emotionally needy people is therefore an inherently flawed strategy. Christian counselor David Powlison believed that people “have a need to love God with heart, soul, mind,” and “to love our neighbor as ourselves.” Any other felt needs are temptations, idols, natural desires, or symptoms pointing to the two real needs that people have but may not be able to articulate. MacArthur wrote that “loneliness, fear of failure, ‘codependency,’ a poor self-image, depression, anger, resentment, and similar inward-focused inadequacies” constitute the felt needs that most churches address. These needs are however only symptoms of deeper problems. According to MacArthur, “people’s deepest need is to confess and overcome sin,” not to have greater self-esteem or make more friends.²²

²¹ Woodward, et. al., “A Time to Seek,” 50; Colson, *The Body*, 45-6; MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 37.

²² Tim Stafford, “Needs and Idols,” *Christianity Today*, May 16, 1994, 21; MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 34, 49.

Colson believed that some megachurch pastors knew the dangers of appealing to desires for personal fulfillment and felt needs, but that they naively thought that they could use therapeutic preaching to attract worshippers and then switch to a more classically biblical message. Colson called those people who look for preachers to fill emotional needs “Donahueites.” Donahueites have been “daily conditioned not to think about great questions” and see “pleasure as the chief aim of life.” Colson asserted that “once we do have the pews filled with Donahueites, it is not going to get any easier.” In other words, the methods that churches use to attract worshippers are the same methods that they will have to use to keep them. Only true spiritual conversion can turn Donahueites into real Christians because, according to MacArthur, “[p]hilosophy, politics, humor, psychology, homespun advice, and human opinion can never accomplish what the Word of God does.”²³

In a 1994 *Christianity Today* article, the Christian psychologist Robert C. Roberts struck at the heart of therapeutic preaching and the Christian counseling movement in general. Carl Rogers, Carl Jung, and every other founder of a school of psychology did not simply put forth differing perspectives on the human condition, but “alternative spiritualities.” Each school has its own way of “conceptualizing what it is to be a person, along with diagnostics schemes and sets of discipline by which to arrive at better ‘health.’” These therapies in some ways agree with evangelical Christianity, but in other ways are completely incompatible. For example, Roberts argued that most therapies cast the patient as “a victim of his society, his unjust upbringing, his early self-objects, his poor training, or ignorance.” Christians, on the other hand, charge the patient as

²³ Colson, *The Body*, 189; MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 32.

ultimately “dysfunctional *by his own responsibility*.” Furthermore, apart from “reconciliation ... with God by the work of the Holy Spirit,” the patient is hopeless. According to this view, pastors like Robert Schuller who preached self-esteem did not just emphasize a different facet of the Christian message, but adopted another religion altogether.²⁴

Roberts believed that hurting Christians could go a long way toward healing by practicing self-denial. Christians “have a sinful nature that needs to die,” and they need to take positive steps to serve others. Service to others is usually not the focus of therapeutic preaching, according to the megachurch critics. Guinness believed churchgoers settle too readily for “privatized, individualistic, and subjective experiences.” Colson called this “Jesus and me” spirituality. This focus on the personal encounter with Jesus is nowhere more evident than in modern praise choruses and Christian rock songs. As one commentator wrote, “one cannot sing praise songs without noticing how first person pronouns tend to eclipse every other subject.” Thus, megachurch worshippers sing worships songs that largely focus on the self, hear a message focused on self-esteem, self-efficacy, or self-actualization, and go home with the idea that, more than anything, Jesus wants them to be happy.²⁵

Megachurches and the Suburban Social Religion

These criticisms of therapeutic preaching hint at the real bogeyman underlying all fears surrounding the rise of the megachurches. First and foremost, those who attack

²⁴ Robert C. Roberts, “Psychobabble,” *Christianity Today*, May 16, 1994, 21, 23.

²⁵ Roberts, “Psychobabble,” 24; Colson, *The Body*, 276; Michael S. Hamilton, “The Triumph of the Praise Songs,” *Christianity Today*, July 12, 1999, 34.

megachurches see them as compromising with consumerism, and hence uncritically accepting of the suburban social religion. In August, 1992 Wooddale Church, a megachurch in the Minneapolis suburb of Eden Prairie, held a service in the Mall of America. While Guinness was appalled at the marriage of the spiritual and the commercial that this service symbolized, he believed that the “problem is not the presence of a church in a mall but the presence of the mall in a church.” Colson wrote that, like mall shoppers, worshippers “flit about in search of what suits their tastes at the moment.” The local church “becomes just another retail outlet, faith just another commodity.” Megachurches even look like shopping malls. Guinness called them “cathedrals of consumption, one-stop church complexes premised on controlled environments with multiple-option boutiques catering to diverse needs.” The ecclesiastical free market demands that churches do whatever it takes to get customers, but a church that behaves as a business “forfeits its authority to proclaim truth and loses its ability to call its members to account.” Businesses typically do not tell their customers how wicked they are, nor do they warn potential customers that eternal judgment awaits those who reject their products. Churches who do the same risk losing members to a less confrontational congregation down the road.²⁶

In the same way that people do not fully comprehend their real needs, they also do not know that their wants are bad for them. MacArthur was therefore appalled that some church planters are “actually surveying unbelievers to learn what it would take to get them to attend.” MacArthur declined to name the offenders. Given the notoriety that Robert Schuller, Bill Hybels, and Rick Warren gained for employing just such a strategy,

²⁶ Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 11-2, 77; Colson *The Body*, 41.

he almost certainly had these two pastors in mind. Unfortunately for those who follow the Saddleback and Willow Creek models, a church built on the desires of unbelievers inevitably “caters to people whose first love is themselves.” MacArthur argued that if potential worshippers have sinful or selfish desires, then giving them what they want is antithetical to the Christian gospel.²⁷

The Christian editor and author Rodney Clapp claimed that consumption “militates against all sorts of Christian virtues, such as patience and contentedness and self-denial.” He asserted that Christians cannot “simultaneously seek and to some degree realize both instant gratification and patience” or “instant gratification and self-control.” Furthermore, because the pursuit of novelty lies at the heart of modern consumerism, Clapp believed that “modern consumers are perpetually dissatisfied.” They feel compelled to move from experience to experience. This compulsion works against fidelity, which Clapp identifies as the most fundamental of all virtues. Clapp did not specifically address megachurches, but his analysis of the supposed incompatibility between Christianity and consumerism points toward the reasons why MacArthur, Guinness, Colson, and others felt that they endanger the Christian faith.²⁸

MacArthur believed that churches catering to the unredeemed desires of unredeemed people could not help but present “Christ as nothing more than a means to contentment and prosperity.” At this point, the critics contended, megachurches are already well down the road toward joining the Word of Faith Movement. Word of Faith

²⁷ MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, xviii, 28.

²⁸ Rodney Clapp, “The Theology of Consumption and the Consumption of Theology: Toward a Christian Response to Consumerism,” in Rodney Clapp, ed., *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1998), 171, 186, 188, 193-4.

preachers teach that God is contractually obligated to fulfill his children's material wants, if they ask with enough faith. Christian apologist and radio host Hank Hanegraaff could not fathom that true believers would see the promises of the Bible as a series of contracts they "can use to command God" to fulfill their wishes. In fact, as MacArthur pointed out, many evangelicals intuitively believe that their faith can force God to meet their material desires. If the members of Word of Faith churches were the only ones who watched and contributed to the ministers on TBN, both the ministers and the network would have gone out of business long ago. Megachurches tap into this same common perception of Jesus as the one who can make life easy by providing health and wealth.²⁹

Attacks on Word of Faith preachers began to appear in the 1980s, even before attacks on megachurches. Most of the evangelical polemical literature attacked these preacher' hermeneutics and theology. Writing in 1985, the Assemblies of God scholar Gordon Fee sounded a familiar refrain, charging that "at its base, the cult of prosperity offers a man centered, rather than a God-centered theology." He went even further and charged that those who "believe this non-biblical nonsense" do so "only because of its appeal to one's selfishness." D. R. McConnell's 1988 diatribe targeted almost the entire Board of Trustees at Oral Roberts University, including megachurch pastors Fred Price and Kenneth and Gloria Copeland. He summarized their teaching as antithetical to the biblical gospel because it "subverts the demand of the cross for self-denial" and "reduces God to a means to an end." Echoing Fee and MacArthur, McConnell believed that "the mind-set of prosperity is focused on the things of this world as the sign of God's approval

²⁹ MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 85; Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1997), 213; MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, 327-8.

and the means of God's blessing." He concluded that Word of Faith preaching is "a carnal accommodation to the crass materialism of American culture."³⁰

Sometimes criticism of the Word of Faith movement came from some surprising sources. T. D. Jakes wrote that Christians should not "dedicate our lives to the acquisition of riches and material goods." "To make finances the symbol of faith," he wrote, "is ridiculous." He chided those who believed that becoming a Christian would lead to "mansions, stocks and bonds, and sports cars." He also called the prosperity gospel a "dangerous idea." At the same time, Jakes is a regular on TBN, and owes his fame in large part to conferences at Oral Roberts University, a center of Word of Faith teaching. He also cautioned Christians not to confuse poverty or austerity with spiritual maturity, encouraging readers to imagine the impact Christian might have "if only they availed themselves of the riches the world offered." As the religious studies scholar Jonathan Walton points out, Jakes wears designer clothes, drives a Bentley, and lives in a \$5.2 million mansion.³¹

Although all of the critics attacked consumerism in the church, few took the next step of actually questioning the suburbanization of American evangelicalism. MacArthur wrote that most megachurches "decide who [they're] going to minister to, fashion the 'product' to suite the audience and don't 'waste resources' on people outside the target

³⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The Disease of Health and Wealth Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2006), 7, 15-6; D.R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 178-9. Gordon Fee is a respected New Testament scholar who is also an ordained in the Assemblies of God, the same denomination that ordained Paul Crouch, Jim Bakker, and Jimmy Swaggart.

³¹ T.D. Jakes, *The Great Investment: Faith, Family, and Finance* (New York: G.B. Putnam and Sons, 2000), 15, 18; T.D. Jakes, *Can You Stand to be Blessed? Insights to Help You Survive the Peaks and Valleys* (Shippensburg, PA: Treasure House, 1994), 44; T.D. Jakes, *Reposition Yourself: Living Life Without Limits* (New York: Atria, 2008), 178; Jonathan Walton, *Watch This! The Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 117.

group.” This particular method of church planting derives directly from Donald McGavran’s homogenous unit principle, or the idea that people want to worship with those who are like them and usually do not cross racial or class barriers when seeking out a church. MacArthur asked rhetorically: “Why do you suppose nearly all the user-friendly churches identify their ‘target market’ as young suburban professionals and other moneyed groups?” Fee even asserted that “[s]eeking prosperity in an already affluent society means to support all the political and economic programs that have made such prosperity available – but almost always at the expense of economically deprived individuals and nations.” He also took a not-so-veiled swipe at Robert Schuller, writing that the Prosperity Gospel in its “more respectable, but more pernicious forms” constructs “15-million-dollar crystal cathedrals to the glory of affluent suburban Christianity.”³²

Fee recommended that his readers pick up a copy of Ron Sider’s 1977 manifesto, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. No evangelical critic went as far as Sider in his criticism not only of church growth, but of the entire consumerist ethos of modern American society. Like secular critics, Sider identified both personal and structural sins as compromising the prophetic witness of the American church. He recounted the story of Northeast High School in Philadelphia. After Northeast followed white migrants out of the city, a new African American high school, Edison, took over Northeast’s old building. Edison High School was by all accounts a failing school, its only claim to fame being that “[m]ore students from Edison High died in Vietnam than from any other high school in the United States.” Sider wrote that most people “would deny any personal

³² Fee, *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*, 17.

responsibility,” but he affirmed that “we sin when we participate in evil social systems and societal structures that unfairly benefit some and harm others.”³³

Like MacArthur, Sider did not generally name offenders, although he did single out Robert Schuller for his belief that “the evangelistic mandate to witness to wealthy persons” means that some Christians should live affluently. Sider stated that “Christians ought to live in the suburbs as well as the inner city.” He believed, however, that the temptation to forget poor Lazarus at the gates is too immense. He wrote that the only hope the American Church has of reclaiming its prophetic witness is for “growing numbers of affluent Christians” to “dare to allow the Bible to shape their relationship” to the billions of starving and hurting people the world over. Sider worried much more that churches meet the needs of starving and sick people than that they soothe the anxieties of the harried housewife or facilitate friendships for lonely suburbanites.³⁴

Sider also attacked what Colson calls the American church’s “edifice complex.” He noted that, between 1967 and 1972, American churches spent \$5.7 billion on new church buildings. He asks: “Would we go on building lavishly furnished expensive plants if members of our own congregation were starving?” Anticipating a negative response, he asked if “[w]e do not flatly contradict Paul if we live as if African or Latin American members of the body of Christ are less a part of us than members of our own congregation?” Sider called for more microchurches as opposed to megachurches. House churches are “flexible, mobile, inclusive and personal.” They also require “little professional leadership.” Suburban megachurches tend to pay their pastors suburban

³³ Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), 132-3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 55-6.

megachurch salaries. House churches allow for more gifts to the poor than churches that devote a majority of their budget to plant and personnel.³⁵

The infiltration of the suburban social religion into African American churches has caused an identity crisis of sorts and engendered a number of critics. The theologian Dwight N. Hopkins, for example attacked black churches “catering to conservative forces in the country,” because these churches “emphasize the accumulation of wealth an the prosperity gospel.” African American prosperity churches “foster a spirituality that removes the individual from his world in order to feel good in the midst of material suffering.” He prefers churches that practice “black theology.” These churches “serve as a prophetic yeast for the rest of the African American community” because they question the individualism, consumerism, and meritocracy of the suburban social religion. Such churches also preach a message “that uplifts people’s souls but also moves their spirits to go out to change the material world as they confront groups with disproportionate privileges and harmful powers.” These same criticisms of conservative African American megachurches prompted liberation theologian James Cone to boycott Spring 2006 commencement ceremonies at Atlanta’s Interdenominational Theological Center, even though the institution was awarding him an honorary doctorate. Cone objected to the presence of social and fiscal conservative Eddie Long as commencements speaker. Like Sider, Hopkins and Cone saw conservative economic policy and the suburbanization of the church as sapping its spiritual vitality.³⁶

³⁵ Ibid., 115, 196, 200.

