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Only a Tract: The Production and Distribution of Evangelical Gospel Literature and the
Construction of Social Boundaries

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Religious Studies

by

Sean Geoffrey Sagan

June 2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Only a Tract: the Production and Distribution of Evangelical Gospel Literature and the
Construction of Social Boundaries

by

Sean Geoffrey Sagan

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Religious Studies
University of California, Riverside, June 2017

Dr. Michael Alexander, Co-Chairperson

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Gospel tracts are religious pamphlets passed out by missionaries in the fulfillment of the Great Commission, a scripturally based duty to evangelize the teachings of Christ. This dissertation examines the use of Gospel tracts in the construction of evangelical identity. Often overlooked as mere ephemera, tracts can be used as windows into the lived religious behavior of ordinary Evangelicals. While nominally tools of outreach, the efficacy of tract distribution is often called into question. However as artifacts of religious and cultural behavior, gospel tracts also shed light on the ways in which certain evangelical communities construct borders of identity between themselves, secular society and rival religious groups. Archival research was employed in the gathering of historical documents from tract literature databases. Contemporary material was obtained through excavation of online literature and found ephemera. The project begins with an

exploration of the interwoven, historical roots of American print culture in the use of images and polemics as a means of social demarcation between Protestants and other Christian traditions. It explores the continuity of anti-Catholic narratives in Chick Publications, the role of purity language in tract culture and also its relationship to American business culture, money and brand identity. Finally, the dissertation situates these various aspects of tract production and distribution within the context of the cultural hegemony of American evangelical Christianity, nativism and conspiracy.

For my wife; Jenna, my mom; Denise, and my in-laws; Lance and Laura. Your love,

support and infinite patience made this possible.

And for my father, Keith Sagan. Zichrono livracha.

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Introduction

It's still early in the season this afternoon, but Angel Stadium in Anaheim is crowded. At near sold-out capacity, fans stream through the parking lot and into the stadium both by car and on foot, through slow-moving traffic being directed by bored-looking parking attendants. Here and there, families gather in the parking lot to tailgate; barbecuing and quietly sipping beer, which is technically not allowed outside the park itself. The parking lot is rapidly filling up, which for an early season game means that an exciting rival is in town, usually the Red Sox or the Yankees. The crowd, usually wearing red and white, mingles with a sea of blue jerseys. The Dodgers have come to Anaheim to kick off an interleague freeway series. For baseball fans in the Los Angeles metro area, chances are they're here for this game. Of course, not everyone is wearing team colors, and not everyone is here for the game. In addition to the "Big A," which can still be seen from the freeway, the entrance to Angel Stadium of Anaheim boasts two giant red canopies in the shape of baseball caps and branded with the team's signature logo. During most games, fans utilize these "hats" to stand in the shade while waiting for party members and taking out tickets.

On this day there are more people under and around the giant caps than usual, and the reason isn't only the draw of the L.A. Dodgers. Standing under each cap, on either side of the park's entrance, are two to three men, holding up signs and passing out literature. The signs, which can be seen from well back in the parking lot, alert the fans to the reason for the men's presence. "Jesus bore our sins" reads one. "The blood of Jesus

cleanses sin” says another. The third man’s sign reads, “God destroys all who forsake him.” The signs are boldly colored, black block letters against a yellow backdrop, coupled with chapter and verse references to the Bible passages from which each sentiment is taken. The men holding the signs, all white, appear to be in their early to mid-forties. While not wearing fan regalia, they could otherwise be mistaken for the countless other game attendees, were it not for the signs, and the tract literature being handed out.

The signs and tracts give clues to the fact that these men are “street preachers,” individuals who feel it is their biblical duty to enter in to the secular world to deliver the message of the gospel. Street preachers are not necessarily from one specific denomination or church organization, although there are some loose networks of organizations with which different preachers choose to affiliate.¹ Often, these preachers have assistants film or photograph their public encounters which are then posted to individual websites, often linked to one another as well as to larger evangelical organizations. These videos provide educational assistance to other evangelists and also serve as a record or archive of the activities of the preacher or ministry in question.

The demeanors with which these preachers engage with the public tend to vary depending on the personality characteristics of the individual. By and large, the videos of most street-preaching activities tend to exhibit a confrontational attitude. Many signs and

¹ Joshua Edelman. “The Intolerable Intimate Public of Contemporary American Street Preaching.” *Performing Religion in Public*. (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 119. While many street preachers are individuals whose activities constitute their own ministries, they frequently organize loosely under the umbrella organization Street and Open Air Preachers of America, or SOAPA.

rhetoric appear intended to provoke an intense, often angry reaction among those being preached to, particularly a secular public holding liberal values. Like their Puritan forbearers to whom they are quick to draw a lineage, the street preacher's purpose is to evoke the specter of fire and brimstone so as to shock the ordinary sinner out of their depraved and God-bereft existence.² The preachers at the stadium were uncharacteristically stoic and subdued; however, this may have had more to do with the heavy presence of stadium security and Anaheim city police than with a conscious change of preaching strategy.

Yet heated or otherwise, the interaction between the street preacher and the public should be viewed as a confrontation, or at the very least an encounter between two distinct classes of people. A disquieting and unnerving encounter with a street preacher is not meant to merely alert passersby to the fact that they sin; it's supposed to disturb their complacency which allows them to remain in the secular social world, asleep to their inequities. These are some of the mannerisms and social strategies evangelical street preachers use in their approach to the Great Commission, a doctrinal duty prevalent throughout much of the Christian religion itself. The Great Commission refers to Matthew 28:16-20 where Jesus gives his disciples the task of delivering his message throughout the world:

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey

² Ibid., 123.

everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

The Great Commission is a primary justification for the practice and activity of evangelism in many forms. Not just biblical but directly ordained by Jesus himself, the Commission carries considerable weight among evangelical Christians seeking to engage in a more active practice of their faith.³

In addition to the vocal and physical performance demanded of the street preacher in their fulfillment of the Great Commission, most such missionaries also utilize small pamphlets and pieces of literature almost universally referred to as Gospel tracts. These tracts vary in size and design. Some exhibit a high degree of production value and some appear to be homemade. While not all street preachers make a point of handing tracts out—though many do—almost all carry with them some form of literature available for distribution. Many of these missionaries carry specific titles that they themselves find most helpful and effective.⁴ While Gospel tracts are not essential to the fulfillment of the Commission, they are popular methods of mediation and offer outreach opportunities which are both spontaneous and planned—performed by both the experienced missionary, as well as the novice.⁵ The distribution of tracts need not even require a raucous public sermon. Depending on the social circumstances, they can be passively handed out. Yet regardless of the intensity of any individual missionary, a Gospel tract is

³ Mortimer Arias and Alan Johnson. *The Great Commission: biblical models for evangelism*. (Abingdon Press, 1992).

⁴ Nancy Tatom Ammerman. *Bible believers: Fundamentalists in the modern world*. (Rutgers University Press, 1987), 92-93.

⁵ David Sonenschein. "Sharing the Good News: The Evangelical Tract." *The Journal of American Culture* 5, No. 1 (1982), 107-121.

intended to act as a sort of spiritual insurance policy. In pursuing the fulfillment of the Great Commission, the methods of the preacher are important only so much as they facilitate the transmission of the Gospel message.⁶ While a shocking experience with a vociferous missionary can be a useful tool in helping someone realize their state of sin, an interaction with a street preacher, however confrontational, might only carry the message only as long as it takes the passerby to walk twenty steps.⁷ The distribution of tracts prolongs the encounter and, if engaged, provides an ongoing opportunity for salvation through the realization and rejection of sin.⁸

Gospel tracts occupy a particular and unique space between scripture and material ephemera. Small and inconspicuous, contemporary Gospel tracts are as ubiquitous as they are unassuming. They are encountered seemingly everywhere, in places that are simultaneously obvious and unique. They are discovered on ATM machines, in the magazines at dental clinics, and on park benches. They are handed out at festivals, on boardwalks and at ball games. They are spotted at rest stops, in national parks, bus stations, public restrooms and in roadside diners. Throughout the US, in urban centers and rural villages, printed exhortations of salvation from sin paper the scenery.

⁶ Peter Stuart. "The ministry of preaching." *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 15, No. 1 (2007), 21.

⁷ D.F. Gordon. The Jesus people: An identity synthesis. *Urban Life and Culture*, 3(2). (1974), 159-178.

⁸ Pamphleting in general is an important part of many messaging campaigns including both political and marketing endeavors. Effective outreach combines direct appeals with the distribution of literature so as to vary the style, if not the content, of the message, thus compounding the longevity of the information. Wodak, Ruth, ed. *Language, power and ideology: Studies in political discourse*. Vol. 7. (John Benjamins Publishing, 1989).

And yet, despite their mundane ubiquity, these tracts are both representations of Christian scripture, and religious objects in their own right. Certainly as printed pamphlets they are meant to be read and to be treated as texts. But they are also meant to be shared, passed around, and read aloud.⁹ On a whole, they tend to be unique, attractive and visually appealing; brightly colored, and glossy or evocative of a variety of artistic aesthetics. Their appearance, illustration and narrative form captivate the reader's attention and, as long as the tract remains intact, prolong the opportunity for conversion. Many mimic other ordinary objects and appear, at first glance, to be money, coupons, or advertisements. One tract is made to resemble a worn out wallet, stuffed with cash. Its contents probe the virtue and honesty of the recipient with a morality quiz which it calls a "Personality Analysis." "Would you return the wallet?" it asks. "What about the money? Do you consider yourself saved?"¹⁰

For obvious reasons, tracts are most often found in places where humanity bustles. The greater number of people, the greater the potential pool of winnable converts. Most Gospel tracts offer of the highest prize imaginable for evangelicals: salvation through acceptance of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.¹¹ In this capacity, tracts function as transmitters of spiritual information by which the Gospel can

⁹ Mid-nineteenth century tracts were distributed primarily to children with the hope that they would recite and perform the contents with their families on Sunday evenings. David Morgan. *The sacred gaze: Religious visual culture in theory and practice*. (University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁰ This particular tract was found lying in a gutter. The colleague who retrieved the tract for me said that it looked to be placed there intentionally. She really did think it was an actual wallet. *The Wallet*. Living Waters Ministry. <http://store.livingwaters.com/Gospel-tracts/money/the-wallet.html>

¹¹ Sonenschein. "Sharing the Good News: The Evangelical Tract," 107-121, 108.

be conveyed to as wide and diverse a potential audience as possible. However, though printed by societies and publishing houses—also distributed by members of individual churches—the effectiveness of tracts does not merely rest with the distributors alone. As objects, frequently discarded in the very public places they were initially viewed, tracts also take on their own agency via a network of interactions between the recipient, the distributor and God. This agency allows the tract to retain the potential for acceptance and conversion with each encounter between the tract and subsequent viewers.¹²

This research is at its heart an exploration of evangelical identity. It is about the theoretical underpinnings which motivate tract missionaries to engage in work which more often than not feels thankless, discouraging and tedious; much printed literature and online discourse is devoted to the alienation generated through witnessing. It is about how missionaries see themselves when they distribute tracts and how their actions build them into better Christians. As such, this project is not so much about the recipient of the tract beyond their spiritual disposition which necessitates outreach, but rather about the intentions and motivations of the tract distributor. This is because there is disagreement, both among mainstream denominations and evangelical groups, over whether or not tract distribution is an effective or even worthwhile outreach activity. Detractors often point to the lack of hard evidence of widespread and prolonged conversion, especially given the oftentimes confrontational nature of both street preaching and the contents of tract literature. Tract evangelists and publishers take this criticism in stride. Of course from the

¹² Jane Bennett. *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. (Duke University Press, 2009).

perspective of the missionary, it's always good and exciting if someone can realize their transgressions through their activities. However, there is somewhat of a realist attitude towards the activity; it must be understood that secular culture and sin hold such sway over humanity that even if conversion numbers could be quantifiable, they wouldn't be verifiable. This is the approach Ray Comfort takes towards the activity. He asks how one demonstrably proves a spiritual change has truly taken over an individual.¹³ How can one be sure that the subject is telling the truth? How does one take into account backsliding? If someone reverts to a life of sin five, ten or even twenty years down the line, can their conversion still be counted? If the truth of one's salvation can only be known to the individual and God, then a successful conversion as point of data can at best only point to a denominational affiliation. Within this framework, anything else is meaningless.

It's difficult to quantify the number of tract ministries for several reasons. This is partially due to the fact that there is often significant overlap between the publication of tracts themselves and other forms of Christian literature including apologia, Bibles, magazines, inspirational fiction, etc. Many ministries, particularly the larger institutions, also increasingly distribute a whole host of alternative media options such as DVDs, apparel and streaming services. An additional reason for the wide array of varying sized ministries is that the necessary materials for tract evangelism are exceedingly easy to procure; indeed, they can often be designed and printed by small or mid-sized independent churches, or even by individual missionaries. Most tracts include space indicating the publication ministry, or the distributing church. One all-text tract, detailing

¹³ Ray Comfort. *The Blue Book on Evangelism*. (Living Waters, 2008).

Jesus' encounter with the scribes in Matthew 7 and Luke 20 merely provided the names of a private couple and included their local phone number and an email address registered with Yahoo. Another, entitled "The Big Question" and found at a gas station pump, only provided as contact information the name Trumpet Graphics and a city—Costa Mesa. Subsequent searching turned up neither a ministry, a business, nor a church.

Because tracts are so easy to manufacture, there is a great variety of competing materials from an array of different organizations. This includes materials published by more structurally organized religious groups commonly associated with the distribution of literature such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Latter Day Saints. The outreach and educational materials associated with mainstream denominations such as Roman Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans and Presbyterians could also be considered a competing type of messaging ephemera. Regardless of denominational affiliation, the vast majority of tracts encountered, especially those presented as "Gospel tracts," and the most popular ministries with an online presence, can generally be identified as evangelical in outlook. This project focuses primarily on these evangelical tracts.

A comprehensive study of the distribution of these tracts would encompass countless publishing institutions spanning a wide array of denominations and many different languages. As mentioned, some of these are major, large scale industrial operations and some are based out of individual homes. To cover each institution with even a cursory degree of depth would be a herculean task. This further raises the question of what type of literature constitutes a "tract?" Is it any type of religious literature, and if so, does an informational pamphlet in the lobby of a Methodist Church or a Reform

Synagogue count? What about the printed material of other religious traditions? Is ISKCON literature of this nature or the pamphlets distributed by LDS? What about Catholic prayer cards?

Perhaps the differentiating element is intent. Are the ephemera primarily informational, personal or transformational? An informational tract's aim is to inform or educate the reader about specifics of the denomination or their doctrine. The 223-page Jehovah's Witnesses booklet *What Does the Bible Really Teach* lays out in great detail the primary beliefs, teachings, interpretations and worldviews of the organization including outlooks on holiday celebrations, family members of different faiths and blood transfusions.¹⁴ While it's possible that someone might feel drawn to the message, the tone of the text is that of an in-depth articulation of religious precepts. A similar point can be made for Hare Krishna literature. While there is outreach intent, most people who join the ISKCON movement don't do so from an encounter with the group's printed material.¹⁵ The literature may detail belief or offer interpretation on the Bhagavad Gita but transformation occurs more often through direct contact with local communities and through community events. Similarly, the purpose of a Catholic or Orthodox prayer card is devotional in nature and circulated primarily among those who already identify as Catholic or Orthodox Christians.

¹⁴ *What does the Bible Really Teach?*. (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2005).

¹⁵ E. Burke Rochford. "Recruitment strategies, ideology, and organization in the Hare Krishna movement." *Social Problems* 29, No. 4 (1982), 399-410.

An evangelical gospel tract, by contrast, is printed with the direct intent of generating a conversion experience, either immediately or at some point in the future. Many testimonials which reference tracts in their conversion narrative where an immediate conversion did not take place, still credited the tract with helping them find salvation at a later date. A Gospel tract is rarely denominationally informational. In fact, most ministries and publishers claim the mantle of non-denominational. From this perspective, a tract is not meant to inform the reader about denominationalism, except in those cases where it is condemned. Rather, it is supposed to deliver a core religious message in the most efficacious way possible. It's even better if it's attractive, interactive or effectively eye-catching. For example, the aforementioned Living Waters "Wallet" tract is meant to realistically mimic the look of a lost wallet with money peeking out from the top or, if it is half open, with an array of fake but realistic-looking credit cards. Yet when fully opened, it retains the reader's attention by providing an interactive morality quiz before providing a paragraph on the folly of sin. Other Gospel tracts provide detailed narrative arcs and contemporary parables. This is a specialty of Chick Publications who weaves their message into highly detailed comic books. One tract from an independent publisher features the face of Jesus with his eyes closed. However, when caught in the correct light, his eyes appear to open. It reads, "Look into Jesus' Eyes you will see they are closed. But as you continue to look you will see His eyes opening and looking back into your eyes."

On some level, all tracts are interactive as the very act of reading implies an interaction between the reader, the text and the author. Gospel tracts, however, also add

additional intermediaries of interaction. Because these tracts so often carry passages and images of scripture, and because there is a greater hope for conversion, it's important to recognize that God is also part of the conversation between the reader and the text. That is why these tracts can be considered as transformational. It is the presence of God, or God as the Holy Spirit, which offers the hope of a greater possibility of conversion, and thus transforms the reader from one, unsaved person, into a new, born-again person. The tracts with the greater ability to catch and hold the attention of the reader necessarily carry the greater potential for conversion.

Much of this project focuses on two large publishers: Chick Publications and Living Waters Ministries; these publishers produce some of the most engaging and visually interesting literature. It is difficult to ignore the allure of some of the more glossy or creative tracts. There is a vast aesthetic difference between the text heavy, newsprint style of the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite and an eye-catching Million Dollar Bill from Living Waters, particularly if the latter is placed to look like found money. Likewise, it's nearly impossible to pass over a uniquely shaped and easily recognizable Chick Tract with its comic narrative, voyeuristic depictions of damnation and dark humor. For a variety of reasons, these publication ministries have generated a greater degree of awareness among the general public. Living Waters Ministries in particular functions as more than just a tract publisher. It is a multifaceted evangelical media institution which operates in a variety of media including: webcasts, radio shows, home video, correspondence education and film. Living Waters often works in conjunction with Christian film star Kirk Cameron of *Growing Pains* fame. As such, an expansion of

outreach media fits neatly with the justification for literature distribution. Tracts demand an interaction with the recipient—the more prolonged, the better. Yet a longer engagement also requires keeping the interest and attention of the reader. Chick’s art and narratives and Living Waters’ pop-culture savvy do just that.

Chick Tract’s distinctive artistic style and harshly worded, politically reactionary language has earned it a degree of awareness in both non-evangelical communities and in some scholarly circles. The organization generates semi-regular attention in local and alternative press outlets, though usually in a negative or at least bemused light. Most recently, the alt media publication A.V. Club referred to Chick’s work as “truly nutty...scare comics”¹⁶ and the Houston Press called them “Awful but thoroughly entertaining.”¹⁷ Chick Tracts also function as both a boogeyman and a punching bag for many secular movement blogs and publications. Patheos Blog has written several stories on the ministry’s anti-evolution stance as well as its anti-Catholic rhetoric and Chick Tract parodies are not uncommon. There is even an entire online depository dedicated to fake Chick Tracts called the “Jack Chick Parody Archive.” Most recently, online-based parodies have arisen which have fused the worldview of Jack Chick and the rhetoric of Donald Trump by creating the aptly named spoof, Trump Tracts.¹⁸

If a publishing society can be said to be “media savvy,” then Living Waters fits the term quite well. The product of New Zealand expatriate and current Orange County-

¹⁶ Joe Blevins. “Exploring the truly nutty Christian scare comics of Jack Chick.” *A.V.Club*. July 11, 2016.

¹⁷ Chris Lane. “Six Insane and Awful but Thoroughly Entertaining Jack Chick Religious Tracts.” *The Houston Press*. July 27 2016.

¹⁸ Ethan Persoff. “Trump Tracts.” <http://www.ep.tc/trump-tracts/>

based evangelist Ray Comfort, Living Waters began as a small, Gospel-oriented newspaper in the 1970s. Over the course of the next few decades, Comfort and his staff developed the organization into a major publishing house which specializes in unique, attractive and interactive Gospel tracts. However, the publishing arm of Living Waters extends far beyond paper tracts and includes a great number of books, documentaries, webcasts, podcasts, and YouTube videos. It even includes a correspondence/online training program aimed at readying new converts and would-be missionaries to the task of evangelism. Also worth noting is the ties Living Waters Ministries keeps with Christian mainstream crossover film star, Kirk Cameron. Cameron, known for his starring role in the Eighties sitcom *Growing Pains*, as well as his starring role in the popular *Left Behind* Christian film franchise, regularly contributes to the ministry's publications and videos, occasionally even participating in filmed sessions of open-air preaching. This association, in addition to the sheer volume of material produced, establishes Living Waters as a significant outlet for both traditional forms of Christian media, as well as online and new media.

Themes

All this attention to the production of attractive, visually complex tract literature naturally raises the question of efficacy. Do tracts actually aid in the conversion of new Christians? The answer to that question is murky. Quantitative data demonstrating tract efficacy based on vocal affirmation is not only difficult to ascertain; it's also a distraction from the overall purpose of evangelism itself. Even Chick Publications, which goes to great lengths to publish stories detailing immediate conversion experiences, provides no

data beyond these semi-anonymous testimonials. Claims of efficacy are thus most useful as a narrative device highlighting the institutional identity of Chick Publications. In fact, Chick testimonials often follow a plot trajectory embedded within the narratives of many tracts themselves. Someone lives in sin, picks up or is handed a tract, and is saved. The primarily narrative-related purpose when it comes to claims of efficacy, as opposed to demonstrable data, is evident in the publisher's slogan. "Chick Tracts get read," it states. They do not convert.

To reiterate, there is always the hope that tract missionary work will bear out positive results. Yet in the absence of a trustworthy way to verify results, questions of efficacy become moot because the theological purpose itself is sufficient, regardless of any quantitative measures of success. The online version of the Living Waters *Evidence Bible* explains this approach:

As you witness, divorce yourself from the thought that you are merely seeking 'decisions for Christ.' What we should be seeking is repentance within the heart... The modern concept of success in evangelism is to relate how many people were 'saved' (that is, how many prayed the 'sinner's prayer'). This produces a 'no decisions, no success' mentality. This shouldn't be, because Christians who seek decisions in evangelism become discouraged after a time of witnessing if 'no one came to the Lord.'¹⁹

However, the action of distribution is something that the individual can quantify. Based on the amount of tracts they have left, they can say following a day of missionary work, "I reached out to 500 souls today." A missionary has no direct control over the current or future state of anyone's spiritual disposition other than their own. To dwell on such questions serves only as a distraction; it can become a deterrent to further activity. Again,

¹⁹ Ray Comfort and Kirk Cameron. *Evidence Bible*. (Bridge Logos 2003). 1.

in the words of Living Waters, “[i]f His hand is not on the person you are leading in a prayer of committal, if there is not God-given repentance, then you will end up with a stillbirth on your hands, and that is nothing to rejoice about. We should measure our success by how faithfully we sowed the seed. In that way, we will avoid becoming discouraged.”²⁰

During the active work of distribution especially, it really doesn’t matter to missionaries why someone is unsaved, or what their own spiritual beliefs might be. It doesn’t matter what their circumstances are or why an unsaved person is in whatever immediate distribution locations they find themselves in. What matters is that they are not (yet) saved, and therefore must be approached, made aware of the gospel and often handed literature. It is, in essence, a religious task which must be done in fulfillment of the Great Commission, regardless of the often negative reactions of the recipient. For tract missionaries, spreading the gospel is an essential calling. Whether or not the gospel takes hold is up to the recipient, and God. Converting a recipient is not what makes the missionary a successful follower of Christ. Helping to facilitate an opportunity for conversion is where the motivational impetus rests.

Ultimately, those who are targeted for such public evangelism are seen as part of a separate existence—a world which is marked by sin and impurity. Such sentiments are fairly common in evangelical circles and are often seen displayed as logos on automobiles and T-shirts as the acronym NOTW, meaning “Not of this world.”²¹ Made

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Christian retailing, particularly among white evangelicals, functions as a key aspect of religious identity and culture in America. It both intersects with traditionally

popular by the Christian apparel company Mardel, NOTW refers to a number of biblical verses where Jesus, and in some cases Paul, draw distinctions between the sacred values of Jesus' teachings and the profane motivations of the secular world. John 18:36 is indicative of this demarcation. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world...my kingdom is from another place." Not only is He separate from the world, in other passages he urges his followers to follow suit. John 15:19 reads, "[A]s it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." A major implication of these verses is the establishment of the idea that the followers of Christ, and Christ himself, operate spiritually on a plane of existence different from the ordinary. This idea is reflected in tract literature. One evangelism handbook reads "... [W]hen a person becomes a Christian, he moves out of one law into another. The law of life in Christ Jesus supersedes the law of sin and death. The Christian lives in a higher plane."²²

Another implication is that this world, "the World" warned about in the scripture, is both corrosive and infectious. Its temptations and non-Godly ideologies pose a

held business values, and allows the consumer to articulate their faith in manners separate from traditional avenues. For McDannell, the stigma against the commercialization of Christianity is largely a problem for liberal Protestants. With a theological focus on thinking about religion and scriptural meaning, liberal Christians typically eschew the more tangible and pragmatic displays of faith and identity. Conservatives, by contrast, favor a lived theology that centers on performing religious activities and identifying as a Christian. As such, "[m]aking, selling, marketing and purchasing link Christians together. Religious objects, unlike ideas can be given as gifts to cement friendships." Colleen McDannell. *Material Christianity*. Yale University Press. (New Haven CT, 1995), 223.

²² Rooted in Romans 8:2. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death." Kirk Cameron, Ray Comfort. *The School of Biblical Evangelism: 101 Lessons*. (Bridge Logos, FL, 2004).

deleterious threat to the souls of humanity and this includes the unsaved friends and family members of the missionary. Moreover, the missionaries themselves are not immune to the effects of the secular world warned about in 1 Peter 20:11-12 which states, “I warn you as temporary residents and foreigners to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against your very souls.” Keeping this in mind, much literature similarly warns against the possibility of “backsliding” and some offers tips on how to witness to “certain groups” lest one become overwhelmed by their argument.²³ Regardless, the key understanding is that within the theology of tract evangelism, there is a spiritual barrier which separates the missionary from the world. Yet this barrier, being social, is porous and to transverse it is to invite the possibility for spiritual and moral taint.

Spiritual and social borders delineate the social and religious identities of the missionaries and their recipients. Ostensibly, to avoid backsliding, it would behoove them to avoid contact with the world altogether, and certainly many world-rejecting Christian groups have chosen that route to one degree or another. However, for many the withdrawal from the world, no matter how appealing, presents a moral conundrum in that it prevents the individual fulfillment of the Great Commission. If a Christian withdraws, they cannot spread the gospel, and through their inaction they risk the damnation of countless people with whom they would otherwise have interacted. Indeed, for those who preach this Gospel of salvation, missionary work is the ultimate act of love, the most necessary expression of agape. Evangelist Ray Comfort likens withholding the gospel

²³ Ray Comfort. *The Blue Book of Evangelism*. “Witnessing to Certain Groups.” (Living Waters Publications. CA, 2008), 66 – 87.

from those in sin to withholding food from a starving child, saying “A child is lying on the ground in front of you starving to death. You have food in your hand. You know God wants you to share the food with the dying child. So the question is ‘Why can’t I have a good relationship with God, without sharing the food?’ You have to answer the question for yourself.”²⁴ If you have access to life-saving sustenance, refusing to share it is a grave moral failing. Thus refusing to share the gospel is not an acceptable option. In fact, it is an ethical atrocity for those who have any empathy for the unsaved.

Fear—born out of the possibility of backsliding, general social anxiety and a desire to avoid conflict with loved ones and strangers—is one of the central obstacles facing both new and seasoned missionaries. Attempting to open a religious conversation with a potentially hostile audience can be daunting and often prevents missionaries from taking the necessary steps towards their evangelical work. The key to overcoming this dilemma is to use the tract as a bridge of discourse by which the gospel message and the power thereof might be transmitted. It is an easily accessible action available to nearly anyone who wishes to begin a project of witnessing. Moreover, tract distribution need not be the end as the distributor becomes more confident in their skills. Even Ray Comfort admits that the anxiety generated from evangelical work can be daunting and is especially difficult for new missionaries. Though he admits that the best thing a new Christian can do is begin witnessing immediately, he recommends tracts as an exceptionally efficacious first steps. “Right from the moment of my conversion I was carrying tracts. If that’s

²⁴ Ibid., 12.

considered baby steps, I'm still taking them."²⁵ While missionaries who gain confidence and skill through ongoing work may begin other avenues of evangelism such as direct and open air preaching, Gospel tracts remain an essential, even foundational part of their spiritual arsenal.

Tracts are a foundational element of experienced evangelism as well as a useful entry point for newly saved Christians. They are also helpful in encouraging evangelism among busy, lapsed or otherwise disengaged members of evangelical communities. Many churches and community centers have literature racks in the lobby containing free tracts, which encourages attendees to take and distribute them. Because of job and family constraints, or even because of the aforementioned social anxiety, many people might be unwilling to take on a public project of evangelism. However, during lunch following church, they can leave a tract for the server with their tip. Or they can place one in the restaurant's bathroom stall. Or they can leave one at the gas pump on the way to work on Monday morning. It is no accident that so much tract society literature, contemporary or otherwise, speaks to the ease of distribution. It impresses upon people the basic, most accessible way to wholly fulfill the exhortation of the Great Commission. It fulfills a core, critical commandment with comparatively minimal effort. One need not be an ordained minister or even professional missionary. They don't even need to have much free time. All they need to do is leave a small paper pamphlet in a public space.

While tract evangelism is about building and performing a Christian identity, it is also about defining the identity of those who are not counted among the saved and

²⁵ Ibid., 27.

delineating social borders between those two groups. Tract literature draws an explicit distinction between religious and secular spheres and the testimonials of missionaries reinforce these ideas. If the non-sacred world, the world without Christ, is tainted by sin, and that sin poses a threat to those in Christ, then it makes sense that the world is often viewed with a sense of wary apprehension and distrust. It is not just that the pleasures of the world present Christians with a distraction from sacred work and behavior. It's that succumbing to those temptations actively threatens the soul with death and eternal torment in hell. The world is not just a place absent Christ; it is the domain of the devil as highlighted in John 5:19 which says, "[w]e know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one." Therefore, to reside in the world and to do the sacred work of God who resides outside the world is to threaten the power structure of Satan and his agents who together maintain control over the profane plane.

Given that perspective, it is not difficult to imagine that many tract ministries and missionaries view the secular world not only in a negative light but also through a conspiratorial lens. The work of both being a missionary and maintaining a state of forgiveness is under constant attack from Satan and his demons. These attacks manifest in the form of temptation, laziness, pride, fear or really any emotional state which might encourage either personal backsliding or neglect in evangelical duties. However, these attacks operate on a macro level as well. If the world itself is Satan's domain, it stands to reason that his power and influence reaches deep into the very foundations of societal fabric and infrastructure. A missionary must not only guard against personal temptations

and failings; they must also stand in defiance of the entire social apparatus which they view as indicative of the world, and therefore in opposition to Christ and his works.

This often manifests in the social worldviews and personal politics of the individual missionary. However, through their literature itself, some publications are especially practiced in establishing narratives and identities defined in hostile opposition to the mainstream social order. Chick Publications is a master of this and much of the scholarly research done on this ministry has focused on the ministry's social politics and attacks on most non-evangelical religious groups. Chick's most obvious and frequent target is the Catholic Church whom the ministry views as the Devil's chief architect for mischief, calumny and general evil within the world. In the Chick Tract Universe, the Catholic Church and the Jesuit order in particular is the chief architect of all manner of attacks on "true" Christianity and is also the catalyzing motivational force between many other religions and institutions deemed agents of the Antichrist. To be sure, other religious traditions are still considered counter to an authentic and acceptable Christianity and, as such, potentially dangerous spiritual pitfalls. However, they are more rarely portrayed as a malevolent agency in themselves and when they are portrayed as such, they are often connected through narrative and interpretation to Catholicism. Further, this does not mean that other non-evangelical Protestant denominations are given a pass, quite the contrary. However, many of these other traditions within the Chick narrative universe are often influenced or even directed by the Catholic Church. Considering that among most American Protestants there has generally been a diminished animosity between

Catholic and Protestant groups, it is nonetheless an important and unique distinguishing feature of Chick Publications.

