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Holy Alliance? Navigating Evangelical Political Identity in the Era of Donald Trump

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By

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Navigating Evangelical Political Identity in the era of Donald Trump

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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Abstract

Evangelical Christians have always had a complex relationship with political issues in the United States, especially with the rise of the Christian right in the 1980s. Pastors and church leaders function as crucial communicators of political values in a contemporary American context. Since 2017 the Trump presidency has provided a new set of issues to consider. With Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance theory and Tajfel's (1981) Social Identity theory as the foundation, this study examines how evangelical Christian pastors conceptualize their religious and political identities, how they communicate with their congregants about political issues and how they handle differences between their political and religious opinions. Six pastors from a mid-sized, Midwestern university town were interviewed using a semi-structured format. Findings are explored in the context of Cognitive Dissonance theory .

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Chapter One: Introduction

On June 18th, 2018 United States Attorney General Jefferson Sessions made public remarks regarding the recently enacted family separation policy that the Trump administration had initiated. During his remarks he did not reference Constitutional law and previous legal precedents. Instead, he referred to Romans 13:1, a passage from the Bible that reads:

"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."- Romans 13:1 (ESV)

After this passage was quoted in defense of the family separation policy the public reaction was mixed. Even evangelical Christians across the United States were frustrated that Sessions would quote the Bible in a context with a specific agenda to promote a policy. Some Christians cite the separation of church and state established by the United States Constitution, arguing that it was inappropriate for Sessions to quote a Biblical text for legal authority within a supposedly secular nation. Many evangelical Christians believed that Sessions took the verse out of context, especially because the passage has been used throughout American history to justify evil actions and systems from slavery to the removal of Native Americans from their land.

The Jeff Sessions incident illustrates a point of national tension. No doubt religion in general and Christianity particularly has played a large role in the political life of the United States. However, there have been large disagreements as to how evangelical Christians are supposed to think about their faith values as they relate to political values. Faith values are defined largely in terms of subjectivity- what Christians believe inside of their churches and how they communicate values in their faith communities. Often these values are communicated inside of local churches with little to no pushback.

Although the term "evangelical" has taken on a political connotation within recent national dialogue, the origins of the term are not political but religious. To be an evangelical Christian means to spread the "evangel" or good news of Jesus Christ. A widely diverse group of almost all shapes and sizes, the evangelicals are hard to pinpoint for a basic definition of who they are as a group. However, in the United States there exists several identifiable patterns and trends amongst the group. As a religious movement evangelicalism has aligned itself with two consistent tenets (or articles of faith)- belief in Jesus Christ alone as a Lord and Savior and belief that the Bible functions as the inspired Word of God, inerrant and completely trustworthy for modern human beings. Although these are religious beliefs, they tend to carry over into how evangelicals approach the public square. If the Bible is applicable to every area of life, then it must necessarily shape how Christians think in the public square. But since the Bible does not offer a guide from A to Z on who to support (the idea of constitutional democracy might have been foreign to writers of the New Testament) the idea of a truly "Christian" political identity remains open to interpretation.

The matter of how political identity has been interpreted and navigated is of central interest to this study. The words "interpreted" and "navigated" are both essential. Interpretation of political identity involves groups of people finding common values and stances on issues that unite them as a group. When groups "navigate" these identities they search for practical ways of living out their common experiences and values. Throughout many periods of the 20th century religious voters were willing to overlook certain shortcomings of various politicians if those politicians expressed ideas that were sympathetic to their movement. Although evangelicals agreed on a set of important issues guided by theology, tradition or pragmatism, they were nonetheless willing to recognize that living in the United States involved compromises for a best

case scenario. Although Christians recognized that not every politician or political party would represent their interests one hundred percent of the time they were still willing to take a chance that certain politicians and parties would represent those interests more comprehensively.

Many contemporary studies have examined the awkward, tension-filled relationship religious groups have with political movements that imperfectly convey their values. Communication studies scholars have examined the unique tensions faced by evangelical Christians in the political realm. For instance, Smith (2016) applied many of the same concepts of importance in the 2016 election to the 2012 election and evangelical Christians making the choice on whether or not to support Mitt Romney (a devout Mormon). Many evangelicals were able to overlook their personal disdain for Mormon principles if they placed political conservatism as a higher value of importance to them. They were willing to in a sense overlook their religious convictions and band together to support Romney for the greater political good.

While the anti-Trump rhetoric from evangelicals has been examined by Medhurst (2017), pro-Trump rhetoric from the same community has not undergone rigorous investigation within communication studies literature. Medhurst found "never Trumpers" appropriating religious paradoxes to explain their lack of support for Donald Trump. The same can be said about evangelicals who support his presidency, namely putting their faith in tension with their political beliefs and hoping for an outcome that would benefit both their faith and their political agenda.

In the past, evangelical Christians have supported imperfect candidates for the sake of the greater good, but Trump provides a unique case example. Trump's personal behaviors are reprehensible to many different groups in the United States. However, evangelical Christians in the United States have placed special emphasis on family values, something Trump has not reflected in his personal life (with three marriages, affairs with porn stars, and personal insults).

When evangelicals chose to support him for president they risked opening themselves up to accusations of hypocrisy. Were they willing to sell out in order to put pro-life justices on the Supreme Court and roll back laws in favor of abortion? This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of evangelical Christian support for Trump.

Ever since his election Donald Trump has alienated many social groups while continuing to hold a solid lock on the white evangelical Christian base. With such a divisive impact on the country, the Trump presidency has many people on the political left and right wondering why Christians continue to support him. This study aims to help evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike gain insight into how evangelicals might reconcile their decision to support Donald Trump considering their conflicting religious values.

Another aim of this study is to help evangelical pastors gain greater clarity and self-awareness in leading their congregants in the current divisive political climate. Pastors are crucial leaders in their churches who help their congregants work through controversial political issues. Pastors can act knowingly and unknowingly as major catalysts to help their congregants think through and act on political priorities. It is important to understand how they help shape their congregation's view of political issues, especially in the current era of Donald Trump.
In an effort to address the aims of this study, evangelical pastors will be interviewed with the following research questions in mind:

Research Questions:

1. How do evangelical Christian pastors attempt to understand and explain their religious and political identity?

2. How do evangelical Christian pastors handle any perceived conflicts between their existing religious and political beliefs and values?

3. How do evangelical Christian pastors communicate with their congregations about political identity in a religious context?

Chapter Two: Literature review

In order to adequately examine the impact of Donald Trump's presidential campaign and resulting presidency on evangelical Christian political identity, a few concepts, theories and ideas need to first be examined. Tajfel's (1981) Social Identity theory will be introduced as a framework for viewing the evangelical Christians and their relationship to politics in the United States. Then evangelical Christians will be introduced as a political group, briefly examining how they have used political power in the United States and how they have thought through and wrestled with controversial political issues in the 20th and 21st centuries. Against this backdrop the unique phenomenon of the Trump candidacy and presidency will also be examined. Finally, the the theoretical frameworks of Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance theory will be introduced. The twin theories will help make sense of the issues in focus.