³⁶ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Heart and Head: Black Theology – Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 31-2; “Bishop’s Appearance May Disrupt Graduation,” *LaGrange Daily News*, May 11, 2006.

Conclusion

If Colin Campbell's account of the rise of consumerism is correct, then the stances of MacArthur, Colson, Guinness, and others are somewhat ironic in that the Puritan theology that these Calvinistic authors look to for inspiration played a crucial role in the formation of the consumerism that they attack. The Puritan focus on feelings and subjective experiences laid the seeds for therapeutic preaching and the quest for new experiences that lies at the heart of the consumerist ethos. In terms of the history of ideas, both the megachurch pastors and their critics are more like quarreling cousins than warring tribes.³⁷

Although Charles Grandison Finney did not lead a megachurch, he did have a mega-ministry that spanned the northern half of the United States. Finney was almost certainly the most popular preacher of the 1830s. In 1835, he published a series of lectures on revivals. He stated that a revival "is not a miracle or dependent on a miracle in any sense." A revival is in fact "a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means – as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means." He commended politicians to his students because they "circulate handbills and pamphlets, blaze away in the newspapers, send their ships about the streets on wheels with flags and sailors, with handbills, to bring people to the polls." Preachers are like politicians in that they want their hearers "to vote in the Lord Jesus Christ as the governor of the universe." Also like the politician, "the object of [their] measures is to gain

³⁷ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Capitalism* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 129, 216.

attention.” Revivalists must therefore innovate and advertise with as much vigor as the candidate running for office.³⁸

Congregationalist ministers Lyman Beecher and Asahel Nettleton criticized Finney’s “new measures.” They reminded their readers “that the *end* cannot sanctify or change the moral nature of the *means*.” Beecher and Nettleton believed that Finney and his followers caused unnecessary divisions in churches by “denouncing ministers, colleges,” and “Theological Seminaries.” These new itinerant revival leaders were “dictatorial and assuming,” flaunting a supposed spiritual authority in the face of parishioners and settled ministers alike. Beecher did not feel that Finney represented a new threat to the church, just a new manifestation of an older phenomenon. He wrote that “[t]he times of Edwards and Whitefield witnessed the currency of counterfeits and were scourged with principles, from which, as a general mint, the spurious coinage proceeded.”³⁹

In light of the similarities between Finney’s revival methods and those of the modern megachurch, MacArthur saw fit to conclude his critique with an attack on the long dead Charles G. Finney. MacArthur, Colson, Guinness, and the rest thus took their place with Beecher, Nettleton, and even revivalists Whitefield and Edwards in attacking what they saw as excessive accommodation to both worldly opinions about success and the unredeemed desires of unbelievers. The specific criticisms differ over time. Beecher and Nettleton disagreed with Finney’s tactics because, in their opinion, they led to social

³⁸ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Leavitt, Lord, and Co., 1835), 12, 167-8.

³⁹ Lyman Beecher and Asahel Nettleton, *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and the Rev. Mr. Nettleton, on the “New Measures” in Conducting Revivals of Religion* (New York: G & C Carvill, 1828), iv-v, 10, 16.

chaos. Megachurch critics have instead drawn on current doubts about the social and spiritual costs of consumerism, and by extension the suburban social region. These doubts also appeared in secular works by authors such as Christopher Lasch. Nevertheless, both religious and secular critics appear to have fought a losing battle. The camp meetings and evangelistic services associated with Finneyite revivalism led to the explosive growth of the Methodists, Baptists, and Churches of Christ. The Congregational Churches of Beecher and Nettleton have dwindled to insignificance. MacArthur, Colson, and other critics have developed significant and popular ministries, but the megachurches have far outpaced them with respect to cultural influence. As popular as MacArthur and Colson have been as authors and ministers, they cannot compete with Joel Osteen or Rick Warren. Furthermore, there are approximately five times as many megachurches in 2013 as there were in 1990. Like Jeremiah, no matter how much they weep and wail over the sins of the people, the megachurch critics seem to be winning relatively few to their side.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 158-9; Beecher and Nettleton, *Letters*, iv. Ed Stetzer, "The Explosive Growth of U.S. Megachurches, Even While Many Say Their Day is Done," *Christianity Today*, posted February 19, 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/february/explosive-growth-of-us-megachurches-even-while-many-say.html>.

Chapter 7 Missionaries

In his critique of the Word of Faith movement, the radio host Hank Hanegraaff briefly discusses South Korean pastor Paul Yonggi Cho. Hanegraaff sees Cho's teaching on "the Fourth Dimension" as both a new spin on Word of Faith theology and a dangerous flirtation with mystic Buddhism. The dimensions of length, breadth, and height are those of the material universe, but the Fourth Dimension is the dimension of spirit. Those who control this Fourth Dimension can manipulate the first three as they wish. By a process that Cho calls "incubation," Christians can visualize a desired outcome, pray for God's guidance, and then speak that desired outcome into existence. Hanegraaff described Cho's Fourth Dimension theology as not very different from that of American Charismatic Word of Faith preachers Kenneth Copeland or Fred K.C. Price.¹

Cho has in fact had a following within American Word of Faith circles and beyond since at least the 1970s. None other than Robert Schuller penned the forward to Cho's 1979 book *The Fourth Dimension*. Schuller wrote that he was "personally indebted to [Cho] for strength, and for insights [he] received from God through this great Christian pastor." He credited Cho's teachings in *The Fourth Dimension* with helping him deal with a tragic auto accident that resulted in his daughter losing a leg. The Word of Faith pioneer Oral Roberts spoke at Cho's pastors' conferences. Cho was also heavily involved

¹ Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1997), 352-4; David Yonggi Cho, *The Fourth Dimension: Discovering a New World of Answered Prayer* (Alachua, Florida: Bridge-Logos, 1979), 1-25.

in Jim Bakker's PTL. In 1977, Bakker promised Cho on air that he would build a PTL studio in Seoul for Cho's Yoido Full Gospel Fellowship. Bakker then called on his audience to send in contributions for the studio. Bakker's apparent redirection of the contributions toward his own personal expenses drew scrutiny from reporters at the *Charlotte Observer*, who then found evidence of other indiscretions at the network. The Cho affair was arguably the catalyst for PTL's spectacular downfall in 1987.²

Cho's influence extends far beyond his relationships with famous American pastors, or even his teachings on the Fourth Dimension. He is a hero of the Church Growth Movement. Yoido Full Gospel Fellowship is the largest church in the world. Founded in 1958 as Full Gospel Central Church, it crossed the two thousand-member threshold in 1964. By 1980, there were 133,000 members, and by 1984 there were 350,000. The sociologist Warren Bird estimates that, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, Yoido Full Gospel Fellowship saw 480,000 people attend its multiple services each week, held mainly in a 10,000-seat auditorium but also encompassing several smaller venues at the main church complex. This success has attracted so much attention that megachurch researcher John N. Vaughan called Yoido Full Gospel Fellowship "the most researched church in the world."³

John Wimber, leader of the Vineyard churches from the late 1970s until his death in 1996, believed that Yoido grew because of Cho's boldness in using signs and wonders

² Cho, *The Fourth Dimension*, ix-x; Harold Smith, "A Heavy 'Latter Rain' is Expected in Asia," *Christianity Today*, November 7, 1986, 48; Charles E. Shepard, "PTL's Bakker Rebutts News Reports of FCC Allegations," *Charlotte Observer*, February 1, 1986.

³ John N. Vaughan, *The World's Twenty Largest Churches: Church Growth Principles in Action* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 36-40; Warren Bird, "World Megachurches," Leadership Network, accessed December 30, 2014, <http://leadnet.org/world/>. Bird maintains a spreadsheet at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AvalHyk8hrPydE9hcFAzVnEwWktrVUNETjVJWVJJWUE&hl=en_US#gid=0. All statistics on global megachurch attendance cited throughout the rest of this chapter are derived from Bird's spreadsheet.

to challenge the power of Satan. Cho himself, and most of his American admirers, pointed to a far more mundane reason for the church's growth. Yoido Full Gospel Fellowship keeps track of its members through a hierarchical cell-group system that countless churches throughout the world have now emulated. After collapsing from exhaustion in 1964, Cho realized that he could not be the personal pastor of thousands of people. While confined to his hospital bed, he came across Jethro's words to Moses in Exodus 18:18, which in the New American Standard Bible reads: "You will surely wear out, both you and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone." Cho took this particular encounter with that verse as a sign that he needed to involve more lay people in ministry. He therefore implemented a system of lay-led cell groups. A cell is a group of people who "meet weekly in a home, factory, office, or other place for the purpose of evangelism and Christian fellowship through singing, prayer, Bible study, offering, giving, announcements, sharing of needs, and praises and ministry to one another." Cho quickly identified people he thought could lead cells, and by 1969 Yoido Full Gospel Fellowship had 152 cells averaging fifty-three members. Cho still wanted more lay involvement, and by 1974 increased the number of groups to approximately four hundred, each one averaging thirty-two members. By 1974 Cho had also introduced a hierarchical system. He divided Seoul into five districts, each with about seven sections. Each section had about twenty-two cell groups. Although Yoido Full Gospel Fellowship has expanded dramatically since then, the same basic cell group structure still serves as the primary means by which most attenders receive pastoral care.⁴

⁴ John Wimber, "Signs and Wonders in the Church Growth Movement," in *Church Growth: State of the Art*, ed. C. Peter Wagner with Win Arn and Elmer Towns (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1986), 216-7;

American megachurches have enthusiastically adopted the home or cell group model. In 1991 Elmer Towns stated that the five thousand-member New Hope Community Church in Portland, Oregon had the most effective small group ministry in America because it followed Cho's model. New Hope's pastor, Dale Galloway, was on the board of Cho's Church Growth International and frequently spoke at his conferences. Influential churches like John Hagee's Cornerstone Christian Fellowship and Rick Warren's Saddleback Church have also adapted Cho's model to suit their needs. The megachurch researchers Scott Thumma and Dave Travis go so far as to state that American pastors "had almost no discussion of 'cell groups' or intentional small fellowship groups until the idea was imported from the model at Yoido Full Gospel Fellowship Church in South Korea." The sociologists C. Kirk Hadaway, Stuart A. White, and Francis DuBose wrote in 1987 that "the growth of the Yoido Full Gospel Church and the Young Nak Presbyterian Church has galvanized attention around a new idea, created focus, and birthed a movement which is just beginning to impact mainline denominations in the United States." The independent fundamental Baptist megachurches relied on busing and maximizing the potential of the traditional Sunday School, but new megachurches required other techniques to facilitate interpersonal connections among displaced, car-driving, middle-class Americans in the expanding suburbs. Yoido Full Gospel Fellowship showed them the way.⁵

Vaughan, *The World's Twenty Largest Churches*, 45-6.

⁵ Elmer L. Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches* (Ventura, California: Regal, 1990), 74; Justin G. Wilford, *Sacred Subdivisions: The Postsuburban Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 94-5; Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 47-8. C. Kirk Hadaway, Francis M. DuBose, and Stuart A. Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 17.

Yoido Full Gospel Fellowship also, and perhaps more importantly, demonstrates two important truths about megachurches. First, the megachurch is a global phenomenon, with the largest Protestant churches in the world existing outside of the United States. South Korea has close economic and political ties to the United States, and most citizens enjoy a relatively high standard of living. Thus, the evolution of some form of the suburban social religion could explain the growth of megachurches there. After all, as Vaughan notes, in 1969 Cho chose to break ground for his new church building in a new, growing area of Seoul “south of the main business district” but still close to “the heart of the city.” But megachurches have taken hold in places that appear to have little to do with the American suburbia of the late twentieth century. New Life Church on Mumbai, India averages seventy thousand in attendance. Lagos, Nigeria has three evangelical churches – Deeper Life Church, Living Faith Church, and Apostolic Church – larger than any in the United States. Jesus Celebration Center in Mombasa, Kenya regularly has sixty thousand people come to its weekly services. These churches have not simply adopted American ways of doing church. As the chart below indicates, several large churches outside the United States predate the rise of most American megachurches, and their pastors passed on the lessons they learned to their American counterparts. Americans did not teach Koreans how to build large churches. Cho taught Americans how to grow their churches to spectacular sizes while not micromanaging pastoral care.⁶

⁶ Vaughan, *The World's 20 Largest Churches*, 42.