Chapters

Chapter one serves two purposes. First, it establishes a historical background for the discussion of American tract evangelism. In particular, this chapter examines those historic forces which influenced evangelical identity over the course of the nineteenth century. By focusing primarily on the publications and methods of the American Tract Society and some smaller publication ministries, this chapter explores the emergence of a textual community unique to the period. The concept of a textual community, first applied to religious society under the medieval Catholic Church, refers to the socially agreed-upon vesting of authority in a scriptural or otherwise important text. It also implies a cultural identification with the text which ensures that members within the community need not be overly versed in its contents. Rather, they need only recognize the text as the cornerstone of cultural, and sometimes political, authority. As such, part of this chapter examines the delineation period publishers established between an acceptable evangelical approach to scripture, and those approaches deemed outside the acceptable mainstream, namely; Catholicism and the Latter Day Saints.

The second explored aspect of a textual community details the shift from a text-only approach to tracts and printed religious materials to the inclusion of images and illustration. In her book *Word in the World*, Candy Gunther Brown discusses the influence of mass publication on the development of an evangelical identity in America.

Specifically, she explores the intentional actions of publishers who sought to both draw a social distinction from the world and utilize their publications to reach into secular society. While identity was reinforced through traditional narratives which preached a distinction between the sacred and profane world, new converts were sought out through marketing techniques which included gilded bindings as well as pictures. Therefore, this first chapter argues that pictures served a greater purpose than merely attracting readers, though that was certainly applicable and related. Pictures also changed the structural dynamics of the textual community, allowing illustration and image to function—within the context of the printed literature—as textually and religiously authoritative. Not only did these images make the text more accessible, they also helped to reinforce religious and social assumptions of those groups beyond the established border—a practice continued under later, more contemporary tract ministries.

Chapter two continues these themes but applies them to the contemporary and popular Chick Tracts of Chick Ministries. Well known in religious and secular circles, Chick Tracts are famous for their use of comic imagery and extensive narratives. They are also known for the highly polemic and often pejorative depictions of people and groups who don't fall within the ministry's somewhat narrow confines of acceptability. In many ways, Chick Tracts represent a throwback to the polemic publications of the nineteenth century, specifically relating to their treatment of Catholicism and the Vatican. In the Chick universe, the Catholic Church functions as the primary arm of the Devil's machinations on earth. Not only will the rule of the Antichrist and the one world government of the tribulation issue from this institution; they are also painted as

responsible for all manner of enemies against authentic Christianity including Islam, Masonry and ecumenicalism.

The metanarrative running through these tracts is decidedly conspiratorial and appears to draw from anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories. In Chick's world, the Jesuit order, who represent the real power behind the Holy See, are the primary movers and shakers of the Devil's kingdom. They function as a secretive cabal whose primary purpose is to erode an authentic, King James-rooted Protestantism and replace it with the toothless ecumenicalism of interfaith alliances. Jesuits are often connected via narrative to other perceived social ills such as LGBT rights and evolution as those and other aspects of secularity accelerate a global moral decay which makes society ripe for the picking by either the Church, or the Devil himself. While this might seem counterintuitive considering the similar conservative positions the Catholic Church takes on many of these same issues, Chick Ministries would likely consider the public anti-gay face of Catholicism to be a smokescreen meant to lull Catholics and mainline Protestants into the illusion of authentic piety. In Chick narrative space, all of this emerges from a centuries-old plot to influence secular and religious powers into corrupting the Bible and subjugating "true" Christians.

It is also difficult to escape that fact that the anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories which form the master narrative of Chick Tract cosmology also resonate with and parallel similar anti-Semitic themes and tropes. It is notable to recall that what Chick Tracts condemn is the establishment of a shadow government or cabal which operates the levers of global power and domination, particularly as applies to religious multiculturalism and

secular media. As such, it's interesting to note that those conspiracies about Jesuit calumny do share some roots with anti-Semitic canards. Indeed, the formation of the Society of Jesus itself was often held as suspect by Inquisition authorities as being a safe harbor to Jews and *conversos* and many of these beliefs would eventually make their way into similar narratives. While there's little evidence that the Chick ministry is consciously drawing from 16th century, anti-Jewish beliefs—the citation they use is taken from a Free Church of Scotland minister—it does speak to the power of such narratives.

Chapter three takes the dissertation into the core theoretical principles which drive tract evangelism, as well as those analyses by which these activities might be evaluated. The overarching themes of this chapter are the use of conceptions of dirt and purity²⁶ in the construction of social boundaries²⁷ between the saved community from whom missionaries emerge, and the unsaved community indicative of secular, mainstream contemporary society. The chapter begins by exploring the anxiety felt by all missionaries, experienced and novice, when preparing to go into the spiritually hostile secular world armed with the gospel and its representations. In light of this anxiety, tract evangelism is a helpful tool in generating the motivation necessary to engage in the physical fulfillment of the Great Commission. Within the practice of active evangelism, there is a spectrum of activity which can range from the risky, high energy, experienced practice of “street preaching” to the relatively low-risk practice of handing out tracts. In this sense, tract distribution, particularly among both newly converted and lapsed would—

²⁶ Mary Douglas. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. (Routledge, 2003).

²⁷ Emile Durkheim and Robert A. Nisbet. *The elementary forms of the religious life*. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976).

be missionaries, functions as a low-level activism, an evangelical entry point through which one might begin missionary service.

This chapter also explores the cultural motivations which underlie such anxieties. It seeks to answer the question, “what is it specifically which makes even experienced evangelists anxious?” It’s worth noting that in answering this question, many missionaries put it in theological or religious terms. They may refer to the anxiety as having a demonic origin, or they may refer a lack of motivation as a temptation to backslide. One notable missionary refers to the feelings of anxiety and laxity as “memos from Satanic Secretaries.”²⁸ The implication is that if they do not engage in their outreach activities, they run the risk of backsliding back into a life of complacency and sin. There is an inherent tension here. In order for an ideal Christian to remain in the Light of God, they must venture into the world of humanity, a world which is increasingly under the control and influence of the Devil.

The anxiety then is an outgrowth of the knowledge that they must transgress dangerous social boundaries as part of their commitment to authentic, apostolic Christian living. Describing it in theological, religious and mythological terms, they increase the rigidity of the social border that separates them from the secular world. However, by transversing this border, they reinforce their own sense of separation from mainstream society.²⁹ One manner in which they do this is by conceiving of these two worlds in the

²⁸ Ray Comfort and Kirk Cameron. *Thanks A Million! An adventure in biblical evangelism*. (Bridge-Logos. FL. 2006), 30.

²⁹ Lorne L. Dawson. *Comprehending cults: The sociology of new religious movements*. (Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 2006), 58.

language of purity and impurity, whereby the saved community to which they belong is pure and the unsaved community from which they came is impure. These ideas are expressed in places where tracts are distributed or where evangelists perform. Some of the more common spaces chosen for tract distribution are public restrooms, rest stops, gas station pumps, and the rims of garbage cans. Some testimonials even refer to tracts being found in gutters, bus stations, ditches and grease spots. When not seeking out physically dirty locations, many missionaries will choose areas where large groups of people gather which also frequently happen to be places indicative of perceived spiritual uncleanness such as rock concerts, festivals, public squares, tourist destinations and casinos.

Evangelists seek these places because they are physical representations of the gulf between the missionaries' position of spiritual purity, and the impure existence they led before becoming born again. The source of their anxiety stems from the fear of returning to an unsaved state and it is compounded by the fact that maintaining their salvation requires they engage in contact with an unsaved world. A tract acts as an intermediary which helps to facilitate that requirement. Imbued with the gospel, and thus the power of the Holy Spirit, the tract behaves as an object which brings a bolt of purity to an impure world. As such, the tract also carries with it a degree of agency, or at least acts as a conduit for the transformative power of God. God's spirit works through the tract, allowing the missionary to reach out to those mired in sin while simultaneously protecting themselves from the spiritual corrosion of the world. In other words, it establishes a material network through which a line of communication is opened between

the missionary, the recipient, and the Lord while simultaneously reifying the social borders which separated the missionary from the world.

The fourth chapter utilizes tract culture to re-examine the strong relationship between the American business world and fundamentalist Christian communities. Building on the recent work of Timothy Gloege which examines brand development in nineteenth century Christian movements, this chapter applies an analysis to the popular “Million Dollar” Gospel tracts from Living Waters Publications. It focuses on the publisher's self-description as workers in the spiritual employ of God. Doctrine, money and labor serve as the principle themes which support the philosophical and ideological foundations of Living Waters because it taps into a larger cultural familiarity with the images and ideas of finance, economy and capital. Such usage reinforces a key aspect of the identity of the ministry and its missionaries. By using images and concepts so ubiquitously “of this world,” the ministry can essentially claim that it by contrast is not. This fulfills the biblical commandment that Christians remain in, but not of, the world. Through the use of money imagery, the seeming opposition between the secular position of money and the sacredness of spirit becomes inverted. Money, perhaps one of the greatest representations of worldliness and sin, is reappropriated for spiritual use and thus becomes a marker for transition from one social world into another. Moreover, the chapter argues that tracts function as advertisements which offer salvation as a product. As such, those who distribute them take on the role of a brand representative. Tract evangelism then functions as an activity which engenders brand identity and loyalty among the already converted.

The fifth and final chapter of this dissertation attempts to situate these diverse strands of identity within a larger socio-political framework. By revisiting previous articulations of identity, the concluding chapter argues that the core themes in Gospel tract literature and culture largely reflect a vision of society that is white, male, Christian and marked by feelings of paranoia and cultural alienation. Tract literature touches on these themes by focusing heavily on biblical passages which draw strict distinctions between sacred and secular worlds, and also by using the values of secular society as markers of sin and social declension. These attitudes further manifest in the witnessing events of some missionaries which often tend to be aggressive and confrontational, particularly when performed by men. The chapter argues that such displays and the literature which they are based on are reflective of a disposition of spiritual privilege. Intersecting with whiteness, masculinity and Christian cultural hegemony, this spiritual privilege imparts a cultural ease with accepting conservative evangelical principles to those already familiar with them. This in turn hinders the development of empathy with those considered outside what is deemed acceptable, while simultaneously marking such groups and individuals as ideal for religious outreach. It is those two forces working in concert with one another which, for secular and non-evangelical people, marks so many witnessing events with feelings of aggression, presumption or unease.

Concluding Thoughts

A common question which requires addressing is simply, “do they work?” Are tracts effective in leading genuine converts to salvation? Frankly, there is a wide expanse of opinion on this. While many individual missionaries swear by their use, contemporary

clergy and outreach organizations are skeptical. Some even go so far as to say that tract distribution is contrary to effective evangelism and can even produce the opposite of the intended effect by pushing away potential new Christians. While it may, in some rare cases, result in an immediate convert, the best one can usually hope for is that the tract may be used as a conversation starter as direct evangelism carries a greater social weight than tract evangelism. Moreover, if a tract is particularly provocative or a missionary is exceptionally aggressive or confrontational, the entire encounter may be for naught.³⁰

It is interesting to note how the publishing societies themselves respond to the question. For instance, Chick Publications leads their website with a banner stating “Chick Tracts GET READ.” This sentiment is repeated on the downloadable catalog: “Soul-winners worldwide know that CHICK TRACTS GET READ! The cartoons grab the reader's attention and present the Gospel. Over 100 different titles are available and each one has its own gripping story, ending in an invitation to receive Christ. Chick tracts can help you reach more people!”³¹ It doesn't state that Chick Tracts save or that Chick Tracts convert, but rather, that Chick Tracts “get read.” Crossway, the current owner of the historical American Tract Society, expresses a similar sentiment in their mission statement: “The purpose of Crossway has been, from its founding as a not-for-profit ministry in 1938, to publish Gospel-centered, Bible-centered content that will honor our Savior and serve his Church. We...exist solely for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel

³⁰ Ruth Moon, Compiler. “Should we still give out tracts.” *Christianity Today*. July 18, 2011.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/august/shouldwestillgiveouttracts.html>

³¹ “Cartoon Gospel Tracts.” <http://www.chick.com/catalog/tractlist.asp>

through publishing and other means in order, by God's grace..."³² The emphasis in both instances is on the religious act of spreading the gospel. Conversions are an ancillary, even if welcome, byproduct. The tract functions as an open door or an invitation. It's a tool for outreach with the potential for conversion. It's an advertisement. The tract does have to power to be noticed, but conversion is up to the individual, and the Holy Spirit.

Ray Comfort, the CEO of Living Waters, is more direct in his response to such queries. Essentially, he views the entire discussion of whether or not evangelism works as a largely irrelevant aside. In fact, claims made about a successful increase of found souls through evangelism should be taken lightly at best and may not even be accurate.

How do you respond to the demand, 'show me the numbers!' I am always amazed at the results pointed to by modern evangelism. They report how many were saved under their preaching, but how did they get access to the Book of Life? Making a 'decision,' walking an aisle, or raising a hand don't indicate whether someone truly repents and trusts in the Savior. I have no idea how many God may have saved through my planting of the seed. The fact that I have planted the good seed of the Word of God is evangelical 'success.' The rest is up to God...Never be discouraged. Your labor isn't in vain.³³

Winning souls is good and important but the focus is on the identity of the missionary.

Evangelism speaks to their identity more so than that of the recipient. In that theme,

Comfort expresses this hope. "It is our earnest prayer that you leave a different person than when you came, and that you will turn your world upside down for the Kingdom of God."³⁴

³² "About." *Crossway*. (2016) <https://www.crossway.org/about/>

³³ Ray Comfort. *The Blue Book of Evangelism*. "Witnessing to Certain Groups." Living Waters Publications. CA, 2008. 39-40

³⁴ Ibid. 8

Chapter 1

A Picture's Progress:

Images and Textual Communities in Nineteenth Century Gospel Tracts

The book is small, about five by eight inches. It can easily fit in a coat pocket or a hand bag, though it shouldn't, because it is very old. It has a hard cover, bound in black cloth and sturdy paper which long ago began cracking. The cloth is faded, beaten, smudged and stained; the card stock is wearing away along the corners of the cover. A crack runs down the center of the spine; this book has been opened and read on countless occasions. The book's pages have long ago yellowed and in fact are turning gray, though the print and illustrations are still quite clear. Remarkably, the binding, despite the earthy, organic smell of old paper and adhesive, remains intact. One can still feel the indentation of the embossed lettering and even though the wear cuts through faded gold print, the words are still quite visible. They read "Evangelical Family Library, *Pilgrim's Progress*." On the inside cover, handwritten in the flowing script of the book's previous owner, is the name "Bill Grave" and underneath his signature is a date, also in his writing: "July 10. 1808." The writing provokes a quick thrill at the realization that one is holding such an historical item. The text, written by John Bunyan, is a copy of one of the earliest and best known evangelical gospel tracts and it is over 200 years old.

But alas, it would seem that Mr. "Bill Graves" is playing a joke on us, or perhaps was an unscrupulous book seller for the publisher of the Evangelical Family Library series was established in 1825—seventeen years following the handwritten date. The cover page, which strangely does not itself provide a date, informs the reader that it has

been printed by the American Tract Society, one of the first and certainly the most prevalent, and prolific Christian publishers throughout the Nineteenth Century. In fact, they remain in business today, 190 years after their inception, although they have moved their headquarters from Boston to New York and today operate under a different name.³⁵ The narrative *Pilgrim's Progress* itself is much older and was not penned under the auspices of ATS. Published in 1678, it was originally composed by the English writer John Bunyan while he was serving a prison term for heresy. The tale describes a fantastical pilgrimage, taken—in the form of a dream—by the eponymously named protagonist, Christian. The journey, which is written as an allegory, describes through the travails of the main character, the moral obstacles and pitfalls of life which invite sin, as well as the way to salvation.

This particular copy was published as part of the Evangelical Family Library line of ATS literature. I found it in the side room of a used book store in Bristol, Rhode Island where it was sitting on a shelf labeled “historical interest,” and sharing space with Rhode Island census lists and descriptions of Massachusetts water infrastructure between 1900 and 1950. It does not have a specific date. However historian David Morgan dates the series to sometime between 1839-1840.³⁶ It was one of their most popular publications and the copy sitting on my desk is one of 12,000 printed as the fourth volume of the EFL series. So in actuality, the book is 176 years old, which is still pretty impressive. The

³⁵ATS-GNP represents the merger of the American Tract Society and Good News Publishing. Both operate as a division of Crossway, a non-denominational publishing ministry which was formed in 1938. <https://www.crossway.org/about/>

³⁶David Morgan. *Protestants and Pictures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 61.

book may have been passed on, from one owner to another, year to year, surviving civil war and all manner of social upheaval. On the inside are two ancient leaves, perhaps used as a book mark, pressed and dried by the pressure of the pages and the years. The finding of this book, common though it may be, puts one in mind of Hawthorne's discovery of the scarlet letter in the attic of his family home.

Of course, there are so many copies because then, as now, the purpose of the tracts was to read them, and pass them on. There are differences, to be sure. Most preferred, modern tracts are short, glossy and extraordinarily cheap to produce. It is highly unlikely that a contemporary missionary would choose to distribute a near 400-page narrative to passersby on the street. Even a fifteen-page pamphlet would likely be avoided. *Pilgrim's Progress* is still relevant, to be sure. However, its use is more prevalent among those already converted, who are seeking a deeper connection with evangelicalism, or those born into the faith. Moreover, the story itself, which is freely available online, in its totality, as well as a synopsis, makes the mass transmission of the story and others like it unlikely. Nevertheless, *Pilgrim's Progress*, particularly the 1839 American Tract Society version of it, remains a text which has proven itself foundational to the manner in which contemporary Gospel tracts are published, distributed and appreciated.

A unique element of the EFL edition was its extensive use of illustration. The employment of images, while not a new development in tract publication, was used relatively sparingly prior to the beginning of the nineteenth century. While it did increase over the early decades, for most publishers—including ATS—emphasis remained on the

presentation of the Word, rather than visual representation of it. The release of the Evangelical Family Library series served as a turning point. Of the advertised series of limited edition texts, ten of the books were sold with either “steel-plate front pieces and/or engraved illustrations within the text.” Most of the publications, however were part of the 43-volume set, “Standard Volumes.” Of those, only four were published without illustrations. By far, the most lavishly illustrated of the series was Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* which boasted seven engravings, and a front piece. Following the success of the series, ornate and heavily illustrated publications became the norm, not only within the ATS, but with other tract societies as well.³⁷

Pictures are one of the signature elements of many Gospel tracts, but they are not always the primary one. Though images played an important role in developing a new type of literary community, it was not necessarily the concept of the image itself which delineated the social and political boundaries of tractarian societies and their consumers. In conjunction with the visual representations presented in the Gospel tract and pamphlet, messages reinforcing social demarcation and even sectarian dispute were common ingredients in early evangelical publishing.³⁸

In essence, pictures work in tandem with several other core elements: the scripture itself, as well as the need to construct socially identifiable boundaries between religious and non-religious groups. On the most superficial level, the inclusion of images

³⁷*American Tract Society, 15th Annual Report*. Quoted in David Morgan. *Protestants and Pictures*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 61.

³⁸ This remains a theme in much contemporary literature as well, particularly in the case of anti-Mormon polemics. David J. Whittaker. “Early Mormon Pamphleteering.” *Journal of Mormon History* Vol. 4 (1977), 40. See also Jack Chick. *The Visitors* (1984).

ensures that the tract catches the eye of a potential reader. While not universal, the use of at least some imagery is a staple of nearly all tracts and ephemeral publications across denominational and sometimes even religious lines. It is not impossible but generally speaking, one is hard pressed to find a contemporary Gospel tract which does not contain pictures. Even a recent copy of the Gideons New Testament, received at the Orange County Fair, has a new cover depicting a high school locker with Christian stickers on it, no doubt attempting to appeal to young millennials. The Jehovah's Witness tract "What Does the Bible Really Teach" differs from its evangelical counterparts in that it is considerably longer at about 214 pages, and spends a large amount of page space discussing relatively in-depth theological matters. However, the pages are interspersed with many brightly colored, glossy illustrations which depict both biblical stories and modern life.³⁹ Indeed, when discussing Witnessing techniques, missionaries who use tracts in their work almost always prefer products which feature interesting, attractive or thought-provoking images.⁴⁰ Frequently, those tracts which contain no images are homemade tracts, printed, and often written by the missionaries themselves.⁴¹

By and large, however, tracts which feature printed images have since the early nineteenth century made up an ever-increasing share of publishing society libraries. As such, the movement from largely text-based tracts to pamphlets which include images is a major focus of this chapter which will first establish the historical background necessary

³⁹*What does the Bible Really Teach?* (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society 2005)

⁴⁰Kirk Cameron of Living Waters Ministries describes the fundamentals of an ideal Gospel tract. Kirk Cameron, "The Million Dollar Tract" *Living Waters Channel*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3jgzwHVQ00>

⁴¹Author unknown. "Pets are Tasty Meat" (2013). Craig and Inja Lewis. "Jesus and the Hypocrites" (2014).

to discuss contemporary tract evangelism in general. This entails an exploration of the economic forces which prompted the inclusion of images on tract literature, thus changing the nature of scripture (and the textual community) for American evangelicals. Second, it will evaluate said religious behavior in light of the politics of the textual community. The hope is to establish a connection between tracts of the antebellum and post-bellum periods, as well as the early twentieth century, with the significantly different publications encountered today. To draw a connection and correlation between such vastly different time periods is no small task, especially as the transient nature of the tract all but ensures impermanence for the vast majority of the publications. In order for them to work, they must meet the needs of both the contemporary missionary, as well as the recipient. Whatever the likelihood of conversion may be, a missionary is much more liable to see success with a copy of Jack Chick's comically delivered classic *This Was Your Life*, than they would be with even a newly published version of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Yet, this does not mean that there are no similarities, or even that connections are hard to find. Pictures and images are the shared attributes which have contributed to the continued relevance and popularity of Gospel tracts. Their inclusion in the tract society canon, which began in the early to mid 1800s, represented a sea change in religious publishing. The inclusion of images effectively changed the nature of what it meant to interpret scripture within a textual community. Increasingly, pictures not only represented the gospel on the tract; they enabled the gospel to work more efficiently through the tract, and thus reshaped scripture in the image of the gospel tract.

Textual Communities

The concept of a textual community has roots in earlier European Christianity, where, regardless of levels of literacy, ecclesiastical and often secular authority was derived from biblical text and the ability of elite individuals to access the text. It is a shared, socio-religious identity that vests varying degrees of political and social authority in scripture. Of course, what constitutes scripture or what is considered scriptural can change and the political differences within groups are what can establish a new textual community. More significantly, it was not only a method by which social and class hierarchies were justified and supported; it also constituted "...a[n]...intensive use of traditional methods... by groups hitherto dependent on oral participation in religion."⁴² The text being the Bible itself served as axis around which European, Christian society was structured.

Participation in society required a submission to an earthly authority, even when authority was vested in a textual source and transmitted from clergy to laity.⁴³ Therefore, prior to, and even well into the Reformation, a largely nonliterate laity could still be counted among a textual community despite the fact that the knowledge of the text itself was restricted to an exceedingly small number of educated elites. The text, which was considered the ultimate arbiter of authority vested in the learned echelon with powers, was accepted by the laity because the text itself served as the pinnacle of power. An agreed-upon authority, and its interpretive implications, allowed the dispensation of

⁴² Brian Stock. *The Implication of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. (Princeton University Press, 1983), 90.

⁴³ Ibid.

information to move with relative ease among members of the community. Because members agreed on the primacy of the text, discussion within that “superstructure” allowed for disagreement and difference on other matters pertaining to personal interpretation, or individual worship.⁴⁴

The increase of literacy among the general population following the Reformation didn't deconstruct textual communities but instead increased their number and widened the scope of what contributed to textual authority. Early evangelicals in Europe and America viewed their use of scripture in a functionalist manner, meaning that while the biblical text itself may be sacrosanct, the multivariate use and production of text was allowable under circumstances which lead to evangelism.⁴⁵ This functionalist treatment is rooted in their interpretation of John 1:1, *in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*. If God is the Word and the Incarnation of Jesus constituted the Word made Flesh, then it follows that religious texts themselves, as representations of the Word, carried with them at least some degree of sacredness. Yet if the Biblical Word was paramount and unable to be changed, then the representations of it could be adapted so as to bring the incarnation, through the gospel narrative, to as many people as possible. Spreading the Word, and thus fulfilling the Great Commission, allowed publishers, distributors and individuals to actively participate in a biblical activity and connect to the culture portrayed in the Gospels and imagined in extra-textual literature.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁵ Candy Gunther Brown. *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing and Reading in America, 1789 – 1880*. (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2004), 22.

This helps to form a culture where an interaction with the Bible is experienced to some degree by everyone who partakes in that society. That's not to say that a generic textual society necessarily requires the specific, denominational form of scripture on which to operate. Rather, it highlights the primacy of textual authority upon which the Christian societies could be built depending on the historical context. Acknowledgment of the authority of the Word establishes an epistemological system of boundaries where a certain degree of interpretation is allowed, so long as it conforms to an agreed-upon foundation.

Candy Gunther Brown is correct to refer to culture created by nineteenth century American Evangelicals as a "textual community." The social forces which saw the entire country transform its literary identity around the reading of religious literature supports such a title. By utilizing the history of the Reformation, and by tapping into the latent anti-Catholic sentiments which pervaded much of the population, tract societies and Christian publishers were able to both reinforce and augment the Protestant textual community. The influence which religious publishing had on both the national economy and what would eventually become mass media, is predicated on a consuming public being willing and able to read the material, and apply at least some of its prescriptions on their lives. Ideas and cultures were shaped by the ease at which tracts and Bibles were printed and distributed but also by the ease in which they could be read and internalized. Tracts printed prior to the Second Great Awakening tended to focus heavily on textual presentation and ideas while saving provocative and colorful imagery for congregational

sermons.⁴⁶ However, the increased demand for images, especially given their pedagogical appeal to multiple literacy levels ultimately solidified the inclusion of images in tract literature.⁴⁷

While numerous denominations formed and supported their own tract societies, some of the largest and most successful were organizations which saw themselves as non-denominationally Christian, and thus removed from the problematic and potentially heretical doctrines of churches deemed too deviant from a sufficiently traditional appropriation of biblical text. Like the earlier textual community in Europe, interpretation and disagreement over personal meaning was fine, so long as the Bible in its normative form was adhered to as both true, and imbued with divine authority. As such, textual communities served, and continue to serve, as an epistemological border and a marker of identity. Adherence within a textual community to a particular method of reading and understanding necessarily creates a demarcation between those individuals and groups who read properly, and those who do not. For nineteenth century evangelical publishing societies, the delineation was stark in terms of who was considered part of the textual community and who resided outside. Tracts and pamphlets, nominally non-denominational and clearly effective at catching attention, often drove an enforcement of a starkly sectarian and undeniably political interpretation of the Gospel message.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Susan Hardman Moore. "For the mind's eye only: puritans, images and 'the golden mines of Scripture'." *Scottish journal of theology* 59, No. 03 (2006), 281-296.

⁴⁷ David Morgan. *Protestants and pictures: Religion, visual culture, and the age of American mass production*. (Oxford University Press, 1999), 219.

⁴⁸ Jay Riley Case. *An unpredictable Gospel: American evangelicals and world Christianity, 1812-1920*. OUP USA. (2012), 9.

Churches who, in the eyes of mainstream and evangelical American Protestant culture, strayed from such interpretations, such as the LDS and the Jehovah's Witnesses, were at best looked upon with suspicion and at worst, as in the case of the early Latter Day Saints, faced a significant threat of social ostracism and often physical violence as well.⁴⁹ Early Mormon leaders, including but not limited to Joseph Smith, were particularly attuned to the polemic power tract narratives had on the larger, mainstream religious populace.⁵⁰

Much of this animosity is documented in religious polemics of the period. E.D. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled* [sic] pays particular attention to Joseph Smith's usage and interpretation of the Bible and, naturally, the composition of the Book of Mormon, which was held by many anti-Mormon voices of the period as being a counterfeit scripture.⁵¹ The first sentence of the first chapter lays out the theme of the text: that the Book of Mormon is an abhorrent forgery and as such, following it sets one apart from acceptable, Protestant norms. "The Golden Bible...is unquestionably one of the meanest in the English, or any other language. It is more devoid of interest than any we have ever seen. It must have been written by an atheist, to make an experiment upon the human understanding and credulity."⁵²

⁴⁹ Patrick Mason. *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South*. (Oxford University Press, 2011), 171.

⁵⁰ Whittaker. "Early Mormon Pamphleteering," 35-49.

⁵¹ J. Spencer Fluhman. "A Peculiar People": *Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America*. (UNC Press Books, 2012) 35-40.

⁵² E.D. Howe. *Mormonism Unveiled*. Originally Published by Telegraph Press. Gainesville. 1834. Found on The Spalding Studies Library. Special Edition. <http://www.solomonspalding.com/docs/1834howc.htm#pg011a>. August 11, 2006. 11.

For Howe, the composition of the Book of Mormon, troublesome though it may be, is merely one aspect of a larger crime. In addition to being heretical and putting potential converts in spiritual danger, the Book of Mormon, in its falsity, is also an affront to the inerrant truthfulness of the Bible. Howe continues, “We should have come to the conclusion that the author was a fearless infidel, and had attempted ridicule upon the Holy Bible; and we still think that it is not improbable that the original design of the author was to bring down contempt upon the inspired writers, and the religion of Jesus Christ.”⁵³ Howe infers that the danger does not lie so much with the possibility of an individual, or even a collection of people, accepting the doctrines and narratives of the Latter Day Saints, regrettable though he may find it. Instead, what the Book of Mormon represents is a full-on assault against the authority of the Bible and the social structure it holds aloft.

We have been in the habit of viewing human nature in a state of moral depravity, but not wholly without some redeeming qualities -- not such, indeed, as would justify any one before the all-searching scrutiny of an Omnipotent God, but such as constitute a social being. But the contents of the work before us present the author, and consequently human nature, in an entirely new light. We could not have believed that any man would have attempted to have prostituted every moral virtue which wisdom and ages have established. If the Bible is a fabrication and forgery, it is the foundation upon which our rights, our civil privileges, our personal safety, and in fine the whole of human happiness are based. If any one denies this position, let him examine those countries where they have not the Bible, or even communities where it is disregarded, and we will venture to predict that his opinion will be with ours. We have carefully examined the works of Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire and Volney, and with all their sarcasm against the divine authority of the Bible, they have addressed themselves to the most noble and learned of the human family; they left the field covered with rubbish, it is true, but of such materials as soon evaporated to the four winds.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

The final sentences of the passage are suggestive. At a glance, the extension of animosity towards the above list of secular authors seems random and out of place. However, their involvement makes an important point for Howe. His inclusion of the said authors in his text links their work with the scriptures of the Latter Day Saints. Despite their high-minded opinion of themselves and their celebration by secular society, they are destined to be forgotten, relegated at best, to footnotes.⁵⁵ Castigating secular, rationalist philosophy as “rubbish” and predicting—incorrectly—their disappearance from cultural memory, is necessary lest a reader reject the Book of Mormon, yet accept the naturalism of European philosophers. For Howe, all these texts are substandard. They stand in opposition to the Bible and contribute to the moral and spiritual decay of civilization. They are not just incorrect theses which may lead individuals astray. They are threats to the textual foundation of a society which places the Bible as the cultural cornerstone of authority. The Bible is the first line of defense against corrosive texts. As secular works are not acceptable, refutation of the Book of Mormon must be biblically based. Only after such critiques are exhausted can individual criticism based on earthly understandings take place. Howe concludes, “If we are not allowed the Bible to prove the Book of Mormon false, we must resort to the reasonableness of the story and positions taken.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Howe's opinion of the authors is also apparent in their absence throughout the rest of *Mormonism Unveiled*. He only makes one other mention of Hume and Gibbon specifically. In deconstructing the creation myth of the Book of Mormon, Howe asserts that the scientific work by the aforementioned would be irrelevant and superfluous were the text to be true, which he maintains it is not.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

Some of the clearest examples of the use of text to establish a “valid” scriptural community in opposition to what were viewed as heretical sects occur in anti-Catholic publications during the period. *The Awful Disclosures* by Maria Monk, now determined to have been a hoax, details the travails of a former nun and her escape from a convent where she was held prisoner. Though highly polemic and pejorative in nature, the sentiments help to illustrate the demarcation seen between Protestant and Catholic textual communities.⁵⁷

I...was ignorant of the Scriptures and was unaccustomed to the society, example and conversation of Protestants; had not heard any appeal to the Bible as Authority, but had been taught, both by precept and example, to accept everything as truth by the priests...I had long been familiar with the corrupt and licentious expressions which some of them use at confessions...I had no standard of duty to refer to and no judgment of my own which I knew how to use or thought of using.⁵⁸

Later, the missive reads:

I may here remark that I never saw a Bible in the Convent from the day entered as a novice, until that which I effected my escape. The Catholic New Testament...was read to us about three to four times a year. The Superior directed the reader to what passage to select; but we never had it in our hands to read as we pleased. I often heard the Protestant Bible spoken of in bitter terms, as a most dangerous book, and one which never ought to be in the hands of common people.⁵⁹

According to the narrative, Catholic usage differs from Protestant in manner of appreciation. The writing implies that the Bible, in Catholic hands is at best rarely

⁵⁷ Ray Allen Billington. *The Protestant crusade, 1800-1860: a study of the origins of American nativism*. (Smith, 1963).