Social identity theory & conservative identity

Tajfel's (1981) Social Identity theory also works well as a lens through which to examine evangelical Christian support for Trump. Tajfel explains how groups find common purpose and unify around issues, functioning as "in-groups." Social Identity theory will be used to examine how evangelical Christians function as a political group and will help researchers understand why evangelicals make decisions to support political candidates or movements.

Rather than supposing that groups are composed merely of individuals who choose to affiliate with other individuals, Social Identity theory proposed by Tajfel (1981) examines human beings as members of groups who are influenced and controlled by the behavior, beliefs and ideology of the groups themselves. This theory is particularly important because evangelical Christianity is composed of several sub-groups with common political goals. Group members need to feel a sense of belonging or "identification" with their ingroup and this goes on to

influence how they interact with other groups. The group is not merely a source of meeting emotional needs or providing structure. Tajfel and Turner (1982) rather propose that the social group literally explains individual source of identity by explaining that individual identity is only found in conjunction with groups.

Taking Tajfel's theory into the realm of evangelical identity is important because it might help scholars understand why evangelical Christians feel pressure to support certain political candidates or causes just because their native group (the group with whom they identify) chooses to support those candidates and causes. Also, the need for homogeneity comes into play as well. By creating a common set of standards and values for a group to abide by (in this case supporting a political candidate or cause) the group is able to distinguish who belongs to it (i.e. in-group) and who does not (i.e. out-group).

SIT is particularly important after the 2016 presidential election and the rise of Donald Trump. The evangelical Christians supported Trump not because of his character (which many Christians no doubt found reprehensible) but because of his stance on social issues with which they agreed. They found themselves supporting his message and movement despite the shortcomings of the messenger. Tajfel's Social identity theory will help explain why this choice was made.

Also, Tajfel's observations regarding how individuals find self-worth and definition through affiliation with groups will prove applicable in this study. For instance, holding evangelical Christian beliefs in the realm of personal faith and holding conservative political beliefs can both have profound impact on shaping how a person sees their role in society and their identity within it. But what happens when two aspects of identity produce tension and conflict? Some Christians might view certain teachings within Scripture as incongruent with

modern conservatism within America. The teaching to love one's neighbor might be found in opposition to the family separation policy mentioned in the introduction. But how do evangelicals navigate their priorities when religious beliefs clash with political beliefs? The answer to the question would depend on which priority is dominant in the situation (religious or political). Is it more important to live according to conservative political principles or to follow the rules of the Bible even if they violate politically conservative orthodoxy? The way in which evangelicals answer this question helps frame how they navigate their priorities.

Conservative identity has been difficult to define in modern American political culture, almost as difficult as the term "evangelical". The term "conservative" functions as a form of social identity, introduced by Tajfel and Turner in the field of psychology. According to Nicholls and Rice (2017), social groups construct norms and a sense of guiding community. Although Nicholls and Rice viewed this in the context of online groups, highlighting these points is also important regarding evangelical political identity. Social/political norms can provide guidance and structure for the in-group, in this case evangelical Christians. For instance, it might be normative for Christian leaders to encourage their congregants to "fall in line" and support Republican candidates and positions during elections. This clearly represents what Tajfel (1982) talked about when he proposed that groups work together and function along homogenous lines as a method of maintaining ideological purity within the dominant group as the group interacts with outsiders.

Evolution of evangelical Christians in politics

Evangelical Christians have played a massive role in shaping the modern political landscape of the United States. Fea (2018) sees the evangelicals as a community driven by fear, a lust for power and a nostalgia for a golden age, in many cases the 1950s. Arguing that these three

tenets have driven the modern evangelical movement, particularly driving them to Trump, Fea retraces how fear has driven evangelicals to the polls throughout the modern twentieth century. In the 1970s reactionary doubts about several Supreme Court decisions including the choice to take prayer out of public schools and the decision to legalize abortion galvanized evangelical Christians to meld their various groups into the Christian Right.

According to Marshden (2007) the movement towards political power from the rise of the Christian Right until George W. Bush became president in 2000 capitalized on selling a political gospel and diminishing the counter-cultural nature of the true Christian message. The three tenets of Fea's analysis (fear, power, nostalgia) diminished the true Christian message in Marsden's eyes. He saw an Americanized Christianity in which dissent from the Republican Party was not allowed and, in many cases, actively discouraged. Although the Republican Party is viewed as far from infallible in conservative political judgment it is nonetheless viewed as the most communicable vessel for pro-life and traditional marriage ideals. Defecting from the party is viewed as somehow defecting from the will of God.

Fitzgerald (2017) highlights the case of Pastor Greg Boyd, an evangelical minister in St. Paul who faced pressure from evangelical right national leaders during the 2004 election to support certain candidates and encourage his congregants to support certain issues. He refused to do so, preaching instead that Christians are supposed to have a distinct voice, speaking real Biblical values into culture instead of aligning with any specific political party. Instead of being met with applause for his views, thousands of members of his church left in frustration and he produced a book entitled *The myth of a Christian nation.* Ironically, Boyd was not telling them to support a liberal agenda, either. However his call was met with suspicion and outrage. He was accused of collaborating with the liberal agenda and not standing up for a truly Christian agenda.

In the book he did not advocate leftist policies or advocate against Christians standing up for pro-life policies. Instead, he criticized the polarization and politicization of the gospel of Jesus Christ in contemporary American politics. He questioned a key part of the social role evangelical Christians were playing and was ostracized by the ingroup for it. In this case Boyd saw a reading of Scripture that deviated from the message of "God and country", instead stressing Christlike love that elevated and mandated love for others, even people who might fit outside of the traditional ingroup. He also bucked the conventional narrative of "reclaiming America's Christian heritage" and was treated with skepticism and suspicion. The case of Greg Boyd illustrates how evangelical Christians band together to (in some cases) ostracize someone who does not propagate the traditional narrative about "God and country".

Christian political identity & Trump

Ever since Donald Trump descended his golden escalator in June 2015 to announce his candidacy for presidency, evangelical Christians have had a complicated relationship with the 45th president of the United States. As early as June 2015, Brown (2015), an evangelical theologian, offered criticism and skepticism towards the Trump agenda. Citing concerns about Trump's language and demeanor, leaders like Brown cautioned evangelical Christians against embracing his agenda even though he seemed to promise conservative reforms. Many Christians maintained a skeptical attitude towards Trump, embracing him only as an alternative to Hillary Clinton in the general election as a last resort when all other candidates had failed. When it became clear that the new president was going to execute a pro-life, pro-traditional marriage agenda unexpectedly, many evangelicals were quick to rally behind him as a surprising source of hope. However, Brown cautioned evangelicals not to put all their political eggs in the Trump basket because he still displayed immature and often vulgar behavior. Although evangelicals

were not as quick to turn around and embrace Trump's personal behavior, on an agenda level the message was largely "fall in line" or leave the evangelical camp once he came to office. Although Trump was a surprise champion and standard bearer of the supposed evangelical Christian agenda, he was nonetheless a standard bearer and dissent was treated as a wholesale rejection of the conservative movement and a narrative agenda of reclaiming America for God. The deeply resonating nature of such an agenda of reclaiming lost hegemony produced a burden within evangelicals. Although he could prove to be an objectionable leader at times the risk of withdrawing support from his cause was too great. Although Christians continued to hold their nose and perhaps would not necessarily agree with Trump's hardline perspectives on issues like immigration or the Affordable Health Care Act they were willing to remain quiet about such disagreements in order to retain the control they now had on issues of abortion and marriage.