Table 7.1: Largest Churches Outside the United States, 1981-2⁷

Name	Location	Pastor	Year Pastor Started	Attendance
Yoido Full Gospel	Seoul, South Korea	Paul Yonggi Cho	1958	105,000
Jotabech Methodist Pentecostal	Santiago Chile	Jose Javier Velasquez	1964	60,000
Young Nak Presbyterian	Seoul, South Korea	Cho Choon Park	1973	20,000
Miracle Center	Benin City, Nigeria	Benson Idahosa	1969	10,000
Brazil for Christ	Sao Paulo, Brazil	Manoel de Melo	1955	10,000
Sung Nak Baptist	Seoul, South Korea	Kim Ki Tong	1971	9,960
Soong-Eui Methodist	Seoul, South Korea	Ho Moon Lee		7,000
Chung Hyeon Presbyterian	Seoul, South Korea	Kim Chang In	1953	6,000
Kwang Lim Methodist	Seoul, South Korea	Kim Sun Do	1971	6,000

The table also reveals that South Korea and South America have witnessed megachurch growth to a greater degree than Africa or Europe. More recent data indicates that this is still true for the most part. Asia is home to 112 megachurches (thirty-eight in South Korea alone), and South America has 41 (fifteen in Brazil). This chapter, however, explores the burgeoning megachurch culture of sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on the megachurches of Uganda. According to Bird, as of 2013 sub-Saharan Africa was home to sixty-two megachurches. That megachurches, and even what on the surface appear to be American-style megachurches, can exist in a war-torn impoverished country – a place as unlike Orange County, California as any on earth – weakens deterministic arguments that

⁷ This information is taken from Vaughan, *The World's Twenty Largest Churches*, 287-8, as well as the fold-out chart on the inside back cover of that book.

attribute the rise of large churches to material circumstances alone or that discount religious or ideological explanations.

Second, these large churches in other parts of the world reveal not only the extent to which megachurches have become a global phenomenon, but also the extent to which megachurches in all parts of the world are connected. Because of these transnational connections linking evangelicals and Pentecostals, megachurch networks constitute one important lens through which to study globalization. Those who define globalization as, in the words of the historians Charles Bright and Michael Geyer, “the Americanization of the world,” will have trouble explaining how Cho became so influential or how Hillsong Church in Sydney, Australia managed to become the dominant force in American worship music. As both Yoido and Hillsong attest, influence within global Protestantism does not always flow from West to East or from North to South. To capture the dynamic, two-way nature of globalization, globalization theorists have coined the term “glocalization.” Glocalization refers to the processes by which local communities adapt global cultural forms to their own contexts. As the African religious scholar Ogbu Kalu notes, glocalization can be a helpful concept as long as scholars do not see Africans or any other group as passively adopting cultural forms developed elsewhere, but instead see them as active contributors in the formation of the global culture in which they participate.⁸

It also follows from Kalu’s point that the American suburban social religion fits within, but does not wholly define, this new world culture. The ethos that in America is

⁸ Charles Bright and Michael Geyer, “Where in the World is America? The History of the United States in the Global Age,” in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 63; Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 188-9.

the suburban social religion expresses itself differently in South Korea, Brazil, or Uganda. These myriad local manifestations nevertheless share enough similarities that they can fit within a single broad category of analysis. A study of the similarities between global megachurches, and the formal and informal connections that bind them together, should therefore deepen our understanding of the suburban social religion as well as the emerging global evangelicalism that finds its most visible expression in the world's megachurches.

Christianity in Uganda

Like many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Uganda would not seem to provide a culturally, socially, or economically hospitable environment for megachurches. Most Ugandans belong, at least formally, to hierarchical, liturgical churches. According to the 2002 census, approximately 42% of Ugandans belong to the Roman Catholic Church, while 36% belong to the Anglican Church of Uganda. Another 12% of the population is Muslim. Evangelical Christians make up only about 6% of the population. By comparison, those metropolitan areas of the United States such as the Northeast that have high percentages of Catholics and a low proportion of evangelicals are inhospitable to megachurch formation.⁹

Furthermore, the population of Uganda is overwhelmingly rural, with approximately 88% of Ugandans living outside of metropolitan areas. And these rural areas are extremely poor. Most Ugandans do not enjoy nearly the same standard of living as the typical American suburbanite, or for that matter the typical resident of Seoul, South

⁹ Uganda Bureau of Statistics, "2002 Uganda Population and Housing Census," accessed December 14, 2002, <http://www.ubos.org/onlinefiles/uploads/ubos/pdf%20documents/2002%20Census%20Final%20Reportdoc.pdf>.

Korea. World Bank data collected between 2010 and 2013 reveals that 37.8% of Ugandans live on less than \$1.25 a day. Although this percentage is higher for several other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, no country outside of sub-Saharan Africa has a higher percentage of people living on such a small amount.¹⁰

The Ugandan state, and the Ugandan political situation, have at times also been inhospitable to powerful Christian movements or prominent Christian leaders. This adversarial relationship dates back to the arrival of the first Christian missionaries in the region. The Anglican Church Missionary Society sent missionaries to the kingdom of Buganda in 1877, and the Catholic White Fathers of Algeria followed in 1879. The king of Buganda, Mutesa I, required foreign visitors to live at court, and so Christians could not proselytize freely outside of present-day Kampala. The king was suspicious of the outsiders, and this suspicion only increased once Mutesa developed a serious illness. The failure of traditional healers to help him after the expulsion of the missionaries in late 1879 only enhanced the newcomers' reputation, however. Their return to court in the early 1880s saw them win converts among the courtiers and skilled artisans who resided there. These influential Baganda witnessed eloquent and forceful debates between the Anglican Alexander Mackay and the Catholic Simon Lourdel. Both missionaries quickly gained a following among the elite of Buganda.¹¹

The association of Christianity with British imperialism, as well as its increased influence over court pages, led Mutesa's son and successor, Mwanga II, to conclude that

¹⁰ World Health Organization, "Country Cooperation Strategy at a Glance: Uganda," accessed March 7, 2015, http://www.who.int/countryfocus/cooperation_strategy/ccsbrief_uga_en.pdf; World Bank, "Poverty Headcount Ratio at \$1.25 a day," accessed December 14, 2014, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.DDAY>.

¹¹ Michael Twaddle, *Kakungulu & the Creation of Uganda* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993), 94-5.

the new religion threatened his rule and dangerously divided loyalties among his subjects. In 1886, after a number of male Christian converts at court rejected his sexual advances, he murdered approximately twenty of them. These young men became known as the Ugandan Martyrs, and their story would come to the fore again in church-state debates in Uganda during the twenty-first century. With this act, Mwanga II angered the British, who backed rival claimants to the throne. After Mwanga's deposition, the British changed their minds and reinstated him, but by that time it was clear who controlled Buganda. Anglicanism now enjoyed an elevated status in the Bugandan state. Buganda even became a kind of missionary center for all of what would become Uganda, with an Anglican Muganda traveling to the remote northern Acholi region as early as 1891, preaching the gospel from a Luganda Bible.¹²

Ugandan Anglicanism soon developed its own peculiarities. Beginning in the 1930s, a renewal movement began within the Anglican Church that called ordinary members of the Church of England to have an individual encounter with the Holy Spirit and to be personally born again. Those who joined the movement – the *balakole* or “saved ones” – did not leave the Anglican Church, nor did the Church hierarchy ask them to leave despite the movement's often harsh criticism of hypocrisy among church leaders and European missionaries. In the United States such Spirit-focused movements have usually led to the formation of new denominations. The *balakole*, however, became a part of Anglican Church culture and helped unite Christians within a country that was, at least

¹² Twaddle, *Kakungulu & the Creation of Uganda*, 27; Kevin Ward, “The Church of Uganda Amidst Conflict: The Interplay Between Church and Politics in Uganda Since 1962,” in *Religion & Politics in East Africa*, ed. Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1995), 99; Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda, 1986-1997* trans. Mitch Cohen (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), 112.

in the 1960s, little more than a confederation of kingdoms. The first native Anglican Archbishops of Uganda were all *balakole*, and all were from outside of the geographical region historically controlled by Buganda. Archbishop Eric Sabiiti (1966-1974) came from Ankole in the Southwestern part of the country, and his two successors – Janani Luwum (1974-1977) and Silvanus Wani (1977-1983) – were from northern areas. As Heike Behrend notes, the *balakole* helped indigenize Christianity because they separated Christian teaching from the colonial powers. The movement also created a type of Anglican evangelicalism that perhaps prepared Ugandans for their early encounters with Pentecostals, first in the 1960s but much more extensively in the 1980s.¹³

Despite Uganda's tradition of charismatic Anglicanism, Pentecostals in Uganda have historically found it difficult to win converts. The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada sent a few missionaries to Uganda in the late 1940s, but an independent Pentecostal Church in Vancouver, British Columbia named Glad Tidings Temple apparently led the first sustained Pentecostal missionary efforts in the country. The Anglican Church opposed the entrance of Hugh and Audrey Layzell of Glad Tidings into Uganda as missionaries for several years, but finally relented in April of 1960. These two helped form a number of Full Gospel churches in Uganda, and Glad Tidings of Vancouver continued to send missionaries throughout the 1960s.¹⁴

After Idi Amin came to power in January 1971, Pentecostals faced banning and persecution. Amin expelled foreign missionaries, and because of Ugandan evangelicals'

¹³ Behrend, *Alice Lakwena & the Holy Spirits*, 119-20; Ward, "The Church of Uganda Amidst Conflict," 74-87.

¹⁴ Simon Kasirye, *The Pentecostal Movement in Uganda: A Souvenir of the Golden Jubilee* (Uganda: 2010), 22-3.

and Pentecostals' connection to these foreigners, attempted to ban Ugandan-led evangelical churches as well. Catholics spoke in defense of these groups, and Amin relented. He did, however, curtail their public assemblies, with the result that many Pentecostal house churches formed during the Amin years. In 1977, Amin also martyred the *balakole* Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Janani Luwum, who spoke out publically against Amin after the dictator sent troops to his house to search for weapons. That same year, Amin finally banned Pentecostal and evangelical groups altogether.¹⁵

Amin's ouster in 1979 brought relief to Pentecostals, but conditions in Uganda were still unfavorable for the growth of megachurches. The historian Kevin Ward writes that the "period between the fall of Amin and the coming to power of Obote for a second term of office was a period of unprecedented violence, especially in Kampala," the one area with a population density conducive to megachurch formation. Almost as soon as Obote assumed the presidency, a guerilla insurgency led by future president Yoweri Museveni formed in 1981. Fighting just outside of Kampala, especially in the region known as the Luwero Triangle, was often brutal. A military coup toppled Obote in July 1985, but the new regime lasted only six months. Museveni's National Revolutionary Movement took Kampala in January 1986. Although war would rage in the northern part of Uganda for the next twenty-five years, Kampala and surrounding areas were relatively peaceful. Only in these conditions of political and social stability could Uganda's megachurches finally form.¹⁶

¹⁵ M. Louise Pirouet, "Religion in Uganda Under Amin," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 11 (1980): 24; Kasirye, *The Pentecostal Movement in Uganda*, 58, 68; Ward, "The Church of Uganda Amidst Conflict," 84-5.

¹⁶ Ward, "The Church of Uganda Amidst Conflict," 87, 97-8. For a detailed account of Uganda's political instability since 1962, see Ronald R. Atkinson, *The Roots of Ethnicity: Origins of the Acholi of Uganda Before 1800* (Kampala: Fountain, 2010), 275-335.

Megachurches in Uganda

Bird identifies four megachurches in Uganda, all of which are in Kampala. He does not list Kampala Pentecostal Church (now known as Watoto) even though a local historian of Ugandan Pentecostalism states that by 1997 seven thousand people attended that church, and the Assemblies of God in the United States reported in 2000 that Kampala Pentecostal Church had eight thousand attenders. In May 2014, Uganda's *New Vision* newspaper reported that Watoto had twenty-three thousand attenders, making it the largest church in Uganda.

Table 7.2: Largest Churches in Uganda

Name	Pastor	Year Founded	Attendance
Watoto	Gary Skinner	1984	23,000
Christian Life Church	Jackson Ssenyonga	1995	22,000
Miracle Center Cathedral	Robert Kayanja	1991	15,000
Prayer Palace Christian Center	Musisi Grivas	1988	6,000
Light of the World	Wilson Bugembe	2003	4,000

A number of other churches, such as Makerere Full Gospel Church, Makerere Redeemed Church, and Deliverance Church, might be megachurches, but there is not enough reliable information on average weekly attendance to definitively place them in that category.¹⁷

These megachurches evince certain characteristics of the American suburban social religion, but speak out of and to their own social and political settings, settings that differ markedly from those in America's suburbs. Because these Ugandan megachurches share a Pentecostal theology with their American counterparts, and because they espouse

¹⁷ Kasirye, *The Pentecostal Movement in Uganda*, 176; "Massive Cult Murder Toll Threatens Religious Liberty," *Pentecostal Evangel*, June 4, 2000, 26; Carol Kasujja, "Watoto Celebrates 30 Years," *New Vision*, May 28, 2014.

certain aspects of the suburban social religion, American megachurch pastors and those in Africa have found enough common ground to become a part of a global megachurch network. After exploring ways in which these pastors' ministries resonate with various aspects of the suburban social religion, this section will look at more specific links between Ugandan and American megachurch pastors. Although observers might simply assume that Ugandan megachurch pastors take their cues from Americans, Ugandan megachurches are in some ways equal partners in the emerging global megachurch culture, and have at times evinced a willingness to break with their American partners when they feel it is in the best interests of their mission in Uganda.