⁵⁸ Maria Monk. *Awful Disclosures*. (James S. Hodson. London, 1837). Found on Google Books. <https://books.google.com/>, 50.

⁵⁹. *Ibid.*, 86.

consulted and at worst, neglected.⁶⁰ It is essentially treated as a relic, brought out on special occasions, but held aloft and apart from all but the elite clergy. To drive home the point, the Protestant Bible, which is both superior and always available to all, is said to be denigrated in “bitter terms, as a most dangerous book.” This passage draws clear, if embellished, distinction between the two relationships with scriptural text. The Bible is the cornerstone of the described disagreement between the two sects, perhaps more so than even Maria herself. In fact, Maria can in some ways be read as a representation of the place of the perceived role of the Bible in Catholic possession. Like Maria, the Bible is held captive within the confines of the monastery and essentially abused and defiled.

Maria’s freedom from the convent parallels her spiritual liberty from a corruptive text. The implication is that wrong interaction with scripture results in real life defilement and perdition. However, contact with legitimate scripture can instead invite a serious and positive spiritual transformation. Upon being given a proper, Protestant bible, Maria describes the change which had come over her:

I soon began to believe that God intended that his creatures should know his will by reading his word, and taking upon them the free exercise of their reason, and acting under responsibility to him...It is difficult for one who has never given way to such arguments and influences as those to which I had been exposed, to realize how hard it is to think aright after thinking wrong. The Scriptures always affect me powerfully when I read them; but I feel that I have but just begun to learn the great truths, in which I ought to have been early and thoroughly instructed. I realize, in some degree, how it is, that the Scriptures render the people of the United States so strongly opposed to such doctrines as are taught in the Black and the Congregational Nunneries of Montreal. The priests and nuns used often to

⁶⁰ Jody M. Roy. *Rhetorical campaigns of the nineteenth century anti-Catholics and Catholics in America*. Vol. 71. (Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), 38. See also Seth Perry. *The endless making of many books: Bibles and religious authority in America, 1780–1850*. (The University of Chicago, 2013).

declare, that of all heretics, the children from the United States were the most difficult to be converted; and it was thought a great triumph when one of them was brought over to “the true faith.” The first passage of Scripture that made any serious impression upon my mind, was the text on which the chaplain preached on the Sabbath after my introduction into the [caretaker] house – “Search the Scriptures.”⁶¹

The passage implies that the Gospel is redemptive and it is powerful. Though impotent under Catholic suppression, it becomes truly transformative under Protestant issue and use, so much so that the power it works on Maria is nothing short of miraculous. It also speaks to the real world transformation such narratives had on the publication societies themselves. For instance, much of the missionary work of the ATS viewed fighting the spread of Catholicism to be one and the same with doing the work of evangelism. They saw themselves and their movement as an extension of the Reformation and often made the assertion that Luther himself would hold the ATS with sympathy.⁶² To the ATS, the evangelical movement was a light shining amidst the gathering darkness of an encroaching Catholicism. Heirs to the Reformation, it was their duty to continue the work of rendering the Gospel accessible, both physically and geographically. The society also published materials which supported this endeavor through narrative means. One such publication was Mary Walshe's *From Dawn to Dusk in Italy*. The massive tract, over 400 pages in length, offers its account of Italy in the nascent days of the Reformation. Though hopeful, would-be Italian reformers attempt to bring the Gospel to their fellows but are met with an ever-increasing resistance and persecution by the Catholic Church.

⁶¹ Ibid., 294.

⁶² David Morgan. *Protestants and pictures: Religion, visual culture, and the age of American mass production*. (Oxford University Press, 1999), 26.

Consequently it is not difficult to see that there are two key functions of the textual community. One speaks to textual communities in general and the other specifically to the emergent community of the late eighteenth through nineteenth centuries. Textual communities in general function as a method through which individuals and groups culturally cluster around a sacred or important text. This ingathering in turn also creates a shared sense of identity. Members, who adhere to the sacredness and legitimacy of a certain text and importantly, a specific manner of reading the text, share a similar identity. Protestant tracts, articles, books and polemics of the period clearly illustrate the ideal use and interpretation of the Bible. More significantly, they remind the reader, in no uncertain terms, of the moral consequences and straying outside the proscribed hermeneutic.

However, the use of easily distributed tracts, pamphlets and books was not unique to Protestant (non)denominations. Well aware of the power of mass distribution, other religious groups also made use of the tractarian model.⁶³ Therefore, the use of printed texts for the purposes of evangelism, polemics or defenses from polemics, broadly share some space within the textual community born out of the Reformation. Yet this applies only so far as the printing and distribution methods of religious literature and materials. The content of those materials make a clear distinction between legitimate and illegitimate identities. Thus, while differing sects and denominations may have shared an adherence to the efficacy of print culture in general, the social borders drawn in the stated messages of much of the literature essentially created two or more different text cultures.

⁶³ Whittaker. "Early Mormon Pamphleteering," 35-49.

Image

The other, more specific element of the emergent Protestant textual community of the nineteenth century did not overly generate an acceptable and unacceptable religious identity. Instead, it changed the very nature by which evangelical texts were consumed. It did this through the ever-increasing use of images and illustration, creating a textual community. The fusion of text and image, and the transition to image-oriented literature can, perhaps unsurprisingly, find its origin in the business needs of the early tract societies.⁶⁴ Following the revivalist events of the Second Great Awakening, churches and religious societies located primarily along the Eastern Seaboard were faced with the difficulty of both ministering and witnessing to a population that was rapidly moving westward into the expanding frontier. Christian religious teachings, which had heretofore been dispensed from a local church center to surrounding townspeople, failed to serve the needs of an increasingly un-churched segment of America by virtue of sheer distance. In order to reach such a far-flung potential flock, religious organizations set upon a medium that could effectively and efficiently distribute a religious message without the necessity of a centralized, local church space, or in fact even a clergy member. Thus, amid the

⁶⁴ Patricia J. Anderson. *The printed image and the transformation of popular culture, 1790-1860*. (Oxford University Press, USA, 1991), 31

nascent stages of the continental expansion, America saw the birth of the tract societies—religious organizations dedicated to spreading the message of Jesus through the inexpensive and transient medium of Christian, Gospel tracts.⁶⁵ Tracts, by nature of their ease of distribution, particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century, freed up the labor of ministries and societies and allowed them to disseminate their message over huge swaths of territory with minimal cost. Once the purview of the itinerant preacher, the publication of Gospel messages on letterhead allowed the greatest number of potential readers to be reached with minimal expenditure.⁶⁶ Where once a single preacher would visit a single community with the Word, now countless communities, in cities and across the frontier, could be witnessed to in a matter of weeks and months which both extended and solidified ministries.⁶⁷ It was then no accident that the rise in prevalence of tract societies coincided with the development of the steam engine, the railroads, uniform currency and the mail order. Such innovations were quickly seized upon by publishers who realized the potential audience this new mass media could reach.⁶⁸

The application of the medium of the printing press generated a great deal of almost reverential importance for nineteenth century missionaries and tract societies. Not merely useful in spreading the evangelical message, the ability to mass produce and

⁶⁵ Nathan O. Hatch. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. (Yale University Press, 1989). The spread of this medium requires an examination of the historical components which allowed the distribution of tracts to make the jump from evangelizing in and of itself, to both entertainment, and mass media.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 128.

⁶⁷ Charles L. Cohen and Paul S. Boyer, eds. *Religion and the culture of print in modern America*. (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 19.

⁶⁸ David Paul Nord. *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

distribute such existentially important materials often saw society commentators speak of it in the language of the miraculous. The writer of an 1826 ATS Annual Report certainly viewed it as such when contemplating its outreach potential and seeing a comparison to the earliest apostles. While acknowledging the oral nature of Christ's instructions to "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature," the writer nonetheless marvels at the power of the new media, unable to see how such technology, in service to the Church, cannot be sanctioned by God

The Committee are aware, that our Lord, in his instructions to publish these glad tidings, had an especial reference to their being proclaimed from the lips of the living teacher; nor would they hide from the view of any...solemn obligation devolving on the churches of Christ, to send forth 'into all the world' the commissioned ministers of Christ, thus extensively to preach the Gospel. Yet it cannot escape observation, that our Lord gave his instructions when the press, the most powerful engine, perhaps, which God has ever entrusted to the use of mortals — was unknown ; and when the general and rapid diffusion of knowledge through the written page was impossible without a miracle...Tracts can be printed and circulated without delay, till they shall meet the eye of all, and when God has shown himself so ready to bless them to the salvation of men ; why shall they not be conveyed to all who are bound to the scenes of... unchanging eternity? ⁶⁹

The implication for the author is that the Gospel, in a sense, foreordained the development of printing techniques, thus placing the increased ability of missionaries to distribute the Scripture, under the auspices of Divine Providence. Not only was the ascendancy of the press over traditional methods of preaching viewed as sanctioned by God, it was also seen as part and parcel to a new age of spiritual revival, and possibly the imminent return of Christ. Partially influenced by the elation following the Revolution, this outlook differed from most contemporary tract society positions by its post-

⁶⁹ American Tract Society Annual Report 1826, 23.

millennial character.⁷⁰ The language of the annual reports of almanacs are marked by an unbridled optimism, that by dutiful labor, effort and superior organization, the millennium could be ushered in. Literature of the period reflects these sentiments in its many exhortations to take up the evangelical cause. Statements like, “Arise, shine for thy light is to come” were common in all manner of publications including reports to committee members and the testimonials of the converted.⁷¹

If access to the press was instrumental in causing such optimistic anticipation, these feelings of elation became a key motivator in realizing the institutional organization necessary to follow through with desires, and truly distribute the Gospel to the far-flung corners of the frontier, and the entire world. A significant portion of ATS Annual Reviews were devoted to organizational discussion. Lists were compiled detailing the infrastructure of both the national organization as well as specific regional chapters. These documents which were included in every Annual Review listed the names and titles of chapter and national officers, agents and employees alongside the numbers of tracts printed or distributed. New business was recorded, including information on each new tract, volume, periodical and testimony printed during the business year. Business expenses were reported in detailed lists of receipts, debits and credits and included lists of publishing fees, labor costs, charitable donations, freight, advertising, office supplies and

⁷⁰Most of the large, contemporary societies and publishers ascribe to a premillennial, dispensationalist worldview. They maintain that prior to the Return of Christ and his subsequent, 1000-year reign on Earth, there will be a Rapture of the faithful. Those left behind will be forced to endure seven years of tribulation and the ascension of the Antichrist. The Tribulation ends with the final battle of Armageddon and the Resurrection of the faithful. Those not saved will be resurrected at the Judgment Day, following the 1000-year reign.

⁷¹Morgan. *Protestants and Pictures*, 50.

just about any other expense which such an organization might incur. In addition, a large portion of the publication was set aside for the Society's charitable transactions. These included both charitable donations to the Society by new and established donors, as well as donations made by the Society to individuals, churches and other charitable organizations. A common theme in these publications was a discourse which centered on the number of people reached versus the number of tracts printed. In 1824, the Annual Review intoned:

Suppose, upon an average, there are twenty counties in a state, and six Depository in the center of each county; that around each Depository are ten Tract Societies, embracing only twenty-five individuals each, and that each of these individuals circulates only 100 Tracts in a year. This would put in circulation 12,000,000 of Tracts, equal to one for every man, woman, and child, in the country ; and if, in this distant world, and while looking through a glass darkly, we may see distinctly the reading of one Tract connected with the hopeful conversion of eight persons, and another of forty, and another of one hundred, what may we not hope to see, in the light of eternity, from the reading of 12,000,000, which this Society in few years may put in circulation. An amazing price, Sir, is put into the hands of this Society, and if improved, will, through grace, be instrumental in preparing multitudes for glory.

'No doubt,' says one, 'they may be exceedingly useful; but to circulate so many will cost too much.' How much, then, will it cost? \$10,000 will put in circulation 1,000,000 Tracts, of ten pages each; or of four pages, nearly 2,500,000; equal to one for every family in the country. And if the expense were borne by every family, it would be for each not more than one hair cent in a year ; and the avails of these, if sold at cost, may put in circulation as many more, and the avails of those, as many more, and so on, down to the end of the world. Is this too much for the purpose of putting in circulation 2,500,000 Tracts; 6,000 of which may be furnished for \$20, and one of which has, in more than twenty cases, been the means of the hopeful conversion of a soul worth a million of worlds? Ten times this sum has been expended, in this country, upon a single horse-race! A million of dollars can be raised, in a single city, or town, at almost any time, for a single manufacturer! \$7,000,000 can be raised, in a single state, for a canal!⁷²

⁷²*American Tract Society Annual Report, 1826.*

The following year, the Evangelical Almanac set its sights even higher. Their review postulated that six hundred million people, of the then world population of eight hundred million, had not had the benefit of the Gospel. They estimated “...but one Preacher for every 20,000 souls, not less than 30,000 missionaries are needed...”⁷³ Though seemingly daunting, the agents, officers, employees and volunteers could justify their optimism through the faith placed, not only in the Almighty, but also in the newfound technological power of the press, and later the railroads and telegraph. Nevertheless, these lofty goals required a growing expenditure and systematization of tract organizations. Money continued to flow in and publications were sent out in great numbers, both attesting to the optimism and zeal experienced by the fusion of technology and scripture.⁷⁴

Despite the technological changes which were occurring throughout the country, tract societies and individual missionaries faced the problem of an ever-growing population, and an ever-expanding geographic space where potential converts could be found. This was a difficult task in North America, to say nothing of the various global missions, and simply printing more material could not sufficiently ensure an initial reading, let alone mass conversions. As a result, societies began to develop and share varying methods and techniques which increased the likelihood of some sort of interaction between the tract, and the potential recipient.

Then, as now, the larger societies tended to maintain a public face of non-denominationalism by either establishing boards which represented multiple, Protestant,

⁷³*The Address of the Executive Committee of the American Tract Society to the Christian Public*. New York, American Tract Society, 1825: 6 Reprinted in David Morgan. *Protestants and Pictures*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 50.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

denominations, or by eschewing all denominational affiliation altogether. Non-denominational organizations tended to be wary of “overly emotional” behavior which was a common occurrence at many early Methodist and Baptist gatherings.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the tract missionaries of the early to middle nineteenth century recognized that while individual distribution via mail or church might be necessary, it couldn't reach as many people as were present at a large, social gathering. These missionaries soon began attending Baptist and Methodist revivals, not because they agreed with their methods, but because the revivals offered the perfect opportunity to distribute Gospel tracts to hundreds of ideally willing recipients, already primed to receive a religious message.⁷⁶

Yet even if they were not willing, missionaries discovered that it was not required that recipients be receptive, or even aware that they were being proselytized too. A variety of methods were developed which enabled a tract to be delivered with minimal interaction between the missionary and the recipient. Common methods included stuffing literature in the pockets of inebriated bar patrons, with the hopes that upon the return of sobriety, salvation might be willingly chosen in the aftermath of sin and hangover. Additionally, tracts might be thrown from stage coaches or left along the road so that a passerby might pick it up at random and become saved.⁷⁷ The ATS put it thus:

⁷⁵ Nathan O. Hatch. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. (Yale University Press, 1989, 56-59.

⁷⁶R. Laurence Moore. *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*. (Oxford University Press. New York. 1994), 75.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 76.

The missionary commencing the work of evangelization *finds no house of God* where he will address the people; no *congregation* assembling to hear: he must meet them in their bazaars or market-places; at their festivals; in their market-places; by the way-side; in their own miserable dwellings, if they will admit him; and he needs the auxiliary of the press, not in the Bible or volume merely but the winged Tract catching the attention and explaining the simple Scripture Truth.⁷⁸

There developed a realization that while there was nothing wrong with personal interaction between preacher and sinner, the Great Commission was better fulfilled—and the millennium ushered in—with the greater number of people reached. The distribution of mass publications in venues which guaranteed an audience of hundreds, or even thousands, of people presented an obvious choice. Personal interaction could be sacrificed, or at least deferred so as to reach a greater number of souls. It was a decision of pure economics. When individuals within and outside of societies came to the determination that it was neither necessary nor preferable to affect people's behavior through personal contact, a cottage industry was born—one which would eventually evolve into what we think of today as the contemporary American advertising industry.⁷⁹

These changes were predicated upon a realization that an effective distribution of materials over so wide a geographical and cultural landscape would require, in addition to a Gospel message, the use of images in conveyance of the meaning. This was because the move from the evangelical travels of the itinerant preachers, to the mass distribution of printed materials, made the interaction between church and potential convert exceptionally impersonal. Tract societies compensated for this by printing both oral, first-

⁷⁸“Foreign and Pagan Lands.” *American Tract Society, 15th Annual Report*, 412.

⁷⁹R. Laurence Moore. *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*. (Oxford University Press. New York. (1994) 76.

person narratives, as well as detailed imagery so as to mimic a face-to-face, religious encounter. The method proved exceptionally effective. The tract presented itself as an attractive and relevant media, while retaining the oral authority afforded to earlier traveling ministers, as well as the written authority of the Bible.⁸⁰ In this vein, an American Tract Society Publication read, “[t]racts too are as necessary for Heathen as for Christian countries; perhaps they are more so. They may be sent where the missionary cannot go. While he is confined to a small district, they may traverse a large kingdom. While he preaches to a few hundred, they may preach to thousands.”⁸¹ Such an explosion in potential converts proved to be a catalyst for both the ongoing mass production and mass mediation of religious material. It also left an indelible mark on the form and content of the literature itself by acculturating the reader to illustration, which through image upheld the Word.

The use of images alongside text became part and parcel to evangelical publications to the degree that few outreach texts and pamphlets were printed without displaying at least a few pictures or artistic embellishments. Images and illustration were so essential to the medium that a market economy emerged, which set the commercial value of a religious text to the amount and quality of illustrations, rather than to the written content. In the early nineteenth century, a gilded and illustrated copy of *Pilgrim’s Progress* might sell for as much as thirty percent more than the plain cloth edition. Advertisements likewise promoted the visual and aesthetic quality of a publication rather

⁸⁰ David Morgan. *The sacred gaze: Religious visual culture in theory and practice*. (Univ of California Press, 2005), 43.

⁸¹ Ibid., 24.

than the content itself. High quality imagery and decoration were presented as being illustrative of high quality religious content.⁸²

A text which was illustrated or gilded performed additional functions beyond conveying religious information in an aesthetically pleasing manner. They were a means by which family identity could be constructed and accessed. Illustrated and engraved Bibles in particular served not only as dispensaries of scriptural and religious knowledge but as a material and domestic focal point around which family life was structured and oriented.⁸³ Not only might families gather together for readings, and through them, be imparted religious tutelage; engagement with the book also reinforced familial roles associated with religious life. Family Bibles frequently showed images of mothers reading the text to children. Depictions of family readings in domestic locations, with children leaning on their mothers, added a gender dynamic which conveyed feelings of comfort and longing and associated them with the content of the text. Distant theological concepts and unfamiliar passages became familiar through the emotions generated by the images, whether or not the words themselves were, in a given section, representative of the overall emotional experience.

Frequently distributed to children from a local church or Sunday school, illustrated Gospel tracts served both an entertainment and instructional function, as households would use the tracts as a recreation activity during evening family

⁸² Candy Gunther Brown. *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing and Reading in America, 1789 – 1880*. (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2004), 72.

⁸³ Colleen McDannell. *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. (Yale University Press. New Haven, 1995), 80.

discussions. Children were given tracts and encouraged to bring them home, read them to their family and become equal participants in the spiritual and social well-being of domestic life. There was a performative element to this as well, but this was done most obviously for the ease of comprehension. Tracts which successfully engaged children helped enable an easier Christian acculturation and socialization. Most importantly, the tracts conveyed images which would prove to be iconic because, as Morgan playfully states, “Children like pictures - and so do Protestants, especially pictures that act like texts...”⁸⁴ In other words, even though religious tracts were originally aimed at distribution towards children, a biblically informative but somewhat unstated image would also appeal to their parents. Following a day at Sunday school, families could sit together in their home, reading tracts, engaging in biblical learning activities and discussing the message.⁸⁵

The American Tract Society maintained the importance of fusing images with text on tract publications. Adapted from the practices of the London Religious Tract Society, the organization viewed tracts as useful to the evangelical cause because they were attractive to the eye. This made the often theologically dry nature of their content rhetorically accessible to ordinary, lay readers.⁸⁶ Such Christian literature was popular because it was not seen as “talking down” to its readers. As such, a great degree of print

⁸⁴ David Morgan. *The sacred gaze: Religious visual culture in theory and practice*. (University of California Press, 2005). 44.

⁸⁵ Anna Elizabeth Engle. *Imagined evangelical communities: Conversion literature and the construction of identity in nineteenth-century America*. (Emory University, 2000).

⁸⁶ Ibid., 51.

material which did not omit literature, poetry and theology, was eagerly sought after by American consumers who preferred the tract style of presentation. It was this popular accessibility which significantly contributed not only to the growth of evangelicalism but also the print industry for many different genres of American literature.⁸⁷

The movement towards the inclusion of images in tracts was critical for a number of reasons. First, in its attractiveness to children, it conditioned in several generations of evangelicals a familiarity with the merger of text and image as an accessible entry way into scriptural understanding and interaction. Moreover, despite often targeting children specifically, tracts with images also proved accessible to adults who might not have had a thorough, religious education. However, in making scriptural lessons more accessible to a greater number of recipients, the tract and bible societies began to change the nature of what was considered both scriptural, and authoritative. As consumers of the literature became increasingly accustomed to the inclusion of images on religious literature, they began accepting images as a natural part of scripture, both in the Bible itself, and in the ephemeral religious pamphlets which contained the message of the Gospel. The Protestant textual culture which emerged following the Reformation remained in place. What had changed was the nature of authoritative representation. Authority was now expected to manifest in images as well as text. The divine Word, represented by the written word, was still of the utmost importance. The difference was that images became an acceptable vehicle by which scriptural information might be conveyed and, more importantly, were expected to be present. If the purpose of tract evangelism was to reach

⁸⁷ Hatch. *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 143.

as many readers as possible, a tract with images was more likely to do so than one without, making the latter necessarily less authoritative though its lack of efficacy. It lacks authority because it is literally unable, or, less able to deliver it.

The image is essential to forming an instantaneous emotional awareness which can convey all manner of cultural signifiers. Through the visual media, meaning resonates and specific frames of understanding are generated as noted by Daniel Boorstin.

While words take time to utter and hear, and require attention to parse their meaning, the impact of the image is instantaneous, its influence decadent. Before the primacy of the image, a salesman or an advertisement would have to describe the attributes of a product in a rational appeal to the intellect. Afterward, it was the mythology of the brand, usually concocted by psychologists that would sway a consumer's heart. Likewise, with the rise of the image in politics, the policy platform of a presidential candidate would come to matter less than the ability of his image to convey ineffable or irrelevant values.⁸⁸

Boorstin's observation was made with political advertisement and messaging in mind. However, the idea that images convey an instantaneous burst of meaning carries over and the gradual inclusion of images in tract literature helped to construct a new type of textual community. Moreover, this image-based community would continue conveying meaning on the back of image well into the current era. Whether a biblical vignettes from the nineteenth century, the cartoonish demons of Jack Chick or the realistic and alluring Million Dollar Bill, these visual markers carry with them the power of instantaneous understanding and, following that, an incorporation of identity.

⁸⁸ Daniel J. Boorstin. *The image: A guide to pseudo-events in America*. (Vintage, 2012), 264.

Though the high cultural emphasis and value placed upon the written word ensures the legitimacy of the tracts, its visual delivery and attractive packaging is essential to its efficacy because it triggers an emotional resonance which more easily helps a viewer identify with the tract's message. The image and the text work in concert with one another by captivating the attention of the reader in service to the Gospel. An image provides an immediate psychological payoff. The image entertains while the text educates. Yet just as the image is an essential tool used to engage the reader, the text legitimizes the use of images, and more importantly, entertainment. With pictures, evangelism from the perspective of the recipient could be fun. Images helped break the content of the text away from the lofty intellectualism of doctrinal theology. They also helped bridge the distance between the events of the Gospels and the everyday lives of the reader, by illustrating their relevance in manners familiar to the audience. Images themselves matter. "Seeing puts believers in the presence of what they wish to see, what they wish to venerate and adore. The sacred gaze allows images to open as icons to the reality they portray or even to morph into the very thing they represent."⁸⁹ Images, when linked to specific social cues and signs, resonate for the viewer and convey a wide array of meaning and interpretation. They recall preexisting understandings within cultural contexts which helps the viewer to interpret and, in essence, communicate the message that the image supports.

The text itself still conveyed the ideas, and doctrine of religious life, and mass production facilitated mass distribution, reinforcing adherence to textual culture and

⁸⁹ Ibid., 249.

community. Still, the images printed on the literature served an equally important role and contributed to what might be referred to as a "visual culture." "Visual culture is what images, acts of seeing, and attendant intellectual, emotional, and perceptual sensibilities do to build, maintain or transform the world in which people live."⁹⁰ The fusion of text and image, born on the back of the mobile, tract medium powerfully reworked the manner in which religious information was consumed and internalized. Mass produced, transient, well distributed and easily understood tracts, particularly those received outside of urban centers, were often the primary manner in which religious information was received. Furthermore, because of their dual function as conveyances of information as well as entertainment, they tended to leave a significant impact. Consumers derived a greater emotional impact and attachment to images than they likely would have with text heavy publications.

The transition from printing text-exclusive or at least text-heavy, religious material into a more image-saturated process not only changed consumer taste; more to the point, it changed the very way consumers of evangelical literature read and understood the Bible. Illustrated tracts certainly did not replace the use or importance of the Bible itself. Instead, they colored the readers' understanding of the scripture. Accessible imagery allowed the information to be easily consumed, thus functioning as an interpretative aid. When readers digested scripture, they often did so with printed tract images in mind. This was a seismic shift for a tradition and philosophy which, while not always eschewing images, certainly privileged written text. If images could help early

⁹⁰ David Morgan. *The sacred gaze: Religious visual culture in theory and practice*. (University of California Press, 2005), 33.

evangelical Protestants internalize the Gospel message, then they served the same function as a text. Moreover, such heavy inclusion of images placed them on near equal footing with the written word and changed the nature of the American protestant textual community.

While seemingly disparate, the confluence of image use and social polemics both stem from a similar source. The mass production of tracts, as well as their widespread distribution, emerged out of a technological renaissance which enabled a widespread social realignment in how such literature was consumed. While church services, prayer meetings, the Bible and revivals still remained part and parcel to American evangelical life, tract literature, appealing to many segments of society, became an unambiguous fixture of religious education and outreach. Yet these traits were not unique to Protestant literature or even religious literature itself. The same social and historic forces which enabled the rapid growth of evangelical publications also allowed for the mass publication and distribution of non-evangelical information—religious or secular. This created a slight paradox. The textual communities which emerged from the widespread use of print technology shared its origin with the rapid growth of modernist ideas, to many of which tract societies and religious authors saw themselves in direct opposition. In fact, despite the harsh anti-Catholic and anti-Mormon stances taken by evangelicals of the period, many of their published works were also dedicated to the temptations and evils of modernity.⁹¹ Thus it is no accident that a major portion of E.D. Howe's missive

⁹¹ Lincoln Mullen. "What are the Histories of American Irreligion?" *Religion in American History* June 1, 2013 <http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2013/06/where-are-histories-of-american.html>

seeks to correlate the Book of Mormon with the secular works of many leading secular intellectuals of the period such as Voltaire and Hume. Religious identities which ran counter to the stated position of the tract societies were just as dangerous as secular, modernist influences.

Nor surprisingly, pictures would increasingly play a role in engendering visual polemics, as well as in conveying religious information. An illustration in ex-Mormon Fanny Stenhouse's pamphlet entitled *Expose of polygamy: A lady's life among the Mormons* instructively demonstrates this. Two panels are presented side by side. On the left is an exhausted-looking woman in Victorian garb sitting beside her daughter who is seeking her attention. The panel to her right features a man embracing a different woman in a non-descript parlor. The caption reads "Wife at home – Husband abroad." Another illustration depicting the mortal dangers of the polygamist lifestyle vividly depicts the murder of a woman named Maud Hatfield by another wife.⁹² The difference between this publication and E.D. Howe's is an important one. While Howe focuses primarily on attacking the Book of Mormon and the person of Joseph Smith himself, Stenhouse's critique centers on what she views as the moral and social failings of early Mormon culture. Yet both utilize a combination of religious polemic and imagery in drawing a distinction between traditions deemed acceptable, and those placed outside the boundaries of legitimacy.

⁹² Fanny Stenhouse. "Exposé of Polygamy: A Lady's Life among the Mormons" (2008). *All USU Press Publications*. Book 39. http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/usupress_pubs/39

Chapter 2

Jack Chick, Jesuits and Jews:

Anti-Jesuitism and anti-Semitism in Chick Publication Literature

Perhaps more than any other publisher, Chick Publications weaves doctrine, image and narrative together in a manner that is attractive to almost all who encounter the tracts—saved or not. Many testimonials share mention of people asking missionaries for specific tracts by name and few are the individuals who haven't encountered a Chick Tract in a restroom stall or a park bench. The site banner famously reads, “Chick Tracts get read.” Yet perhaps it should also read “Chick Tracts get remembered,” as many people from all walks of life are familiar with the most recognizable titles: “This Was Your Life,” “Why No Revival,” “Death Cookie,” “Somebody Goofed,” or “Dark Dungeons.”

Chick Tracts are unique from other tracts in a number of ways. First is the uniqueness presentation of the tract itself. Though many missionaries and missionary societies employ some sort of attention-grabbing, visual marker—money tracts for example, Chick Tracts publish small, easily identifiable and often recognizable booklets. With few exceptions, one side of the tract features an image representative of the story or message within, overlaid atop a solid, bold-colored background.⁹³ The other side is black, upon which rests the tract's title in all capital letters. From afar, they look like candy bar wrappers. Another key difference lies in the presentation of a tract primarily or at least

⁹³ “This Was Your Life” is an exception to that. The cover features an angel and a human soul staring at the title, set against a backdrop of stars. The angle of the drawing's perspective gives the viewer the impression of a movie theater with the title box as the screen.

heavily laden with pictures. Doctrine is important, but it is never explicitly stated, at least until the final page. Instead, most tracts begin with a sophisticated degree of plot and character development. Many characters even make appearances in several tracts, thus developing their own narrative arch. For Chick, in contrast to *ATS/Crossways* and *Living Waters*, the message manifests primarily in the form of a narrative in place of a simple lesson and an exhortation. The lesson is always present, but it is learned by the reader vicariously, through the spiritual journey of the main character and then reinforced with a doctrinal statement at the end of the booklet.