Communication scholars Harris and Steinler (2016) see a different, darker reality within contradictory evangelical support for Trump, arguing that it is a sort of "give-take" relationship. If evangelicals bow down to Trump's agenda and offer uncritical praise then Donald Trump will restore their dreams of a white hegemonic structure of power in the United States. Offering the argument that white evangelical hegemony was threatened during Barack Obama's progressive presidency, Harris and Steiner claim that Trump has presented evangelicals with a chance to reclaim that hegemony and join in with the Make America Great Again agenda. The lust for political power has long been a part of the white evangelical consciousness. Because of Donald Trump's strongman personality and his promise to fight for traditional evangelical values (pro-life Supreme Court justices and traditional marriage) many evangelical leaders were willing to overlook his repugnant personal qualities (misogyny, tweeting, racism, etc). The restoration of

traditional Christian values was fused with the MAGA agenda to create a supposed holy alliance between evangelicals and the Trump presidency.

Clearly, a common theme of evangelical support for Trump is their ability to overlook his negative personal qualities (the immature tweeting, divorces and other reprehensible personal qualities) for some perceived greater good. According to Lakoff (2017) embracing the Trump phenomenon involves embracing a worldview with no core and no central set of principles, merely the embrace of his ego. However, evangelical Christians can gain access to his ego and use it for their own purposes. The naked embrace of political power for the sake of a supposed "greater good" is exactly what Marsden (2007) warned about during the Bush administration. He warned that this would result in compromising a Christian witness of love and faith before the watching world and equate Christianity with an agenda of partisan bitterness and division.

Cognitive dissonance

One theory that works well as a lens through which to examine the phenomenon of evangelical support for Trump is Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance theory (CDT). According to CDT, people experience anxiety or "dissonance" when they are forced to navigate conflicting beliefs that they hold. Every day human beings are forced to make decisions that involve some element of dissonance, holding two opposing ideas in contrast and making decisions on how to proceed through those tensions. Since many everyday decisions involve great amounts of tension, cognitive dissonance is something that must be dealt with. Festinger's theory is a great lens to view evangelical Christian support of Donald Trump during and after the 2016 election.

The nature of conservative identity must be considered in order to truly understand why Trump's call for conservative support resonated so deeply with Christians during the 2016

election. Examining the strong-held nature of this belief will also help communication studies researchers understand how holding two important beliefs in tension (Christian identity versus conservative political identity) can cause cognitive dissonance amongst evangelicals. In other words, how do evangelical Christians navigate their priorities when religious beliefs clash with political beliefs?

Originally developed by Festinger (1957) in the field of social psychology to explain how and why people hold contradictory beliefs and seek to reduce differences between such contradictory beliefs in everyday life, Cognitive Dissonance theory has been used to examine many kinds of political and religious movements. For instance, Smith (2016) viewed evangelical Christian acceptance of Mormons as "Christians" despite their questionable theological beliefs. Political affiliation was also considered with Mitt Romney's presidential run in 2012 in full view. The study examined whether Christians willing to overlook their beliefs in the theological realm (of Mormons not being full-fledged Christians) and hold their support of Romney higher for the sake of political identity and the 2012 election. Although the issue of electing a Mormon to high office served as a unique issue for Smith's study of the 2012 election, many of his same observations can be applied to the issue of Christians voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. On the one hand Trump was a person to be concerned about initially during the 2016 election. He was not seen by white evangelical Christians (especially leaders in the community) as a representative of Christian values in society. But eventually evangelicals were able to overcome and reduce their dissonance by choosing in a sense to hold political identity above their religious beliefs. Donald Trump was viewed as someone who did not possess the character to hold the highest office of the land, which was something evangelical Christians had long valued. But given the alternative during the 2016 election of supporting liberal Democrat Hillary

Clinton, many evangelicals were willing to support Trump and in some cases plug their nose while doing so. As Long (2016) notes, they believed they were choosing "the lesser of two evils." In exchange for voting for him and supporting him perhaps they would accomplish some of their major goals as a group. A sort of reciprocal relationship developed between white evangelical leaders and the incoming administration.

Chapter Three: Methods

Recruitment

Local evangelical Christian pastors in the Mankato area were recruited through convenience sampling. They were contacted via email and asked to respond if they were interested in being interviewed. These pastors were asked to participate because their congregants were largely conservative with a rural mindset. People in rural Minnesota counties tend to vote Republican and feature a more prominent focus on religious and moral issues.

Participants

Six evangelical Christian pastors from the Mankato area were interviewed. The study was confined to this area for two reasons- proximity and prime sampling. Mankato is also a conservative area where pastors have many conservative-leaning congregants. Interviewing pastors in this area provided an opportunity to tap into the wealth of experience they likely have interacting with politically conservative congregants.

Denominations of the pastors varied across the spectrum, from more socially conservative to more socially liberal. Such a contrast was highlighted by interviews with a Baptist pastor and a pastor in the evangelical Covenant denomination. Although participants all came from the same town they each pastored different churches with different backgrounds, traditions and practices. These differing traditions revolved around interpretations of theological tenets and denominational preferences.

Data Collection

Wengraf's (2001) approach was used during the interview. While keeping the research questions at the center of the interviewer's process, his methods allow room for follow-up

questions that help both the researcher and the participant dig deeper into an issue. For instance, if a side issue came up in the question about evangelical Christian identity there were opportunities for follow-up down the "rabbit trails" of the interview.

Participants were asked questions about how they would guide their local congregations through complex, difficult political topics. Sample questions included "In what ways do you believe the Bible should be a guiding authority in the political affairs of American voters?" and "How do you portray political viewpoints and guide your congregation in political conversation today?"

Qualitative Content Analysis

Following data collection, the recorded interviews were transcribed and coded. The coding methods of Elo and Kygnas (2007) were used in the current study. Elo and Kyngas wrote about two primary methods of content analysis- deductive and inductive. For the current study inductive coding was used, starting first with open coding and then moving through categorization and abstraction.

Open coding involved reading and re-reading the transcripts while searching for common themes. The information was then categorized when groups of commonalities were discovered within the data. For instance, when similar themes were noticed during the open coding they were put together in another category. If one pastor talked multiple times about "values" or the term "values" came up, that term was integrated as a category code. Finally, during the abstraction phase, data was combined into larger categories using "content-characteristic words." (Elo & Kyngas, 2007, p. 111). "Content-characteristic words" were words used by participants themselves. Research was analyzed and organized according to the words these participants used.

For instance, pastors talked about not giving space for division in their church services. Echoing this theme, many pastors reiterated the point with similar language. Such similar language was grouped together under one large theme. Examples included "putting up picket fences" and "don't bring the split." These types of terms indicated the same theme of not giving space for division.

Chapter Four: Results

The results are discussed in this chapter as they are aligned with the research questions: how the pastors interpreted their religious and political identities, how they communicated with their congregations about political issues, and how they handled conflict between religious and political opinions and beliefs.