Kalu argues that Benson Idahosa's work in Nigeria changed African Pentecostal churches. Unlike the United States, where a wide variety of religious broadcasting existed before the rise of the Charismatic cable networks of the 1970s, television and PTL penetrated the African interior at roughly the same time in the 1980s. Idahosa partnered with Jim Bakker to bring religious television to western Africa, a move that increased the regional profile of his church substantially. Media exposure, along with a Word of Faith theology, spread the concept of "the big man and the big God" who can shower material blessings on his followers. As in America, Idahosa and pastors like him published books and hosted conferences to train other pastors. Their reputations grew, and they became objects of admiration and emulation.¹⁸

In 1986, Idahosa came to Uganda with the German Word of Faith evangelist and TBN stalwart Reinhard Bonnke as part of the latter's continent-spanning Christ for All Nations crusade. Their timing was perfect. Museveni had just come to power, fighting in

¹⁸ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 106, 114-5;

and around Kampala was over, and Pentecostal Christians now had greater freedom of worship than they had ever had. Everywhere Bonnke went in Africa, approximately fifty thousand people flocked to his amazing six-story tent, complete with floodlights and a modern sound system. Bonnke, Idahosa, and their associates preached on the Holy Spirit, demons, Salvation, the work of Christ, and the End Times. The preachers also attacked traditional denominations and held up the importance of signs and wonders as vital to the health of local congregation. The prosperity message was prominent throughout. Finally, Bonnke, Idahosa, and friends sold dozens of different books and tapes by American preachers, including Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, John Osteen (father of Joel), and Jimmy Swaggart.¹⁹

It is unclear what impact the Christ for All Nations crusade had on Uganda, but it did arrive in the country at a particularly opportune time, and the subsequent history of Ugandan Pentecostalism reveals that Bonnke and company found an audience receptive to their teaching. Like Idahosa and the authors featured at the crusade bookstore, Ugandan megachurch pastors cast themselves as entrepreneurs, entertainers, and therapists, big men who serve a big God. Prayer Palace Ministries, for example, touts Bishop Musisi Grivas as a founder of schools and hospitals and a trainer of pastors. He also “runs several agricultural projects” and teaches others “how to alleviate poverty through self-employment and job creation.” His pursuits include founding Dunamis FM 103 “which transmits from Mukono Town, throughout the eastern, western and central regions of Uganda and it reached over 6 million people every single DAY with power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Grivas is also a healer, claiming to have “seen over 400

¹⁹ For an account of the Christ for All Nations crusade in Harare, Zimbabwe, see Paul Gifford, “‘All Africa Shall be Saved’: An Appraisal of Reinhard Bonnke’s Pan-African Crusade,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 17 (Feb. 1987): 63-92.

HIV/AIDS medically documented victims being healed by the Hand of God and medically documented AIDS free, as a result of 24/7 intercessory (unceasing) prayers which was established in this ministry in 1987.” Although Grivas is hardly known outside of Uganda, an article in that country’s *Daily Monitor* singled him out as an egregious example of what happens when an omniscient celebrity pastor becomes the center of a church. A member of his church noted that “members are not as sprightly,” and give less money, when Grivas is absent. The author of the article states that at churches like Prayer Palace, “[o]ne gets the feeling that it is the pastor and not God who is behind all the miracles.”²⁰

Wilson Bugembe of Light of the World has enjoyed a much more congenial relationship with the press. Uganda’s *New Vision* newspaper treats Bugembe as a beloved celebrity and closely follows the growth of both his church and his recording career. *New Vision* reported on August 27, 2012 that Bugembe would have a release party for his new album *Biribabitya* at the upscale Hotel Equatoria in Kampala. *New Vision* reported on all of Bugembe’s album releases, all of which appear to have taken place at upscale hotels. The paper also ran features on Bugembe, like their “Ten Things to Know” column in which he talks about his favorite food (silver fish with beans), his favorite recording artist (American Christian singer Michael W. Smith), and his favorite sports team (Manchester United). As with other eligible young celebrities, *New Vision* also tracked Bugembe’s love life. Bugembe seems at home with his celebrity, even hosting a “Celebrity Sunday” at his church during which several prominent Ugandan recording artists and comedian

²⁰ Prayer Palace Ministries, “Bishop Musisi,” accessed December 29, 2014, <http://www.ppcu.org/Bishop.html>; Agnes K. Namaganda, “Who Do You Really Worship,” *Daily Monitor*, February 19, 2012.

Mendo M7 performed. The paper noted that Bugembe “played a sort of talk show host” as he emceed the event.²¹

Bugembe has not crossed over to American audiences as either a pastor or a singer. Robert Kayanja of Miracle Center Cathedral has become a frequent guest on TBN, however. In Uganda, Kayanja has hosted conferences on relationships that featured talk-show style panel discussions that included members of parliament and Ugandan television personalities. His message and style fits well with the American cable network, and his theology falls right in line with that of the other Word of Faith preachers appearing on TBN. In one sermon at his home church, for example, he denounced beggars as liars and told a story in which he demanded a first-class ticket on a flight from Nairobi to Kampala because “the Lord sees me as first class.” At his January 23, 2003 appearance on TBN’s *Praise the Lord*, he pointed out that “Jesus Christ trusted his body to a businessman. He couldn’t trust it to anybody else.” Kayanja spoke of Joseph of Aramethea, the man who took Jesus’ body from the cross to the tomb. Kayanja went on to proclaim 2003 the year of the Triple Blessing. He applied the idea of the Triple Blessing to a number of areas, but pointed specifically to the areas of business, entertainment, and health. Those in need of healing in 2003 would receive it, those in need of guidance in their business would receive, and those like host Matt Crouch who strove to redeem the worldly realm of film and television would receive their miracle to do God’s work in that unlikely venue. The message throughout centered on personal

²¹ Mathias Mazinga, “Where’s Your Ticket to Heaven?” *New Vision*, August 27, 2012; Mathias Mazinga, “Bugembe Shines at Lengara Embaata,” *New Vision*, September 14, 2011; Mathias Mazinga, “Riding High with ANI,” *New Vision*, October 7, 2010; Nicholas Kajoba, “Bugembe Launches Kamawo Eka,” *New Vision*, August 26, 2008; “Bugembe’s Celebrity Sunday Reunites Artists,” *New Vision*, February 1, 2011; “Ten Things to Know About Pastor Wilson Bugembe,” *New Vision*, April 7, 2011; “Bugembe’s Tough Fiance Sets the Rules,” *New Vision*, September 10, 2011; “Bugembe, Who’s the Lucky Girl?” *New Vision*, June 8, 2012.

fulfillment and success – the receipt of miracles for the realization of personal dreams. In his subsequent appearances on TBN he preached on similar themes. No doubt TBN regulars Morris Cerullo and T.D. Jakes expounded this familiar message when they spoke at one of Kayanja’s conferences in Kampala in 2007.²²

Kayanja has at times taken on politics, and publicly supported both Republican policies and those of Uganda’s president Yoweri Museveni, a staunch Bush ally in the War on Terror. In one appearance on TBN, Kayanja rejoiced that “the president and first lady of Uganda are believers in the Lord Jesus.” Then, sounding almost like Jerry Falwell, he called his hearers to take “back America in Jesus’ name.” In another appearance on TBN, he prayed specifically for President Bush and praised God that the American president was a believer. Like Kayanja, Jackson Ssenyonga of Christian Life Church has built his ministry on a therapeutic, self-help message aimed at the Ugandan context but that would also sound familiar to American suburbanites. Uganda’s *Daily Monitor* called him a “motivational speaker,” and Ssenyonga named his popular television program *Winning in Life*. Also like Kayanja, Senyonga does not shy away from political statements. In 2010, he invited all eight presidential candidates to a prayer vigil, and even had portraits made of those who could not attend so that they could still “be present” and receive anointing from the Holy Spirit. Given the history of church-state relations in Uganda, a politically outspoken and theologically conservative pastor is not necessarily a sign that the pastor is politically conservative. Nevertheless, these

²²Roderick Ahimbazwe, “A Neon Affair at the Girl Power Convention,” *New Vision*, December 21, 2013; John Lloyd, “Uganda’s Controversial Pastors,” *Financial Times Magazine*, October 24, 2008, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/20b089e0-9f14-11dd-98bd-000077b07658.html>; “Praise the Lord,” original air date January 23, 2003, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/ttNGNoMzofJsu9mjcT4sHQeXIC55f2Wq?offset=1608>; Brian Mutebi, “Uganda’s Love for Celebrity Preachers,” *Daily Monitor*, August 12, 2012.

megachurch pastors have chosen to support Museveni's government, and they do not appear to have ever questioned the United States' involvement with the rest of the world, or with Africa in particular.²³

This affinity for America certainly has something to do with the historical connections between American missionaries and church leaders and those in Uganda. Kayanja, for example, speaks highly of pioneering Word of Faith evangelists T.L. and Daisy Osborne. Of all these pastors, Ssenyonga in particular is proud of his American connections, and his church's website boasts that in the United States he "has addressed and shared ministry opportunities with governors, senators, mayors, and spiritual leaders, such as Jack Hayford, Bill Bright, Pat Robertson, A.R. Bernard, John Kilpatrick and many others." Hayford, Paul and Jan Crouch's personal pastor, leads the largest church in the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. Bright founded Campus Crusade for Christ, and of course Robertson was a major figure in both Christian broadcasting and the New Christian Right. A.R. Bernard leads Brooklyn's thirteen thousand strong Christian Cultural Center. John Kilpatrick is former pastor of Brownsville Assembly of God in Pensacola, Florida, a major center of the "Third Wave" of Pentecostalism that stressed miraculous healings as well as extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit's presence, such as uncontrollable body tremors, paralysis, and holy laughter. All of these names have at times carried considerable weight among suburban evangelicals in America. Ssenyonga's citation of them indicates that their messages and methods, which accord with the suburban social religion, resonate in some African contexts as well. He also cites them in

²³"Praise the Lord," original air date February 20, 2003, <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/VnM2lrMzqFauQmSwVUMECMN1fGDhAxUf>; "Praise the Lord," original air date March 13, 2003; <http://www.itbn.org/index/detail/lib/Networks/sublib/TBN/ec/p4NWtyMzqYjQ0gFm84ujlLxLmp2YICP>; Rachel Kabejja, "Good or Bad Shepherds?" *Daily Monitor*, August 30, 2008.

order to bolster his own standing, to let others know that he is comfortable moving among internationally known American evangelical leaders.²⁴

African megachurch pastors typically do not feel that they need validation from Americans for their work, however. Ssenyonga is the only pastor who touts his American connections on his website. Ugandan church leaders have at times chafed at American interference. Rick Warren is the highest profile American megachurch pastor who has become involved in Ugandan church culture, and even Ugandan politics. Many in the American media saw Warren's hand behind Uganda's proposed anti-gay law, a statute that would have meant life in prison or even execution for homosexuals. Writing for the Daily Beast website in 2009, the journalist Max Blumenthal noted Warren's outspoken support for California's Proposition 8 as well as his association with the Ugandan pastor Martin Ssempe of Makerere Community Church. Ssempe was a prominent partner in Saddleback's world anti-AIDS initiatives. Blumenthal notes that Ssempe's "stunts have included burning condoms in the name of Jesus and arranging the publication of names of homosexuals in cooperative local newspapers while lobbying for criminal penalties to imprison them." He goes on to note Ssempe's presence at Warren's 2005 and 2006 global AIDS conferences, and Ssempe's 2007 campaign against homosexual rights.²⁵

Warren never censured Ssempe for publishing the names of homosexuals in the newspaper or for burning condoms, leading observers to conclude he tacitly approved of these actions. The relationship between Ssempe and Warren was however more fraught, and the breakdown of their friendship over the anti-gay laws in Uganda points to the

²⁴ Christian Life Ministries, "About Pastor Jackson Ssenyonga," accessed December 14, 2014, <http://www.christianlifeministries.org/about-christian-life-ministries/about-pastor-jackson-senyonga>.