Another characteristic of Chick Tracts familiar to casual readers and distributors is the stark delineation many of the narratives establish between Christian and secular communities, perhaps itself visually represented by the dual color scheme of the tracts themselves. The social perspectives presented in the images and narratives function as a deep cultural divide which is only in rare circumstances traversed. This divide is not merely an accident of composition but is instead a critical boundary illuminating the differences between secular and religious society. Secular society in the Chick narrative universe and those secularizing forces in particular are arrayed against Christians. They are many, some might say they are legion, and their roots ultimately rest within the overwhelming societal sins brought about through the ongoing march of secularism and modernity. The Chick Tract catalog reads as a veritable library of each and every social force deemed counter to the message of the Gospel.

In the Chick universe, these sins masquerading as social forces are treated with both animosity and scorn. While redemption is usually available to individual sinners, its

forces and institutions are beyond repair. This brokenness of civilization is partially the fault of humanity's proclivity towards sin. However, it is also the result of the direct catalyst and agency of these institutions who actively and at some level knowingly perform the work of Satan with the intent of ushering in the Antichrist. This is a worldview which is profoundly conspiratorial. In Chick narratives there are no cultural accidents. Negative and immoral movements and forces work in concert with or at the behest of the Devil to counter the work of God and His servants. Yet while all these enemies stand counter to the God's law, there is one which serves as the principle arbiter and organizer of Satan's endeavors on Earth: the Catholic Church. Vast, sprawling and nefarious, the Church and its agents serve as a common foil and motif. Guilty not only of adhering to a heretical doctrine, the Church is portrayed in Chick tracts as being behind nearly every social ill and false belief system throughout history. Moreover, it is through the Vatican institution by which the one world government of the tribulation will rule.

For Chick narratives and literature, conspiracy is the lens through which most of human history is read and interpreted. It is also a useful sorter of identity. A conspiratorial outlook allows little interpretive room between us and them binaries and further reinforces a sense of "being in the World," but not spiritually "of it." Chick Tract conspiracies are not made up out of whole cloth. Many, if not most, of them have roots both in historical, American anti-Catholic sentiment, as well as in nineteenth century anti-Jesuit propaganda. However, in certain tracts, there are also strains of anti-Semitic tropes as well. Though coded as being in opposition to the Catholic Church, some of these narratives are remarkably reminiscent of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, that

notorious nineteenth century forgery which greatly influenced twentieth century and even contemporary anti-Semitism. Moreover, these tropes are used in conjunction with a comic style which integrates classic and resonant, though covert, anti-Semitic canards and imagery with overt anti-Catholic invective. This chapter recognizes this phenomenon as a unique, if dark, method for using tracts in the construction of identity borders. Chick narratives traffic in the language and culture of conspiracy because conspiracy theory is effective in establishing an acceptable social boundary demarcating the good in-group and the evil out-group.⁹⁴

Enemies

Ultimately, these themes often revolve around three main areas which present a danger to the authentic Christianity depicted in the tracts. All of them are usually traced back to the Catholic Church in some manner but they are significant enough in their own right that they deserve some attention. Evolution and contemporary scientific thought is one such area. In this, Chick Publications is not unique and they adhere to a fairly typical, American fundamentalist position on the scientific precept—namely, that the entire theory is false and detracts attention from the glory of God's creation, calls into question the infallibility of the Bible and should generally be replaced with creationist curriculum. The moral shakiness engendered by an adherence to an evolutionist worldview also works in concert with an array of movements and identities that sit under an umbrella that

⁹⁴ Jane Parish. "The age of anxiety." *The Sociological Review* 48, no. S2 (2000): 1-16, 10-11

might be identified as multiculturalism but is more often derided as ecumenicalism or “tolerance.” Targets include rival religious practices such as Islam and the LDS as well as Atheism and the LGBT movement and communities. Many tracts feature characters that are not part of any of those communities but are merely lapsed or complacent Christians. Assuming a childhood baptism or a misunderstood conception of grace will save them; these characters often end their stories condemned to eternal hellfire and displaying a state of shock and incredulity. Yet all of these narratives are indicative of a belief in a society that has veered significantly off the rails. The implication is that a society tolerant of false religions, moral laziness and turpitude is a society tolerant of sin and therefore subject to destruction.

Like other conservative evangelical organizations, Chick Publications embraces young earth creationism as a viable scientific theory.⁹⁵ Living Waters Publications, for example, offers six tracts which explicitly address evolution and the necessary rejection of it, and three which peripherally touch on the subject. Two of the evolution-specific tracts are cards which direct the recipient to an online movie and one, which broaches the subject in an in-depth manner, utilizing text rather than image as its almost sole medium—a rare occurrence for Living Waters. Good News Publishers, the parent company of Crossways, and recently the American Tract Society, currently offers one, text-only tract addressing the subject.⁹⁶ By contrast, Chick Publications offers five tract titles, all of which are drawn and narrated in the publishing house's characteristically

⁹⁵ Young Earth Creationism is the belief that the entirety of the universe is no more than 6600 years old in accordance with the biblical creation account in Genesis.

⁹⁶ Voddie Baucham, Jr. “Life’s Ultimate Questions.”
<https://www.crossway.org/tracts/lifes-ultimate-questions-2837/>

vibrant and provocative style. What makes these tracts so different from similarly themed tracts of other publishers is the equal interweaving between image and text. Other anti-evolution tracts follow a similar pattern. They begin with a brief discussion of ontology, asking questions pertaining to the purpose of human existence and the universe in general. These are the opening words of Crossways' tract, "Life's Ultimate Questions." "Every human being who has ever lived or will ever live has asked, is asking or will ask four basic questions: *Who am I? Why am I here? What is wrong with the world? And how can what is wrong be made right?* While we may not say them, it is in the soul of every person to wrestle with these questions." The tract goes on to establish a demarcation between secular answers and Christian ones. Unsurprisingly, this is not an unbiased assessment of the two positions as evidenced in the first sentences of each respective section. "Who am I?" the tract asks. "You are an accident." "Why am I here?" it questions. Because, "[y]ou are an accident." The religious answers are contingent on acceptance of the Gospel and becoming born again. Who are we? We cannot know until we discover Jesus Christ. Why are we here? To serve the purposes of God. Why this juxtaposition? The tract addresses it by saying, "If these two sets of answers—from our culture and from the Bible—are placed side by side, something very interesting happens. With the answers from our culture, you are left worthless, empty, and hopeless. You're on your own to pursue satisfaction...and you'll never find it. But the Bible says you are precious. You have purpose. You were purchased."⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Ibid

Living Waters opens its argument slightly differently by stating their view on scientific method and aligning Darwinism specifically against it, allowing the tract to position itself as anti-evolution but still pro-science. In this vein, it utilizes an interpretation of biologic taxonomy where the term “family” is replaced with the biblical word “kind.” The purpose of this is to reject the concept of speciation through natural selection and instead put forth the idea that creationism is more in line with scientific understanding. Yet the core of the message still addresses the ontological question of self and being within this Christian worldview.

The purpose of telling you these things is to bring up two important points: First, if naturalistic evolution is true and there’s no God, then we are all just animals with no moral responsibility. There’s no ultimate morality other than what society says is right and wrong. That means pornography is okay, as are fornication, lust, adultery, and homosexual behavior. Anything goes—as long as society okays it. That’s good news for red-blooded human beings with raging hormones. This is really a strong incentive for clinging to belief in evolution, wanting it to be true. Second, and more importantly, if molecules-to-man evolution is false and the Bible is right about our Creator, then we aren’t just animals with primal instincts. We are human beings, made in the image of God, with a unique sense of justice and a God-given knowledge of right and wrong (Romans 2:15). If the Bible is right, then Heaven and Hell exist . . . and it’s possible to experience the free gift of everlasting life with our Creator.⁹⁸

Faulty science and belief in natural selection are serious problems but they are ultimately manifestations of a larger, more existential issue which rejects both the exceptionalism of humanity as well as the divine authorship of the universe.

Evolution therefore is not merely incorrect; it is a threat to the very conception of a Christian “self.” It also is a form of idolatry in that it sets a reverence for the creation above its own creation.

⁹⁸ “Stop Following Me.” Living Waters. <http://store.livingwaters.com/Gospel-tracts/in-depth/stop-following-me.html>

All of these elements are expressed and grappled with in Chick's treatment of evolution. However, Chick evolution tracts lean heavily on image and narrative. The drawings in all the evolution tracts are done in the comic strip style rather than the comic-realist form utilized in other tracts. This suggests that the target audience for these publications skews younger which makes sense considering the emphasis conservative Christians often place on the teaching of evolution in public classrooms.⁹⁹ As such, each tract—"Big Daddy," "Apes, Lies, and Mrs. Henn," "Moving On Up," "There Go the Dinosaurs," and "In the Beginning"—are all expressly listed for "older children" with links to other tracts within the age range. Three of the five tracts also share a common narrative conceit. "Big Daddy," "Apes, Lies and Mrs. Hen," and "There Go the Dinosaurs" all feature a secular classroom in which the teacher or professor of evolution is challenged and bested by a born-again student. "Apes, Lies and Mrs. Hen" even feature recurring characters, Susy Barnes and her teacher Mrs. Hen, who engage in similar confrontations in other tracts.

The teaching of evolution in schools is viewed as related to a second source of enmity which serves as a catch-all for many Chick Tract titles and can loosely be referred to as "progressivism." However, in this context, it might be better understood as "tolerance," where "tolerance" is not a virtue but a social cudgel wielded against Christians. The term itself is used as a rhetorical foil in many tracts. It functions as a cue which prompts an understanding of a variety of ills, ideas and movements. In the Chick

⁹⁹ Ronald L. Numbers. "The creationists: The evolution of scientific creationism." (1992).

context, it is also weighted with an additional understanding which sees the secular culture as demanding tolerance for sin, and falsely labeling Christians as intolerant towards others when they reject such demands.¹⁰⁰ Under that mindset, the logic behind the rejection of same-sex marriages and ecumenical holiday displays and language begins to make sense.¹⁰¹ It is further encapsulated by the oft-heard advice, to “love the sinner but hate the sin.” Evangelism and opposition to progressive issues are done out of love, not animosity. Under this hermeneutic, the opposite is true. The dominant culture is the secular culture which tolerates all manner of sin—including non-Protestant religions—and is in actuality intolerant of Christians.¹⁰² Under these circumstances, the plot points of tracts such as “The Last Generation” come into relief.

¹⁰⁰ Christian Smith and Michael Emerson. *American evangelicalism: Embattled and thriving*. (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁰¹ Paul Froese, Christopher Bader and Buster Smith. "Political tolerance and God's wrath in the United States." *Sociology of Religion* 69.1 (2008), 29-44.

¹⁰² Not even all Protestant denominations are free of condemnation. One tract predicts that in the end of times, even mainstream Protestants, in keeping in theme with Chick Tracts' enmity towards ecumenicalism, will line up on the side of forces of the Antichrist. Great prophesies of the Bible are being fulfilled before our eyes. In these last days we see the rise in power of a system Christ hates. It is called “Mystery Babylon, the Mother of harlots and abominations of the earth. A man sits at the head of this evil organization and pretends to be Jesus...He is an antichrist. For centuries this organization has systematically murdered millions of bible believers through inquisitions. This system, called the Whore [of the Revelation] is now the most wealthy and powerful force on earth... The last pope will be known as **the** antichrist. Satan will enter his body and he will be worshipped worldwide...The following leaders of major Protestant denominations **all** called the pope **ANTICHRIST**.; Luther (Lutheran), Calvin (Presbyterian), Cramner (Anglican), Wesley (Methodist), Knox (Scottish Presbyterian), Maher (Congregationalist), etc. (original emphasis).

The premise of “The Last Generation” is that global government has taken over all political, educational and religious institutions in the world.¹⁰³ When the main character, Little Bobby, tells his parents about the New Age healer who is coming to speak to his class on how to root out heretics, his Christian parents gasp, “God help us,” to which Bobby retorts, “You just said the wrong thing you *intolerant* jerks.” (Original emphasis) The stress on the word “intolerant” occurs at a crucial turning point in the story. In retribution for his families thought crimes, Bobby turns them in to the religious authorities and the next day they flee to a cabin in the woods. Their location is soon discovered. However, when the authorities arrive, they find only piles of clothes. The rapture has already occurred.

Though more ornate in story and image, this tract functions as an allegory for demarcation between the spiritual world, and the world of the flesh. This is the world that, according to the books of John and Romans in the Bible, followers of Christ are to be in, but not be of. This world of flesh, as opposed to one sufficiently guided by spirit, is responsible for a dominant and oppressive, secular culture which champions causes such as abortion, LGBT rights, ecumenicalism, evolution and so on. It is a place that Christians must contend with, but not tolerate and certainly not embrace. Ultimately, it is a place which, through its sin, will help to usher in the Tribulation and the events of the Revelation of John. Through the use of such narration, Chick constructs a world in which legions of enemies stand in opposition to true Christianity and the Word of God. Christianity here is seen not as a city on a hill but as a besieged island, surrounded by the

¹⁰³ Jack T. Chick, “The Last Generation” *Chick Tracts*. 1992

continual tumult of dark and hostile waters. The forces these waters represent are nominally the forces of the Devil but to non-evangelical observers are the aspects of modernity that most take for granted: evolution, gender rights, ecumenicalism and other typically liberal-aligned, political positions.

However, it is clear that in the ministry's view the preferred weapon in Satan's arsenal is the Catholic Church. Monolithic in its agenda, the Church looms ever present in Chick's universe as an instrument of evil and villainy. Its clergy are all, to varying degrees, in cahoots with the forces of hell, jointly hatching plots with the intent of destroying Bible-believing Christianity in pursuance of ushering in the reign of the Antichrist. Catholics are blamed for everything from the New Age, to science, to Islam. In "The Visitors," Chick manages to intimate a connection between Catholicism and the LDS.¹⁰⁴ Not even mainstream Protestants are safe from the machinations of this dire entity, falling prey to ecumenism, interfaith, and the deceptively benign language of tolerance, all of which the ministry literature ties in some manner to Catholicism. This is the overarching narrative of the Chick moral universe. Satan is hard at work in the world, stealing souls through the temptation of temporal pleasures, alternative lifestyles, secular philosophies and false religions. The Vatican and its ancillaries are his chief lieutenants, all of whom act as catalysts for other traditions deemed Antichrist as well as seemingly unconnected immoral social movements. The Church is a persecutor of true Christians and the prime vehicle for the ascendancy of the Antichrist. On top of that, the Vatican

¹⁰⁴ Jack Chick. "The Visitors." *Chick Tracts*. No. 61. (1984). The panel reads, "It's a mixture of Babylonian and Jewish religions, Masonry and Catholic tradition." The panel includes a footnote, which reads "Mormonism is another daughter of the Mother of Abominations," which is a common Chick reference to the Catholic Church.

organization forms the basis for the one world government perceived in Revelations and brought to life on the pages of “The Last Generation.”

Chick Tracts are inheritors of a virulent strain of anti-Catholic sentiment which ran through much of the Protestant publishing community in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As mentioned previously, this phenomenon was exemplified by the anti-Catholic missive *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, a polemic detailing the main character's imprisonment, and abuse at the hands of monastic authorities, as well as her subsequent escape. The story is fulfilled when she is finally introduced to the authentic, Protestant version of the Holy Scripture, a spiritual change which both castigates Catholicism and elevates a cultural adherence to a Protestant textual community. These sentiments found fertile ground in the demographic changes which were occurring throughout the early twentieth century. An increase in visible Catholicism, brought about through immigration from predominantly Catholic regions, raised an anxiety in many conservative Protestant circles that the significance of their religious practice was in danger. Reactionary efforts, particularly against Catholics, but also against Jews and other “foreigners” arose in response to the non-Protestant character of America's changing urban landscape.¹⁰⁵ This changed somewhat in the years following World War One and leading into the Great Depression when there occurred a small easing of animosities between the two sects. The sense of common cause emerged from the patriotism and nationalism of the war and united Catholic and Protestant groups in the furtherance of

¹⁰⁵ George M. Marsden. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 14.

social causes. Arguably their greatest achievement was the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, banning the manufacture, sale and consumption of alcohol. However, this unity was short-lived. As the optimism from the end of the war receded, the social landscape was marked by an increase in nativist reaction, manifesting most visibly in the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and other white, Protestant, supremacist organizations.¹⁰⁶

These sentiments eased somewhat following the end of the Second World War. This was partially a result of the GI bill which facilitated the successful integration of Jews and Italian Catholics into a nominally white, collective identity.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, in an effort to assimilate into the dominant, white community which they now had access to, these ethnic groups took on an increasingly Protestant-normative appearance.¹⁰⁸ This would not be a total departure from traditional—specifically Catholic and Jewish—religious identities in favor of Protestantism itself, but rather, the adoption of a religious social life which struck an acceptable balance between religious and secular identity, while retaining an identity with the religion itself. Herberg described it thus: “Our cultural assimilation has proceeded in essentially the same way as our linguistic development – a few foreign words here and there, a few modifications of form, but thoroughly and still unquestioningly English. The Anglo-Saxon type remains the American ideal to which all other elements are transmuted in order to become

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 53-54.

¹⁰⁷ Harold M. Hyman. *American Singularity: The 1787 Northwest Ordinance, the 1862 Homestead and Morrill Acts, and the 1944 GI Bill*. (University of Georgia Press, 2008).

¹⁰⁸ Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews became white folks and what that says about race in America*. (Rutgers University Press, 1998). See also Donald Yacovone and Noel Ignatiev. "How the Irish Became White." (1996): 667-669.

American.”¹⁰⁹ As such, the tendency of these traditions to iron out uncomfortable ethnic identifiers, particularly within white Catholicism, allowed for a decrease in religiously-based anti-Catholicism. In the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, none but the most reactionary evangelical organizations made a habit of regularly and publicly decrying Catholic religion and culture. Cartoonist Jack Chick was then, and remains today, one of the more extreme holdouts.

Chick Publications’ treatment of Catholicism has previously been addressed by scholarly observers. Clark examines Chick's anti-Catholic materials for references to Communism to first show how Chick establishes Communism as an outgrowth of the Catholic Church and second, locate the tracts within a larger body of anti-Communist, comic literature of the Cold War era.¹¹⁰ Dittmer focuses on the premillennial, dispensationalist prophecies prevalent in the tracts and identifies the geopolitical significance of the tracts among like-minded readers.¹¹¹ Borer and Murphree offer the broadest assessment of Chick's approach to Catholicism. Their analysis of Chick emerges out OF their research on the concept of “culture war” and the politically counterintuitive boundaries, alliances and enmities engendered by this idea.¹¹² They note that Chick's

¹⁰⁹ Protestant, Catholic, "Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology." (1955), 21.

¹¹⁰ Clark, Emily. "Of Catholics, Commies, and the Antichrist: mapping American social borders through cold war comic books." *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 21, no. 3 (2009): 3-3.

¹¹¹ Dittmer, Jason. "Of Gog and Magog: The geopolitical visions of Jack Chick and premillennial dispensationalism." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 6, no. 2 (2007): 278-303.

¹¹² Michael Ian Borer and Adam Murphree. "Framing Catholicism: Jack Chick's anti-Catholic cartoons and the flexible boundaries of the culture wars." *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 18, no. 1 (2008): 95-112.

treatment of Catholics generally falls under three main categories; associative, subversive and hidden agenda. The associative framework positions the Catholic Church as the catalyst for much of the world's problems. The subversive framework establishes the Church as the chief villain of many narratives and the hidden agenda frame posits that their ultimate goal is the fomenting of a progressive agenda working as counter to true, authentic Christianity. Still, Borer and Murphree's aim is to use Chick's animosity towards Catholics as evidence of the flexible boundaries of "culture war discourse." What they by necessity leave out is an analysis of the underlying tropes and image motifs which Chick utilizes in the creation of these tracts which make the work so compelling to readers and believers and further reinforces culture war enmity on a visual level.

Catholicism, represented by the institutional edifice of the Vatican, is in many ways an umbrella under which most if not all social ills reside. In Chick's universe, the Catholic Church is an existential menace. Part trickster and part scourge, there are few social sins which it is not behind or at least, does not co-sign.¹¹³ Tracts which don't explicitly feature the Church often make veiled references to Catholic practices.¹¹⁴ Wholly adversarial, it functions as a proxy for Satan to do his work in the world and when the events of the Revelation transpire, the Vatican will assume its role as the seat of the Antichrist. For this ministry, The Church writ large is monolithic in that everything it does, it does to serve the goals of Hell, both willingly and unwittingly. However there is a

¹¹³ "That's Baphomet." https://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/1074/1074_01.asp

¹¹⁴ The line of dialogue, "Is that a "New Age Healer" makes a reference to "The Blessed Mother Goddess" and the "Queen of Heaven." "The Last Generation" https://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0094/0094_01.asp

small degree of ambiguity. This usually comes in the form of individual Catholics who encounter the authentic Christianity of the Gospel and become saved, rejecting the worldly and demonic trappings of Catholicism.¹¹⁵ Generally speaking, these conversion narratives follow a similar trajectory as other tracts which heavily feature born-again themes. As such, it is not surprising that Chick narratives share so many themes with those of their forbearers such as those described in the *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*. Their purpose was to wholly stigmatize the Catholic Church in a manner so effective that it would become applicable to all manner of non-dominant religions. It's a stark and ancient theme. The redeeming light of the Gospel can reach the lost in the darkest of institutions.

Therefore, not surprisingly, nowhere in the ministry's library is there any redemption offered to Catholicism as a whole. Even to assume that the Church might have problematic elements but has lost its way is not offered as a possibility. As is made clear in tract after tract, the Catholic Church, from the outset, has been a counterfeit institution, cloaked in the veneer of Christianity—if it was ever considered legitimate to begin with. In constructing these storylines, Chick Ministries pulls from the work of nineteenth century Scottish Free Church theologian and anti-Catholic polemicist Alexander Hislop who locates the origin of Catholicism itself not in the Gospels but rather in Bronze Age pagan beliefs particularly emerging from Babylon and Egypt. For example in Egypt, Hislop asserts, this religion worshipped the sun god Ra and consumed an unleavened sacrament in his honor. Contemporarily, the letters IHS which form the

¹¹⁵ "Last Rites" https://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0082/0082_01.asp

seal of the Society of Jesus and are sometimes stamped on some communion wafers does not stand for the Latinized form of Jesus' name and honorific but rather for the Egyptian gods Isis, Horus and Set.¹¹⁶

Despite such animosity towards the entirety of the Catholic Church as a global institution, the publisher reserves the largest degree of scorn for what they view as the true power behind the Holy See: the Society of Jesuits. It is through the Jesuits that the Devil exerts his influence on worldly institutions. "[T]he Jesuits' real goal is to destroy true Christians and make the world submit to the Pope...[W]e are surrounded with Jesuit-trained operatives who don't wear a priest's collar, and are thus "invisible." [They] manipulate governments and foment wars, all "for the greater glory of God."¹¹⁷ Thus, while the Catholic Church might seek to influence and control world institutions and events, it does so under the direction of the Society of Jesus. To put it more specifically, the Church is the structural apparatus by which the Jesuits—and through them, the Devil—operate. In many ways, this is a classic conspiratorial canard, in both historic and functional aspects. It operates in a form similar to other familiar conspiracies involving the Illuminati, the New World Order and many other conspiracies involving shadow

¹¹⁶ Alexander Hislop. *The Two Babylons or The Papal Worship Proved to be the Worship of Nimrod and his Wife*. Loizeaux Brothers. 1959. "To a Christian these letters are represented as signifying "*Iesus Hominum Salvator*," "Jesus, Savior of men." But let a Roman worshipper of Isis...cast his eyes upon them, and how will he read them? He will read them of course according to his own well known system of idolatry: "*Isis, Horus and Seb*," that is "the Mother, the Child and the Father of the gods," – in other words, "The Egyptian Trinity."

¹¹⁷ *Jesuits* <http://www.chick.com/catalog/comics/0120.asp>. 2016 A commenter writes: I am thankful to have this information in order to know the truth about what is going on "behind" the scenes." June 17, 2016. And another: "It becomes clear who will be running the world governments and who the false prophet will be." June 5, 2015. <http://www.chick.com/catalog/comics/0120.asp>

governments. As such, the trope is hardly conjured out of thin air. Conspiracies focused on Jesuits have been prevalent since the order's inception, and many of them are interwoven with or at least influenced by anti-Jewish canards as well. One aspect of Chick's foray into the Jesuit conspiracy which makes it uniquely interesting is his associations with the allegedly ex-Jesuit priest Alberto Rivera.

Alberto Rivera has been the main source for the vast majority of Chick Tracts' anti-Catholic material. Born in 1937 in the Canary Islands to a Catholic family, Rivera entered the seminary at the age of seven under duress but also at the behest of his mother, a devoted Catholic. He describes his first awakening to the false nature of the Church two years later upon hearing of his mother's sudden illness and impending death. While accompanying her in prayer to Mary, and following the Extreme Unction, Alberto's mother suddenly sat up exclaiming in horror at a vision of fire and demons. She died with a look of horror on her face.¹¹⁸ Despite this event, Rivera claims to have continued his studies and eventually received his ordination at which point he was tapped by the Archbishop to lead an operation to infiltrate Protestant churches at the behest of the Jesuit order. It was at this point that Rivera rejected the Catholicism he had been brought up in, rescued his sister from a convent and turned his life over to Christ.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ RBT. *The World of Jack Chick*. Last Gasp. San Francisco. 2001, 47.

¹¹⁹ Though never expressly stated, it's interesting to note that Rivera's narrative arch in some ways mirrors the trajectory of the Apostle Paul in that he begins his journey towards conversion by first serving as a persecutor, or in this case an infiltrator of Protestants. Also interesting is the brief mention of his sister whom he rescues from a convent, especially in light of the common nature of this trope, especially in American anti-Catholic literature.

Upon their meeting in the early 1970s Jack Chick gave Rivera a global audience through the use of his tracts, comic books and articles in the *Battle Cry* newsletter. Many of the most fantastic claims about Catholicism emerge from these publications, most notably that the Vatican is behind Islam, Communism, Masonry, the KKK, the Mafia, the New Age and the LDS.¹²⁰ The publication of Rivera's story caused considerable controversy. Understandably condemned by Catholic institutions and individuals worldwide, Chick's *Alberto* publications and generic tracts on Catholicism were also banned from numerous Christian bookstores, both Catholic and Protestant.¹²¹

The ministry still presents Rivera as an ex-Jesuit who fled the order and the Church following his discovery of the world-dominating machinations of the Vatican. It is, however, important to note that the Catholic Church has disavowed Rivera and described his claims as fraudulent, saying that not only were his claims libelous, but he was never even an ordained member of the clergy.¹²² Many of the attacks against Rivera also originated in a 1981 *Christianity Today* exposé which portrays Rivera as a common con artist.¹²³ Naturally, Chick Ministries pushed back by publishing what it claimed was a Vatican ID card, letters of certification, photos of him with students and testimonies supporting Rivera's accounts, all of which the Catholic Church rebuffs.

¹²⁰ Jimmy Akin. *The Nightmare World of Jack Chick*. (Catholic Answers, 2008), 10. The tract *Men of Peace* illustrates Rivera's claims as to the Catholic origins of Islam. In it Mohammad's wife Khadija and her cousin Waraquah are implicitly portrayed as Catholic conspirators who are the secret force behind Muhammad and Islam. Of Muhammad's first marriage Chick writes, "[Kadija] and her Catholic cousin Waraquah became [Muhammad's] trusted advisors and helped push his new religion."

¹²¹ Ibid., 11.

¹²² Ibid., 14.

¹²³ RBT. *The World of Jack Chick*. Last Gasp. San Francisco. 2001. 47.

The Catholic Church denies Rivera's most important claim, that he was a priest. To substantiate the claim the *Alberto* comic book carries the picture of an official-looking document from the Archbishopric of Madrid-Alcala in Spain dated September 1967. It identifies Rivera as a priest and gives him permission to travel abroad in his ministry. There is no other Church documentation such as an ordination certificate, shown in the book. An individual in California, who grew suspicious of Rivera in 1973, wrote to the archdiocese office in Madrid-Alcala to ask if Rivera was really a priest. The Archbishop's office concluded that he was not a priest, and that the travel document, which was little more than a form letter, was 'acquired by deceit and subterfuge' to enable Rivera to get a passport.¹²⁴

Regardless of whether or not Rivera's claims are forthright or fraudulent is nevertheless beside the point as the claims themselves continue to appear in Chick Literature and in fact form the basic narrative foundation for the ministry's position on Catholicism. True or not, Rivera's story and anti-Jesuit invective continues to harmonizes well with the premillennial dispensationalist eschatology derived from Hislop and put forth by Chick Publications.

There are also threads of historical connections between the two conspiracy tropes which reach back into the nascent years of the Society of Jesus. The order, founded by Loyola Ignatius in 1534 coalesced during the height of the Inquisition during in the decades immediately following the Jewish and Moorish Expulsion under Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492. Following a religious conversion, Ignatius established the order with the express purpose of serving as global missionaries aiding in the fomentation of the Christian soul and operating directly under the direction of the Pope.¹²⁵ Even so, their name, taken from Jesus' name rather than the originator of the order, implied an outlook

¹²⁴ Gary Metz. "Jack Chick's Anti-Catholic *Alberto* Comic Strip is Exposed as a Fraud." *Christianity Today*. March 13, 1981. Cited Akin. *The Nightmare World of Jack Chick*, 14.

¹²⁵ John O'Malley. *Jesuits*. 2006. XXV

which viewed only God as their foremost hierarchal authority, thus instilling a degree of animosity among other Catholic orders.¹²⁶

Ignatius Loyola himself also came under fire for his perceived laxity in admitting new members, in particular the descendants of *conversos*: the Jewish converts to Catholicism following the Expulsion and their descendants. Loyola and the Jesuits at least initially took a relaxed position and admitted a number of *converso* descendants into the order. In the earliest years of the order's existence, it was relatively easy for a potential confrere of Jewish descent to gain admittance to the Jesuits.¹²⁷ However, in 1555 the Papal offices issued a series of decrees barring the admittance of members of Jewish descent based upon a religious aversion to offer admittance into Christian society to those descended of the Jews responsible for the Crucifixion.¹²⁸

These laws would mark the beginning of the implementation of the *Limpieza de Sangre*, or "Blood Purity Laws." These laws arose out of a fear that the offspring of the recently converted Jews of Spain were not only practicing their former religion in secret, but were also using their newfound identities to infiltrate Spanish and Catholic institutions with the intent of Judaizing both Spain and the Catholic world. So severe were these fears that anti-*converso* riots were a not uncommon occurrence. *Limpieza de Sangre* implemented in different bulls over the course of two centuries sought to minimize this perceived threat by barring admittance to religious and political life of

¹²⁶ Alphonso, Herbert. "The Origin and Meaning of Jesuit Apostolic Community." *Gregorianum* 72.2 (1991): 357-364.

¹²⁷ Maryks, Robert A. *The Jesuit Order as a Synagogue of Jews: Jesuits of Jewish ancestry and purity-of-blood laws in the early Society of Jesus*. Vol. 146. Brill, 2010. I

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

conversos whose Jewish ancestry in some cases was several generations removed. These laws, though aimed at *conversos*, also affected the descendants of Muslim converts. Moreover, the implementation of these laws coincided with Spain's new but growing colonial project in the Americas. These laws, which were initiated in fear of Jewish infiltration, would also form the foundation for what would become contemporary racism as they were adapted to encompass indigenous Americans, Mestizo descendants and African slaves.¹²⁹ As a result of an early ambivalence on the part of the Society of Jesus towards the *Limpieza de Sangre*, the Jesuits were smeared early on with accusations of harboring Jews and Jewish interests.