RQ 1: Conceptualization and Clarification of Religious Identity

Participants conceptualized and clarified their religious and political identities in the following ways: explaining non-negotiable beliefs an evangelical Christian must hold, distancing themselves from the modern political connotation of the term "evangelical," and explaining their political values based on religious values.

Evangelical pastors hold non-negotiable beliefs. Participants stated some non-negotiable evangelical beliefs which would make or break their identity as an evangelical. For example, after referring to some disagreements on minor issues, one participant emphasized these non-negotiable beliefs as "close-handed issues":

> We differ some in the way that some evangelicals would look at some of the gifts . . . but for the most part more the close-handed issues uhm… the Trinity, you know, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, you know a lot of the foundational things that are kind of we call them non-negotiables

It was common for participants to define their evangelical identity with a series of distinguishing beliefs. For instance, one participant emphasized the importance of a personal relationship with Christ:

> What distinguishes evangelicals from all other faith denominations is… membership to a church is more important to them than really having a relationship with Jesus Christ. As evangelicals we believe in having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and not necessarily… having connection with a church that makes you a believer or a Christian.

For this participant being an evangelical meant a "personal relationship" or experience of knowing Christ rather than just belonging to a church. Right off the bat this put the term evangelical in a subjective realm of experience. Meanwhile, other participants emphasized the theological tenets of an evangelical. One participant said:

> I'm fine considering myself an evangelical, someone who believes that the Word of God is… infallible, that it is going to communicate what God wants us to know, that we can depend on it, rely on it, base our lives on it, our worldview on it.

For this participant the infallibility of God's Word served as a non-negotiable belief. Rich in theological connotation, the word "infallibility" implies that the Bible is the totally perfect, literally inspired Word of God with no mistakes in meaning as passed down throughout the centuries. This participant wanted to drive home that all evangelicals must hold a high view of Scripture, believing it to be a perfect vessel through which God communicates "what God wants us to know." In addition to not containing any mistakes, the Bible also acted for this participant as a guide for transmitted divine purposes for humanity. Additionally, the participant made it clear that people could "depend on it, rely on it, base our lives on it…"

Another non-negotiable belief was standing against theological liberalism and standing for a certain set of classic conservative beliefs:

> Evangelicalism came out… in conjunction with… liberalism that denied the inspiration of Scripture, the deity of Christ and some things like that. And so that kind of formed an evangelical church.

This participant conveyed that evangelicals do not merely identify *with* certain beliefs (i.e. a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a belief in the infallibility of Scripture) but identify *against* certain beliefs as well. In the above quote the participant juxtaposes evangelicalism against liberalism which in the early 20th century denied certain crucial pieces of the evangelical creed: denying "the inspiration of Scripture, the deity of Christ…."

While not every pastor gave a categorical list of religious doctrines an evangelical Christian must believe, one participant gave a consistent, historically accurate list:

> Yes, I'm an evangelical Christian, believe in the full gospel, Bible. We believe in…The God the Father, the Trinity would be God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. We believe that the church is God's idea and being part of the church is, is a commendable thing that the Bible instructs and we believe that the Holy Spirit guides and leads the believer. The Bible has final authority in everything we do and Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives, and that His example is what gives us the reflection of how we should live.

This participant listed several non-negotiable beliefs most conservative Christians have believed to be true over the centuries: a belief in a literal, personal triune God and a belief that He has

revealed Himself through the Bible. These ideas in the theological realm shaped a strong, robust evangelical identity for the participant.

In reflecting upon the word "evangelical," a final participant reflected on "a desire to hold the true Biblical worldview and… Try to live and govern a church so to speak according to the ways of the Bible." The term "worldview" came up in this answer. The mission for the evangelical was to "try to live and govern" according to a Christian worldview which could be found in unswerving loyalty to Scripture. Inherent in the terminology of "worldview" was a belief that the Scriptures are again an infallible guide relevant and applicable to life in the 21st century.

Evangelical pastors distance themselves from the political connotation of evangelical. When it came to the traditional theological definition of evangelical Christian, the pastors unanimously assented and agreed to being called an evangelical. However, many pastors lamented the political connotation that has arisen particularly within a North American context, aligning the term evangelical with Trump voter or right wing voter. One participant remarked for instance that he would not define himself as a Liberty University evangelical or religious right evangelical. Many participants believed that this form of evangelicalism had been recklessly tied to a form of nationalism which put American identity on the same level as faith identity. For instance, one participant said

> Yeah it's funny you know I grew up in a very conservative Baptist setting and you know, evangelical meant about 82 different things, at least there's a list of 82 things you had to adhere to. I think if someone were to say are you an evangelical in a Liberty University or Religious Right way I'd say naw that's not the evangelical of Scripture.

An interesting tension comes up in this statement, pitting the "Liberty University" or "Religious Right" evangelical against the "evangelical" of Scripture. In this participant's mind the LU or RR evangelical was an overly-politicized evangelical, and the participant seemed to believe this was an errant interpretation.

With a similar sentiment, another participant lamented the politicization of the term evangelical. This participant was comfortable identifying as a theological or religious evangelical but went on to say:

> But politically that term has… come to mean something that uhm I'm not sure I would love to stand in the midst of that group. CNN, MSNBC, Fox's talk about evangelicals--I don't know that often when they're talking about that's the group I would place myself with.

Echoing the quote from the previous participant, this participant saw mainstream media caricaturing the evangelicals and claiming these odd folks represent something with which this participant was not comfortable identifying. The participant seemed to have a difficult time accepting the political definition attributed to evangelicals in the current political environment. Listing the news media networks like CNN and Fox might provide another clue to the participant's meaning. After all these news networks often report the news with an agenda, providing a skewed view of certain groups at times. This participant more than likely did not want the term "Evangelical" to define him according to the overgeneralized and sometimes inaccurate viewpoint of the American news media.

Explaining political values based on religious values The connection between strongly held religious identity and political identity also came up with participants. This is best summed up by one participant:

> There's something about us and about them and about the evolution of all these different things… you know at their base words, and I'm not a politician so forgive me if I…. but it seems to me that conservatives are working to conserve what we have, of what we own. That's why I think you see building a wall is to protect us and to conserve what we have. Liberal has to do with sharing. In a way what we have with others, trying to find a way to help others. So liberal politically can mean that. In a theological framework conservative has come to mean an adherence to the Word of God and by and large it has also become identified with what I would call overly literal interpretation of the Scriptures, which has been in many ways legalism.

This participant's acknowledgement "I'm not a politician" was followed by a frank attempt to interpret conservatism and liberalism by a broad set of values (conserving versus sharing). An intriguing tension emerges here because one of the social values set forth by Jesus and the first century church was the value of sharing with others. According to this participant's definition, political conservatism appears to be diametrically opposed to Christian values.

Participants continued to emphasize that conservatives and liberals were best identified by the beliefs they held. Holding a certain set of beliefs was at the core of what it meant to be a "conservative" or "liberal". They were not defined by the clothes they wore, the houses they lived in or any other outward sign. Instead, they were clearly distinguished by their beliefs and

how they gave those beliefs expression in the world around them. For instance, one participant said:

> Conservative I think generally, to conserve small government… Small government authority over our lives, that the government should largely kind of you know live and let the people do their thing... Liberal I think in its healthiest form to stand up for the subgroups that um maybe because of culture and society and whatever else get left over.