²⁵ Max Blumenthal, "Rick Warren's Africa Problem," Daily Beast, January 7, 2009, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2009/01/07/the-truth-about-rick-warren-in-africa.html>.

complicated relationship between American and foreign evangelicals. For his part, in the Fall of 2009 Warren publicly stated that he opposed the “criminalization of homosexuality” and that it was “not [his] role to get involved in other nations’ politics.” It was his role, however, “to shepherd other pastors who look to [him] for guidance.” He also wanted to “correct errors, lies, and false reports when others associate me with a law that I had nothing to do with, completely oppose, and vigorously condemn.”²⁶

Ssempe and the interdenominational and interfaith group he headed, Uganda National Pastors Taskforce Against Homosexuality, called on Warren to apologize, and they directed harsh words at Ssempe’s former associate. “Your letter has caused great distress and the pastors are demanding that you issue a formal apology for insulting the people of Africa by your inappropriate bully use of your church and your purpose driven pulpits,” they wrote. Pastors not quite as given to controversy as Ssempe also expressed concern over Warren’s remarks. The Anglican assistant bishop of Kampala, David Zac Niringiye, stated that the “international community is acting like it can’t trust Uganda to come up with a law that is fair.” Christopher Byaruhanga, a theology professor at Uganda Christian University, characterized western Christians’ condemnation of the law as “imperialism.” “They don’t understand our ethics in the country of Uganda,” he said, “and they are trying to impose what they believe.” Warren might have believed that it was his job “to shepherd other pastors,” but many Uganda pastors did not see themselves as his sheep. Imperialism in their minds did not manifest itself as the American Christian Right’s attempt to implement their dominionist social agenda abroad, but rather as

²⁶ Sarah Pulliam Baile, “Intercontinental Divide,” *Christianity Today*, February 2010, 17.

Westerners' assumption that they knew better than Ugandans did how to run their society.²⁷

Ugandan megachurches began and grew without American help, and though their messages resonate with those of megachurch pastors and they often speak at one another's conferences, they do not walk in lockstep. And as the debates over Uganda's anti-gay legislation reveal, American megachurches do not dictate how their counterparts in the majority world interact with their surrounding cultures. The megachurch did not begin in America and then colonize other countries. Americans have in the past exported theologies and ideologies, but Africans have adapted these ideologies in response to their social, political and economic environments. They have shown little evidence that they desire or require guidance from self-appointed "shepherds" in the United States.

Conclusion

The religious studies scholars Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe describe how, during the 1980s, scholars and researchers affiliated with mainline Christianity often severely criticized South African Pentecostals for their beliefs and practices. These criticisms generally centered on uncorroborated allegations of support for apartheid or other unpalatable political positions. Hexham and Poewe also note the frequency with which these accusations came along with wild, unfounded charges that large independent churches were "under the control of the CIA or the American Christian Right." It is important to remember that, because the history of Christianity in Africa is often also the story of Western imperialism, these accusations seem plausible on the surface.

Furthermore, the highly toxic political environment in South Africa during the 1980s did

²⁷ Ibid., 18-9.

not encourage sober or nuanced debate on religious groups' affiliations or politics. Nevertheless, South African church leaders frequently demonstrated their independence of American influence. When the loose conglomeration of Pentecostal churches known as the International Fellowship of Christian Churches formed in 1989, it explicitly excluded Americans from membership. These churches did, however, intentionally cultivate a relationship with Paul Yonggi Cho.²⁸

The charge of control by imperialistic American Christians is therefore not new, nor is it unique to Uganda. Like South Africa's or South Korea's or South America's megachurches, Ugandan megachurches exist alongside, rather than under the control of, American megachurches and megaministers. Pastor Gary Skinner, born in Zimbabwe to Canadian parents, started the church now known as Watoto on Easter Sunday 1984 with seventy-five people. By the time it attained megachurch status in the late 1980s or early 1990s, Watoto developed a system of small groups that helped maintain cohesion. The church grouped members into cells known as "clusters." Each cluster had six people. Groups of clusters formed districts, of which there were five in Kampala. These cells came together for large worship services – and by the first decade of the twenty-first century these gatherings were probably the largest in Uganda – but pastoral care and Christian fellowship occurred in the cells. Skinner's model strongly resembled Cho's. A megachurch in South Korea provided a template for a Zimbabwe-born Canadian to build one of the largest churches in sub-Saharan Africa.

As Watoto grew, one of its strongest international allies became Hillsong Church in Sydney, Australia. Founded in 1983, Hillsong came to dominate contemporary

²⁸ Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, "Charismatic Churches in South Africa: A Critique of Criticisms and Problems of Bias," in *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture*, ed. Karla O. Poewe (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 51.

worship music in the English-speaking world by the early twenty-first century, with its various bands and artists selling sixteen million albums. Watoto uses Hillsong music, and the Watoto Children's Choir has performed at Hillsong conferences in Sydney. Hillsong prominently features the Watoto ministry to orphans on its website as one of its major ministry partners. Hillsong pastors Brian and Bobbie Houston spoke at Watoto's thirtieth anniversary celebration in June 2014. American megachurches have therefore been irrelevant in the development of this large, influential church in Uganda, and its style of worship and its ministries would not change even if it were to cease all contact with American churches. Watoto did not import an American model, and it is certainly not a tool of American evangelicals.²⁹

Watoto is of course part of the world evangelical community, as the church's ongoing relationship to American Word of Faith preacher Joyce Meyer attests. It is, however, its own entity. The proliferation of media formats and technologies facilitates and accelerates the creation of a global evangelical culture, one guided by increasingly visible and influential megachurches. African pastors have read books by Word of Faith pastors for decades, and for just as long American pastors have looked to Cho's church growth lessons. Radio, television, and the internet knit together these already existing networks that much more tightly while also providing a wider array of evangelical media from which to pick and choose.

The chart that concludes the chapter reveals much about the nature of this simultaneously tightening and expanding megachurch network. The absence of American churches on this list of churches with fifty thousand or more weekly attenders indicates

²⁹ Michael Paulson, "Megachurch With a Beat Lures a Young Flock," *New York Times*, September 14, 2014; "The Choir," <http://www.watoto.com/the-choir>, accessed December 17, 2014; Kasujja, "Watoto Celebrates 30 Years."

that those megachurches most familiar to American observers may not be the most important nodes in a network increasingly centered in the global South and East. As areas outside of North America and Europe claim a greater proportion of the world's Christians, and as these areas nurture churches that dwarf the largest in America, it also seems likely that Asian, African, and Latin American Christians will wield greater influence within the world Christian community. The megachurches of the Global South – and not the megachurches of the New South – might become the center of world evangelicalism in the decades to come.

Table 7.3: Churches with 50,000+ Worshipers

Name	Location	Pastor	Attendance
Yoido Full Gospel	Seoul, South Korea	Paul Yonggi Cho	480,000
Elim Central	San Salvador, El Salvador	Mario Vega	75,000
Deeper Christian Life Ministry	Lagos, Nigeria	William Kumuyi	75,000
New Life Church	Mumbai, India	S. Joseph	70,000
All Nations Community	Seoul, South Korea	Lee Jae Hoon	65,000
Victory Metro	Manila, Philippines	Steve Murrell	65,000
Pyungkang Cheil Presbyterian	Seoul, South Korea	Abraham Park Yoon-sik	60,000
Jesus Celebration Center	Mombasa, Kenya	Wilfred Lai	60,000
Church of Peace	Santarém, Brazil	Abe Huber	50,000
Royal Court of Jesus	Allahabad, India	Rajendra B. Lal	50,000
Bethany Church of God	Surabaya, Indonesia	Abraham Alex Tanuseputra	50,000
Nambu Full Gospel	Anyang, South Korea		50,000
New Life Assembly of God	Chennai, India	David Mohan	50,000
Apostolic Church	Lagos, Nigeria	Gabriel Olutola	50,000
Living Faith (Winner's Chapel)	Lagos Nigeria	David Oyedepo	50,000
Ministere du Combat Spirituel	Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo		50,000

Chapter 8 Conclusions

That Protestant churches move to the suburbs is almost a truism in American religious history. The suburbs have not only attracted churches, but have reshaped church bureaucracy. In 1990, Elmer Towns profiled Randy Pope, pastor of Perimeter Church in Atlanta. Perimeter Church, one of the largest churches in the Presbyterian Church in America, takes its name from one of the ring interstates surrounding the metropolises of the Sun Belt. When Pope came to Atlanta to start a church in 1977, he realized that I-285 changed residential patterns in the city. Pope explained that he “didn’t want to build just one super church touching only one socioeconomic group in one part of Atlanta.” He instead “wanted to find a way to impact the whole of the city – reaching far beyond the influence of one church in one location.” Pope developed a church structure in which he served as the CEO of Perimeter Church Ministries, Inc., but Perimeter Church itself existed as several church campuses, each with its own on-site pastor. Each campus sent five percent of its income to the central corporation and supplied three elders to serve on a central board that set the vision for Perimeter Church. Individual congregations could implement that vision as they saw fit. In Atlanta, then, the United States interstate system effectively catalyzed an innovation in Presbyterian church government. Towns even coined a new term for Perimeter Church – the “extended geographical parish church.” In practice, Perimeter Church constituted a new “minidenomination.”¹

¹ Elmer Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today’s Most Innovative Churches* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1990), 90-1, 97, 241.

Seacoast Church in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina worked within the constraints of suburban government and used modern communications technology to extend the scope of the multisite church model far beyond the confines of one city, and in so doing accelerated the move toward minidenominationalism. Seacoast faced an obstacle in 2002 when the city of Mt. Pleasant told the growing church of three thousand that its proposed building expansion violated local land use and zoning codes. Seacoast Church decided to rent a warehouse, put together a live worship band, and play videotaped sermons on a large screen. By 2005, Seacoast had already expanded to nine campuses in South Carolina and counted seven thousand members. Those worshipping at satellite campuses – including one some 215 miles away in Greenville– watched pastor Geoff Surratt live via video each Sunday. Worshippers who lived hundreds of miles away from each other now identified themselves as belonging to the same church, and identified the same man as their pastor, even though they were unlikely to ever meet one another or the man who delivered the sermon each Sunday. Surratt literally wrote the book on multisite churches, and regularly preaches the benefits of expansion not through church planting, but through the innovative franchising of a unifying church brand and charismatic personality.²

Already in 2005, multisite churches were a growing trend among megachurches. Of the ten fastest growing churches during that year, seven had multiple campuses. Of the ten largest churches in 2005, all but one was a multisite church. Of the three fast growing churches that were not multisite, two added satellite campuses after 2005. Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church remained the lone holdout. Of the fifty largest churches in the country

² Bob Smietana, “High-Tech Circuit Riders,” *Christianity Today*, September 1, 2005, 60; Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

in 2012, thirty-seven had multiple campuses. In 2011, the sociologists Scott Thumma and Warren Bird found that half of all megachurches were multisite churches, and another fifth were thinking about adding another location. Instead of starting new churches, with their own names, pastoral teams, and local identities, megachurches increasingly used satellite technology to extend their brand and their pastor's fame throughout their region, or in the case of churches like Lifechurch.tv in Edmond, Oklahoma and Mars Hill in Seattle, throughout the country.³

In 1973 Towns asked: "Is the Day of the Denomination Dead?" Independent fundamental Baptist megachurches like Thomas Road Baptist in Lynchburg, Virginia, Highland Park Baptist in Chattanooga, Tennessee and FBC Hammond, Indiana had their own schools, publishing houses, and missionary agencies. They were denominations unto themselves. Multisite churches operate in much the same way. Although they rarely have their own schools and their pastors generally choose to publish with major evangelical publishing houses, they govern their churches according to their own rules and draw their identity from a shared brand and vision rather than a denominational heritage. Even multisite churches that belong to traditional denominations downplay their affiliation. Of the twenty-one Southern Baptist churches with more than seven thousand people, twenty have multiple locations. Only five of these multisite churches identify themselves as Baptist.⁴

³ Surratt, Ligon, and Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution*, 22-3; Warren Bird and Scott Thumma, "A New Decade of Megachurches: 2011 Profile of Large Attendance Churches in the United States," Hartford Institute for Religion Research, November 21, 2011, <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurch-2011-summary-report.htm>.

⁴ Elmer L. Towns, *Is the Day of the Denomination Dead?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1973).