Chick Tracts and the testimonies of Alberto Rivera operate within a nexus of both intra-Catholic and Protestant anti-Jesuitism. Hislop's opposition to the Jesuits and the Church is largely religious in nature. He rejects Catholic authority because it is pagan in nature, having been derived from Babylonian Mystery religions. Its assumed Levantine origins reinforce this idea. Born out of ancient Babylon and acclimating itself to each subsequent historical era, the Catholic Church is in the perfect position to take its place as the Babylon on the Revelation. Yet while it's unlikely that Alberto Rivera would disagree with that, his animosity towards the Church, by way of the Society of Jesus, shares more in common with the political anti-Jesuitism present in varying forms during the Inquisition and the French Third Republic. The Church is viewed not only as a counterfeit religion, but as a powerful and manipulative, geopolitical force.

¹²⁹ Martínez, María Elena. *Genealogical fictions: Limpieza de sangre, religion, and gender in colonial Mexico*. (Stanford University Press, 2008).

Though Rivera passed away in 1997, his stories and their publication lay the foundation for an ongoing discussion both in and outside of the ministry about the nefariousness of the Jesuit order. A 2011 edition of *Battle Cry* ran a story warning against turning one's attention away from the dangers posed by the clandestine, Vatican political apparatus. Concerned that too much global attention is trained on Islam, the article "... reminds us that this powerful [Jesuit] servant of the Whore of Babylon is still quietly placing members in the world's power centers." Having learned from the dustup over Alberto Rivera's credentials, or lack thereof, the focus of animus is turned away from ordained clergy and instead on to secular graduates of Jesuit universities. "One little known fact," the article claims, "is that few Jesuits actually become priests. Instead, many go on to positions in the political and business world where they quietly influence key legislation or policy decisions." It's not easy to miss the implication. What began with Alberto Rivera's clandestine infiltrations into Protestant churches has since become the foundation for a nefariously mechanistic cabal of global elite, bent on influencing world politics. It may, however, be a little more difficult to catch the subtext. Though applied to the Jesuits, the trope is considerably reminiscent of classic anti-Semitic canards warning against the political infiltration and global domination of institutions by a Jewish cabal.

Whether or not the implication is a consciously intentional one on the part of the author is unknown. Either way, the implication is still there and in fact is doubled down upon.

Jesuit universities claim millions of graduates, yet only about two percent of them ever wear a priestly robe. Instead, many go on to positions in the political and

business world where they quietly influence key legislation or policy decisions...The present Governor Jerry Brown of California trained for at least a while to be a Jesuit priest...The present U.S. Supreme Court contains six Roman Catholic and three Jewish justices. Jesuit university web sites claim that their graduates are involved in world affairs at every level. Based on history, there is no reason to disagree with them. For centuries, in dozens of countries, Jesuit “missionaries” succeeded in worming their way into high government levels. But when it was discovered that their goal was to bring the country under the control of the pope, they were summarily expelled.”¹³⁰

Religiously based, anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories are not necessarily covers for anti-Semitic conspiracies. Yet where anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories appear, anti-Semitic ones are often close by, if not woven into the former. Bringing attention to the number of Catholic and Jewish Supreme Court members is a dog whistle meant to clue in supporters to the conspiracy using familiar and resonant references. Alluding to the religious makeup of the U.S. Supreme Court as not sufficiently Protestant, and thus not representative of an authentic America, is also a complaint made in conspiracy and white nationalist circles and in fact has not gone unnoticed among mainstream Protestants as well, though the latter exhibits considerably less consternation at that fact.¹³¹ To be fair, white nationalist organizations are not likely to be the intended audience for Chick literature and the ministry shows open dismissal and disdain for the opinions of mainline Protestants, whether they agree on certain issues or not.¹³² However, such appeals to

¹³⁰ “Why care about the Jesuits” *Battle Cry*.

<https://www.chick.com/bc/2011/jesuits.asp>. November/December. 2011

¹³¹ Elisha Coffman. “6 Catholics, 3 Jews: Does it matter that there might soon be no Protestants on the Supreme Court?” *Christianity Today*. May 11, 2010.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/mayweb-only/29-22.0.html>

¹³² Nevertheless, The Southern Poverty Law Center, a leading anti-hate advocacy organization, does list Chick Publications as a monitored hate organization. The

representation on the Supreme Court are still meant to strike a shared cultural nerve by exploiting an anxiety over the loss of Protestant dominance and forwarding the “culture war” narrative.¹³³

Historically, Jews and Jewishness has been imagined by non-Jewish populations as a philosophical and theological foil on which to sharpen one’s own identity.¹³⁴ If Jews, as imagined by Christian powers, have historically played the role of Antichrist and anti-society, is it any wonder that those arc hypes, minus the specific religious designation, are so easily appropriated for use against Catholics? This is especially striking when measured against the overwhelmingly, anti-globalist, conspiratorial worldview that many ministries, other than Chick Publications, hold. The following is from an issues page published by Living Waters:

Fifty years ago homosexuality was illegal throughout the entire world, except for Sweden which had decriminalized sodomy in 1938. In the space of just half a century this tiny 1-3% of the population have made themselves a global political power with greater influence in the courtrooms and legislatures of the world than the Church of Jesus Christ. This astonishing transformation surpasses that of Darwinism, Marxism, and even Islam in its speed and breadth of reach.¹³⁵

publishing society is aware of this and has both discussed it in its literature, and on occasion, lampooned it in their tracts.

¹³³ James Davison Hunter. *Culture wars: the struggle to control the family, art, education, law, and politics in America*. (Basic Books, 1992).

¹³⁴ David Nirenberg. *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*. WW Norton & Company, 2013. Introduction.

¹³⁵ Scott Lively. “Gay Marriage as a Sign of the End Times” Quoted by Ray Comfort. “Homosexuality – A Sign of the End of an Age?”
<http://www.livingwaters.com/articles/homosexuality%E2%80%94a-sign-of-the-end-of-the-age>

Note the references to a small but disproportionately powerful global elite exerting its influence through government systems to the detriment of authentic Christianity. Like so many similar statements employed against the Catholic Church, this passage also utilizes terminology which has typically been leveled against an imagined cabal of Jews. The specifics of the cultural identity changes, but the charges and tone of the accusations remains the same.

Stereotype in Image

As such, the language and art of Chick Publications traffics in Jesuit conspiracy and anti-Semitic imagery both with intent of marginalizing Catholicism, and also by setting up a cultural example of what the ministry is not. In this case, that specifically means the ministry is not under the sway of the Vatican, and thus the Devil. Working in concert with the story lines, Chick Publications' artwork is essential to this construction. Anti-Semitic imagery and tropes carry extraordinary cultural currency in their ability to take ingrained historical biases and transpose them onto new target communities.

Chick Publications employ a distinct but recognizable form of artistic depiction in their villains. Individual villains vary, appearing as differing degrees of diabolical characters, sinners and non-believers. Their facial countenance is fairly standard in their depictions, frequently displaying hooked noses, furtive eyes and swarthy skin. Sometimes they feature marks of disease including warts, open sores and excessive sweating. Within the context of the narrative, they usually stand as representatives of some form of temptation. Demons will encourage lust in an unsuspecting victim, bankers will talk farmers into debt, and false religious figures will trick or coerce would-be

Christians into a life of heresy. As is standard, each instance is marked by a general aura of conspiracy and calumny against the Christian civilization and is always used in conjunction with the Chick Tract, anti-Catholic narrative thematic. However, though it's never explicitly stated, the artwork depicting villains regularly uses classic anti-Semitic imagery even though the groups targeted are non-Jewish.

This is possible because the polemic power of anti-Semitism and its ability to generate cultural resonance lies partly its use engagement with narrative and imagery. So potent is this currency that it historically has not even needed actual Jews living in the vicinity to be effective as a negative cultural touchstone.¹³⁶ Centuries of Christian teachings and their exploitation by secular authorities have distilled and engrained a cultural imagining of the evils of Jews and Judaism in the absence of both actual Jews, or even Judaism as a direct polemic target.¹³⁷

These depictions became assimilated into a rhetoric which served as a nebulous, yet concentrated, force consisting of a series of evil manifestations threatening some combination of greed, lechery, slyness, disease and employment by the Devil. Chick Publications' appropriation of these images and classifications are never directly aimed at

¹³⁶ Moore discusses the origin of such imagery and stereotypes in his book, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*. Moore's thesis is that three primary medieval classes—heretics, lepers and Jews—formed an axis around which an emergent, persecuting culture would revolve. Each of these groups, in posing some problem or another for Church and secular authorities, found themselves targeted and depicted in certain ways that were often times interchangeable. In this manner, authority figures managed their power by scapegoating of suspect classes and through the use of interchangeable and demonizing images, depictions and narratives. R.I. Moore. *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*

¹³⁷ For more information see Bernard Glassman, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes Without Jews: Images of the Jews in England, 1290-1700*. Wayne State University Press. 1975

Jews, though in a broad sense everyone who stands apart from their definition of a saved Christian are considered to be under the sway of the Devil.¹³⁸ However, anti-Semitic motifs do appear, particularly in the ministry's artistic depiction of antagonists. Remaining current throughout many tract narratives is the application of the worldwide Catholic conspiracy trope. One of the ministry's most recent tracts, *Still no Revival*, portrays an image of mainstream Protestant ecumenicalism as being the brainchild of a shadowy Catholic plot. On one side of the panel is a televangelist minister, handing the microphone over to a priest. Behind the priest, immersed in shadows, are sinister images of a Pope, Mary and a cloaked inquisitor. The Pope is drawn in a manner reminiscent of European anti-Semitic propaganda, with a swarthy countenance, hooked nose and enclosed in darkness. The panel says in bold, "Christian leaders are drawing closer to the pope." This pronouncement is followed by images of torture at the hands of cloaked clerics with the caption, "Remember the Inquisition?"¹³⁹

¹³⁸In fact, Chick Ministries exudes, if anything, a high degree of philo-Semitism. As such, tracts involving Jews often go to great lengths to portray Jews as beloved by God and thus exempt from most of his religious attacks, if not God's final judgment. However, these images pervade the strips when wielded against nearly every other enemy group. On the rare occasions when Jews do appear in stereotype, it is a less direct stereotyping. The most direct manifestation of Jewish caricature appears as a shtick in "Love the Jewish People" when an Israelite character leaving Egypt complains about having to slaughter the Passover lamb. In an inflection reminiscent of Yiddish caricature, the Israelite mother, in keeping with the "Jewish Mother" trope, nags her reluctant husband, "[a]lright Mr. Unbeliever. I bought this lamb so do your duty as head of this household." "Poor Little Lamb." Jack T. Chick LLC. (2007)

¹³⁹The Pope is depicted with swarthy skin and a hooked nose. "Still no Revival." Jack T. Chick LLC (2011)

The tract, entitled “Death Cookie,” offers a clear example of this interweaving of anti-Catholic narrative with anti-Semitic imagery.¹⁴⁰ All this fits into the ministry’s geopolitical worldview of one-world governments and the Kingdom of the Antichrist. The plot features a fanciful history of the Catholic Church in which two presumed agents of Satan hatch a plan to create a false religion. “How can I gain control...without an army?” one asks. “It’s easy” replies second. “If you can make a man believe that you can put his soul in hell, he’ll do anything to save his skin.” The tract continues with an ongoing dialogue detailing the necessary steps for the implementation of control over a populace. It is determined that the Eucharist, trivialized as a cookie, is set up as an idol awaiting veneration. Its image is reimagined as a pagan symbol of an Egyptian sun god. This new religion takes on a Catholic form by adding false references to Jesus, thus masquerading as Christianity, with the Eucharist idolatrously worshipped as a god in and of itself. “My friend,” the original conspirator says. “If we pull this off, our cookie will become a death cookie for anyone who opposes our holy work.”¹⁴¹

In addition to fusing anti-Semitic tropes and imagery with anti-Jesuit conspiracy theory, some tracts also appropriate historical events of Jewish persecution in the construction of rapture and end times story motifs. This is particularly prominent in “The Last Generation,” a narrative tract imagining an eschatology scenario and drawn in a comic-realist style. “The Last Generation” is similar to many other popular end times representations such as *Left Behind* and *The Late Great Planet Earth*. It depicts a possible

¹⁴⁰ “Death Cookie.” Jack T Chick LLC. No. 79. (1988)

¹⁴¹ Ibid. The implication being that ingesting the Eucharist is effectively a spiritual poison, preventing those who partake from receiving eternal life.

playing out of the events leading up to the rapture including a totalitarian, one-world government and a proliferation of state-enforced, false belief systems. The climax, which ends in the Rapture of the faithful, indicates that the tract takes a premillennial stance on the timing of the imminent Tribulation. It's no accident that this totalitarian vision resonates as familiar because many of the images and plot devices are reminiscent of both dystopian literature and aspects of the Nazi regime. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Chick Publications is particularly adept at evoking Holocaust-related tropes and imagery in their narratives. This is done to a greater degree than other tract publishing organizations and this is certainly the case with "The Last Generation" which also, in keeping with the overall meta-narrative of the Chick universe, identifies the Catholic Church as a dictatorship.

In this not-too-distant future, the world capital has been relocated to Rome, the implication being that the Catholic Church will have a critical role to play in the kingdom of the Antichrist. The orders and edicts emerging from the Roman seat of power are clear. Christianity has been outlawed and its practice warrants a death sentence. The roofs of homes are numbered and under surveillance and the educational system serves the dual purpose of indoctrinating children in the beliefs of the state, and enticing them to turn in subversive relatives. The story itself begins with the convening of a Global Supreme Court. There is a close-up of the chief justice. His pronouncement is unambiguous and sets the tone for the entirety of the tract. "It is the decision of this court [that] anyone who claims that Jesus Christ is the ONLY way to the Father in Heaven shall be committed to a mental camp for treatment or shall be executed." Thus begins the story which is

ultimately a reimagining of the events leading up to the Rapture and Tribulation. The principle story details the worldly indignities which will be visited upon believers in the end of days. The subplot deals with a family of Christians who must contend with the draconian government of the Antichrist, as well as their son Bobby who has fallen under the influence of the government's dangerous doctrine which is being disseminated through the public schools. The tract tells the story of a power struggle between the influence of Bobby's family and a world in moral decline, increasingly under the influence of the Devil. It also practices a distinct use of Nazi imagery. Most notably, the character Little Bobby is dressed in a school uniform which bears marked similarity to the uniforms of the Hitler Youth. In one panel, he raises an arm in an accusation reminiscent of a stiff-armed salute and also threatens another character, his mother, with having her sent to a "concentration camp." This is all to say nothing of the general totalitarian themes of the comic in which characters engage in denunciations of friends and family to state police agencies who are not Nazis in the historical sense but agents of the global Vatican Government.

This marriage of anti-Catholic devices and problematic use of Jewish history are unsurprisingly reflected in the work of Chick Publications' chief anti-Catholic surrogate, Alberto Rivera. While he was alive, Rivera regularly published that the Holocaust itself was orchestrated by the Jesuits and that the event was merely a continuation of the Inquisition, especially as it targeted non-Jews as well. His work, and more current descriptions of his work published by the ministry, lays out his views that the purpose of the Holocaust, horrendous though it was, served mainly as a Jesuit plot to purge the

world of authentic Christianity. In other words, the destruction of Jewish life in Europe was a cover for the real target: Protestant “heretics.”

Dr. Alberto Rivera, ex-Jesuit priest, says ‘holocaust’ is the wrong word. He prefers ‘inquisition.’ ‘The Jews have not let us forget the Nazi slaughter of their people, but no one has continued to remind us of the other four to six million non-Jews also executed,’ he points out.

Bohdan Wytwycky in ‘The Other Holocaust’ documents seven million non-Jewish civilian victims of the Nazi death machine in Poland, Ukraine and Belorussia. Historians suggest that the death camps and gas chambers were used specifically against the Jews, yet no serious investigation has been directed toward this even larger number of non-Jews who were executed. Dr. Rivera states that in his training as a Jesuit he was taught that the Vatican manipulated the Nazi death machine not just against Jews, but more broadly against all ‘heretics.’¹⁴²

Through Rivera, the ministry skirts the line of actual Holocaust denial by penning the phrase “the Jews have not let us forget...” He seems to imply that there is a conscious, concerted effort to elevate Jewish Holocaust victims over other victims of the Nazi regime, or that non-Jewish victims have been purposefully erased from the historical record. This is a common aspect of engaging in Holocaust denial while attempting to avoid controversy and backlash by implying or inserting ambiguity in the historical record and narrative. As Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt recently wrote, this is a form “soft-core Holocaust denial” wherein the Holocaust record undergoes a process of “de-Judaization.” Says Lipstadt, “[soft-core denial] does not deny the facts, but it minimizes them, arguing that Jews use the Holocaust to draw attention away from

¹⁴² “Hitler’s Death Camps...Holocaust or Inquisition.” *BattleCry*. January/February 1989. <http://www.chick.com/bc/1989/holocaustorinquisition.asp>

criticism of Israel.”¹⁴³ Hardcore denial, by contrast, questions and denies specific elements of the Holocaust, or the genocide itself.

Officially, though in a rather convoluted and roundabout way, Rivera and Chick Publications place the onus of responsibility for the Holocaust on the Jesuits. Yet in so doing, they also diminish the Jewish connection to the Holocaust by implying that the entire event was a smokescreen for the ongoing Spanish Inquisition. In Rivera’s case, the purpose is not to maintain that the Holocaust discussion is a calculated cover for the creation of the state of Israel which is a common denier claim.¹⁴⁴ Instead, the focus on Jewish victims to the assumed exclusion of other victims is calculated to obscure the true victims: Protestant Christians.

Just as anti-Semitic imagery and conspiracy theories are hitched to anti-Jesuit counterparts, the Holocaust itself is appropriated for use in the construction of Chick tracts and other literature. Why might this be the case? On the one hand, from a narrative perspective, it makes sense that Chick chooses to invoke the specter of the Holocaust in describing the end of days. This is because of the rhetorical power that comes with alluding to the crimes of the Nazi regime. It is the political quip de rigueur for those who traffic in incendiary, populist speech. In employing such bombastic imagery and allusion,

¹⁴³ Lipstadt differentiates between “soft-core denial” and “hardcore” denial because she views Holocaust denial as a type of “historiographic pornography. Deborah Lipstadt. “The Trump Administrations Flirtations with Holocaust Denial.” *The Atlantic*. January 30, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/the-trump-administrations-softcore-holocaust-denial/514974/>

¹⁴⁴ Deborah Lipstadt. *Denying the Holocaust: the Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. (The Free Press, 1993).

the ministry is really no different from countless other commentators and private citizens across the political spectrum. However, another explanation lies within the pages of Christian Scripture.

Who the persecutors of the Apostles were should not escape notice. By and large, those serving as oppressors to Jesus and His followers make up, within the confines of the Gospel narrative, the Jewish establishment: the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin—and sometimes just "the Jews."¹⁴⁵ By and large, for varying reasons, the New Testament flips the Jewish historical narrative on its head. It is not the Jews who are suffering under Roman occupation—at least not primarily; it is the early Christians fleeing the violent, oppressive, wrongheaded and sometimes satanic Jewish authority. This is reflected not only in the Christian Scriptures but also in the writings of early Church fathers who further extend the blame beyond the often maligned Pharisees and Sanhedrin and on to the Jewish people in their entirety.¹⁴⁶

Chick Tracts' frequent evocation of the Holocaust in depicting their understanding of the run-up to the Tribulation is also a representation of the meta-narrative of the Gospel text in that they depict Christians becoming martyrs in the face of an oppressive regime. Yet more than that, these depictions repurpose historical Jewish suffering, in this case, the Holocaust, to a contemporary, politically Christian end. The same is also true of Rivera's minimizing the Jewish connection to the events by labeling the Holocaust a continuation of the Inquisition, his rhetoric aimed at all enemies of the Catholic Church.

¹⁴⁵ Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 55

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

By using such imagery in conjunction with the pre-Tribulation story, they are in essence appropriating the Holocaust to generate an identity commiserate with the imagined suffering of the Apostles and martyrs. For Rivera, Chick Publications and individuals who share their views, suffering to the degree witnessed during the Holocaust is inconceivable not only because of the scope and quality of the horrors perpetrated, but also because the non-Christian nature of the core group of victims runs counter to the self-conception of the would-be martyrs of the end times. The unspeakable scale of suffering caused by the event must on some level be evocative of the Tribulation. The problem is that the primary victims weren't Christians. Such a reality can't square with a self-understanding which posits that Christians "will be hated by all" but in such hatred and persecution will receive salvation. The Holocaust therefore can be seen as a run-up to the Tribulation, the final event of persecution which will mark the salvation of the world's true martyrs.

What this ultimately represents is the age-old concept of Christian Supersessionism. That idea, that the ministry and covenant of Christ makes the previous Mosaic covenant with the Israelites obsolete, also frames the Jewish Biblical tradition as a narrative run-up to the Crucifixion and Resurrection.¹⁴⁷ The traditional framework posits that the Jewish story is effectively over, and the Christian Church is the seat of

¹⁴⁷ Thomas Breidenthal. "Neighbor-Christology: Reconstructing Christianity before supersessionism." *CrossCurrents* (1999): 319-348. (320)

God's historical presence in the world.¹⁴⁸ However, the thematic elements of martyrdom and persecution so heavily represented in the Chick library situate this notion in both the contemporary era and the imagined future. It is not merely the Israelite covenant that Christians have access to; it is also the historically forged identities of Israel as well. Moreover, story lines like those in "The Last Generation" and other similar depictions of the Tribulation supersede Jewish memory of the Holocaust and other traumas and reimagine them as ordeals for Christian martyrs in the Last Days.

The strong premillennialist disposition of Chick Publications insists that these events will transpire sooner rather than later—maybe have even begun. Global and political current events are interpreted as being forewarnings of the Rapture and subsequent Tribulation. A major element of that belief system is the understanding that the End is marked by an overwhelming presence of apostasy which will have such a high degree of organized, global political power, that authentic Christians will come to be hated by the rest of society and will eventually become subject to persecution. Given the belief that the prophetic words of the Bible are playing out in the current historical era, it is not only global events which signify the truth of God's Word; it is also present in negative interactions accrued during the missionary process. This narrative of marginalization is backed by Scripture. Matthew 10:22 states, "And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved." This verse and the theology which derives from it is an essential component in understanding why

¹⁴⁸ F. Littell, 1973. *The Crucifixion of the Jews*. 30. Cited in Kim, Lloyd. *Polemic in the Book of Hebrews: Anti-Judaism, Anti-Semitism, Supersessionism?*. Vol. 64. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006. 6.

many conservative evangelicals feel alienated from mainstream culture and why Chick Ministries in particular utilize that alienation in the construction of a sense of self. Missionaries act out the evangelism of the apostles and read the social difficulties inherent in that process as the incipient stages of a prophesied suffering. This constructs a position of outsider which harmonizes neatly with their interpretation of the religious duties and social positions of Christians in the final days.

Many contemporary Christians, particularly American, conservative, evangelical Protestants, identify with these two interwoven tropes. They see themselves as disciples of Christ, tasked with the same Great Commission as the Apostles. For them, the physical process of evangelism functions as an articulation of an ideal Christian identity which allows them to perform as the Apostles themselves.¹⁴⁹ They also carry the knowledge that such behavior will stir up anger among those who are targeted to hear the message. That reaction, too, correlates with Scripture and reinforces their identities. The thought process is as follows: "Like the Apostles I am tasked with fulfilling the Great Commission. When I do it, I am persecuted, as were the Apostles. Such persecution is also a fulfillment of scriptural prophesy." The actions and beliefs of tract missionaries allow them to "live" Scripture and reinforce their Christian conservative identity. Following in the footsteps of the Apostles becomes an ideal Christian activity. They are not just speaking the Word; they are living it, literally, through both the distribution of the Gospel, as well as the

¹⁴⁹ Plummer, Robert L. "The Great Commission in the New Testament." *The Challenge of the Great Commission: Essays on God's Mandate for the Local Church* (2005): 33-47.

perceived social backlash which often occurs. From their perspective, part of spreading the Gospel involves standing against “immoral” social norms. Therefore, it also means suffering socially for these actions and potentially even risking their lives. Their activities, which are necessarily oppositional to dominant social mores, is itself a physical representation of the evangelism understood through such an interpretation of Scripture.

Chapter 3

It's Only a Tract: the Agency of Sacred Matter in a Secular World

It's a clear summer morning at the Huntington Beach pier in Huntington Beach, California. Cars pass through the intersection of Pacific Coast Highway and Main Street and beach goers, both tourists and locals, ride by on bicycles and carry surfboards along the boardwalk. In the center of Pier Plaza, a moderately-sized crowd has gathered around popular evangelist Ray Comfort, who is standing on a step stool, against a lamppost. He is separated from the crowd by a seven-foot, semicircle buffer zone, marked by a chalk boundary which he himself drew earlier in the morning. Comfort is animatedly giving his "Good Person" sermon. He peppers his subject, a college-age man who is standing outside the circle, with questions. "Are you a good person?" he asks. "Have you ever told a lie?" "Well, yeah." The man replies. Then you're a liar!" Comfort shouts. "Have you ever stolen?" The man answers affirmatively. "Then you're a thief as well!" The encounter progresses for about ten minutes as Comfort deftly walks through his familiar steps: morality test, Law, damnation, Resurrection and Salvation. At the end of the sermon, he reaches over the chalk line and hands the man a tract, thanking him for his participation. The audience offers a polite smattering of applause.

At its heart, the practice of handing out tracts is about transgressing boundaries, particularly when crossing them carries with it the threat of interacting with sin. In a worldview where religious and cultural identities are delineated between Christian and un-Christian, pure and impure, distributing literature provides the missionary with a mechanism for social interaction. The tracts serve as a physical marker of spiritual

protection. It is a means by which one can be clothed in the armor of the spirit and protected from the corrupting and corrosive influences of the world. Such protection is of the utmost necessity when such engagement is not a choice but is required under biblical authority. It is thus impossible for Christians to completely avoid interacting with non-saved communities and individuals from both a scriptural standpoint, as well as a practical one.¹⁵⁰

Evangelical tract missionaries rarely behave as world-rejecting movements though their theology explicitly rejects the “world” in its entirety. That is to say that what is rejected is what the secular world represents and offers in terms of values which is deemed contrary to their understanding of morality and modernity. Given that, their rejection is somewhat qualified and rarely implies a completely physical withdrawal. For instance, modernity doesn’t necessarily imply a rejection of technology. Quite the contrary, American evangelicals are famous for their embrace of technological mediums which, while interfacing with the secular world, prove an effective avenue for messaging and ministry.¹⁵¹ This is evidenced in the early to mid twentieth century radio dominance of Aimee Semple McPherson or the relatively recent proliferation of televangelism. What may seem at first glance to be a withdrawal from secular society is in fact a tension between what Grant Wacker calls the “primitive and the pragmatist.” In other words, evangelical identity can partly be characterized by an expression of holiness which, for

¹⁵⁰ Heather Hendershot. *Shaking the world for Jesus: Media and conservative evangelical culture*. (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 11

¹⁵¹ Grant Wacker. *Heaven below: early Pentecostals and American culture*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

the purposes of evangelism, can be tempered by intermingling one's work with practical strategies.¹⁵²

In any case, this rejection of the world is a selective rejection. Embracing many of the practical and technological trappings of modern society, such as mass communication and medicine, is rarely seen in all but some of the most remote apostolic congregations and only then, it varies depending on the individual.¹⁵³ As such, it is not uncommon to hear or read the old joke about the motor boat and the stranded women repurposed to websites, tracts and evangelical manuals in the form of a spiritual parable.¹⁵⁴ The purpose here is to highlight that God is at work even in things that would not seem overtly spiritual, holy or miraculous. The world and much of its secularity, both technological and mundane, can be interacted with in the pursuance of the Gospel.

Tract missionaries and the umbrella publishers by and large profess a religious outlook which sees the world as morally unredeemable. Salvation, therefore, can only be

¹⁵² Ibid., 10.

¹⁵³ Some members of "serpent handling" Apostolic churches in rural Appalachia have been known to refuse medical attention, or have it administered against their wishes following a snake bite in the performance of the handling ritual. Ralph Hood, Jr. and W. Paul Williamson. *Them that Believe: the power and meaning of the Christian serpent handling tradition*. (University of California Press, 2008), 141-144.

¹⁵⁴ Following a hurricane, an old woman is stranded on her roof, surrounded by rising flood waters. A small motor boat approaches and the operator offers to rescue the woman. "Go on to someone else" she tells him, "God will provide." This occurs at least twice more until finally, the water overtakes her. Annoyed, she confronts Jesus upon gaining entrance into heaven. "Hey there" she accuses Him. "I thought you were going to provide for me. "Lady," Jesus responds, "I sent you three boats. What more did you need?"

found on an individual level and requires a full transformation of the convert's identity.¹⁵⁵ Such conditions necessarily create tension. Interaction with the world invites danger and impurity and the threat of spiritual regression, often referred to as "backsliding." Nevertheless, scriptural requirements mandate an engagement with secularity in order to win converts in the fight against darkness—an action which reifies their own pure identity.

This, however, poses something of a quandary for the would-be tract missionary. The primary function of the tract is to serve as a vehicle for the distribution of the Gospel. Naturally this requires, on the part of the missionary, interaction with that same impure world. It does neither the saved distributor, nor the unsaved sinner, any good for the former to withhold Jesus' message. It may not be a sin in and of itself, but the lack of motivation and "zeal" for God can also lead to backsliding.¹⁵⁶ At the very least, it is considered a socially moral act, akin to offering food to a starving person. Food nourishes the hungry and the Gospel leads the lost home. Nineteenth century British evangelist, Charles Spurgeon was known for saying, "When anyone dies, I ask myself, 'Was I faithful?' Did I speak the truth? And did I speak it from my very soul each time I

¹⁵⁵ W. Michael Ashcraft. *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader*. (NYU Press, 2005), 8.

¹⁵⁶ "If you never have sleepless hours, if you never have weeping eyes, if your hearts never swell as if they would burst, you need not anticipate that you will be called zealous. You do not know the beginning of the true zeal, for the foundation of Christian zeal lies in the heart. The heart must be vehement with desire, panting continually for God's glory, or else we shall never attain anything like the zeal that God would have us know." Charles Spurgeon in Ray Comfort. *The Blue Book on Evangelism*. Living Waters Publications. 27.

preached?”¹⁵⁷ For committed evangelicals, saving others is almost as important as saving one’s self.

This is the conundrum tract missionaries, especially the new ones, have. Being born again signifies an old self dying to the world. Someone born apart from the world desires to keep their new selves clear of the corruption and impurities of their former lives. However, reentering the world as a messenger for God is considered the highest calling. It is both a spiritual and a moral requirement. Thus, from an evangelical perspective, the beauty of the tract is in its simplicity. Fully cognizant of the anxieties inherent in missionary work, tract evangelism enthusiasts advocate their distribution as an easy and effective way for both new and shy Christians to fulfill their spiritual responsibilities.

Evangelists such as Ray Comfort are aware that the social anxieties engendered by public preaching are psychological in nature and cause social discomfort in most missionaries. They’re also aware of the discomfort and annoyance their actions cause in those to whom they preach. Comfort describes his first open air preaching session thus:

The first time I open-air preached in the U.S. was off a trash bin at Waikiki in Hawaii. Shortly after that I wandered among the sun bathers and said, ‘Hello, folks. My name is Ray. It must be a dream to lie on this famous beach and enjoy the warmth of the Hawaiian sun...and it probably would be a nightmare for a preacher to suddenly stand up and preach to you. But I have something extremely important to tell you, and I will be as quick as I can.’