This participant zeroed in on the ideas or general principles found in conservatism or liberalism, identifying conservatism with "small government" and liberalism with a progressive ethic of inclusion and protection for minorities. Although these were not necessarily specific policies they were foundational worldview presuppositions which would shape how conservatives and liberals thought and acted about specific policies. For the participant these ideas served as a springboard from ideas to action.

Another participant saw the tension between conservative and liberal identity in terms of what these two groups believed. But this participant could not as quickly and neatly differentiate between the two:

> When I was very conservative I could tell you what liberal was because it was the things I disagreed with. You know and you know if there's been times in my ministry where I've tended on the left of center it's easier to say what conservative is because it's what I disagree with.

This participant defined the terms "conservative" and liberal in tension with one another, saying he could easily define conservative because it was what he disagreed with. However, this participant was able to clearly state what he was and was not when he held those previous

beliefs. When he was a conservative he could clearly pinpoint what the other side believed and why it was wrong because he was forced to take a stance against it. Being forced to take a stand for something or against something helped reinforce ideological dividing lines for participants. They were able to define what they stood for as they understood and communicated what they were against. However, this same participant also admitted the lines were becoming a bit more blurry when he moved towards the center and away from being completely conservative or completely liberal.

Often the correlation between a theological and political conservatism and liberalism was seamlessly integrated. Participants saw conservative policies and (Republican policies particularly) as compatible with a Christian worldview while some participants were hesitant to state that liberalism could be compatible with the Christian worldview. One participant expressed a belief that the conservative/liberal divide was more complicated than it sometimes seemed:

> And that's really important to me because sometimes if you align with more of a conservative view, there's elements with the conservative view that on the surface is like "oh! It's straight Biblical" But then there's some underlining things that are tremendously unbiblical that are not necessarily seen. But then with the liberals you say "liberal, man it seems very, very unbiblical." But then there's some underlining things that are tremendously Biblical things on the liberal side of things.

This participant noted that it was difficult to condemn one side and heap unqualified praise on the other. Instead, both sides of conservative and liberal political conversation had elements of

good and elements of bad to them. But not every pastor saw these issues as gray. Instead, one participant drew on Biblical imagery to describe conservative versus liberal:

> I just think it just is… just so dangerous because it's a wide road, it's a broad road, it's a destructive road. And uhhh… that term just fits in government too. Liberal is, I don't know. I just… they both have just really mirrored one another…

Describing liberalism as a wide road drew back to imagery Jesus used. According to the words of Jesus, the broad road would lead to destruction and the narrow road would lead to life. By using this comparison this pastor claimed the excessive permissiveness of liberalism would harm the church and the political sphere. According to this participant safety and security (freedom from danger) lay in following the conservative, narrow road.

In summary, participants conceptualized their identity by identifying with non-negotiable beliefs, distancing themselves from the political connotation of the evangelical label and embracing conservatism. These factors helped shape how they communicated their identity.

RQ 2: Communicating with Congregants

Participants also elaborated on how they communicated with their congregations about controversial political issues. Three underlying themes arose: emphasizing ideas that protected the shared humanity of everyone, regardless of political differences of opinion; encouraging congregants to follow personal convictions; and not giving space for division in church gatherings.

Protecting shared humanity. When communicating about tough, divisive political issues, evangelical pastors focused on big picture issues. They did not necessarily want to divide

over what they deemed to be small issues. One participant in particular illustrated how he framed these big picture issues as issue of the heart. Using the example of abortion, this participant noted that it was more important to act and speak in a way to change hearts rather than merely affect legislation:

> Our job as the church is not to primarily dictate over and say this is not, this is immoral, you guys should be doing this, but rather to see people saved and coming to know Jesus and desiring to follow Him.

This participant indicates that the goal is to gain converts and members of the church. Clearly this participant wants to affect a heart change, not merely dictate morality through legislation. To this participant the most important goal was not "dictating" or enacting laws. Instead, evangelicals should teach the message of Jesus and make the Christian life more desirable.

Another participant emphasized how he calls on his congregation to examine their hearts and see if they are really getting at the core of God's priorities for a good and just society. He believes that society has missed truly important issues in large part because Christians have been convinced that unimportant issues are greatly important. By emphasizing certain values and creating a political agenda based on these values, this participant believed that evangelical Christians were perhaps overlooking people at the margins of society.

> I think that the very thing that we think is weighty to God and heavy and really important, I think we might miss it a little bit you know? And I think it's partly because of how our minds have been shaped over time to think these issues are more important to really I think there's some things that we really need to dig into the Scriptures more and pray about to really see what the heart of God is.

The participant's indication that Christians need to "dig into the Scriptures" and see "what the heart of God is" serve as telling clues to unlock what the participant believes. Although this participant believes that Christians in the United States have missed some central issues of importance to God through political activism, he also believes these Christians have an opportunity to reorient themselves around caring for people and looking to God's true priorities which can only be unlocked through Bible-reading and prayer. The same theme of caring more about the heart came about through the words of the participant. Previously, the theme of "heart" came up in relationship to caring more about changing the hearts of people than changing legislation. However, this participant used the same language of "heart" explaining how evangelicals should care more about the heart of God in seeking justice and protecting shared humanity by defending the oppressed.

Following personal convictions. Participants did not directly encourage their congregants to support certain issues or candidates. Instead, they encouraged them to live according to their convictions and possess a strong moral compass. The issue of Trump also came up in the context of political disagreements within church when participants were asked how they would respond if different members of their church pressured one another to support certain political candidates over others. One participant responded:

> …six months ago I really was very direct about the political climate that we live in and I brought people back to the Word of God and what God says. What does God want us to do? That way nobody in the congregation goes well "I'm leaning this way" or "I'm leaning this way" No, like I'm leaning towards God and then what…whatever direction God leads me towards because of … my convictions,

> and my Biblical beliefs, and that's a direction I go, not going this direction and trying to make God agree with what I decide to go with, right?

This pastor explained that he tried to stay above the fray of telling people to vote for one candidate over another. Instead, this pastor encouraged church members to follow their convictions in determining who to vote for. Another pastor expressed similar sentiments:

> I personally believe that individuals should be guided by their own moral compass… those who are followers of Christ or… those who are leaning into the Scriptures for guidance should find guidance from that.

Drawing out the idea of following a "moral compass" and pointing out that evangelical Christians need to be led by the Scriptures, this participant continued along with the theme of generally encouraging congregants to be led by their values, even though these values were not necessarily directly defined by the pastor.

Not giving space for division. Participants were unwilling to let political controversies dominate the agenda of their Sunday morning gatherings or their focus as a community. One participant summed up the idea of holding politics as secondary by not allowing them to dominate Sunday morning gatherings or occupy a central role in church discussions:

> I probably just don't give a lot of space for it. People can get riled up but it's not something we will take a strong stance on. Whether it's abortion… my personal feeling is a strong "this is probably the most immoral thing that has been allowed to happen in our nation…" that being said I've wrestled with again do you put up more walls by making that stance?