This proliferation and growth of megachurches and minidenominations has led some observers to conclude that the secularization hypothesis is a myth. The anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann states flatly that those scholars who propounded the secularization hypothesis “were wrong” because since the late twentieth century “Christianity around the world has exploded in its seemingly least liberal and most magical form.” The sociologist Donald E. Miller claims that while “many of the mainline churches are losing membership, overall church attendance is not declining.” He claims that “new paradigm” churches are at the forefront of a “Third Great Awakening” or “a second reformation that is transforming the way Americans will experience Christianity in the new millennium.” Roger Finke and Rodney Stark argue that the evidence of church growth in the late twentieth century “was so immense that even social scientists could no longer believe that religion was on the wane.” They believe that historians and sociologists of religion pushed the secularization hypothesis because their own preferred brand of religion – liberal mainline denominationalism – has been declining for decades. These sociologists and historians, they charge, consequently ignored the growth of sectarian conservative Protestantism. Religion, according to Miller, is only increasing its influence on individuals and within the public sphere. Like Luhrmann, he concludes that the “secularization thesis is clearly wrong.”⁵

Finke and Stark correctly point out the precipitous decline of the mainline and the explosion of nondenominational conservative Protestantism. The early megachurch lists

⁵ T.M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 302; Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1, 11, 180; Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller, *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 1; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy, 1776-2005*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 45.

compiled in 1980 and 1990 reveal as much. The percentage of nondenominational megachurches increased from 14.3% in 1980 to 37.7% in 2012. In 1990, researcher John N. Vaughn identified four churches with over three thousand in average attendance in the mainline Presbyterian Church USA. This total represented 4% of churches with over three thousand attenders. As of 2012, there were only two PCUSA churches with more than three thousand attenders. Since 1980, the number of United Methodist megachurches increased from five in 1980 to forty-three in 2012, but its overall share of megachurches has fallen from 3.8% to 2.8%. This decline in the influence of mainline megachurches includes the decline of many prominent downtown churches in large cities. First Christian Church of Canton, Ohio, First United Methodist in Houston, Highland Park Presbyterian, and Highlands Church of Christ in Dallas have all lost megachurch status. Even Southern Baptist churches with a more “mainline” theology have disappeared from the megachurch list, with Walnut St. Baptist in downtown Louisville and FBC San Antonio standing out as the most prominent examples. The decline of highly visible, venerable institutions certainly gives the impression that Americans are abandoning church, but the rise of even larger, if less venerable new suburban megachurches has led some to conclude that the American church is thriving.⁶

Secularization and Differentiation

The decline of the mainline, and of denominationalism in general, carries more historical and social significance than Luhrmann, Finke, Stark, and Miller recognize. Pointing out that conservative church gains outweigh mainline losses focuses too much

⁶ John N. Vaughn, *Megachurches & American Cities: How Churches Grow* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 126-36; Elmer L. Towns, John N. Vaughn, and David J. Seifert, *The Complete Book of Church Growth* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1981), 349-53.

on raw numbers and misses the cultural importance of changing habits in church affiliation and attendance. Secularization theorists describe the phenomenon in more nuanced terms than simply declining church attendance. José Casanova identifies three different types of secularization – “secularization as religious decline, secularization as differentiation, and secularization as privatization.” An exploration of the megachurch as it relates to these three aspects of secularization reveals that the megachurch is in fact one of the most salient examples of secularization in America. After discussing the two less controversial types of secularization – differentiation and privatization – I will explore the relationship between the proliferation of megachurches and religious adherence rates in America since 1980.⁷

Differentiation between different social sectors in modern America is perhaps the most widely accepted and least controversial of the three types of secularization. The geographer Justin Wilford defines differentiation as the process by which social institutions “develop and express their own internal rationality and thereby begin to separate themselves from other institutional spheres.” Peter Berger argues that, with respect to religion, differentiation means that more and more sectors of society free themselves “from the domination of religious symbols and values.” Similarly, Chaves defines secularization as “the declining power of ... religious authority structures” over other social spheres. Millions might flock to church, but if an increasing amount of social

⁷ José Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 7.

and cultural space is no longer open to church influence, then secularization has occurred.⁸

Even Finke and Stark recognize increasing religious pluralism, but they do not seem to understand its importance as it relates to differentiation. Disestablishment in the United States has ultimately led to what Berger describes as “a demonopolization of religious traditions.” A pluralistic religious milieu creates an environment in which “any particular choice is relativized and less than certain.” When each religious choice becomes less certain, religious belief in general becomes less plausible. Thus, a certain group of individuals might find that a particular church accords with their own beliefs, hopes, or dreams, but the success of that church in attracting worshippers does not mean that the church has succeeded in building a plausible worldview that those outside of the church must respect as part of public discourse. Megachurches are not unifying communities behind their vision and mission despite their explosive growth. Overall religious adherence rates increase, but adherence is fragmented across a number of denominations, or more recently, minidenominations.⁹

George Marsden calls the historic mainline denominations America’s “informal religious ‘establishment.’” The ecumenical National Council of Churches exemplified the respectable religion of the public square. Mainline churches called Americans to adhere to a broad morality that they believed all citizens intuitively accepted. No comparable, unified religious front has compensated for the sharp decline in mainline adherence.

⁸ Justin G. Wilford, *Sacred Subdivisions: The Postsuburban Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 28; Karel Dobbelaere, “Secularization: A Multi-Dimensional Concept” *Current Sociology* 29 (1981): 11; Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociology of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967), 107; Mark Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority” *Social Forces* 72 (Mar. 1994): 751-2, 770.

⁹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 134, 152.

Furthermore, no religious group has managed to unify Protestant churches behind a single message or gain the respect of political and educational leaders. Throughout its history, the United States has witnessed denominational schism and proliferation to a greater degree than other countries, but the megachurch phenomenon has fueled this proliferation even more. The 1,045 Baptist and nondenominational megachurches (68% of all megachurches) have the resources to function independently. Their pastors often share pulpits and appear at conferences together, but they do not need or behave as if they need any financial, educational, or logistical support from any outside institution. Hundreds of independent megachurches have now replaced the institutional strength of large downtown denominational churches, many of which were megachurches in 1980 but have since disappeared from large church lists. Minidenominations might offset the numerical losses of the national denominational bodies that commanded respect during the early and mid-twentieth century, but they have not replicated their cultural influence.¹⁰

Pluralism and differentiation have therefore not just led to secularization in general, but have accelerated fragmentation and differentiation within conservative Protestantism. The theologian and social critics David Wells agrees that “one of the principal effects” of modernization “has been to break apart the unity of human understanding and disperse the multitude of interests and undertakings away from the center, in relation to which they have gathered their meaning.” He goes on to explain that, with respect to “the Church, too, the center has been fractured, and the fragments of belief are scattered to the edges.” Evangelicalism, according to Wells, has since the late

¹⁰ George M. Marsden, *Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 98-9.

1940s suffered from a lack of agreement on cultural and social goals other than world evangelization. “Unity must be built on more than a shared desire to evangelize,” Wells asserts. Unity “instead has to grow out of a broad cultural strategy, the implementation of broad biblically worked-out view of the world.” Megachurches have largely ignored Wells’ warnings. They continue to focus on the goal of evangelism and downplay the need for a theologically informed unifying cultural mission. The new minidenominations that have grown out of megachurches have only exacerbated the sense that evangelical churches have no goal beyond expanding their own brand and helping individuals find happiness. Just as different sectors of society follow their own internal logic and so come to constitute separate spheres, individual evangelical churches follow their own path and occupy their own niche within their community’s church environment. They simultaneously draw in thousands of worshipers while reducing their ability to speak authoritatively beyond their own walls to other social institutions and even to other Christians.¹¹

Perhaps the most powerful evidence that megachurches are the product of a secularized, differentiated society comes from megachurch pastors and church growth leaders themselves. Differentiation has led to a situation in which, according to Wilford, “religious reasons” are no longer “accepted as authoritative in non-religious spheres.” As the British sociologist Steve Bruce explains, “religious interest groups have been effective in the public arena only when they have presented their case in secular terms.” McGavran, Wagner, Arn, Towns, Schuller, Warren, Hybels and all the rest have spent their careers preaching to pastors that they can no longer act as if their churches

¹¹ David Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 7-9.

automatically have the respect of those in their communities. They look to the fields of business and social science to develop new practices, and they use business and social science reasoning to justify their decisions not just to those on the outside, but to themselves. Religious reasons therefore do not even have authority in religious spheres, much less non-religious ones. Church growth leaders and megachurch pastors have succeeded by assuming the truth of a social theory (secularization) that some social theorists try to debunk by pointing to these very leaders' and pastors' success.¹²

Church growth leaders recognized that they would have to adapt to their surrounding culture rather than assuming that they were an integral part of that culture. Lee Strobel of Willow Creek wrote that what “we as Christians have to do is crack our society’s cultural code.” Writing about one hopelessly out of touch church he visited, Strobel charged that by “doing church the way it always had been done, they had created an atmosphere where *they* felt comfortable but which would have chased away” the unchurched. Strobel’s boss Bill Hybels stated that the “typical church is no place for the unchurched.” “To anybody but the already convinced,” he continued, “the average church service seems grossly abnormal.” The church growth consultant William Easum called on churches to “to make basic changes in leadership skills, the quality and scope of ministry, and the method of preaching and worship.” Churches must make these plans “not with our members’ needs in mind, but the needs of the unchurched firmly before [them].” Churches should no longer demand that those outside adapt to its ways and traditions, but should instead adapt its ways to attract those outside. As Easum reminds pastors, “[p]eople no longer attend church because of guilt or parents, or peer pressure. People

¹² Wilford, *Sacred Subdivisions*, 30; Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2002), 21.

attend church today only because they want to.” It is the church’s job to help people want to attend. This basic tenet of the Church Growth Movement therefore assumes that formerly religious ideas no longer have authority outside the walls of the church.¹³

This recognition that church as an institution and religious ideas in general no longer automatically commanded the respect of the populace extends to how pastors understood their place in society. C. Peter Wagner associate C. Wayne Zunkel chided those pastors too sheepish to plant new churches because they “feel they have a right to members, a salary, and a building.” Pastors should be willing to sacrifice the trappings of social respectability to see their churches grow. Too many American pastors have lived “very very well” and have demanded “for themselves the very best” for far too long. Strobel told pastors that if they want to reach people, they must eschew clerical garb, special parking places, and honorific titles because these markers of status “smack of elitism, and some cases, arrogance.” The clergy can no longer count themselves as professionals, can no longer expect the rewards that come with professional status, and face the disapprobation of their flocks for holding on to the marks of professionalism that doctors, lawyers, professors, and businessmen assume without much fuss.¹⁴

The firm conviction that secularization in America has proceeded apace did not discourage church growth leaders. Like Schuller, they saw the mountain in their midst as a potential goldmine rather than a permanent roadblock. They saw a secular America as a

¹³ Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 160, 181; Bill Hybels and Lynn Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 32-3; William Easum, *How to Reach Baby Boomers* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 20, 22, 65.

¹⁴ C. Wayne Zunkel, *Strategies for Growing Your Church* (Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook, 1986), 77, 108; Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, 66.

prime setting in which to recover the vitality of the early church. McGavran and Arn encouraged church leaders to remember that the “ancient world” was “just as pluralistic as our own.” The early church experienced “fantastic growth” because it “was powerfully influenced by” the “unshakable conviction” that “belief in Jesus Christ was essential for salvation.” They note that many Christians “live in many university towns” that are “modern replicas of Athens.” Zunkel reminded pastors that for “the first Christians, there was considerable pain yet unbelievable growth.” He then surmised “that in the absence of pain, we also have the absence of growth.” McGavran even wondered “if a little persecution here wouldn’t do us some good.” “We have it so easy,” he continued, “that we are not keyed up to do our best.” Part of regaining the power of the first church – the “Acts 2” of which Bill Hybels dreamed – involved a return to the political and cultural world of the first century.¹⁵

The Church Growth Movement saw secularization as a good thing because it made it more difficult for “cultural Christians” to persist in a half-hearted association with the church. It also forced churches to take their evangelical mission seriously. According to Wagner, after the social upheaval of the 1960s, “the time was ripe” for churches to awaken from their slumber and embrace church growth principles. McGavran and Arn wrote that “we must recognize that the opportunities for the spread of the gospel have never been greater.” Wendell Belew, an official with the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, repeated ad nauseam that the 1970s might be “the greatest day of the church.” “If there were a choice of any time period of history wherein

¹⁵ Donald McGavran and Win Arn, *Back to Basics in Church Growth* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1981), 18-9, 63. Zunkel, *Strategies for Growing Your Church*, 108; Donald McGavran and Win Arn, *How to Grow a Church* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1974), 29.

to perform the most significant ministry for the cause of Christ's kingdom," he gushed, "it should be *this day*." The transportation and communication revolutions rendered the late twentieth century "a marvelous time for churches to grow." Schuller characteristically predicted "a fantastic future for the church in the United States of America." For these leaders, secularization was cause for optimism.¹⁶

Even though they justified their practices with appeals nonreligious spheres, and even though religious commitment declined, these pastors and authors overestimated their own distance from the culture they hoped to reach. Whatever church growth methods pastors chose to implement, they could not grow without appealing to the suburban social religion of which they were a product and to which they contributed. Megachurch pastors might have liked to think of themselves as bringing back the first-century church in a first-century culture, but had they adopted such an adversarial stance they would never have built such large churches.

The fate of the independent fundamental Baptist megachurches – the ones that dominated Towns's account of the large churches of the late 1960s – is instructive. Towns believed that "the greatest key to the success of the ten largest Sunday Schools is their evangelistic zeal." Towns also found that these churches emphasized separation from worldly amusements like dancing and drinking. For Jack Hyles, church growth was a matter of visiting more people and running more buses each Sunday. For Jerry Falwell, radio and television were the means to grow the church. The independent fundamental Baptist pastors never seemed to contemplate changing the method of presentation or the

¹⁶ McGavran and Arn, *Back to Basics in Church Growth*, 95-6; M. Wendell Belew, *Churches and How They Grow* (Nashville: Broadman, 1971), 45, 58, 70; Robert H. Schuller, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities* (Glendale, California: G/L Regal Books, 1974), 1.

style of the service. They also do not appear to have contemplated installing structures and systems that would allow their institutions to continue beyond their own tenures. Dallas Billington of Akron Baptist Temple “especially disagrees with those who call a committee form of church government biblical.” He felt “the New Testament teaches that leadership comes through the man of God and that scriptural churches are led by men rather than committees.”¹⁷

John Rawlings of Landmark Baptist Temple believed that by 1980 there would be between twenty-five and fifty churches associated with the Baptist Bible Fellowship that had Sunday Schools with more than three thousand members. Towns chided the Southern Baptist Convention for using ineffective church growth methods while tagging the independent churches of the Baptist Bible Fellowship as the wave of the future. Subsequent events belied Rawlings’ and Towns’ optimism. As of 2013, there were five independent white Baptist churches with more than three thousand in average attendance, not twenty-five or fifty as Rawlings predicted. Independent fundamental Baptist churches have actually lost ground. When Towns published his list in 1969, six churches had Sunday Schools averaging over three thousand. Of that original list, only FBC Hammond and Akron Baptist Temple have maintained these high attendance levels. Far from taking over the conservative Protestant church world, independent white Baptist churches stagnated while nondenominational churches flourished. Furthermore, the Southern

¹⁷ Elmer Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools and What Makes Them Grow* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 116-7, 127, 141; Jack Hyles, *How to Boost Your Church Attendance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 20-1; Jack Hyles, *Kisses of Calvary and Other Sermons* (Murfreesboro: Sword of the Lord, 1965), 92; Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns, *Capturing a Town for Christ* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1973), 91-2.