Taking in this description, it becomes obvious that there are numerous elements that would seemingly deter a new missionary, even one who would have as illustrious a

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 51

career as Comfort. Most obviously, there is the social unease Comfort causes by admittedly pestering sunbathers. Remember, this part of the encounter occurs after the formal performance of the public sermon. Comfort is intruding on their individual vacation spaces so as to preach the Gospel. Furthermore, he is at Waikiki Beach. One might safely assume that the sunbathers he's witnessing to are not fully clothed. Waikiki is no church. It is a profane space and the worldly influences, most apparently sexuality, carry the risk of encouraging sin and backsliding on the part of the missionary, of rendering him unclean. As if to drive this point home, Comfort's memory is published next to a picture of the event. He is standing, Bible in hand, atop a large garbage bin clearly marked "Trash."¹⁵⁸

There is a relationship between the inherent, psychological fears of social interaction and the spiritual fears of impurity. Social anxiety and flailing motivations are the immediate symptoms of a larger spiritual problem: that interaction with those unsaved persons might at best demoralize, and at worst inspire temptation to sin. Thus, to bring others to a life of purity, and an eternal salvation, one must risk the impurity of the world which can manifest as either social anxiety or active temptation. For new converts, passively distributing tracts is the safest way to do this. Distribution requires as little direct social interaction as the missionary likes. A new missionary can begin comfortably by merely leaving tracts in public spaces. Direct, person to person preaching can happen later, if at all.

¹⁵⁸ R. Comfort. *The Way of the Master*. (Bridge Logos Foundation, 2006), 3.

In instances where would-be missionaries require or desire a less conspicuous method of messaging, tracts essentially do the talking for the missionary. Tracts left behind in well-trod public spaces are sometimes referred to as “getaway tracts.”¹⁵⁹ Getaway tracts keep people occupied while the missionary can escape. Ultimately, the missionary is merely a messenger for God’s word. The active agency which allows the tract to be seen lies within the tract itself. Both modern and historical producers of tracts have frequently made this claim. A poem originally printed by the Full Salvation Tract Society speaks to this phenomenon:

Only a tract
It’s only a tract! You may tear it,
And crumble it up in your hand;
The wind as it passes may bear it
And scatter it over the land.
It’s only a tract! You may spurn it,
And deem it unworthy a thought;
May ridicule, trample and burn it,
Despise it and set it at naught.
It’s only a tract! But it telleth
Of holiness, happiness, heaven;
Where God in eternity dwelleth
With sinners His love has forgiven.
It speaks of a future of glory,
Of present enjoyment and bliss;
And will you neglect such a story,
So loving, so joyous as this?
It whispers, “No matter how hardened,
No matter how vile you’ve been.
You may at this moment be pardoned,
And saved from the burden of sin.”
It points to the Substitute dying,
The Sinless for sinners like you.

¹⁵⁹ David H. Troyer. *Tracts and Evangelism*. (Self Published, 2008), 39.

Oh, soul on His merits relying,
Come prove that its message is true!
It is but a tract, yet its warning
Is whispered in Jesus own voice;
And at thy acceptance or scorning,
Either Heaven or Hell will rejoice!¹⁶⁰

In 1908, this poem also appeared in a copy of the *Gospel Herald*, a Pennsylvania-based Christian newsletter and almanac which still exists today in the form of a fairly standard-looking evangelical website. Alongside the poem, the *Herald* writes, “[w]e believe that great good can be accomplished by these little messengers. Will you help send them to the ‘ends of the earth?’” Among contemporary missionaries and tract societies, these sentiments remain. In a Living Waters video, celebrity affiliate Kirk Cameron speaks to the importance of tract evangelism. “We live in the age of information. Every day new devices are invented to help us communicate with each other in easier and faster ways. But in spite of all the social networking and all the electronic gadgetry, there’s one non-electric method of communication that remains consistent as a highly effective way to communicate the Gospel quickly and painlessly. Behold the Gospel tract.” Later in the same video, Ray Comfort appears describing the relatively minor role of the missionary, placing emphasis instead on the tract. “You can just throw this on the ground...you can just put this on your neighbor’s door knob and run.”¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ “Only a Tract” *Gospel Herald Vol 1 No 5*. Full Salvation Tract Society. 1908. Found on Papergreat: the World of Books, Ephemera and Knowledge, one piece of paper at a time. January 6, 2013. <http://www.papergreat.com/2013/01/only-tract-from-full-salvation-tract.html>

¹⁶¹ “Can I have another one?” Living Waters. June 28, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDLmQuKht5U>

In both historic and contemporary examples, a greater degree of agency is often placed on the tract itself, or even an inactive or neutral “missionary.” The agency of the missionary is largely superseded by the agency of the Holy Spirit. The regular responsibilities for a Bible-believing Christian are to do the work of evangelism themselves, or with other like-minded individuals as the situation warrants. However, should this become overly stressful or taxing, the very nature of the media allows the tracts to function as a pair of Gospel training wheels. The ease and stealth through which they are delivered spare the missionary uncomfortable social encounters and maximize the chance of a positive encounter with a receptive reader.

The testimonials of contemporary individual missionaries reflect the ease with which tracts can be distributed and the variety of spaces they occupy. A posting on an online message board reads:

I am shy naturally, so I carry Chick tracts with me wherever I go. I leave them everywhere...library, school, on people's cars, grocery store, beach, other cities...even in the ladies'/public restroom. The strangest place I had to witness was in my neighborhood. Four years ago, my little sister and I went throughout the whole neighborhood by ourselves inviting people to church and giving them tracts (I was 12 then, and she was 10), and I had to witness to an elderly man, because he was asking questions. At first I was fearful (like a deer caught in the beams of oncoming headlights), but my little sister said a silent prayer for me and I came through just fine. He ended up coming to our church and the pastor preached about Salvation that day of all things. :) Now I just go on visitation with my Pastor and several other people from our church. We go doorknocking and witness to people and invite them to our church. Oh yeah, I still leave those Chick tracts everywhere.¹⁶²

¹⁶² Author: “The Third Link” July 27, 2004.

<https://www.christianforums.com/threads/strangest-places-youve-ever-witnessed-at.672514/page-3>

In fact, this post sparked a lively argument over the merits of using Chick Tracts as an evangelical tool. Another user responded, “Erm, no offense, but... you actually believe those Chick tracts? Those make me laugh so hard they bring tears to my eyes. They are written by a pathetic liar named Jack Chick who hates God's Church. He claims the Vatican is the Beast, but I would like to see his proof to back those claims.” This user was in turn answered at a later date: “I don't know if you have read this tract *This Was Your Life* by Jack Chick but it's a pretty accurate presentation of the Gospel. I would ask that would you please not go around badmouthing fellow Christians just because you don't agree with their views.”

Besides being a simple method of proselytizing for novice or worried evangelists, tracts also intersect with the public sphere and public acts of religion. Most street preachers also hand out tracts. Yet the space for emphasis between distributing literature and speaking to the multitudes is easy to blur. The idea of performance is ultimately what links public preaching with tract distribution. Both performances enter public spaces to offer a Christian message of salvation, differing only in their specific forms. Whether a missionary is preaching in the open air, or passively handing out literature, they are fulfilling the Great Commission and their responsibility as a Christian. In each act, they have ventured out into the world, to bring the Gospel to a helplessly sinful humanity. These activities serve as the ultimate confirmation of faith to those performing them. Their actions fulfill scriptural commandments, publicly mark their identities, and simultaneously fulfill commandments related to both faith and works. Evangelism is both the most important work and also clear evidence of faith.

It doesn't escape the notice of either the casual observer, or the veteran missionary, that the stakes are higher for the street preacher than for the tract distributor. Still, street preaching and tract distribution share many elements of overlap. While tracts may be a convenient entrance into evangelistic life, they remain a critical element of witnessing for even more experienced missionaries, if only to act as examples for new converts and newly revitalized Christians.

Living Waters affiliate Trisha Ramos demonstrates this in her web series, "Two Minute Evangelism Tips." The aim of her ministry is to encourage greater evangelical participation by illustrating her own creative methods for tract distribution. In one video she demonstrates how an untrained missionary can spread the Gospel while ordering fast food. "... [W]hat we're going to do is something that you'll be able to do really quick when you stop for fast food."... "I'm going to order and hopefully someone's going to pull up behind me...and I'll show you what to do next. This is really easy, you can do this too." "Excuse me" she asks the drive-through attendant. "Can you tell me how much for the order for the car behind me?" Turning to the camera, and the audience, she quietly says, "I'm going to pay their bill. So watch what I'm gonna (*sic*) do...I'm going to give this guy a tract and tell him to give the car behind me a tract as well. And guess what? They've got their meal paid for and they've got a tract. Hopefully that will cause them to read the tract and give glory to God...Yay that's so exciting!" she exclaims while clapping once the exchange is made.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Trish Ramos. "Evangelism Drive-through Two Minute Top." *Fishing With Trish*. <http://www.fishwithtrish.com/tips.php>. October, 2 2008.

At the bottom of her video page, Ramos presents her viewers with a challenge. “If you have never passed out a tract, I would like to extend a personal challenge to you. You have one week from the time you read this to pass out *one* single tract... If don't have any tracts you can purchase them at Living Waters. They have the best tracts I've ever seen. Then when your tracts arrive, you have one week from the time they arrive to pass out your first tract.” She ends the challenge with a call for viewers and readers to submit their stories, which they do enthusiastically.

Some sample testimonials from her website are as follows:

I am totally itching to share my faith, but I'm so shy I just don't know how. So I usually end up feeling guilty because Christ gave His life for me and I can't even bring myself to talk about it. So I took you up on your challenge last week, and on my very last day I finally made sure I actually had a tract with me and gave it to the K-Mart cashier. (Karen)

I am very shy, and would never have dreamed I could witness. I have been encouraged by listening to The Way of the Master to start sharing my faith. I now give out million dollar bills when I go to Wal-mart or the grocery store. God can use even shy people! (Deanna)

Well, I did it!!!! Twice! First, my husband and I were at a gas station and I just walked up to this girl and handed her a million dollar bill. She looked at me like I just fell off of Mars, but she took it. Second, I was at another gas station, which was full service. I didn't realize it was full service, but God did. (The Lindeman Family)

Our church walks the town of Butler, PA one Saturday a month passing out tracts and talking with people. My two daughters and I participate in this. We put one in

every open car window we see, we visit every public restroom we can and leave them in the stalls, pass them out to people in the library (who are already reading anyway), give one to everyone in the laundromat, put Big Daddy in evolution books at the library. We carry Chick tracts with us everywhere and give them to everyone who will take them. Tape one to your electric or gas meter for the meterreader. K. K., Pennsylvania

Gospel tracts help ease the interactions between evangelists and the members of the mainstream society to whom they are tasked with witnessing. In this matter they operate both functionally and doctrinally. The physical distribution of tracts facilitates an ease of interaction that eludes all but the most gregarious evangelists. Through tracts, the deliverance of the Gospel requires only the most minimal interaction in the passing of one from one hand to another. Often, even this degree of interaction is unnecessary. Leaving tracts out in public locations is a perfectly viable technique for those too shy or nervous to preach directly and many publishers and missionaries point to testimonials discussing this. One wrote, “I’ve been in the tract ministry for years and sure love to pass out...tracts. They have grabbing stories which cannot help but to be read. I put them everywhere because I’m too shy to talk to people. I am not very good with my words but I love everyone and don’t want anyone to go to hell for eternity. I couldn’t wish that on my worst enemy.”¹⁶⁴

Tracts, Dirt and Purity

Conceptions of purity are, in essence, constructions of social boundaries and in that capacity, determinants of communal identity. If intra-community members designate

¹⁶⁴ “You can be a good witness. Chick Tracts can help and it’s fun too.” Chick Publications. <http://www.chick.com/cartoons/witness.asp>

their community as pure, then by definition, the presence of outside social influences constitute “dirt,” what sociologist Mary Douglas has defined as “matter out of place.”¹⁶⁵ The Book of Acts provides an interesting scriptural example of purity being tied to in- and out-group, communal identity. In a double vision shared by both Peter and the gentile Centurion Cornelius, an angel appears before this pious Roman and tasks him with delivering a message to Peter. Cornelius is approached for his faith and piety, despite the fact that he is uncircumcised and therefore deemed unclean. For his part, Peter, while hungry, witnessed an enormous sheet in the sky which held a variety of animals, many of which were not kosher. Peter was told to “slay and eat,” and initially he considered the vision as a test of his adherence to Jewish dietary law and refuses to eat as he is commanded. However, he is reproached by heaven, “What God has pronounced clean, you are not to regard as common.” Set straight, Peter understands the gist of the divine message. He eventually tells Cornelius, “You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to associate with or visit a foreigner; and to me God has shown that one is to call no human being common or unclean.”¹⁶⁶ Scripturally speaking, early Christian approaches to purity were malleable in form if not intent. Purity requirements and meanings could be breached in favor of the expansion of the Church and therefore the proliferation of the Gospel message.¹⁶⁷

Nevertheless, the danger inherent in such transgression is not to be ignored. Mary Douglas helped illuminate the social ramifications of this phenomenon when she

¹⁶⁵ Douglas. *Purity and Danger*, 30

¹⁶⁶ Acts 10:28

¹⁶⁷ Countryman, Louis William. *Dirt, greed, and sex*. (Fortress Press, 1988), 66-

famously wrote: “danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is indefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others.”¹⁶⁸ This is above all a construction of social boundaries in which permissible interactions and behaviors of respective bodies are mediated by a fear of dirt and a desire to preserve purity. “The social body contains the way the physical body is perceived.”¹⁶⁹ As such, purity and the striving for cleanliness does not necessarily imply a literal fear of contamination—though it certainly can—but is also an exercise in maintaining an ordered and contained society. As such, the human body must be treated as a social body—that is to say, a body that is reflective of the structures, values and boundaries of a given community.¹⁷⁰

Whether passing out tracts or engaging in direct evangelism, the very act of carrying the Gospel into the world invites both hostility and the threat of impurity. Yet while such social interactions invite impurity, the presence of the Word serves as a spiritual armor protecting the subject from the corrosive threats of secularity. Such metaphysical conflicts are sometimes used to explain the struggle to overcome social anxiety and the fear of approaching strangers with the Gospel.

From an evangelical perspective, the world is a dirty place. It is tainted by violence, declension, sexual impropriety and financial corruption. Many believe that it is ripe for the culmination of the events of the apocalypse. However, until the events of the Revelation occur, mundane activities such as shopping, car maintenance, work and

¹⁶⁸ Mary Douglas. *Dirt and Purity: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 60.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 70

traveling are still required. For many missionaries and even laity who wish to begin the process of evangelism, these ordinary activities offer a unique and accessible, but low-impact opportunity to speak the Gospel. Interacting with various service personnel provide the individual with a captive, if ambiguously receptive, audience. Often bound by company rules and cultures of politeness and customer service, workers such as fast food employees and grocery checkers are less likely to push back against the Gospel message than people out for a walk on a weekend afternoon.

Such encounters are often documented by missionaries on video and uploaded to personal websites and video hosting sites such as YouTube. The missionary in one such video is a young white man, and he looks about twenty-four or twenty-five years old. He's wearing a worn, red hoodie and keeps his blond hair short. He wears glasses and speaks with a midwestern accent. He is passing out money tracts in a shopping mall. The first place he places one on is in an empty kiosk shelf. The second tract he passes out, he folds "to look like real money." "You fold it up like this," he says, demonstrating his method. The tract really does look like a bill from someone's wallet. He drops the tract. "[You] just drop it on the floor. And somebody will find it even if it's just the person who's cleaning up the floor." The camera cuts to the mall restroom. The young man demonstrates how a tract can be left on the sink, on the paper dispenser or in the seat cover box. Ultimately he places another one on the sink. The film cuts again to a middle-aged, heavy-set white, blonde woman descending an escalator. At the ground floor of the mall, she takes a seat, looks around, pulls a tract out of her purse, places it on the bench and departs. Spy music is quietly playing on the soundtrack denoting the low impact,

clandestine nature of their activity. The two missionaries continue throughout the mall, leaving tracts on lobby tables, ATMs, vending machines, photo booths, and, significantly, on the edge of trash cans.¹⁷¹ Most of these places are overwhelmingly mundane and many, such as mall toilets, sink counters and trash receptacles, are overtly polluting. In this, the video is reminiscent of Ray Comfort's description of his early preaching experiences. His choice of location is important because the Waikiki beach represents the type of worldly distractions that tempt one to sin, not unlike the secular commerce of a shopping mall. Yet more fascinating, as if to personally illustrate the delineation between the purity of the Gospel and the impurity of the world, Comfort stands on a garbage bin clearly labeled, "Trash."

While not all distribution sites, intentional or otherwise, are marked by the overt presence of dirt and impurity, they do share a common characteristic: they are not recognized as sacred spaces. They are characterized by being mundane, ordinary, secular and profane; and for many tract missionaries, this characterization is indicative of the taint of sin. Indeed, some publishers also advocate distribution in both evangelical and non-evangelical churches. In the former case, they can be picked up by a non-saved member, or they can be redistributed later on. In the latter instance, some missionaries make it very clear that Catholics in particular and main line Protestants in general are, by virtue of lacking a distinct experience of conversion, in need of saving as well.

From the point of view of the publishers and their missionaries, these are not sacred spaces; these are the places of the world and, as such, share characteristics with a

¹⁷¹ Chad Owens. "How to pass out a Gospel tract." Youtube.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSpZIRlOEYs>. May 26, 2009.

general conception of a tarnished humanity. Regardless, all non-evangelical spaces are prime locations for distribution and the more public, like a park or city plaza, the better. These are border places where human occupancy is both transitive and temporary. As liminal spaces, they represent boundaries that anyone in profane society might cross. All the while, this open character of liminal spaces poses, to the saved missionary, the possibility and threat of sin.

Sin creates spaces which the Gospel and tracts in particular can transgress. Tracts function as pockets of holiness in an impure space. They are mobile batteries of the pure and sacred. Tracts transform a profane space into a sacred one, thus allowing the missionary to transgress those secular boundaries. The motif which plays upon the interactions of dirt and purity are also prevalent in Chick Ministries' testimonial literature. "I found a Chick tract in the restroom in high school..." says one testimonial. "...I was saved from reading it." Another recounts, "A lady came out of the ladies room in a fancy restaurant holding one of your tracts that I had just put in there, tears streaming down her face. Her makeup was a mess. I believe she was under conviction from the message in that tract." It is further displayed under the heading, "Maybe this will happen to you." Though not in a restroom, one testimonial reads, "In 1989 I was depressed and even suicidal. I was walking the streets of Nashville one night and I happened upon THIS WAS YOUR LIFE! laying on a grease spot in a parking lot. I read it, threw it down and then came back and read it again. In the months that followed I repented and was

saved.”¹⁷² The tract in this instance is explicitly juxtaposed with the impurity of both the grease stain, and the individual’s guilty state. Its Gospel message is too pure to be obscured by grease and human emotional frailty. The newly saved individual not only notices and reads the soiled pamphlet; he or she—after discarding it—returns the next day and becomes saved.

Waters harmonizes the commandment against adultery with two important passages from Matthew and Corinthians in order to highlight the emphasis placed on purity, both of body and soul. A recent text tract, “Are you Good Enough to go to Heaven?” asks:

Who of us can say that we are *pure* of heart? Jesus warned, ‘Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.’ (Matt. 5:28). God has seen every thought you have had and every sin you have ever committed. The day will come when you will have to face His Law, and we are told that the *impure*, fornicators (those who have sex before marriage), and adulterers will not enter the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9, 10).¹⁷³

For those unfamiliar with these scriptural passages and teachings, the implications can be shocking in their starkness. Spiritual impurity derives not only from sinful behaviors, but from sinful thoughts as well. Thus, from an evangelical perspective when Jesus implores the removal of the log from one’s own eye, it is not only to admonish one against unfair judgment, but to awaken all to their sinful nature. Hypocrisy is not the sin in itself; it is a symptom of sin.

¹⁷² “You can be a Good Witness. Chick Tracts can Help. And it’s Fun Too!” <http://www.chick.com/cartoons/witness.asp>

¹⁷³ Ray Comfort. “Are you Good Enough to Go to Heaven?” *Living Waters*. <http://store.livingwaters.com/are-you-good-enough-to-go-to-heaven.html>. (2015) Emphasis mine.

Similar legal discourse generates significant currency across the wide range of Living Waters' outreach products. Broadly laid out, they maintain that sin is a civil crime, the punishment for which is extravagantly exorbitant. The defendant is obligated to serve the punishment and pay the fine. However, at the last minute, a stranger steps in and offers to pay the fine out of abiding love. Unsurprisingly, this "stranger" is meant to signify Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross for the sins of humankind.

To make clear what an incredible thing He has done for you, let's look again to civil law: You are standing in front of a judge, guilty of *very* serious crimes. All the evidence has been presented and there is no doubt about your guilt. The fine for your crime is \$1,000,000 or life imprisonment, but you haven't two pennies to rub together. The judge is about to pass sentence . . . he lifts his gavel, *when someone you don't even know steps in and pays the fine for you*. Justice has been served, the law has been satisfied, and you are now free to go. What's more, the one who paid your fine showed how much he cares for you. His payment was evidence of his love...That's what God did for you, 2,000 years ago. He sent His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, to pay your death penalty in your place. Jesus died on the cross on your behalf, so that you could live. You are guilty; He paid the fine. *It is that simple*. (Original emphasis)¹⁷⁴

The tracts justify the apparently disproportionate fines for the crimes of sin by referring to the idea that human law is flawed and "impure" and that God's Law is perfect and "pure" is illustrated in the tract, *Are you Good Enough to go to Heaven?*¹⁷⁵ This tract

¹⁷⁴ Ibid

¹⁷⁵ In addition to understanding transgressions against God's law as creating impurity, the legal language and jargon might also be meant to appeal to audiences with legal troubles. Broadening the analogy to include both traffic and civil transgressions, Living Waters expand the definition of criminal behavior by using different legal categories to illustrate the broad nature of sin.

elaborates on the theme throughout its exegesis and offers a parable to drive the point home:

A little girl was once watching sheep grazing and thought how white they looked against the green background. But when it began to snow she thought, ‘The sheep now look *dirty* against the white snow!’ It was the same sheep, but with a different background. When we compare ourselves to *man’s* standard we look pretty clean, but when we compare ourselves to the pure snow-white righteousness of *God’s* standard, His moral Law, we can see ourselves in truth: that we are unclean in His sight. The Bible says it is appointed for men to die once and then face judgment, and that Law is the holy standard by which humanity will be judged on Judgment Day.¹⁷⁶

Yet again, the state of sin, or even the threat of impurity, draw a line of separation between a society determined to be of God and one designated to be human. In this instance the demarcating language takes the form of the jargon of moral law as well as secular. Most obviously, the tract uses the Ten Commandments, and their scriptural harmonies, to demonstrate the difference of standards between God’s perfect law and the flawed and corruptible law of humanity. Yet the tract also extends the metaphor to incorporate aspects of the civil justice system and the emotional and religious impact is increased by associating the breaking of a civil law with notions of uncleanness. If the fact that the breaking of a civil law essentially results in damnation seems harsh, it should. The key idea is that what is seems harsh to our limited human understanding, is just according to the Law of God. What seems pure and clean is, according to God’s approach to sin, dirty and tainted. Even the smallest transgression invites sin and thus impurity.

¹⁷⁶ Ray Comfort. “Are you Good Enough to Go to Heaven?” *Living Waters*. <http://store.livingwaters.com/are-you-good-enough-to-go-to-heaven.html>. (2015)

Within this context dirt is an essential signifier of sin from both a narrative and a visual perspective because the presence of dirt provokes an instantaneous association with impurity. The language and imagery of dirt and purity allow for a visceral understanding of sin as a social transgression because they also evoke anxiety over defilement of the body itself. These narratives and images conceive of sin as more than a mere moral failing. Instead sin portrayed as a physical agent of defilement drives home the seriousness of its nature. Placing a greater emphasis on human law over divine by necessity places a higher value on the human self as opposed to God. Because the human self is inherently flawed and tainted through Original Sin, so too is secular authority. Moreover, the pollution flows both ways. Placing undue emphasis on non-divine law, society and authority also invites those forces and institutions into the worldviews of human beings. The moral precariousness of the human condition is what makes human society flawed. Such flaws are further reinforced by engaging in secular society to any degree more than is absolutely necessary. Drawing a distinction between divine and human law and society is essential to this paradigm because these metaphors about the impurity of society are extended to imply a defilement of the individual body.

What is happening here is partially in keeping with Douglas' understanding of the relationship between the body and society. Douglas maintains that social boundaries and rules against transgression often manifest in cultural narratives related to impurity of the body. Bodily functions deemed impure or unclean can be used and have been used historically to reinforce class, caste and communal identity. Avoidance or disassociation from aspects of the body signals a distinction between different groups. The symbolism

of the boundaries of the human body is used to express danger to the social order.¹⁷⁷

Transgressions against these social boundaries render the individual unclean and thus threaten the overall purity and wellbeing of the community. What makes the use of purity language and imagery in tract culture unique is that it is not the body which pollutes the social order, but the social order which pollutes the body and by extension, the soul. As human proclivities toward sin are all pervasive, than socially constructed human institutions are also subject those polluting aspects. Only God and the Kingdom of God are free of this. The social order established by God is the ultimate source of purity and authority. However, because the world is ultimately God's creation, human (mis)use of the world is the source from which pollution and corruption issues forth. Human beings and the societies they create are the ultimate manifestation of matter out of place. It is not the body itself that invites and generates pollution which threatens society. It is human social behavior which, flawed as it is, risks bodily and spiritual pollution.

This is illustrated scripturally in Paul's letter to the Galatians. He writes to this community after hearing that they are following a strict interpretation of Hebrew law while placing the Gospel in a secondary position.¹⁷⁸ In so doing he likens this devotion to ordering the needs and desires of the body over that of the spirit. This is best illustrated in Galatians 5:16-21.

¹⁷⁷ Douglas, Mary. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. Routledge, 2003. P. 152.

¹⁷⁸ Lull, David J. *The Spirit in Galatia: Paul's interpretation of pneuma as divine power*. Vol. 49. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006. P. 42.

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Seeking gratification of the flesh removes oneself from the Spirit and relocates them to a place of impurity where they will be unable to “inherit the kingdom of God.” Moreover, according to Paul, the desire of the Galatians to stringently uphold the Law of Moses in the aftermath of the events of the Gospel is to artificially create a community of law which is outside the will of God. Though seemingly pious, this is in fact a transgression akin to the acts of impurity and sexual impropriety which Paul lists. These passages also establish clear boundaries of identity between one group and another. In using the religious behavior of the Galatians to illustrate transgression from the Spirit, Paul is also implicitly castigating them for following Jewish custom instead of the Gospel. As such it is not merely the use of the Hebrew scripture which Paul finds troublesome, it is that it is happening in a Jewish manner.

By ordering the spirit as ontologically superior to the easily flawed human body, and associating the body with Jewish custom, Paul in effect lays down the boundaries of identity for the new tradition. In fact, he all but says as such in the first chapter. “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of

Christ... I want you to know, brothers and sisters that the gospel I preached is not of human origin.” Clearly there is a distinct demarcation between what Paul considers an authentic gospel and that which he considers counterfeit. The true gospel “is not of human origin.” The true gospel is further under threat of defilement by those who would “pervert the gospel of Christ.” Nevertheless, the danger such perversion poses is ultimately not to the Gospel itself. Human beings can do little harm to the actual Word of God. The true danger and defilement is posed towards those who would follow doctrines deemed false; doctrines, behaviors and identities outside the acceptable boundaries of Christian society.

This is a recurrent theme in tract literature. Many of Chick Publications tracts in particular deal heavily with themes of sin, dirt, and the purity of salvation. A tract with no dialogue, Jack Chick's “One Way,” portrays life's journey as an endless walk undertaken by the whole of humankind who as a result of the biblical Fall in Genesis, are tarnished by sin. In one panel, Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge. In the next, they are caked with filth and smudged with dirt. Subsequent generations of humanity—their descendants by blood and through sin—are drawn wandering, as an endlessly mobile mass with the shared comic depiction of sin through taint. Artistically, they are rendered utterly soiled by the inclusion of flies and comic stink lines. Salvation of course removes the dirt and this is evidenced by a pair of children who accept the Gospel message and are—to their overjoyed surprise—miraculously cleansed through the blood of Christ

which rains down on them from the cross.¹⁷⁹ One boy viscerally rejects “God’s Love Gift” and rejoins the muddy mobs passing by, half asleep and zombie-like, to eternal damnation. In Chick literature, sin is nearly always signified by the imagery of dirt. Some tracts portray sin slightly differently as a dark cloud which releases a pestilent rain on the sinner.¹⁸⁰ (“It’s all About You) Others will utilize the imagery of illness which stands as an allegory for sin. Yet always, the key takeaway is that sin, represented as dirt, soils the sinner and marks them as set apart from the community of believers.

Recently, Chick Publications posted a series of testimonials to their Facebook page which they entitled, “CHICK TRACTS GET READ – even in bathrooms.” It was accompanied by a one-panel cartoon depicting a man washing his hands in a public restroom. The walls are covered in graffiti, which includes a pentagram, and a rat is scurrying across the floor. Visible under the closed door of the stall are two legs belonging, it’s assumed, to someone reading a Chick Tract. At the bottom of the image is a link to the online tract catalogue. The caption, which is followed by testimonials, reads: “A friend wrote: ‘Do you ever receive testimonies from people who found tracts in a bathroom or other places left randomly?’ Absolutely! And because you asked, here are 7 ‘Bathroom Testimonies.’” One telling aspect of the caption is the certainty with which the ministry representative replies. The forceful “Absolutely!” implies recognition that the choice of public restrooms as a site of distribution is not only common; it is

¹⁷⁹ The Dutch version of the tract is in partial color and features red blood which rains down from the Cross. Jack Chick. “One Way.”

http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/0081/0081_01.asp 2002

¹⁸⁰ Jack T. Chick. “It’s All About You!” *Chick Tracts*. 2009.
https://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/1048/1048_01.asp

encouraged. What follows are varying descriptions, posted by the ministry, of the importance of both leaving and finding literature in public bathrooms.¹⁸¹

Found a life-changer on a toilet paper roll:

Here is a story that will bless you. 30 years ago my friend...was in a bathroom stall in Dallas Texas and someone had laid the tract "This was Your Life" on the toilet paper roll. He read it. That was the tool God used to start convicting him of his sinful life style. Not long after that he got saved. He and I ended up going to church together and ministering on the streets and distributing Chick tracts.

Found at school:

'Love you guys... [This was your Life] track(sic) impacted hugely in the 70's when someone was leaving them on the bathroom floor at the school I attended. I could not deny the truth that confronted me so effectively and I started opening the bible to read the verses from the tract...'

Found in Wal-Mart:

...I also want to say that I love Chick tracts. The first one I ever read made me cry. I found it in a Wal-Mart bathroom...

Some of the testimonials discuss elements of the conversion process which go beyond merely accepting an evangelical belief system, by also radically changing one's core identity. Not merely about being unsaved and becoming saved, the following testimonials locate the nature of the convert's former state of unsaved within specific and frowned-upon identities, implicitly linking the former identity with the presence of dirt and corruption.

From bathroom to Bible-believer:

Me, my wife and three kids were once very devoted Catholics. Then someone left 2 Chick tracts in a bathroom (This Was Your Life and How to Get Rich) To make a long story short, we are now all saved and attend a Bible believing church. Our lives are now dedicated to God to reach out and teach other Catholics the truth.

¹⁸¹ "Chick Tracts get Read – Even in Bathrooms. 'Facebook.
<https://www.facebook.com/chicktracts/posts/10157185227935058:0>. August 1, 2016.

My son and I love placing Chick tracts everywhere we go, we even go into some of the Catholic churches and place 2-3 at a time.

In this testimonial, there appears to be an attempt to draw a correlation between the signifying dirt of the bathroom and the Catholic Church. The testimonial proclaims that the couple found the tract in the bathroom, while Catholic. After becoming saved and joining a “Bible believing church” they make a point of distributing tracts not in bathrooms, but at Catholic churches themselves, a presumable site of pollution that needs the saving, cleansing message.

Almost as prevalent as the focus on the bathroom as an ideal site of distribution, is the more subdued implication of a change in identity. The following testimonial describes the recipient, the writer’s husband, as a “long haired, drug user.” Such disdainful description renders the eventual transformation applicable to the whole person as opposed to their religious outlook alone.