This participant saw an unnecessarily divisive bold stance as something that would potentially put up more walls and do more harm than good. Another participant said:

> And so, I guess you got to continue to put up those picket fences and just keep those unnecessary divisions out the best you can without being… controlling, judgmental, weird, all of those type of things.

By putting up "picket fences," this pastor determined what he wanted to allow in and what he wanted to keep out. He decided to control the messages going to and from the church platform on Sunday morning. All the while he emphasized the balance of not coming across as "controlling, judgmental, weird." By putting up these picket fences this pastor saw himself as a controlling force in what topics could be addressed and what topics were given priority.

Another participant argued that the church should not split or bring division. Instead, churches should seek to bring people together despite disagreement:

> It's important that we understand what we are dealing with as a church that we don't bring the split. We would rather bring people together and preach the gospel to them and let them know that Jesus will will not behave like that, even if we disagree on a particular subject. It doesn't have to undermine what the Scripture says. What would Jesus do? That's the question we ask.

This participant brought the central question back to moral concerns, pointing out that unnecessary divisions should not be at the center of a Christian's mind. Instead, Christians should always ask themselves how Jesus called them to act. Meanwhile, he acknowledged that political issues are secondary because taking a stance on certain issues is not a prerequisite for obtaining eternal life.

Another participant used the example of his local congregation, explaining how the diversity in their congregation is shaped by a desire to be Christians in politics and not merely focusing on partisanship:

> We've got people here who are conservative, farm people, country people… who are Republican, conservative, sitting right next to professors at the university, or another university or college. And we've got liberal and conservative right here. And so I encourage people actively when it came, I think we were working through the book of 1 Timothy, and it was a couple of sections where Timothy said pray for your leaders. And so I just asked them and this was during some of the conversation about the wall and I think this was during the shutdown. And I said just a question for you "have you been praying for Nancy Pelosi? And… for Donald Trump in the same amounts for the same urgency? Or have you favored one over the other in your prayer life?"

Directing his congregation back to the spiritual practice of prayer for leaders, this pastor encouraged all his congregants to take on an attitude of spiritual concern, especially towards people with whom they disagreed. His concern stood as a challenge for both Republicans and Democrats, encouraging them to find common ground inside of the church and think broadly about their government, not just in terms of leaders with whom they agreed or disagreed, but in terms of how the government could function best.

Evangelical pastors communicated to their congregants about political matters by protecting shared humanity, encouraging them to follow their personal convictions and not giving space in public gatherings for political division. Although these participants believed political issues needed to be addressed, they were only addressed in public settings in a way that

would move the congregation forward. These guidelines for addressing and communicating about political issues helped participants sort out how they would handle such issues in their congregations.

RQ 3: Handling Conflict between Political and Religious Experiences

Participants addressed how they navigated natural tensions between the teachings of their faith and their political perspectives. Often these twin identities (religiously evangelical and politically conservative) and sets of opinions overlapped and meshed. However, their political and religious opinions sometimes came into conflict. When this happened, how would participants determine which of the two opinions were more important? Participants appeared to handle such conflicts in two ways: by framing morality in terms of what God cares about and reconciling their competing and sometimes contrasting moral values.

Morality is framed in terms of what God cares about. Participants spoke frequently about morality. Often these participants interpreted morality through the lens of what the Bible has to say. These participants often believed that the Bible functions in laying down God's final word in how people should act. One participant suggested,

> I believe this is what Jesus said to look for- look at the fruit. If they have good fruit there is a good foundation, there's a good underlying root. And so I think we need to look at issues but I think we need to look at character. And I can't believe that the evangelicals were duped by Trump. And I think many of them said I couldn't possibly vote for Hillary Clinton and I get that. Uh people just kind of just swallowed and said "okay, let's vote here. But I can't believe the people that are still embracing Trump and… I'm just deeply

> confused and really worried about that. What's become of, what's become of the church? What's become of the social, of the conscience of the nation?

The participant used familiar evangelical Christian language to characterize Trump's presidency. Evangelical Christians often talk about fruit in terms of personal actions and attitudes. The question is often asked whether a person is bearing good fruit or bad fruit with their actions. But this participant was "deeply confused" and "worried" about the nation picking a president with bad fruit, going so far as to say they were "duped by Trump." Even stronger, this participant asked what had become of the church and the nation, almost encouraging evangelicals to reflect on their social conscience.

Another participant summed up Christian social values in the following manner:

> So I think we stand with one another for care of things that He has given us to watch over. But I think chief among them would be interpersonal relationships- love, respect, honoring one another and helping one another. I think we're all about the "how can we make this a better place?"

This participant believed that God has called human beings to watch over the earth and create an environment where that would be effectively done. These were emphasized as the priorities of God and therefore the priorities of God's creation. The participant went on to explain how this tangibly played out (through "interpersonal relationships").

Reconciling competing values. Participants framed their tension between their political and religious identities in terms of the current phenomena of a Trump presidency. While Trump has accomplished many of the hot agenda items of conservative Christian movement, he has also

alienated and offended many Christians with his hostile rhetoric. This participant reconciled competing values by pointing to Trump's lack of character as a reason for not supporting him:

> I would say look at his character. I would say the guy has some clouds of smoke all around him. You've got people close to being indicted, you've got all kinds of issues. You've got issues of immorality. He himself has confessed to all of these, you know relations with women, you learn a lot about his character from how we treat one another; it seems to be he seems to degrade women and all of these poor people, every turn.

This participant believed Trump had degraded the character of the conservative movement and could not function as a representative of conservatism because of his character and language. He was unable to embrace the Trump presidency like some evangelicals because he held certain values (or "character") too highly and believed the Trump administration violated those values. The participant held to certain criteria deduced from his faith and believed a president's character would reveal whether or not he would be an effective leader. This participant reconciled competing values by judging Trump according to his religious beliefs. Echoing the same theme, another participant said:

> Trump getting elected… I mean what does that say to us that somebody who is so morally not the leader that the evangelical would choose as a leader. Does that say that those two things are still at the center for them and they don't care what type of leader they elect as long as those two things stay true? I don't… I'm asking a question. I don't know that I have an answer because I think the character that I see in our president is so antithesis to the character of Christ.

Again, the character question came into play. By pointing back to Trump's lack of character, this participant put up clear boundaries. This participant would support a candidate who was a great moral leader. However, noting that Trump was "Somebody who is so morally not the leader that an evangelical would choose...", he turned around and asked if voters who supported him were able to overlook a balanced focus on morality because he gave them what they wanted on abortion and gay marriage. In the harshest terms possible, the participant said Trump's character is the "antithesis to the character of Christ." In this case the participant valued the "character of Christ" and judged Trump's character in relationship to it. He reconciled competing values by holding the character of Christ as the standard and judging politicians according to the standard.

But not all participants saw Trump through a negative lens. One participant noted:

> you know, a lot of politicians run with a certain narrative to attract a certain segment of population and I think he said some things and… and… that appealed to the conservative evangelical movement such as "I have a list here of 20 judges that I will appoint, all pro-life, dada dada da…" Boy I'll tell ya, um, he's not a politician. He's not a politician and I think that's what's so awkward to deal with because he's not a politician. He's not even the most skilled at using some of his narrative and things he says and the way he says them, that type of thing. But I believe despite all that I really believe that he's an instrument sent by God for something.