Baptist Convention grew from one church with more than three thousand in average attendance in 1969 to 101 in 2013.¹⁸

In an ironic twist, Towns' own church became the symbol of this shift in megachurch culture. Jerry Falwell seemed more willing than his peers to temper his strident separationism for the sake of his political and evangelistic ambitions. Falwell and Towns went beyond simply calling for more evangelism and criticized "some fundamental churches" for using "the *wrong method*" to reach the lost. Unlike his independent fundamental Baptist brethren, Falwell had a nationally syndicated television show by the early 1970s. And unlike Greg Dixon, Falwell completely abandoned strict separationism when he founded Moral Majority. Although Falwell harped on the importance of "saturation evangelism," he also affirmed that "a great church ministers to the total needs of men." Like Schuller, Falwell thought large churches were better because they could hire specialists who could help a wide variety of people deal with their personal problems. With respect to new styles of Christian music, Liberty University, where Towns still serves as a Dean, gave birth to DC Talk, perhaps the most popular Christian rap/rock/pop group of the 1990s. In 1996, Thomas Road Baptist Church did the unthinkable and joined the once hated Southern Baptist Convention. Had Thomas Road remained independent, it would be the largest independent fundamental Baptist church in the country. That it continued to grow while its sister churches declined

¹⁸ Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*, 5-6.

indicates that it shed the independent fundamental Baptist mindset long before it shed the label and joined a denomination.¹⁹

Just telling church members to share the gospel more and putting them in a position to do it no longer worked for the independent fundamental Baptist churches. In order to grow, they had to speak to the concerns of their increasingly suburban, white-collar population. These pastors knew their neighborhoods were changing. Towns noted that Akron Baptist Temple cut its bus routes from forty to seven because “the factory workers” who founded the church “became more affluent, owning first one, then two automobiles.” The typical member of Akron Baptist Temple was no longer “the hillbilly transplanted from West Virginia or Kentucky.” Canton Baptist Temple still brought in five hundred people on buses each Sunday, but pastor Harold Henniger stressed that his bus riders were “not from the slums or ghettos.” Landmark Baptist Temple recognized that it “is common for people to travel the expressway, coming thirty miles to church.” Landmark still sent out seventy buses each week, but only into “middle class and upper class neighborhoods.” Towns reported that pastor Rawlings felt “that the stability of building on middle class suburbanites is another reason for the great potential of his church.” G.B. Vick at Temple Baptist eschewed bus ministry because he wanted to bring in whole families, not just children. In 1968, he led his church out of “an undesirable neighborhood” in downtown Detroit to a “new four million dollar building” in “the center of the suburban population.” Towns concluded that “increased wage earnings of members bought a sophistication to these churches” and that “[m]any upper class individuals in

¹⁹ Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns, *Church Aflame*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Impact Books, 1971), 43; Falwell and Towns, *Capturing a Town for Christ*, 19, 81-2; “Falwell Farewell,” *Christianity Today*, July 1, 2007, 13.

upper class neighborhoods have lower class values and seek a church reflecting their value system.”²⁰

Towns and the superstar independent fundamental Baptist pastors he studied did not seem to realize that the changing circumstances of their attenders and the changing neighborhoods in which they ministered might require a change in methodology or a revision of their message. Judging by the fates of these churches, the number of those in “upper class neighborhoods” who held onto “lower class values” declined sharply during the 1970s and 1980s. The fundamentalist pastors that Towns profiled never discussed the need for sermons on topics other than salvation and evangelism, the merits and drawbacks of modern worship music, or any changes they might need to make with respect to the acceptability of certain leisure activities. They expected continued growth would come by simply sharing the gospel with more people. They assumed that the unchurched still had respect for the institution of the church as well as a basic cultural acquaintance with the tenets of conservative Protestantism. The church did not have to do anything to bring in worshippers beyond reminding people that unless they became committed Christians they would go to hell.

Secularization and the Privatization of Religion

The therapeutic message that was absent from the independent fundamental Baptist megachurches of the 1960s is also the hallmark of the newer megachurch cells small group. Megachurches build communities through these small groups. The sociologist Robert Wuthnow, after hundreds of surveys and interviews, concludes that these communities are however “quite different from the communities in which people

²⁰ Towns, *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*, 21, 64, 71-2, 79, 83-4, 125-6.

have lived in the past.” Small groups are “fluid and more concerned with the emotional states of the individual.” More significantly, they reshape God so that he “is now less of an external authority and more an internal presence.” “The sacred becomes more personal,” he continues, “but in the process, also becomes more manageable, more serviceable in meeting individual needs.” He believes that “the small-group movement is currently playing a major role in *adapting* American religion to the main currents of secular culture that surfaced at the end of the twentieth century.” Small groups are inherently therapeutic, reinforcing belief “in a divine being who is there for our gratification.” A tame spirituality that downplays God’s power or transcendence “can accommodate the demands of secular society.” Christians “can go about their daily business without having to alter their lives very much.”²¹

Small groups might have brought individuals together, but they also engendered a privatized religion that rarely impinged on public spaces. Privatized evangelicalism lies at the heart of megachurch philosophy. Here again, an increasingly pluralistic religious milieu led to an increasingly privatized religion. Interaction in the public square is simply easier when religious people do not seek to make their own views normative outside of their own homes and churches. Marsden believes that privatization really accelerated during the 1950s. Norman Vincent Peale, the most famous and influential mainline minister in America at the time, opposed the mainline ecumenical movement because he believed churches should try to meet personal needs instead of attempting to challenge injustice and immorality. Social commentators like Will Herberg and Martin Marty already recognized the phenomenon that Robert Bellah would later dub the American

²¹ Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America’s New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 3-4, 7.

civil religion – a pervasive and overarching faith in the United States as God’s favored nation and instrument, but a faith that was otherwise devoid of specific theological content. The essentially secular ideals of individualism, autonomy, personal responsibility, and scientific efficiency guided American life. The more explicitly religious a particular idea, the less that idea has been able to serve as a broad basis for consensus.²²

Luhrmann’s analysis actually supports the idea that conservative Christianity in America is an increasingly, and even intensely, private affair. Charismatic churches like the Vineyard churches she studies are growing rapidly. She notes that our “highly industrial, highly literate, information-saturated society” encourages “intense absorption experiences” in which people shut out the world and commune with God. She agrees with Robert Putnam that Americans are more disconnected from one another than ever. Luhrmann therefore concludes that intense communion with the divine is a means by “which the loneliest of conscious creatures can come to experience themselves as in a world awash with love.” She even recognizes that these spiritual practices involves a “suspension of disbelief” because everything in the Christian’s environment tells them that the world operates according to natural principles and it is not a loving place. More individuals might be attracted to this type of religion than ever before, but it is a type of religion that does not encourage the church as an institution to engage with other institutions. It does not even encourage individuals to engage with other individuals.²³

²² Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: A Study in the American Quest for Health, Wealth, and Personal Power from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 288-9; Marsden, *Twilight of the American Enlightenment*, 106, 110-2.

²³ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 320, 322-4.

Evangelical political activity has often faltered on this inherent tendency towards privatization. Marsden notes that the New Christian Right's rhetoric often obscured its proponents' at least formal commitment to religious liberty. The sociologist Christian Smith describes evangelical social activism as primarily a "personal influence strategy." Rather than seeing government as a means of correcting social evils, most evangelicals believe that these evils disappear once individuals accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Evangelicals influence society through personal relationships and calling others to follow Christ, one person at a time. Smith states that the personal influence strategy "tends to render evangelicals rather blind to the supra-individual social structures, aggregate effects, power dynamics, and institutional systems which profoundly shape human consciousness, experience, and life chances." They consequently do not understand "how the social world actually works" and cannot "formulate relevant and responsive solutions to complex social, economic, political, and cultural problems." The personal influence strategy therefore "undermines evangelical influence in the public square." Thus, according to Smith, converting everyone to the same privatized religion cannot solve complex social problems.²⁴

The acceptance of privatized religion is even evident when prominent megachurch pastors talk about evangelism. Schuller, Warren, and Hybels knocked on thousands of doors when conducting their initial surveys, but visitation and bus ministries, not to mention evangelistic crusades, are not a part of their program. Leaders of the Church Growth Movement openly reject Billy Graham Crusades and evangelistic cold calling meant to extract a decision for Christ. Wagner associate George Hunter

²⁴ Marsden, *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment*, 146; Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 202-3.

asserted that churches must instead develop methods of evangelism “to which secular people can respond.” Hybels tells Willow Creek attenders to work hard and be honest and work, and then be ready “when someone asks us about our faith or the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to a person’s need for the Lord and prompts us to share God’s message with them.” Intimate conversations about faith occur once Christians have proven themselves good citizens and good workers. Unbelievers are “not interested in committing their lives to Christ unless they observe attractive and consistent patterns of living in the Christians they know.” Quoting author John Aldrich, Hybels calls on Christians to “*be* the good news before they share the good news.” Christians have to cultivate “a measure of trust in us and our motives” before they share Christ with their friends and coworkers. Hybels implicitly recognizes that Christianity faces a credibility crisis in the public square, and is usually only welcome when unbelievers’ private problems spill over into public settings like the workplace. Many older conservative denominational megachurches do not share this hesitancy about personal evangelism. D. James Kennedy built Coral Ridge Presbyterian through Evangelism Explosion, a door-to-door evangelism program that he then successfully marketed to other churches. Nevertheless, when Hybels and his followers in the seeker church movement talk about personal evangelism, they usually assume that unbelievers expect believers to keep their faith to themselves except in crisis situations, and only then after they have proven their worth in non-religious ways on the job or in the neighborhood.²⁵

²⁵ Win Arn, “Mass Evangelism: The Bottom Line,” in *The Pastors Church Growth Handbook*, vol. 1, ed. Win Arn (Pasadena: Church Growth Press, 1979), 95-109; Win Arn, “A Church Growth Look at ‘Here’s Life: America,’” in *The Pastors Church Growth Handbook*, vol. 1, ed. Win Arn (Pasadena: Church Growth Press, 1979), 44-60; George Hunter, “Some Practical Ways to Being,” in *The Pastors Church Growth Handbook*, vol. 1, ed. Win Arn (Pasadena: Church Growth Press, 1979), 38; Bill Hybels, *Christians in the Marketplace* (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 1987), 29; Bill Hybels and Mark Mittleberg, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 54, 108.

Secularization and Declining Religious Adherence

Social scientists like Luhmann, Miller, Finke, and Stark usually attack the secularization hypothesis on the grounds that religious adherence rates are increasing, or at least holding steady. They therefore understand secularization more as an overall decline in religious belief than a loss of influence over nonreligious spheres. Miller notes that around 40% of Americans attend worship weekly. Finke and Stark point to a consistent national religious adherence rate (the number of people who are members of a given church or identify with a specific denomination) of 62% between 1980 and 2000. Other statistics tell a different story, however. When surveys ask respondents what they did last Sunday, rather than asking them if they attended church, the percentage reporting that they went to church drops from around 37% to 27%. Time diary studies from 1965 revealed that 40% of Americans attended worship on a given weekend, while those taken in 1995 revealed that 27% did. A comprehensive evaluation of data from the National Congregations Study and the United States Congregational Life Survey reveal that at the beginning of the twenty-first century only 21% of the population attended worship on a given weekend. Furthermore, the percentage of those who *never* attend church has increased from 13% in 1990 to 22% in 2008. Responses to the question of whether survey participants attended church last week seem to indicate what respondents want the surveyor to think they did, or what they wish they had done, rather than what they actually did. Religious attendance is therefore most likely half of what Miller, Finke, and Stark report, and the long-term trend is one of decline rather than stability.²⁶

²⁶ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 4; Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 23; Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 48-

Megachurches have for the most part failed to arrest this decline in religious adherence among Protestants. Religious censuses taken in 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010 measured adherence rates for dozens of denominations, although they unfortunately did not begin counting members of nondenominational churches until 2000. A look at long-term trends in the 155 counties with Southern Baptist megachurches reveals that between 1980 and 2010 Southern Baptist adherence rates usually did not keep pace with population growth. In 72.9% of these counties, Southern Baptist adherence rates increased at a slower rate than the population. This relative decline is even more apparent in those counties with the most Southern Baptist megachurches. In eighteen of the twenty counties (90%) that have three or more Southern Baptist megachurches, Southern Baptists grew more slowly than the population. In six of these twenty counties (30%), Southern Baptists actually lost members. On the other hand, only 13% of the 135 counties with fewer than three megachurches experienced an absolute decline in the number of Southern Baptists. Individual Southern Baptist churches might be attracting the unchurched, or they might be attracting those unhappy with their home church, but they are not capturing their towns for Christ.