A coworker would leave chick tracts in the bathroom at work. At that time my husband had long hair and a long beard and was a drug user. My husband would read the tracts and then put them back so nobody would know he had read them. He says he used to look forward to finding new ones that he hadn’t read. What he didn’t realize at the time was that the word of God was being planted in his mind and heart. Those weren’t just entertaining reading materials, as he thought. They were seeds. That seed began to grow and through other events that God brought about in his life he ended up visiting a church with me and getting saved. He began reading those tracts in 1986. He is now a missionaries’ [sic?] in Yucatan Mexico.

An interesting aspect of this testimonial is the depiction of the husband “look[ing] forward to finding new ones....” Excitement described in testimonials is actually a fairly common reaction to finding tracts, particularly colorful or entertaining ones. Recognition

of enthusiasm among missionaries shows a degree of self-awareness on the part of the ministry that a large part of their outreach fills a position as entertainment media and nowhere is this more prevalent than in the Chick Ministries website banner prominently reading “Chick Tracts get read.” But that aside, that familiar narrative function also plays out in this testimonial which features a person easily marked by the trappings of a sinful lifestyle, in this case long hair, a beard and drugs. This sort of whole person transformation is a recurring theme which appears to regularly apply to a rather facile imagining of what a sinner looks like; in essence, a dirty, scruffy hippy.

These testimonials speak to the ability of tracts to illuminate the ease with which the sacred, and by proxy, purity and impurity become ambiguous. The believer helps the non-believer, trapped in a sty of sin, escape by giving them a tract. The tract, through the narrative and imagery presented, enlightens the sinner to their unsaved situation and allows them to remedy their predicament. The giving, accepting and reading of the tract in effect become formalized or at least standardized. This process bridges the liminal gap between the impurity of the sinner and the purity of the saved and transitions the former into a new spiritual situation. In essence, the networking of a tract performs a ritualistic function. In these instances the act of accepting the Gospel in the form of a tract appears to look remarkably like the consumption of the eucharist. As its consumption, following the confession of sins, reorder the identity of the penitent within Body of Christ, so too does the acceptance of the Gospel through an evangelical tract, reorder the sinner in line with a new social reality. In both instances, identities are shaped through the consumption of spiritual information which allows a path for a spiritual realignment with God. The

difference is one of identity, shaped through the production of different cultural markers: eucharist, tract or any type of transformative mediation.¹⁸² The formerly unsaved individual has undergone a significant reordering of their life. They have passed not only from one spiritual location into another but from one social group to another as well. They are different from how they were before, both spiritually and socially.¹⁸³ In fact, the social positioning of the ritual serves as a greater catalyst of spiritual change than age or even cultural formality. It marks the acceptance of a new community and spiritual way of life.¹⁸⁴

As if to drive the point home, the most detailed of the posted testimonials describes one sinner's transition from regular attendee of the Northern Nevada, alt-art festival, Burning Man:

From 'Burning Man' to Burning for Christ:
I went to Burning Man last year, the pagan festival in the middle of the desert in Nevada, it was there that I experienced the true drunkenness of sin, and when I left the festival, I never felt so hollow or worthless in my life. I stopped at a gas station and found in the bathroom one of the Chick tracts 'This Was Your Life', I believe, and in it I found the chance to accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior, and for the first time in a long time, felt happy. After the things I did at Burning Man, I never thought I could obtain forgiveness, but I was thankfully proved wrong. This year the Burning Man festival may hit 50,000 people, and I want to do something about it, I want to help those in need of Christ.

Festivals are common locations for tract distribution because they are large, public events which promise a significant pool of target recipients. Yet they are also selected because

¹⁸² Pete Ward. *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church*. (London: SCM Press, 2008), 128

¹⁸³ Bronislaw Malinowski. *Magic, Science and Religion*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1955), 40.

¹⁸⁴ Catherine Bell. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95.

most music and lifestyle festivals are seen by tract missionaries as promoting value systems which are antithetical to a doctrinally acceptable life. In other words, not only are there lots of people who are in attendance, these attendees happen to be, from the perspective of the missionary, the type of people most in need of the Gospel message. After all, this is the reason the writer is there: “[T]he Burning Man festival may hit 50,000 people, and I want to...help those in need of Christ.” However, this also allows the missionary to draw a sharp identifying contrast between themselves, and those who are attending the festival. That they were once an enthusiastic “Burner” actually helps in the creation of social boundaries. The delineation is both social and temporal. Once they had experienced the “true drunkenness of sin.” Yet the finding of a tract, in a bathroom no less, brought them across that boundary and into the Light of God. Moreover, we see another example of morally problematic spaces being utilized as an initial catalyst for the power of conversion and then revisited with the intent of inverting the profane nature of these spaces through the distribution of the tract. Through the simple distribution of small pieces of paper, a major festival is turned from an orgy of filth and vanity into an opportunity for mass conversion.

Within the narratives of the tracts themselves Chick’s “One Way” represents one of the starkest representations of the social division articulated in the publishing house's literature and the missionaries who ascribe to it. In this tract, sin is dirt and impurity. It is in fact contagious, contracted initially by Adam and Eve and passed down through subsequent human generations, its symptoms exacerbated by the human susceptibility to temptation and pride. It is a disease both inherited and communicable.

By viewing society portrayed as a filthy mass, and the saved children as cleaned individuals, the tract places two, parallel societies on moral exhibition. One, whose residents are drawn smudged and soiled, displays a visible mark of spiritual taint. The other, smaller society is displayed unmarked. Additionally, by including an actual depiction of the division between these two societies as a wall, the tract further highlights the methods by which one may safely transgress those boundaries. Furthermore, as with most Chick Tracts, it also depicts the consequences for failing to follow the ideal path in the form of hundreds of figures approaching a flaming ledge. However, for the newly forgiven characters, and presumably those actual individuals moved by the tract's message, it offers a path by which to navigate oneself into a new and pure life, having been washed clean by Christ's sacrificial blood.¹⁸⁵

To be born again is to join a new society. In this tract, purity and the striving for cleanliness serve as exercises which create and maintain social groupings and boundaries. By using dirt as an instigator of such a clear delineation between social groups, it also presents and reinforces the ministry's view of society and the universe. The purpose of purity and impurity is to create rituals which allow for the conditions for public atonement and community reinforcement and this manifests within the narrative of the tract. Breaking purity barriers transgresses the society's social boundaries and incurs society-proscribed consequences.

¹⁸⁵ "One Way" portrays this by showing the children kneeling under the Cross as the Blood of Christ showers them. In the foreign language, print versions of the tract, the blood is actually colored red.

These conceptions and realizations of consequences help establish “legal” borders that contain communal behaviors. To transcend those boundaries is to invite the danger of expulsion and dirt, just as it is depicted in “One Way,” as the primary signifier of expulsion from the community. It coats the body, marking one as separate, deviant and subject to punishment and the exercise of power. This power is hierarchal in that its ultimate source radiates outward from God. But it is functionally diffuse, laterally reinforced as a series of social beliefs and norms.¹⁸⁶ Power in the secular world, particularly from the perspective of Chick Publications, is ultimately exercised by the Devil. Though God ultimately reigns supreme over creation, such narratives place believers in a position of resistance. The sinful society, which from this perspective is the dominant society, exerts power in the form of the Devil’s influence over both the saved and the unsaved. The Gospel message, the Word itself, is the only viable defense against such spiritual oppression.

As many ministries and publishing societies situate themselves as opposed to the dominant social and popular culture, the idea that the latter might somehow win out is unsatisfactory. Regardless of the adversarial power Satan holds on earth, the true locus of power rests with God. A sin is a transgression against the Law of God and requires punishment since dirt is not the punishment itself; it is a marker of the transgression, of being caught red-handed. Thus punishment and punitive measures are a common and critical theme for many Gospel tracts. With many publishing societies, large and small, the final pages, or reverse of the tract, often provide an opportunity for repentance in

¹⁸⁶ Manuel Vasquez. *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 137.

which a sinner swears an oath or offers up the Sinner's Prayer, a prayer of contrition. Tract narratives frequently show this as an action taken in response to learning about the universal threat of Hell, though it may also be used as a show of humility and contrition. Not all tract publishers use such devices at the end of their tracts. Some, like Living Waters, are disdainful of the Sinner's Prayer, arguing that it leads to false conversions and misplaced pride on the part of the missionary. What nearly all publishers do share is a general agreement on the consequences for failing to accept one's state of sin: eternal damnation.

The Agency of Tracts

Elements of this ambiguity transcend the tracts as objects and scriptural representations and extend to areas and locations where would-be missionaries choose to deliver and distribute them. Certainly the usual suspects for distribution make the list: festivals, city centers, rock concerts, political events, etc. However, as per the ministry's stated purpose, salvation through the tract medium need not be made necessary via hand-to-hand, human contact. Chick Publication's website specifically notes that the medium's effectiveness operates without the physical presence of the missionary. As such, tracts appear wherever potential sinners are perceived to congregate. However, there are preferred locales of distribution that seem to be targeted with semi-regularity: gas stations, mass transit systems, shopping malls and public restrooms. These places are targeted for their proximity to human activity and transitiveness in particular. A location which multiple people frequent is more likely to win the greatest number of souls.

Therefore, a tract may be ignored by twenty people but so long as one picks it up and reads it, the tract stands a chance of reaching its potential purpose.

In essence, a tract exhibits a constraining force or what sociologist Emile Durkheim calls an *interdict*. An interdict is a demarcation between that which is considered sacred and that which is perceived to be profane. It is the socially agreed-upon line where the sacred and profane become mutually exclusive and this line cannot be transgressed lest profanity render the sacred meaningless or even profane. Each polar opposite cannot exist without the other which defines it by what it is not.¹⁸⁷

... [T]he world of sacred things is, by definition a world apart. Since it is opposed to the profane world...it must be treated in its own peculiar way: it would be a misunderstanding of its nature and a confusion of it with something that it is not...All that is used in our commerce with the one must be excluded from our commerce with the other.

In the simplest of terms, an interdict is the socially imagined marker between the sacred and the profane. It's the Gospel tract's spiritual position on the boundary of this line which gives it agency. Durkheim describes a tendency of the sacred, as perceived by individuals and societies, to spread out into profane spaces and to make that which is not religious, of religious importance. "Religious forces are represented in the mind in such a way that they always seem ready to escape from the points where they reside and to enter everything passing within their range."¹⁸⁸ Or, rather, humans exhibit a tendency to make things that might not seem overtly religious, so.

¹⁸⁷ Emile Durkheim. *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. 357

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 358

A Gospel tract embodies this ambiguity. As cheaply made ephemera, it's hard to imagine one carrying any significant degree of material or financial value. Indeed, more often than not, they wind up as literal garbage, cast away among gutters, trash cans and others spaces of refuse. Nevertheless, they contain within them, the Word of God and, as such, are simultaneously embodied by the most valuable commodity imaginable: the offer of salvation and eternal life. Yet that muddies the traditional Durkheim school conception of sacred and profane because the activation of sacredness operates on multiple axes. depending on one's social perspective because not all users of the tract find it sacred all the time. More important still is the aspect that the transformative power of Gospel tracts appears to be operated by the presence of impurity which is related to but not synonymous with profane. Tracts are best utilized not only in profane spaces but in spaces where profanity is characterized by dirt. How purity and impurity interact and generate religious meaning helps to shape what is considered sacred. Purity is associated with vigor and health, whereas impurity has been traditionally associated with illness and death. Purity is a cure for the disease-laden impure. However, both are essential to each other's purposes and enable the potency of their respective opposite. In other words, something is rendered pure and, as such, potent through its opposition to impurity and vice versa. In its ability to render defiled that which is pure, it also carries with it a certain power which in its own right, is as sacred as the pure. This reversibility speaks to an intimate relationship between the pure and the impure. The impure, which is seen as taboo and therefore dangerous, can be utilized in the pursuit of purity and takes on a

mysterious power of its own.¹⁸⁹ The profane, while standing in opposition to sacred, also represents differing degrees of impurity and, as an integral element in this relationship, threatens additional defilement.¹⁹⁰

Caillois' approach to the relationship between the sacred and the profane, the pure and impure, envisions a dynamic in which both elements remain distinct in their characteristics but regularly interact with one another. In fact, in order for their potency to be maintained, the sacred and profane must continually engage in a cycle of defilement and purification as their potency is meaningless without challenge from its opposite. They may constitute separate quantities, but the border separating them is porous. A tract then should be seen as a pocket of the sacred with the ability to penetrate the profane. Its message, the Word of God, has the power to transgress the most impure of spaces and render them, for a time, sacred and pure. In essence, the tract is activated by the presence of dirt. As a manifestation of the Word, its transformative power stands in bold contrast to the sin of the recipient and the secular, profane, impure world. This in turn allows the recipient to witness their own transgressions in stark relief and be touched by the holiness of God's Word while existing in places marked by impurity. If they accept the message, they are cleansed of sin.

This is exemplified through the establishment of temporary sacred spaces in service to the missionary process. While tract missionaries may not go out into the world with the intent of establishing official, temporary churches, there is an awareness of the

¹⁸⁹ Roger Caillois. Meyer Barash, trans. *Man and the Sacred*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 19.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

potential for the creation of a special, if not sacred, space. The space of evangelism is a space of encounter where two individuals from different spiritual dispositions meet on footing unencumbered by the rules of the mainstream society. It also carries the potential to become a ritual space where the sacred discourse of evangelism binds the two participants together in one purpose—the witnessing of the Gospel. In such a space, ordinary surroundings effectively recede into the background of the participant’s attention. The encounter occurs within a mundane or even profane space but the sacred nature of the Holy Spirit, through the Gospel, carves out a break in the surrounding bustle. Moreover, as is so often the case, the need for the recipient’s conversion is ancillary to the function of the ritual. Though the intent of the missionary is the saving of souls, such a transition on the part of the recipient need not occur to fulfill the commandment of witnessing. For the commandment to be fulfilled, the Gospel need only be shown and witnessed. The ritual can take place even if the unsaved audience is resistant. This phenomenon is clearly seen in the following testimony. While the outcome is ambiguous, the transition from mundane to sacred space and time is fairly stark.

I witnessed at a Weight Watchers lobby. I was telling my friend why I was quitting Weight Watchers [to join] a Christian weight loss program and it just started from there. I told her the whole Gospel message. It was weird because people were all around us, but it felt like we were the only two in the place. Then a year later, I helped her get a job at my company. We still work together, but I really haven't had a chance to witness to her any more.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ “Washed Clean” May 31, 2004.

<http://www.christianforums.com/threads/strangest-places-youve-ever-witnessed-at.672514/>

There is an order and method to tract evangelism which is often missed by a casual observer. The passing out of literature is a means through which a ritual discourse can be opened. Should a recipient engage with the material or the missionary, an interaction occurs which fits the pattern of ritual behavior. Engagement with the missionary activates the ritual of “witnessing” and creates a sacred time and space which in turn generates a social boundary which separates the participants from their social surroundings.¹⁹²

The very act of distributing tracts establishes a social exchange network which transmits social and spiritual information and power. This occurs with the aid of two distinct but interwoven agents. First, in the direct hope that the primary function is fulfilled, the recipient will be saved and will gain entrance into Heaven’s celestial society following their passing. The more people who are reached, the more potential converts, and the more souls ultimately kept out of the clutches of the Devil. The tract ideally facilitates a conversion, while the real agency remains with the Holy Spirit.

A secondary, less potent agency also exists within the document itself. As the historic textuality of earlier tracts frequently detailed narratives of magical and wondrous texts, so too are similar powers claimed for contemporary tracts. The following missionary on a video posted to YouTube discusses the transformative power of the Word of God which is only made clear and accessible through tracts.¹⁹³

Hello, brothers and sisters in Christ. I want to share with you some information about Chick [tracts]....I think they can really help you understand the word of

¹⁹² Erik Cohen. "Pilgrimage centers: concentric and excentric." *Annals of tourism research* 19, no. 1 (1992): 33-50. 44.

¹⁹³ Penny Fung. “Chick Tracts get Read...And People Get Saved” *Youtube.com*. March 12, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcZUdlDXNLg/>

God by looking at the pictures within. I love my Chick Tracts, they really help me to understand what I'm reading. If some of you are struggling with reading and understanding the Bible, first, pray. And God will help you. The Holy Spirit will guide you to understanding. [T]he word of God is so important, and prayer is so powerful. I understand what it's like to be frustrated and not understand scripture; I used to read as much as I could, but I couldn't understand everything. So, I kept learning, and looking at pictures, and eventually garnered a good understanding of the Word...These are really so great and really help you understand the Word...These are invaluable, really. They will help you. They so concisely describe and show the Word...They are SO clear and easy to understand...Oh! One more thing [Shows "Stairway to Hell"]: This one is really good. It's a personal testimony about someone who wasn't saved and who accepted Jesus as savior. He described his background, his involvement with alcohol, drugs, and a lot of other things, and eventually he changed and became Christian. Many people are touched by Chick Tracts and become saved. They are powerful. Again, with the pictures provided, everything becomes clear and understandable. Through continued faith and blessings, the Chick Tract business still thrives.

Interestingly enough, there are two subtly contradictive statements relating to the agency of tracts. Near the beginning of the testimonial, the missionary appears to place a greater degree of spiritual emphasis on the Bible itself as the Word of God. A tract can be useful in helping to “understand” the Word but its purpose remains for the most part a pedagogical tool. However, towards the end of the testimonial, the missionary shifts the focus of power from the Bible to the tract itself. “Many people are touched by Chick tracts...they are powerful.” This shift in focus is important. It’s not that the usage and imagined behavior of tracts is contradictory. Indeed, when looked upon as separate statements, they do appear divergent. However, in actuality both the pedagogical and transformative roles of the tract exist alongside one another in a sort of continuum or dialogue. Each element of agency only functions when interacting with its counterparts,

each of which performs its own role in facilitating spiritual transformation. These elements—the tract, the distributor, the recipient and the Holy Spirit—all interact with one another in determining the outcome of the ritual encounter.

It's not that the paper object itself possesses the power to enact spiritual change, just as a copper wire does not create electricity. However it does facilitate the transformative power of the Word. The tract is therefore more a transmitter than a generator, a constituent but essential element in the social act of distribution. Religious significance is not about the tract but what the message and power of it entails for both the giver and the recipient. The object, as a mere paper booklet, is ultimately meaningless but it is imbued with meaning via the social value and ritual which surrounds it. Tracts become integral to this spiritual transaction because of their relationship to the Holy Spirit but not because there is a divinity within them which is separate from the power of God. The giving of the object enables a type of spiritual network which connects individuals who are saved with those who are not while also simultaneously allowing for the possibility for the opening of a line of communication with the divine.

The interaction between distributor, tract, recipient and the Holy Spirit is explained well with political scientist Jane Bennett's understanding of a network assemblage of interactions between materials. A theory of the relationships between animate and inanimate matter, assemblage is a fluid system which describes the interactions between human and non-human agents. These interactions may or may not

be intentional or desirable but their resulting behaviors result in an outcome which carries some degree of bearing on human life.¹⁹⁴

The interaction between the varying facets of tract evangelism fits within the parameters of this conception of assemblage and interaction. The religious act of tract distribution is not merely mythical and ritualistic, but becomes political and social as well. This is most obvious when reading literature and testimonials which detail the constructed boundaries between saved and unsaved communities. To engage in such distribution is a performance of scripture and myth and thus a generator of sacred meaning. But even more than that, it creates and navigates a channel of communication between the missionary, their target, the tract and God. In a successful interaction which leads to conversion, it can be said that God speaks to the recipient through the tract. Tract distribution creates such an assemblage between the giver, the recipient, and third party

¹⁹⁴ Her signature example describes the 2003 East Coast Blackout in which the behavior of electrons, constrained by reactive currents shut down the grid from Ohio to New York, resulting in one of the biggest U.S. losses of power in history. Not acting alone, the electric crisis was augmented by human actors in the form of government deregulation which created an unintentional market shortage of reactive current, driving up both prices and demand. In conjunction with an unusually hot summer and the effects of brush fires in Ohio, the demands on the electrical grid proved too onerous and power across the continent shut off. It isn't that market deregulation caused the blackout, rather, deregulation was one factor which allowed for reactive currents to behave in such a way as to put undue strain on the electrical grid. Avoiding like events is to be intuitively aware of our actions and surroundings. *Ibid.*, Ch. 8.

observers in that the medium provides an opportunity for the recipient to enter into spiritual communion with God.¹⁹⁵

This assemblage also includes the imagined sacred and secular societies of the evangelical community. In their dynamic interrelations and ongoing negotiations between the secular and sacred, they define one another and act upon one another in ways that can have social and political consequences. Sin manifests itself as dirt which serves a double purpose of separating the pure of the saved community, from the impure of society at large. If a born-again Christian is to limit the degree to which sin poses a temptation, they must necessarily limit their interaction with the secular world. Of course for many, cutting secular ties means jettisoning personal, vocational and economic relationships which hold over from their former selves and are still essential to day-to-day living. This is especially true when one first becomes saved and is unlikely to have the structural, social support system of a like-minded church or otherwise organized community.¹⁹⁶ In that interim time between becoming saved and joining a community, a critical change must occur in how the individual views their place in the world. Moreover, this mindset should ideally remain for years to come lest the temptations of the former life manifest again. This doesn't mean those who become born again physically withdraw physically from the secular world. Rather, it means that the values and social boundaries, or lack thereof, which the secular society places on the world are no longer those of the saved individual.

¹⁹⁵ Isabel Hofmeyr. "Inventing the World: Transnationalism, Transmission and Christian Textualities." *Mixed Messages: Materiality, Textuality, Missions*. Jaime S. Scott and Gareth Griffiths eds. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 22.

¹⁹⁶ Ammerman. *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists*, 170.

The tract acts as an interrelational cleansing agent which purifies the sinner, and marks them separate from secularity provided they submit to the quiet, yet mandatory punishment of submission before God. Yet more than a discussion of punishments and cleansing, the tract also remains a conduit for social interaction between unlike groups by acting as a medium between two individuals within opposing social circles. The tract is a key which opens doors between unlike groups and facilitates social interaction. Tract culture encourages a clear division between a social world which is sanctioned by the born-again community, and the taboo realm of “the World.” The tract rests in between the sacred and profane worlds and therefore acts as a method of transit through which the Gospel, characterized by holiness, might manifest in a profane environment.

In 1929 evangelist AF Pollock wrote on tract evangelism, “[i]t was only a tract dropped into a standing motor-car as the distributor passed down the street, but the sequel proved it to be a link in the chain of the Lord’s dealings with a soul.”¹⁹⁷ This one quote exquisitely captures the linked interactions which manifest in the process of the distribution process. There is something to be said for the manner in which tracts are meant to behave when left in public spaces, waiting to be picked up. Tract missionaries place a great degree of emphasis on the interconnectivity of the tract experience and refer back to the efficacy of the tract while giving a greater degree of responsibility to God, the Holy Spirit or the Gospel even as they weave a network of discourse between God, the missionary, the recipient and the physical tract.

¹⁹⁷ A.F. Pollock. “Only a Tract.” 1929. Found on <https://www.believersbookshelf.ca/AIO/A.F.Pollock%20-%20Only%20a%20Tract.pdf>

Chapter 4

Employed by God:

Labor, Capital and Brand Representation in Living Waters Gospel Tracts

Living Waters Publications is good with money. Rather, more specifically, they're good with using the concept of money and wealth in their tract distribution. Of their roughly sixty popular titles, twenty of them utilize the image of money, the concept of money or even actual money in one form or another. Chances are, if one encounters a Gospel tract in the shape of money or referencing money, it originated at Living Waters. New Zealand expatriate Ray Comfort is the founder of Living Waters Publications. Begun as a Gospel newspaper in the mid 1970s, Living Waters was developed by Comfort to serve as an important tool of retention and enforcement of identity in the face of steep attrition rate following initial conversions. The ministry today carries on that legacy and articulates these beliefs in its vision statement:

Our vision is to inspire in every Christian a God-glorifying passion to fulfill the Great Commission. Our mission is to accomplish this through our award-winning television program, our Ambassadors' Alliance and Academy, Transformed and Deeper training conferences, CDs, DVDs, books, and unique Gospel tracts. Our earnest prayer is that God would raise up laborers as never before. Our desire is for those laborers to embrace biblical evangelism, and our aim is to equip them with tools to make the task easy and effective.¹⁹⁸

The vision statement highlights an important element of the way the ministry sees itself. Despite the orthodox constellation of American, Evangelical-leaning organizations of

¹⁹⁸ "Statement of Faith" Living Waters. <https://www.livingwaters.com/statement-of-faith>

which Living Waters is one, the emphasis of the vision statement is, for the most part, not on theological or ethereally spiritual concerns. There is no discussion of the Trinity, salvation by grace, the nature of sin or other orthodox concerns. Rather, its attention is on the practical and workable business of evangelism. Yes, it maintains their purpose of Christian inspiration. But that inspiration is not meant to merely convert one to an evangelically orthodox worldview; it is meant to inspire a convert, or a lifelong Christian, to initiate a lifestyle change where the spreading of the Gospel message, itself an orthopraxis, becomes a spiritual vocation. Yes, these people are converted and, as such, are saved. In rejecting the trappings of the world and accepting the salvation-granting sacrifice of Christ, they are born again. They are also potential workers whose labor can be utilized and channeled into doing the work of the ministry, and thus the work of God.

Money and labor are the major themes which support the philosophical and ideological foundations of Living Waters because it taps into a larger cultural familiarity with the images and ideas of finance, labor and capital. Living Waters' tracts may be unique but in their uniqueness, they are intimately familiar. We are culturally attuned to be attracted to money and so we are attracted to these tracts. Further, like the majority of the population, missionaries are trained to place a heavy value on work and labor. In so doing, the spiritual work of witnessing necessarily transcends charitable motivations—the altruism of saving souls—and transforms the action of evangelism into something of a favored profession. They view the increase of personal wealth with relative ambivalence, seeing money as a neutral medium, often tainted by human greed and Original Sin.

Likewise, though they are not adherents to a Prosperity Gospel, they are often likely to view larger degrees of wealth as a sign of blessing, rather than as a pathway to sin.

Yet it should not escape one's attention that the primary stated aim of the ministry is not the building of the church through the acceptance of donation, but rather through the distribution of Gospel literature in the fulfillment of the Great Commission.¹⁹⁹ As such, the moderate, mildly positive approach to wealth and earning is ancillary, if not wholly rhetorical. Yes, Living Waters is adept at using the language and images of money and capital in their evangelism, but they remain just that: language and images. With rare exception, which will be addressed later, actual currency is never exchanged. Of course, that is not to say that what is exchanged is not of value. Even though the exchange of tracts offers no economic or denominational worth, within the context of the mission, they still facilitate salvation: a gift of incalculable value. This is no commoditized grace. The gift being exchanged is ostensibly free, at least from the religious perspective of the distributor. What is actually occurring is the construction of a system of gift wherein social cohesion is formed through the reception and acceptance of the Gospel, operating within the tract medium.

The use of economic imagery and language serves the immediate purpose of being psychologically attractive to passersby. However, it performs another function as well. It effectively reinforces a key aspect of the identity of the ministry and its missionaries. By using images and concepts so ubiquitously "of this world," the ministry

¹⁹⁹ The ministry website does offer a link for donations but the overall character of the organization is officially a not-for-profit publishing house.

can essentially claim that it, by contrast, is not. This fulfills the biblical commandment in Romans to remain in, but not of the world. Through the use of money imagery, the binary opposition between the secular position of money and the sacredness of spirit becomes inverted. Money, perhaps one of the greatest representations of worldliness and sin, is reappropriated for spiritual use and thus becomes a marker for transition from one social world into another.

Money Tracts

What are ‘Money Tracts’? Evangelist David Troyer designates between what he considers to be realistic and unrealistic money tracts. Though he doesn’t directly name Living Waters, his descriptions of the bill’s denominations match fairly well with the publishing house’s design. While useful at times, Troyer presents the efficacy of these tracts as something of a mixed bag in terms of positive results. For Troyer, unrealistic money designs include the Million Dollar Bill tracts because of the outlandish nature of the denomination. This issue is even more pronounced when using bills with even larger denominations. Their attractiveness as mediums of message is in the whimsical nature of the absurd denomination. People’s eyes are naturally drawn to them. However, this is also their weakness as these tracts can be rejected as soon as they are discovered to be fake currency.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ Ray Comfort would disagree with this and often argues that it is the very absurdity and humor of the large denominations which help to keep the reader engaged. The same would apply to novelty bills featuring the faces of celebrities, or to holiday-themed money tracts.

By contrast, “realistic money” includes tracts which are generally printed with more common, circulated denominations. Some carry the Gospel message on one side while others utilize the front half of one bill. Generally, Troyer prefers these tracts to the unrealistic designs because they hold the attention of the recipient longer than the former. Out of desire for money, the recipient’s eyes will linger on the tract as they discern its counterfeit nature. Naturally, this also becomes a drawback. Upon discovery of the non-negotiable nature of the currency, some recipients may become irate and either discard the tract—and its message—outright, or even become hostile with the missionary. Busy places with high foot traffic are again preferred but Troyer also recommends anonymous distribution rather than person-to-person evangelism.²⁰¹

The most common of these tracts is the Million Dollar Bill. Shaped and colored as American currency, the most current Million Dollar Bill features the portrait of Ben Franklin and, but for the glossy texture of the tract, looks remarkably like U.S. tender. They are colored like U.S. currency and professionally printed and though they appear glossy close up, from afar they really do look like real money. They are also frequently updated to keep up with changes in the appearance and anti-counterfeit measures of authentic currency. Even when non-legitimate denominations are represented, the color, design and shape of the tract undeniably signify money. It is the back of the “bill,” however, that clues the recipient in to the true nature of the ephemera.

The million dollar question: Will you go to Heaven when you die? Here's a quick test. Have you ever told a lie, stolen anything, or used God's name in vain? Jesus said, ‘Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery

²⁰¹Troyer. *Tracts and Evangelism*, 30

with her in his heart.’ Have you looked with lust? Will you be guilty on Judgment Day? If you have done those things, God sees you as a lying, thieving, blasphemous, adulterer at heart. The Bible warns that if you are guilty you will end up in Hell. That's not God's will. He sent His Son to suffer and die on the cross for you. You broke God's Law, but Jesus paid your fine. That means He can legally dismiss your case. He can commute your death sentence: ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.’ Then Jesus rose from the dead and defeated death. Please, repent (turn from sin) today and trust in Jesus alone, and God will grant you the gift of everlasting life. Then read your Bible daily and obey it.

Ray Comfort is noticeably proud of this series of tracts, saying regarding the original “Million Dollar” tract, “It’s deliriously popular, people love em(sic), and we have ***sold*** millions of these tracts because they’re so easy to give out...”²⁰² His enthusiasm for this is so great that he has even developed a certain catch phrase which he utilizes in evangelical encounters where upon handing out a tract he jokes, “it’s great when you get the change.”²⁰³ While by far the most popular Living Waters’ product, the Million Dollar tract is not the only currency-themed literature available for purchase and distribution. Comfort reminds us of its availability and efficacy amidst a flurry of jokes about the deficit and government fiscal policy, guaranteed to resonate with conservative Christians, skeptical and disappointed with perceived economic overreach.