This participant noted that Trump was an imperfect vessel for God's plan. However, this participant believed that he was "an instrument sent by God" for a divine purpose. Notice the participant hedged his saying "he's not a politician." According to this participant any of Trump's myriad of flaws did not disqualify him from being an instrument of God, with a special,

divine purpose. The participant went on to say "I'm not sure what it is." However, according to this participant God was in the mix, setting up Donald Trump to accomplish something. Although this participant was not sure of the specifics of this purpose, any invocation of a divine purpose would set his presidency above any criticism. The participant was able to justify Trump's behavior and make sense of his presidency by pointing back to the mysterious "will of God." Although Trump was not morally perfect, for this participant the will of God was to have Trump in place as an "instrument". Since Trump functioned as an instrument of God's will, this participant was comfortable giving support to his agenda even though Trump's behavior was questionable at best.

Another participant had a similar way of handling any conflicts between political and religious identity:

> When you look at all the trails economically and the things I value- economics and morality I see that he has done a tremendous job. It's just that uh people undermine if they don't believe in and agree with what he's saying and what he's doing. And he's just trying to protect the nation from destroying itself. People don't like that.

According to the participant Trump exerted strong leadership in revitalizing the economy and reviving morality. This made him a strong leader who was criticized merely for leading and protecting the people of the United States. The same participant also pointed out that he was winning a crucial culture war by making it acceptable to say "Merry Christmas" during the holiday season again. According to these religious values, Trump represented the beliefs of these pastors.

Participants handled differences between their political and religious experiences by framing morality in terms of what God cares about and reconciling competing values. Although these participants believed their political and religious experiences were both important, they reconciled these opposing experiences by making difficult choices. All participants clearly wanted to reconcile the teachings of their faith to their political experiences and vice versa. The above mentioned ways helped them do so.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Interviews yielded salient themes relevant to participants' evangelical identity, how they communicated about political issues to their congregations and how they handled conflict between their religious and political identities. Several relevant themes emerged from each topic of discussion. In terms of conceptualizing identity, evangelical Christians strongly identified with certain non-negotiable evangelical beliefs and explained political values based on religious values. In terms of communicating with congregants, participants focused on protecting shared humanity, following personal convictions, and discouraging division. In terms of handling differences between religious and political opinion, evangelical pastors framed morality in terms of what God cares about, and some found tension between supporting Trump and Christian values. In this chapter the data collected to answer the research questions will be examined through the lens of Social Identity theory and Cognitive Dissonance theory. Limitations and areas for future research will also be discussed.

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel's (1981) Social Identity theory also helps to make sense of the results. SIT explains that an ingroup/outgroup mentality can give common purpose to groups and guide individuals in making important decisions and forming opinions about valuable issues. In this case the political and religious identities of pastors were influenced by the social groups they were a part of. They also used their position within social groups to influence the makeup of the social group. This section examines how participants are influenced by the group identity and serve to influence the group identity.

Certain evangelical beliefs shaped how these pastors thought about their involvement in faith community (the church) and society at large. For instance, a pastor might believe that the Bible is the inerrantly, inspired perfect Word of God and the final authority for moral matters. This same pastor would then cite the Bible as his or her reason for supporting a certain set of moral values in interactions with other people. This pastor would also encourage members of his or her community to the same set of values based on interpreting the Bible.

Tajfel's Social Identity Theory can help make sense of how Christians identify in their churches, framing this identification as part of the process of interpretation. The term "evangelical" served as a form of social identity for these pastors. They identified as evangelicals according to a series of set beliefs and these beliefs in community with one another shaped how they interpreted all of life, including how they sought political interpretation. Again, these pastors saw themselves first as ministers of the gospel. Although these beliefs were deeply personal they were not private. Their definition of evangelical stemmed in certain theological beliefs but branched out to shape how these pastors thought about politics and communicated about politics. One pastor leaned on the book of Genesis to describe how he believed the world was originally set up. Drawing insight from the Biblical origin story, he was then able to reach the conclusion that this origin story communicated God's intentions for society. This participant was able to carry his theological beliefs (grounded in the book of Genesis) into the world around him. He carried certain theological beliefs into his everyday living and beliefs about how people should act towards one another. This language was phrased as creating a culture of human flourishing, because this participant saw a culture of human flourishing in the book of Genesis. Although this is one specific example, this process of theological interpretation took place in

many other ways with many participants. They were able to draw beliefs from the Bible and their theological tradition and bring those into interpretations into current events.

Participants did not merely rely on their own interpretation. Instead, they also relied on their evangelical groups for mutual interpretation. The "social" aspect of such mutual interpretation showed up in how evangelical pastors rely on their congregations to validate or reject what they teach from the Bible on any given Sunday. Most pastors started with the foundational belief that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. After all, this is part of the definition of an "evangelical." Believing certain things to be true about the Bible is part of what makes a Christian part of the "evangelical" sub-group. Participants generally check in with other sources to make sure their interpretation of the Bible is correct. For instance, a pastor might also turn to a respected evangelical commentator to make sure their interpretation squares with orthodoxy. Also, evangelical pastors face certain pressures to conform and not dissent from their sub-group of Christianity. Certain sets of assumptions held by the group about the Bible might be encouraged and not discouraged.

Pastors also used their position within the group to influence members of their social group. They often talked in terms of controlling or filtering what was discussed during Sunday morning services and in their faith communities. One pastor mentioned not allowing room for division and "taking away the voice" of people who tried to stir up such division. They had the ability to allow space or not allow space for talking about divisive and difficult political issues.

Another example of pastoral influence within the evangelical Christian social group was how many pastors encouraged their congregants to vote. One pastor mentioned that they did not tell congregants exactly what ideas to vote for or which candidate to support. Instead, pastors were able to plant certain values in the minds of their congregants and encourage them to think

according to a conservative evangelical interpretation of the Bible. Pastors did not indicate that they told their congregants to support Republicans, Democrats or independents. Instead, they encouraged their congregants to have certain issues in their minds when they went to the ballot box. One pastor encouraged his congregants to think about "God's original intent" for life and marriage in particular. He encouraged participants to vote for the candidate which best represented God's original intent for life and humanity.

Finally, pastors used their influence to encourage critical thinking about difficult, controversial issues. While pastors did not directly seek to tell congregants what conclusions to draw about these issues, they encouraged them to think about these issues and viewed themselves as fair arbitrators of such issues. One participant used the example of encouraging an African-American pastor friend to share about police brutality at church. Another participant explained how he encouraged participants to take a compassionate stance towards public officials by praying for both Donald Trump and Nancy Pelosi at the height of the government shutdown in January 2019. Although these pastors were not concerned about eliciting particular viewpoints from their congregants, they were concerned about encouraging them to think about such issues in a nuanced way. They used their leadership positions to make room or not make room for such issues. Although the pastors did not allow space for division they did often make space for intentional conversation in the group.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive Dissonance theory examines how individuals resolve competing or discrepant information, including political and religious values. Cognitive dissonance is faced any time individuals must resolve two issues or choices which seem incongruent. In this study participants faced cognitive dissonance any time they confronted a political versus religious values divide. In

every case the participant was asked to overlook a certain set of objections in order to voice support. For pro-Trump participants they were asked to overlook his inflammatory rhetoric in order to stay in line with his pro-life and traditional marriage agenda. However, anti-Trump participants were asked to stand against Trump and his agenda in support of "not compromising" and speaking truth to power.