Southern Baptists were not the only group to witness this decline in relative size over the period 1980-2010. Protestant Megachurches in the thirty high concentration metropolitan areas listed in table 1.2 did operate in an increasingly religious environment in that the four religious censuses taken over that time reveal a rise in overall adherence rates. Of the thirty metropolitan areas with the highest concentration of megachurches, twenty-one saw rates in religious adherence increase more rapidly than the population.

9; C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Marler, "How Many Americans Attend Worship Each Week: An Alternative Approach to Measurement," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44 (Sept. 2005): 317-8.

This rise in adherence seems to have had little to do with megachurches, however. Of these twenty-one high megachurch concentration metropolitan areas that saw adherence rates increase faster than population, in only ten did adherence rates *among Protestants* increase faster than the population. The other eleven metropolitan areas saw sharp increases in the numbers of Catholics and Mormons, and it was this increase that fueled the rise in overall adherence rates. As the middle column below reveals, the real story of Sun Belt religion in the late twentieth century might be the growth of Catholicism rather than the proliferation of suburban Protestant megachurches. In sum, twenty of the thirty high concentration metropolitan areas saw adherence rates among Protestants increase at a slower rate than the overall population.

Table 8.1: Religious Adherence in High Concentration Megachurch Areas

Protestant Adherence Rates Increase at a Greater Rate than the Population	Protestant Adherence Rates Fail to Increase at the Same Rate as Population	Overall Adherence Rates Fail to Increase at the Same Rate as Population
Redding, CA Gainesville, GA Chattanooga, TN Memphis, TN Birmingham, AL Oklahoma City, OK Macon, GA Lynchburg VA Pensacola, FL Fayetteville, NC	Fort Collins, CO Greenville-Anderson-Mauldin, SC Nashville-Davidson-Murfreesboro-Franklin, TN Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell, GA Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX Amarillo, TX Springfield, MO Grand Rapids-Wyoming, MI Indianapolis-Carmel-Anderson, IN Boulder, CO Modesto, CA	Bellingham, WA Springfield, IL Huntsville, AL Evansville, IN Little Rock, AK Knoxville, TN Colorado Springs, CO Lubbock, TX Austin-Round Rock, TX

Even within those ten areas that that saw an increase in Protestant adherence rates, the influence of *megachurches* on this increase is ambiguous. The Memphis metropolitan area has five Southern Baptist megachurches, but between 1980 and 2010 the

metropolitan population grew by 31.7% while the Southern Baptists grew by only 14.7%. The Presbyterian Church in America, however, grew by 1,585.2%. This growth was almost all attributable to one church – Second Presbyterian. This apparent explosive growth of the Presbyterian Church in America accounts for only 1.3% of the growth in adherence rates in the Memphis area. At the other end of the state, between 1980 and 2010 overall adherence rates in the Chattanooga metropolitan area increased more rapidly than the population. Southern Baptists growth rates outpaced the population, with the area’s six Southern Baptist megachurches appearing to have contributed to the growth. In Oklahoma City, the Assemblies of God grew by 65.2%, while the population grew by 43.7%. The three Assemblies of God megachurches most likely made a difference, especially since during the period 1980-2010 the denomination only added ten churches in the area. On the other hand, despite the presence of four Southern Baptist megachurches in and around Oklahoma City, that denomination only grew by 19.7%. In Gainesville, Georgia, a Southern Baptist megachurch helped that denomination to increase by 81%, and a Congregational Holiness megachurch helped that obscure group grow by 133.8%. Both figures, however, fall below the rate of population growth (137.5%) and well below the overall growth in religious adherence (234.8%). They even fall below the growth rate of Protestants as a whole (140.4%). On the other hand, the Catholic Church in Gainesville grew by 3,731.1%, adding 37,711 members and constituting 39.8% of all new religious adherents. In Redding, California, the growth of a Christian and Missionary Alliance megachurch helped that denomination grow by 2,283.3% in that area. This one denomination with its mere three congregations, accounted for 24.3% of the growth in religious adherence in Shasta County.

In many places in the country, then, megachurches are having no influence on overall rates of religious adherence. But the direst statistics for the future of megachurch growth have to do with the types of people megachurches generally attract. In a 2009, Thumma and Bird found that 72% of megachurch attenders actively attended another church immediately prior to their decision to attend the megachurch. Another 4% grew up in the church. A mere 6% never attended a church of any kind before attending the megachurch. This proportion does not differ significantly from the 5% of those attending all churches, regardless of size, who had never attended church before arriving at their present church. For all of their rhetoric about the need for methodological innovation in order to reach the lost for Christ, megachurches as a whole do not appear to be winning over the unchurched in large numbers, nor do they appear to be more effective than their more diminutive neighbors who for whatever reason have not grown to gargantuan size.²⁷

The “dechurched” – those who once attended church regularly but who did not attend before coming to the megachurch – are perhaps the most interesting group that megachurches reach. Eighteen percent of those attending megachurches fall within this category. This pool of dechurched is however shrinking. The percentage of religious “nones” – those who have no religious affiliation – has risen dramatically since 1991. The proportion reporting no religious affiliation between 1974 and 1991 remained steady at 7%. Between 1991 and 2000, the proportion doubled to 14%, and by 2008 had reached 17%. Nones are of course far less likely to take their children to church. Long-term survey data found that among those born before 1910, 80% attended church before the

²⁷ Warren Bird and Scott Thumma, “Not Who You Think They Are: A Profile of People Who Attend Megachurches,” Hartford Institute for Religion Research, June 2009, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurch_attender_report.htm.

age of 12. Of those born after 1970, the percentage attending church as children fell to 60%. Longitudinal studies found that between 1981 and 1997, church attendance rates for those between the ages of three and twelve fell from 37% to 26%. As fewer children and teens grow up in church, the pool of the potential dechurched is shrinking while the proportion of the purely unchurched increases. Megachurches have had a much harder time attracting the unchurched than the dechurched. Moreover, it is not at all clear that megachurches are better than other churches at attracting the dechurched. The 18% of megachurch attenders who were dechurched before attending their megachurch is not that much greater than the 16% of those attending churches of all sizes who were dechurched before making their way back into the fold.²⁸

At least among baby-boomers, almost two-thirds of the dechurched never return to church, no matter what megachurches do to attract him. The sociologist Wade Clark Roof found that, of those born between 1946 and 1964 who grew up in church, 33% remained in church after the age of eighteen, 25% dropped out and came back, and 42% stayed away for good. In 2007, the Southern Baptist Convention found that 70% of Protestant youth dropped out of church between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. As in Roof's study, the Southern Baptist's found that while only 30% of Protestant youth remained in church, approximately 25% of dropouts returned by the age of thirty. Another 21% of Protestant youth dropped out but attended church on average less than twice a month. Another 25% never returned at all. Any religious group that loses 42% of

²⁸ Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations," *American Sociological Review* 67 (Apr. 2002): 166; Chaves, *American Congregations*, 19-20, 51; Sandra L. Hofferth and John F. Sandberg, "Changes in American Children's Time, 1981-1997" in *Children at the Millennium: Where Have We Come From? Where are We Going?*, ed. Timothy J. Owens and Sandra L. Hofferth (New York: Elsevier Science, 2001), 204; Bird and Thumma, "Not Who You Think They Are."

its children will be approximately one-third its original size within two generations. Again, while megachurches draw approximately one fifth of their members from the ranks of the dechurched, they are not arresting the steady flow of the dechurched into the ranks of the permanently unchurched.²⁹

Frequent church attenders and the dechurched constitute 90% of all those who choose to attend megachurches, but both of those categories are shrinking relative to the overall population. At the same time, the trend toward church concentration shows no signs of slowing down. As the pie of Protestant church attenders decreases, the individual pieces are becoming larger. Growing megachurches garner media attention and give the impression of persistent religious vitality in the wider culture, but survey data reveal that these churches are for the most part only consolidating the losses from the other churches, and they are not even doing a good job of that. Long-term demographic trends indicate that the fields will not exactly be white for the harvest in the future. The sociologist Mark Chaves points out that, over the past century, “differential fertility has produced approximately 80% of the shifting fortunes of liberal and conservative Protestant churches.” With declining fertility rates among conservative Protestants, there will be fewer conservative churchgoers to fuel megachurch growth. Moreover, the overall proportion of Protestants in the United States fell from 62% in 1962 to just over half in 2000. A Baptist switching to a nondenominational megachurch is one thing, a Roman Catholic doing the same is quite another.³⁰

²⁹ Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journey of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 155; Scott McConnell, “Lifeway Research Finds Reasons 18- to 22-Year Olds Drop Out of Church,” August 7, 2007, <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church>.

³⁰ Chaves, *American Congregations*, ?, 62.

Changing fertility rates and immigration from South American and Asian countries affect church attendance over the long term, perhaps the span of a century. Some survey data, however, reveal that cultural attitudes towards the basic beliefs of evangelicals have shifted dramatically over just the last thirty years. Americans in general are less inclined to embrace conservative theology and morals. Belief in an inerrant Bible declined from 40% of Americans in 1982 to 30% in 2008. In 1988, only 12% of the population supported gay marriage, but by 2008 39% of the population did. Among those born between 1966 and 1990, half supported gay marriage by 2008. In the early twenty-first century, the American populace seemed less inclined to support the conservative Protestantism that the vast majority of megachurches espoused. Megachurches will have to work that much harder to draw attenders from an increasingly skeptical pool of potential attenders. Indeed, some data indicates that church attendance in America is becoming increasingly polarized, with frequency of attendance becoming strongly correlated with an adherence to evangelicalism. Chaves reports that during the 1970s, one quarter of frequent church attenders were evangelical Protestants, but that proportion rose to 40% by the first decade of the twenty-first century. Megachurches are attracting large numbers of the already converted, building evangelical enclaves in a cultural and demographic environment increasingly hostile to their message. The megachurch world is becoming a conservative Protestant ghetto.³¹

³¹ Chaves, *American Congregations*, 35, 88, 91-2, 102; Robert Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 403.

Conclusion

Evangelism – preaching the good news and winning converts – lies at the heart of the secularization of American culture. Writing about colonial America, the historian Mark Noll argues that evangelicals’ acceptance market principles during the Great Awakening grew out of their overwhelming compulsion “to present the gospel” rather than enforce “social uniformity under the guidance of an established church.” Adopting the most effective means for winning over the individual conscience, or what Noll calls “the acceptance of market practices,” would eventually lead “to the privatization of religion and to social consequences that figures like Whitefield could not have approved.”³²

Megachurches, then, are new manifestation of an old trend in American evangelicalism. Suburbanization, and the concomitant revolutions in transportation and communications, made the megachurch possible, but the evangelistic impulse compelled church leaders to take advantage of new residential and technological advances to make the megachurch a reality. Entrepreneurial pastors who genuinely wanted to see souls saved tailored their messages to appeal to the prevailing ethos of their communities – the therapeutic, managerial, consumerist, and politically conservative ethos of the suburban social religion. Like the evangelists of the Great Awakening, they focused on winning individual converts rather than creating a new sacred canopy or a de facto religious establishment. The political activism of the New Christian Right constituted a quixotic effort to stave off secularization rather than a fresh evangelical political movement.

³² Mark Noll, “Protestant Reasoning about Money and the Economy, 1790-1860: A Preliminary Probe,” in *God and Mammon in America: Protestants, Money, and the Market, 1970-1860*, ed. Mark Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 271.

Falwell's own willingness to leave behind independent fundamental Baptist sectarianism and more overt political involvement meant that Thomas Road Baptist Church survived, while Indianapolis Baptist Temple did not. The megachurches that prospered recognized that they had to adapt their messages and methods to their increasingly secular environment. They embodied the suburban social religion.

Marsden argues that the American Enlightenment consensus broke apart in the 1960s because of the "scientifically informed ethic of constructive self-realization and self-determination" did not provide an adequate basis for collective social activity. It left questions of meaning, truth, and first principles unanswered. Mainline Protestantism provided these first principles until advancing pluralism ultimately questioned these denominations' privileged social position. A similar scientifically informed ethic of constructive self-realization lies at the heart of the suburban social religion. As with the American enlightenment, this instability might lead to the breakdown of the suburban consensus that informs most megachurch thinking. Miller touts that new paradigm churches have led to a democratization of Christianity and have "eliminated many of the inefficiencies of bureaucratic religion by an appeal to the model of the first-century church." The movement toward multisite churches and the focus on one central celebrity pastor belies the assertion that newer churches do not constitute "bureaucratized religion." Furthermore, Miller seems to confuse privatization and democratization. As in almost every other area of American life in the twentieth century, layers of bureaucracy mediate relationships between megachurch leaders and their members, and these members are free to work within certain constraints to construct their own identity, or in this case, their own faith. The end of the American Enlightenment left Americans with

little sense that they were anything more than individuals engaged, in the words of Marsden, “in the endless quest for competitive advancement, consumer goods, and entertainment.” Whether megachurches provide a deeper meaning for life, or only offer a privatized religion that functions as a tool in the quest for competitive advancement, consumer goods, or entertainment, remains an open question.³³

³³ Marsden, *Twilight of the American Enlightenment*, 94-5, 156; Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 179, 181.

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