Some participants handled the cognitive dissonance by emphasizing the significance of certain issues but not directly telling congregants how to vote. Many pastors only talked with their congregants about political matters in terms of telling them about the *importance* of voting. In this way pastors were safeguarded from accusations that they were telling congregants how to vote. But pastors also indirectly wielded political influence over their congregants by emphasizing certain issues above others (i.e. abortion and homosexuality). By emphasizing these issues as overarching "moral concerns" they sometimes unintentionally de-emphasized other issues, giving believers permission to support a candidate who took a strong stance on the more important issues. For example, despite Donald Trump's less than stellar personal conduct, pastors were able to encourage their congregants to emphasize how successful he was in fulfilling their key "moral" items. For instance, one participant emphasized how he believed Trump has made it more acceptable and mainstream for folks to say "merry Christmas" to one another. Although this is one minor example it illustrates a much larger point. How pastors helped their congregants navigate such cognitive dissonance was based on what was important to the congregants. For instance, if the congregants felt that certain culture war agenda items (like saying "merry Christmas" or supporting pro-life Supreme Court justices) were more important they would be more likely to reconcile their cognitive dissonance by choosing to support Trump.

Cognitive dissonance also seemed apparent when pastors discussed their identity as leaders. For example, they did not view it as their responsibility to tell their people who to vote for; however, they did see themselves as fighters for certain moral imperatives (a culture where "life flourishes", etc.), and they believed they had a responsibility to teach their congregants how to act responsibly in the public square. Many pastors viewed themselves as conservative evangelicals. They were conservatives in the sense that they held a high view of living by the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God. They wanted to take the text of the Bible as literally as possible and apply it to their lives. In this way they wanted to "conserve" meaning as traditionally applied down through the centuries. Meanwhile, the other facet of their identity was "evangelical". These participants wanted to be led by their theological convictions about the Bible and be identified as followers of Jesus Christ. However, cognitive dissonance forced them to make imperfect choices in an imperfect world where their convictions could not necessarily be followed without compromise. As self-identifying conservative evangelicals these pastors needed to make strategic choices. One pastor admitted that Trump was "not a politician" but still was "an instrument of God" in a way that he perhaps did not understand. This could potentially provide a way out of the dissonance. After all, who can see into the mind of God or understand the will of God fully? By putting the Trump agenda into this category, the participant was able to find some peace and reconcile the dissonance. Although Trump might have vulgar characteristics, he was appointed as a leader by God and there had to be some greater purpose for supporting him. These sorts of thought processes had to be worked out in the mind of pastors as they considered their identity as an evangelical and how that evangelical Christian identity helped them sort out cognitive dissonance.

Conclusion

Religion can serve as a polarizing and controversial topic, and in recent years has served to create more division. Understanding how evangelical Christian pastors conceptualize religious and political identity, communicatt with congregants and handle political and religious differences could help Americans of all political and religious affiliations understand why religious and political groups experience and create an ingroup/outgroup mentality.

For communication scholars this is an important study showing how religion shapes public opinion and drives voters and political participants to value certain issues and concerns over others. For some Christian pastors abortion and homosexuality served as the most important concerns, driving them to support Donald Trump's candidacy and presidency amid potential objections. For other pastors his moral character proved to be too insurmountable of a barrier. Communication scholars will no doubt examine the unique phenomena of the 2016 election and the Trump presidency for quite some time. However, studying evangelical Christians offers a unique set of challenges and opportunities for communication scholars to gain a deeper understanding of the 2016 election and how it continues to shape the political divide.

Limitations

The study took place in a largely conservative setting. Perhaps respondents would have addressed the issues at hand differently if they lived in an urban or suburban area. Also, the town in which data was collected has a large Caucasian population. Perhaps a more ethnically or culturally diverse setting would yield different data.

Additionally, the researcher identifies as a member of the evangelical Christian community. This fact might create a bias towards certain ideas or pursuing certain areas of research. If the study had been conducted by a non-evangelical, different topics may have been

explored. Although familiarity with evangelical language and culture caused me to view the data with a specific lens, it also provided the opportunity to explore areas that may have been unfamiliar to non-evangelicals.

Future Research

Avenues of future research are almost limitless for this topic. The rural/urban divide might be a place to start. The study took place in a largely rural area where voters tend to hold more conservative political opinions. For this study a rural audience was used, especially an area with many conservatives. But these research questions may yield different answers if asked in a "blue" area or a more diverse setting. Pastors in large urban areas might conceptualize their identities differently, communicate about political issues with their congregants differently and handle differences between their religious and political opinions differently in such geographical locations. Since evangelical Christianity is such a broad area of study, researchers could continue to examine how Christians interpret their identity as evangelicals and what it means for their political perspectives.

For this study participants were interviewed individually, but it would be fascinating to get several perspectives on these issues in a focus group format. Perhaps focus groups could be used to engage pro-Trump participants and anti-Trump participants in conversation with one another. In this study participants were only questioned in a one on one setting and did not interact with other participants who might hold an opposing viewpoint.

One recurring theme throughout each interview was a belief that the United States was founded on Judeo-Christian principles and had drifted "away from God". Perhaps this narrative has contributed to some of the polarization in our culture and has been misunderstood by people who do not hold this view. But perhaps future studies could seek greater insight and

understanding on this point. It would be advantageous to understand why pastors hold this view and attempt to make sense of why pastors believe the country was taken from Christians.

Religion and politics can prove to be difficult topics, especially when brought into conversation with one another. But religion and politics play a crucial role in making sense of many of the disagreements in the United States today. Evangelical pastors play a crucial role in shaping how many Americans think about religion and politics, namely how those two controversial topics interact with the Trump presidency. Right now the United States is preparing for another presidential election where religious and social issues will likely again play an important role. Some evangelical Christians will no doubt overlook Trump's controversial and negative actions because he has accomplished many of their socially conservative goals. At the same time there will be equally committed and convicted Christians who will not find it in themselves to support the current president for re-election, using much of the rationale cited in this study. Through all of this it is important to understand the big questions facing evangelicals and many Americans in general.

Appendix A:

Questionnaire for pastors

1. Do you identify as an evangelical Christian? What does that term mean to you?

2. In what ways do you believe the Bible should be a guiding authority in the political affairs of American voters? What does it look like for Biblical authority to guide American public life?

3. What do the terms "liberal" and "conservative" mean to you in a political sense? Where do you fall along that spectrum?

4. What do the terms "liberal" and conservative mean to you in a religious sense? Where do you fall along that spectrum?

5. Are there certain topics that should be most important to evangelical Christian voters during election cycles? What would those topics be and how are they determined to be most important?

6. Since Donald Trump took office do you believe he has done a good job representing conservative ideals and values as previously defined? Why or why not?

7. Are Christian conservative viewpoints portrayed improperly in American political conversation today? Why or why not?

8. How do you portray political viewpoints and guide your congregation in political conversation today?

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