While the million and trillion dollar tracts sell best, the ministry offers a number of other money-themed products. The Million Dollar Bill is available with Christmas, Halloween and celebrity-themed options and can also be printed in Spanish as well. For

²⁰² “The Million Dollar Bill (Tract)” 2013
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3jgzWHVQO0>

²⁰³ Comfort and Cameron. *Thanks a Million*, 4.

large crowds and gatherings, evangelists can use a giant, 18” x 8” version for greater visibility. There is a tract that looks like a credit card, an aluminum coin imprinted with the Ten Commandments, and a novelty stretch penny, also with the Ten Commandments.²⁰⁴ There is a tract, in this instance, resembling a \$100 bill which utilizes the subject of money, and its fleeting nature as a jumping off point for discussing the Gospel. Finally, there is a tract which doubles as an envelope in which actual money can be placed, particularly during the holiday season though it can be used anytime. “Why not give away \$365 a year?” the website implores. Additional reasons for this tract are interesting and speak to Living Waters’ view of itself as coming from a deeper place of community engagement than more impersonal publishing houses such as Chick Ministries. Tracts are an essential element in evangelism and can certainly stand on their own. However, Living Waters also places great emphasis on direct, person-to-person evangelism which tracts can help facilitate.²⁰⁵

The website offers four reasons for evangelizing using real money. First, it offers the money as a token of apology on behalf of all those Christians who have taken money under cynical or false pretenses. This is a common refrain in this ministry and Comfort has worked this theme into his oral evangelism. “Hey, I’m not trying to get money from you; I’m not trying to get you to join my church.” Practically contextualized within this

²⁰⁴ The Credit Card is actually called a Smart Card. It is futuristic-looking and evokes images of the “One World Currency” often discussed in certain Evangelical circles

²⁰⁵ “When Preaching and private talk are not available, you need to have a tract ready...Get good striking tracts...a good Gospel tract may be the seed of eternal life. Therefore, do not go without your tracts.” Ray Comfort quoting Charles Spurgeon. Ray Comfort. *The Blue Book on Evangelism*. (Living Waters Publications 2008)

tract, the gift of currency also performs a role as a type of service within the larger, unsaved community. “Christians,” Living Waters tells us, “should be giving back to the community, not taking from it.”²⁰⁶ In showing their commitment to community, they hope to foster a more generous evangelicalism.

The second reason begins the actual witnessing process with the hope that the missionary will establish the line of questioning so favored by both Comfort and Cameron. “Do you think that you are a good person? Have you ever lied? Have you ever stolen? Have you ever committed adultery, physically or in your heart?” If one answers affirmatively, they are informed that “God sees [them] as a ‘lying, thieving, blasphemous, adulterer at heart,’ and the Bible makes it clear that you will end up in Hell. But there is good news.” The good news is always the Gospel, followed by the Sinner’s Prayer. If the target recipient doesn’t convert on the spot, the information inclusion in the tract will suffice should they choose to become saved later. It should be reiterated that the second reason for including money is essentially the same reason for the distribution of any tract and this reasoning spans most evangelical tract publishers. However, the hope in this instance is that the money will lead to an acceptance of the message the tract is trying to convey.

The third reason plays upon the assumption that the recipient of the envelope harbors skepticism that a religious organization, particularly one which engages in street evangelism, is acting altruistically. Out of acknowledgement of the social dynamics

²⁰⁶ “A Gift for You.” Living Waters, 2014.

http://store.livingwaters.com/index.php?page=shop.product_details&flypage=flypage.tpl&product_id=132&category_id=8&option=com_virtuemart&Itemid=369&lang=en

which shape the work of evangelism into an adversarial process, the gift of a denomination as small as even one dollar is meant to represent a show of good faith. The hope of course is that surprise at the good faith of the missionary might elucidate at least a curiosity as to the veracity of the Gospel. The recipient may not accept God's eternal gift of salvation, but the money, however fleeting, is theirs to keep, no strings attached. These types of tracts are particularly popular during the holiday season and are often designed to look like Christmas gifts.

The fourth reason is highly symbolic. The envelope is laid out in such a way that the Gospel message sits behind the money gift. The money, which is secondary in importance to the message, is meant to symbolically obscure the printing. The tract as such becomes a physical representation of Isaiah 59:2 where the money, which is acting as and can lead to sin, literally obscures the Gospels and thus, the path to salvation. "Allow God to wash away your sins," the ministry maintains, "and your eyes will suddenly be opened to a whole new realm." It should be noted that for whatever the specific reason for distribution, Living Waters insists that this tract should only be filled with crisp, fresh dollar bills obtained from the local bank because "there's something clean and fresh about new bills."²⁰⁷

Labor and Capital

While there is sparse reference to these "money tracts" in scholarly literature, what little mention exists tends to ascribe a Weber-derived gloss as means of explanation

²⁰⁷Living Waters online store.
http://store.livingwaters.com/index.php?page=shop.product_details&flypage=flypage.tpl&product_id=132&category_id=8&option=com_virtuemart&Itemid=369&lang=en

for their function. Under the umbrella of a larger discussion of the religious uses of money, Chidester briefly mentions that the tension between sacredness and the profane nature of money is mitigated somewhat by religious nature of money tracts.²⁰⁸ However what those religious elements are, he does not explicitly say despite a brief and fleeting mention of ritual. This brief treatment is noticed by Kathryn Lofton who—somewhat acerbically—critiques Chidester, saying “We do not linger long on these trickster tracts...Although it seems you could hunker down in the imagined dialectical space between Weber and Money tracts, the train barrels onward.”²⁰⁹ Yet, however briefly the tracts are dealt with, both individuals manage to zero in on a characteristic of the distribution of money tracts, which is tantalizingly Weberian. Ministries who distribute money tracts, and Living Waters in particular, do appear to appropriate an attitude towards currency that is deeply reminiscent of the capitalist spirit.

All this implies a general comfort the missionaries who use Million Dollar Tracts have with the money as a concept. Money is not seen as a force of evil in itself. For Living Waters, it is a neutral object or institution which can be used by the Devil to engender and promote sinful thoughts, behaviors and actions. To the ministry, it is not wealth itself which causes people to sin. Instead, it is sin which makes wealth and money problematic. Thus, the ministry’s use of money serves a number of functions. First,

²⁰⁸ David Chidester. *Authentic fakes: Religion and American popular culture*. (Univ of California Press, 2005).

²⁰⁹ Kathryn Lofton. "Chidester, David, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*." *JOURNAL-AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION* 75, no. 2 (2007): 464-466.

because of the prospect of increase, it behaves as an effective attention grabber that to some degree makes people more likely to hear a message, or at least more likely than they would have been had they ignored the tract or the missionary. Second, the frequent employment of actual money inextricably links the actions of the missionary with a language and behavior set that mimics the economic functions of the larger society.²¹⁰

The use and distribution of the image and object of money provides that perfect medium that displays other-worldly but not in itself sinful, that mediums such as sexuality or power, cannot.²¹¹ Power runs the risk of alienating potential converts by running counter to notions of *agape* which remain an important aspect of the ministry's doctrine, if not always understood as it often is in liberation ministries.²¹² Likewise, discussions of sexuality can engender hostility and discomfort and imagery can run the risk of being perceived as inappropriate, excessive or even pornographic. Money by contrast is such a ubiquitous social force that its use and presence garner wide appeal and allow the missionary to operate with a comfort and ease not easily obtainable with the use of a lengthy pamphlet or a wordy selection of scripture.

The public disposition the publishing house exhibits towards money is generally one of positive ambivalence. Money is not a source of evil or sin in and of itself, but its use and acquisition is frequently marred by sin. Money by itself is a neutral entity, as is

²¹⁰ James Davison Hunter. *Evangelicalism: The coming generation*. (Barron's Educational Series, 1993).

²¹¹ "Save Yourself some Pain." *Spiritual Warfare*.
<http://www.livingwaters.com/save-yourself-some-pain/spiritual-warfare> 2014.

²¹² "Statement of Faith. *Living Waters*. 2014.
<http://www.livingwaters.com/statement-of-faith>

the pursuit of wealth, so long as they do not eclipse gratitude for and subservience to God. For Living Waters, money can and should be utilized as an evangelical tool, but generally in ways which overall further the pursuance of the goals of the ministry and the proliferation of the Gospel.

It was once said that the wallet is the ‘last frontier’-- that it’s the last thing that comes to God in surrender. But it should be the first, along with our surrendered heart. Jesus spoke much about money. He said that we cannot serve God and mammon...word ‘mammon’ was the common Aramaic word for riches and it signifies ‘that which is to be trusted.’ In other words, either money is our source of joy, our sense of security, the supplier of our needs -- or God is.

When you give, make sure you do so with a cheerful heart. Our giving should be a systematic and purposeful giving to the church where we fellowship...It should be in response to need...It should be sacrificial...and should be done in secret with a humble heart...It is a key to spiritual fruit...²¹³

The Ministry’s approach to money is scripturally in keeping with the Colossians Three admonishment against pathos, passion or “inordinate affection” as it is designated in the King James Version of the Bible. Thus, Living Waters believes that while there is nothing directly wrong with the human drive for “sex, power, money or material things,” an immoderate emphasis on them in one’s life—or alternatively, indulgence outside the confines of set moral acceptability—is the vehicle by which sin enters one’s life.²¹⁴

However, it is not the individual threat of a momentary, moral transgression which Living Waters considers most detrimental, but rather the slow backslide into identification and participation with an overly worldly culture. In this, they quote John

²¹³ “Save Yourself some Pain.” *Giving to God. Living Waters*. 2014.
<http://www.livingwaters.com/save-yourself-some-pain/giving-to-god>

²¹⁴ “Spiritual Warfare.” <http://www.livingwaters.com/save-yourself-some-pain/spiritual-warfare>

and James, saying, “[w]e are told, ‘do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.’ ‘Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.’”

To what degree is this performance of duty prevalent in the distribution of money tracts? In addition to utilizing the image of money, Living Waters is also particularly adept at evoking the language of labor and economic exchange. Much of their ministerial activity is likened to secular labor and business practices. It is such a prevalent trope that Comfort likens the conversion process itself to the ostensibly secular world of labor and wages, saying, “When you were in the world, You had a different boss.” You once served sin, but you quit because you suddenly discovered that there was going to be a payday, and you didn’t like the wages—they were gross. The wages of sin is death. A down payment had already been dealt to you in this life, and full payment would have come in hell in the next. It was a real bad deal. Thank God you had the good sense to obey His command to quit before payday came. As such, it is incorrect to assume that the inner-worldly asceticism of tract missionaries mirrors the stoic rejection of all secular pursuits, save labor, which so characterized the protestant spirit of Weber’s Calvinists.

Missionaries associated with Living Waters in particular do not forgo all pleasures and sacrifice all entertainment on the altar of work and increase. However, it’s hard to miss the intertwined relationship between both capital and labor, particularly if one views, as these missionaries do, the saving of souls to be a spiritual profession. To be sure, there remains a rejection of the engagement with frivolous, profane and flesh-centered activities. But the emphasis on what constitutes a godly work has changed from an

emphasis on the exercise of labor to the exclusion of all else, a position which views witnessing as a spiritual vocation.

For Weber, such a social ethic of labor constitutes a “calling.” It is an obligation to the diligent increase of wealth manifesting as a virtuous, worldly asceticism. We see this in the writings of Ben Franklin whom Weber quotes at length. In a voice reminiscent of religious tracts from the period, Franklin preaches to us the value of business and money in tones and a lexicon which bespeak the pulpit with phrases like “Money begets money” and “He that wastes idly...” Weber sees that this articulation of what otherwise might be called avarice is to the capitalist spirit a performance of duty, wherein the principle ethic is the increase of one’s own capital. His words are instructive. “Truly what is preached here is not simply a way of making one's way in the world, but a peculiar ethic. The infraction of its rules is treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty.”²¹⁵ Weber’s *espirit* infuses capitalism with a moral imperative.

This calling compels the individual to engage in work, and thus bring forth an increase of wealth. It constitutes a duty because its aim is not the use of the accumulation of frivolities and pleasures, but rather as a sign of ethical piety. Avarice is inverted and sanctified, so long as the goal is the accumulation of wealth itself, rather than the fruits of that wealth. This in turn designates the individual as honest and pious. His wealth provides a tangible measure of the good standing of his credit, both economic and spiritual. Thus, “...what is preached here is not simply a way of making one's way in the

²¹⁵ Max Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. (New York: Scribners, 1958).

world, but a peculiar ethic. The infraction of its rules is treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty.”²¹⁶

Tract distribution then might appear to be a classic manifestation of worldly asceticism. It is a major marker of identity for the ministry itself and additionally serves as a diving motivator in the distribution of tracts. Both of these instances, therefore, provide the ministry with the legitimacy necessary to support and inspire those who would take on the work. People who engage in these types of evangelism are essentially—like most worldly ascetics—navigating a middle way between wholesale, spiritual withdrawal and secular participation. Traversing this middle way allows them, to a certain degree, to maintain contact with friends and loved ones, and triangulate their message and lifestyles as more attractive to the people whom they are trying to sway. In accordance with John 17:14, they see themselves as “in the world” but not “of the world.” As Billy Graham said, “[their] home is in heaven. [They’re] just passing through this world.”²¹⁷ However, there is still the need to present at least the appearance of balance and moderation, if not of faith, other than the practice of evangelism. The missionary must to a degree appeal to the inordinate appetites of humanity without themselves crossing the line into the purveyance of temptation and sin. They must in essence determine a medium which can best captivate attention and interest, while simultaneously maintaining an acceptable distance from the corruptive influence of worldly culture.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

²¹⁷ Billy Graham. “Billy Graham Quotes on Heaven.” *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association*. May 22, 2014. <https://billygraham.org/story/billy-graham-quotes-on-heaven/>

This balance is frequently present in the tone the ministry's representative effect in discussing evangelism. Despite the gravity of the subject matter, Living Waters tends to approach the actual behavior of witnessing with an informal, often humorous attitude. This is not to say that they treat the Gospel or its ramifications with irreverence or disrespect. Rather, it means that they imbue the Biblical injunction to be "in the world, not of it," with an additional meaning which transcends the quasi-passive distribution of tracts as a sole evangelical action. The ministry understands that to be in the world is to connect with those who are of the world and this of course is done with a generally affable demeanor, and the use and evocation of worldly objects such as money. Utilizing and participating in the spaces and institutions of the secular world, chief among those being money and commerce, Living Waters exemplifies the archetype of Weber's world-rejecting ascetic. Though not explicitly Calvinist, the ministry shares this self-conception with its Puritan forbearers. Moreover, because they choose to remain in the world, their activities necessarily become a network of interwoven interactions which help to both bridge connections to the secular world, and reinforce the social structure and Christian identity of the missionaries.²¹⁸

However, the behavior of money tract missionaries differs from Weber's worldly ascetics in two very important ways: the tracts distributed are not real currency, and accumulation of real money by the ministry is not seen as a marker of godliness. Living Waters is not a Prosperity Gospel ministry. Though they may not eschew the

²¹⁸ David Hunter *Evangelicalism: The coming generation*. Barron's Educational Series, 1993. 63.

accumulation of wealth or the pursuance of profit, they do not necessarily view being wealthy as a sign of God's blessing. Though that may be implied, or at least acknowledged, money is treated first and foremost as a means to continue individual and institutional evangelism. Wealthy, poor or middle-class distribution is technically open to everyone, and thus salvation is technically open to everyone. Money, we recall, is not a sin in and of itself, so long as it is not given improper ordinance and so long as it is not used in a manner antithetical to the Gospel. Additionally, though the ministry does provide avenues for donation, the primary aim, particularly as expressed on the website, is not to grow through tithing, but rather to grow through tract distribution. To be sure, Living Waters does sell a variety of tracts, literature, gifts, media and music, and donation is encouraged. However, the official aim is towards evangelism, not institutional growth.

Brand Identity

For a missionary, the very act of passing out tracts signifies an image of an ideal Christian activity. Recall for a moment the earlier discussion of how the spiritual labor of distribution serves as an opportunity to mark oneself as a laborer for the kingdom of heaven. The use of money and the language of economic forces transform the financial signifier of currency into a spiritual one. This transformation also affects the missionary. Passing out tracts allows the distributor to align their ordinary selves with a Christian ideal and take up the role of apostle. To be a tract missionary is to walk in the footsteps of the earliest evangelists, to emulate them, and to perform their acts. It is literally a spreading of the Word and it carries with it a rich narrative history through which

evangelists might identify. Their work not only emulates the Apostles, but also the Reformers who broke the Catholic Church's grip on Gospel, with the printing press as an ally, and made the Gospel available to all the world. In so doing, they also assume the role of Christ or rather, a Christ-like individual who sees the dispensation of the Gospel as the highest, yet most important calling.

Living Waters evidences this in various explanations of their doctrinal approach. The ministry's evangelical method is two-fold. Their numerous videos, books and training manuals are explicit on this point. First preach the Law, and then preach Grace. To Living Waters, the Gospel of Grace makes no sense without first understanding the Law and, more to the point, human transgressions against the Law. People must understand that they "deserve Hell – but are offered mercy instead." Sinai produces fear of God, because of his wrath. Calvary produces love of God, because of His mercy."²¹⁹ Thus to live Christ-like is to be an evangelist. It's not about "What would Jesus do?" but "what did Jesus do?"²²⁰ To be the ideal Christian is to be as Christ-like as possible, which means preaching the Law, and tempering it with Grace. Ray Comfort's play on the 1990s pop-Christian doctrine abbreviation, commonly articulated as WWJD more or less sums up the sentiment. It's pointless to speculate what Jesus would do today. Christians must go by what was written then. For Comfort, this means preaching the Cross. It's fundamental.

The vast majority of Comfort's work intentionally functions and presents as a sales training manual. *The Blue Book on Evangelism* is a question-and-answer format text

²¹⁹ Ray Comfort. *The Blue Book on Evangelism*. (Living Waters, 2008), 35

²²⁰ Ibid., 36

where concerns about the common pitfalls inherent in witnessing are addressed. It describes itself as “An Ambassador’s Guide” and makes numerous references to spiritual labor and the necessity of effectively representing what it means to be a Christian. *The School of Biblical Evangelism* is a correspondence and online training manual co-authored by both Comfort and Kirk Cameron. Yet another notably business-oriented book is *How to Win Souls and Influence People*. This play on Dale Carnegie’s business world classic, *How to Make Friends and Influence People*, is Comfort’s guide to living an actively evangelistic life. Its purpose is explicitly stated on the back jacket: “You too can learn how to win souls and influence people for the Kingdom of God.”

In addition to the explicit examples of similar terminology referenced previously in this essay, Living Waters literature functions as a key component in establishing the image and identity of the organization. References to business and labor function alongside evangelism manuals which, in form at least, mirror their secular counterparts. This, in conjunction with the slick, heavily mediated website and glossy, detailed professional tracts, allows the ministry more than just the appearance of commercial interest. It also all grants them access to the power and efficacy of organizational branding.

The process of using the dynamics of business and brand identity in the formulation of American evangelical identity was not invented by contemporary publishing societies such as Living Waters. Viewing Christianity as a brand has roots in American evangelical history and is most recently explored by Timothy Gloege in his book *Guaranteed Pure*. He argues that fundamentalism Christian identity manifests

initially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century out of a desire to distill Christianity into an easily recognizable ideal.²²¹ The central conceit of his thesis is that the contemporary, American fundamentalist movement and the identities tied up in it emerge from the same model as contemporary brand advertising. Gloege argues that organized fundamentalism, viewed as a “pure” form of Christianity, was built using the same strategies employed in building late nineteenth-century American businesses. Branding in particular rose in prominence and witnessed significant market growth. Evangelical leaders, many of whom also had ties to American industry, increasingly saw value in applying marketing strategies to their religious affiliations. Henry Parsons Crowell was one such individual who created a harmonious marriage between American business practices and evangelical Christianity. He served as head of the governing board for the Moody Bible Institute but he was better known as the founder and owner of Quaker Oatmeal. It is in the story of the development of the latter where Gloege finds evidence of how Crowell’s business model not only made Quaker Oats an enduring and iconic brand, but also helped give rise to the contemporary makeup of fundamentalist Christianity in America, in which Living Waters is included.

Crowell, a lifelong Christian, had rededicated himself to Christ after witnessing a young George Moody give a revival-style Bible reading in an Ohio church. So inspired was he by Moody’s sermon, that Crowell, who had little acumen as a preacher, promised to serve God as best he could in business by helping fund and raise up laborers in God’s

²²¹ Timothy Gloege. *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism*. (UNC Press Books, 2015).

service.²²² His 1882 entrance into the oatmeal industry occurred at a time when many different purveyors and producers of oatmeal were competing with nearly identical products. As a result, prices fell below production costs, resulting in stagnant growth. Oatmeal, which was bought at retail by shoveling the product from a barrel into a bag, was from the consumer's point of view indistinguishable from one brand to the next. Initially laughed at by his business contemporaries, Crowell chose to circumvent this soggy economic outlook by focusing less on the product itself, and more on how the product was marketed.²²³ Crowell revolutionized the industry by jettisoning the functional yet unremarkable barrel method and instead packaging his product in individual boxes which were sealed and then shelved in stores. He further drew attention to his product by taking out a high saturation of "richly illustrated" advertisements in local and national press outfits. The brand image of the smiling, convivial Quaker, in eighteenth-century garb, quickly became and today remains an iconic one. The image evoked a sense of comfort and nostalgia, but more importantly a sense of safety. Early

²²² The early articulations of his faith emphasized a plain reading style of scriptural understanding in which God operated directly, and personally with the faithful, though not always in the ways they might imagine. This hermeneutic left him largely tolerant and accepting of a wide variety of religious practices, so long as they called themselves "Christian." However, following a series of personal tragedies and financial setbacks, prior to Quaker Oats, Crowell began to take an increasingly conservative, and dispensationalist view of Christianity. This provided him with a religious framework by which he could judge proper belief and practice, and measure it against the high standard of authenticity set by dispensationalism. In other words, it offered Crowell, and allowed him to display, a "pure" articulation of Christianity. Ibid, 137. Crowell prayed "If you will allow me to make money to be used in your service...you will receive the glory." Day. *Breakfast Table Autocrat*. 35-59. Quote on 59.

²²³ Ibid., 135-136

renditions of the smiling Quaker, pictured him holding a scroll on which was printed a single word: “pure.”

Crowell understood that the concept of purity was particularly effective in competing with other producers of oatmeal, especially when their product was stored in large, accessible barrels. Quaker Oats by comparison came to the consumer sealed in an easily identifiable box.²²⁴ From a consumer’s perspective, the oatmeal came to them directly from the mill. There were no intermediaries. How could it not be “pure”? The near direct-to consumer-distribution, in conjunction with the branding which evoked a narrative of purity, helped create, in the general oatmeal-purchasing population, a relationship between the company’s image and themselves. That there were no actual Quakers involved in the production was irrelevant. The image created a gift by engendering a narrative and association of purity. Consumers returned the favor by identifying with and remaining loyal to the brand. At the time, this was a novel concept. But today, ensuing brand loyalty and identity is such an essential part of doing business, that it is all but ubiquitous.²²⁵ Quaker Oats quickly overtook its competitors and, by 1901, became a newly incorporated organization with a considerable national trade infrastructure.

Crowell was not alone in his view that Christianity and business could be built upon similar structural and ideological foundations. He was joined in that conviction by

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Timothy Gloege. Interviewer Daniel Silliman. “How a Pioneer of Branding Invented Christian Fundamentalism.” *Religion Dispatches*. May 2015. <http://religiondispatches.org/how-marketers-invented-old-time-religion>.

fellow Christian businessmen of the period such as: Dwight Moody, George Stuart, Marshall Field and George Pullman. Religious enterprise for these men could be ensured by a “secular genius” which could be tested in the marketplace.²²⁶ However, his newfound orthodoxy, in conjunction with his earlier promises made to help raise up spiritual laborers, reinforced his convictions that there was no line of demarcation between doing business and supporting the church. In 1901, shortly after the initial successes of Quaker Oats, Crowell was asked to serve on the board of the Moody Bible Institute in hopes that his business acumen could help stabilize the organization which was floundering both financially and institutionally. He quickly consolidated support and assumed control of the governing board which allowed him to hire new staff with the intent of widening the scope, influence and appeal of the Institute. The message was still conservative and dispensationalist. However, it eschewed heavy emphasis on doctrine and theological identifiers, and instead promoted what was called “Bible Christianity.”²²⁷ Unsurprisingly, this period also saw the publication of *The Fundamentals* and the increased proliferation of a belief which viewed pure and authentic Christianity as one predicated in the complete inerrancy of Scripture.²²⁸

Thus Crowell, and his Moody Bible associates, approached reinvigorating both the Institute and American Christianity in general in a similar manner employed during his time at Quaker Oats. Amid a landscape of competing religious movements and

²²⁶ R. Laurence Moore. *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*. (Oxford University Press. New York. (1994) 185.

²²⁷ Ibid., 142-143

²²⁸ George M. Marsden. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 41.

institutions, they sought a way to distinguish themselves from their denominational contemporaries by approaching the spread of the Gospel as they would the selling of a commodity which could be both useful and enjoyable.²²⁹ To these men, Christianity—like oatmeal—was a food, albeit a spiritual one. Likewise, just as oatmeal dispensed from the barrel ran the risk of being contaminated, Christianity under the influence of negative social forces was also threatened by contamination. In this case, the pollutant came in the form of modernism and all that it entailed. Denominations that incorporated modernist principles were tainted forms of Christianity and, therefore, inferior products. They were “...cheap substitute[s] – oatmeal sowed with sawdust.”

However, the Institute met with some resistance from clergy and lay leaders who were unfamiliar with the Institute’s theologies, even if they shared similar positions. In response, Crowell implemented a structural culture which sowed evangelical outreach with the language of the business world. If the Moody Bible Institute was the producer of this fundamentalist product, then religious leaders were viewed as “retailers.” These retailers already had established relationships with their own denominations who were referred to as “wholesalers.” Because these wholesalers acted as denominational “gatekeepers,” Crowell and his associates bypassed them by sending *The Fundamentals* and other similar literature directly to local pastors and lay leaders. This created a bottom-up demand system through which ordinary churchgoers began to demand the fundamentalist product. If the denomination refused, the individual could always go

²²⁹ R. Laurence Moore. *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*. (Oxford University Press. New York. (1994), 186

somewhere else. *The Fundamentals* were so starkly accessible that ordinary middle-class people could understand whatever doctrinal points it presented, while simultaneously identifying with the themes and ideologies offered.²³⁰

The Fundamentals, the text which would give rise to the commonly known term fundamentalism, was actually a twelve-volume, paperback series which was partially financed by businessmen Lyman and Milton Stewart and would go on to form the cornerstone of early twentieth century, dispensationalist and anti-modernist thought.²³¹ They carried within them many of the markers and characteristics that would come to define contemporary fundamentalism and served as a rallying cry for conservative Protestants eager to distance themselves from their modernist counterparts. Devoted to the “integrity of scripture,” *The Fundamentals* sought to establish God as the foremost spiritual and scriptural authority.²³² Naturally, this authority was both above, and in opposition to, the authority modernists were perceived to have placed on science and “higher criticism.”²³³ In other words, social and academic ideas such as evolution and textual criticism muddled the waters and obscured from the sight of ordinary people what

²³⁰ Timothy Gloege. *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism*. (UNC Press Books, 2015). 196. Crowell considered other denominations his direct competitors. As such, he saw reaching out to them to be a fruitless endeavor as he recognized that modernist churches were unlikely to change. Such action would be like Quaker Oats attempting to appeal directly to Kellogg’s or a civic reformer appealing to Tammany Hall. As in business, Crowell realized that it was more efficacious to target the consumer, so as to undercut the competition.

²³¹ George M. Marsden. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991). 41. Lyman Stewart was also the co-founder of Union Oil Company.

²³² James Davidson Hunter. *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. 22

²³³ Ibid.

was imagined to be a pure and authentic Christianity. *The Fundamentals*, and the movement named for them, promised a direct, straightforward and accessible doctrine and it was intentionally marketed as such. If the type of Christianity championed by Crowell was the brand, then *The Fundamentals* were the advertisement. Therefore, salvation was the product being consumed.

Though fundamentalism, as a social force, has seen considerable evolution in the way of media presentation, much of its essential, doctrinal characteristics remain more or less the same as they were in the early half of the twentieth century.²³⁴ Living Waters' most well-recognized tract, the "Million Dollar Note," is even more stark and fundamental than that. Naturally, the ministry provides a wide selection of tracts which do address some of the same anti-modernist conversations championed by the early Moody Bible Institute and articulated in *The Fundamentals*. But the "Million Dollar Note" pares the message down even further to what Comfort describes as the bare essentials of the Gospel. Recipients only really need to know four things: the Law, their transgressions against the Law, the punishment for their transgressions, and the reprieve offered by God. A good evangelist needs to be careful that their approach does not

²³⁴ George M. Marsden. *Fundamentalism and America Culture: New Edition*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), 249. Marsden argues that methods of evangelism in particular have changed since the early twentieth century, particularly in terms of technology. He notes in particular the rise of radio and televangelism. This is somewhat in contention with the central thesis of this book which sees such distribution methods, and more recent ones, not as replacements for traditional outreach, but in parallel.

distract from the message. While addressing social issues is not forbidden, for inexperienced evangelists it carries the risk of dragging them into a fruitless argument.²³⁵

The same can also be said of common platitudes such as “Christ died for your sins.” Without knowledge of their transgressions from the Law, the recipient is likely to, rightfully, become offended at such a claim.²³⁶ Even personal testimonies can become problematic because they can confuse and water down the Gospel’s message. Comfort admonishes, “Too often we give the impression that we weren’t happy, that there was something missing in our lives, until we found Jesus.” This is wrong for a couple of reasons. For one, not everyone who needs salvation is unhappy or down on their luck. There are plenty of people living in sin who are perfectly happy, and ignorant of their impending spiritual danger. Moreover, the message isn’t really about “happiness” to begin with—it’s about sin and salvation. The purpose of Christ’s embodiment, message and resurrection was not to engender good feelings but to offer salvation. “Instead,” he tells us, “explain how you came to see that you were condemned under the Law, headed for Hell, and how God’s grace saved you through the cross etc.”²³⁷ In other words, digressions from the pure, essential message of the Gospel are distractions from ultimate goal of the message. Distractions dilute the Gospel and muddy the brand.

Law, transgression, punishment and salvation; these are the primary contours of the Living Waters brand of Christianity. They are essentially all one truly needs to

²³⁵ Kirk Cameron and Ray Comfort. *The School of Biblical Evangelism*. Bride Logos 2004. 14-15.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ray Comfort. *The Blue Book on Evangelism*. (Living Waters Publications. 2008)

become a Christian and, thus, become saved. If a missionary runs through these points in a witnessing encounter, the recipient has a stark choice. They can either accept the message or reject it. Such an approach leaves little wiggle room for rationalization and diminishes the possibility of both contention and false conversion. Furthermore, if one is unwilling or unable to preach in person, the tract does the work for them.

HERE IS THE MILLION DOLLAR QUESTION: Will you go to heaven when you die? Here's a quick test: Have you ever lied, stolen, or used God's name in vain? Jesus said, 'Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' If you have done these things, God sees you as a lying thieving blasphemous, adulterer at heart, and the Bible warns that one day God will punish you in a terrible place called Hell. But God is not willing that any should perish. Sinners broke God's Law and Jesus paid their fine. This means that God can legally dismiss their case...Today repent and trust Jesus, and God will give you eternal life as a free gift. Then read the Bible daily and obey it. God will never fail you.

The passage ends with the web address LivingWaters.com, which ideally prompts an interested recipient into visiting and continuing their spiritual growth.²³⁸ Visiting the website further familiarizes the individual with the ministry's self conception and doctrine. More importantly, it offers ideological support for the newly saved in the form of videos, books and, naturally, a large assortment of tracts. For Living Waters, no time is too early to begin evangelizing. When speaking about his early evangelism, Comfort explained "...I [took] baby steps, and I did fall over and get bruised. However, right from the moment of my conversion I was giving out tracts. If that's considered baby steps, I'm

²³⁸ "Million Dollar Note." Living Waters Ministries. The tract cites John 3:16 as its doctrinal support and adding "...[t]hen Jesus rose from the dead, defeating death."

still taking them.”²³⁹ This in turn serves another important function. Determining to become a tract missionary, especially for Living Waters, means that the actions of a new missionary help to perpetuate the ministry’s identity and approach to what it means to be a Christian. The tract missionary becomes a part-time representative of God.

Right from the moment of becoming born again, the new Christian is expected and certainly encouraged to take up the mantle of evangelism. It is an essential part of identifying as this type of Christian. The emphasis is on identity, not on the action of distribution. An identity in Christ requires that one’s being comes before one’s doing.²⁴⁰ Therefore, becoming Christian necessarily comes before being Christian. If someone becomes saved, it is more or less expected that they will in turn take up the torch themselves because fulfillment of the identity requires the performance of speaking the Gospel; and speaking the Gospel is a critical aspect of identifying as a Christian.

Business and advertising in particular have long been associated with evangelical publication and distribution. The methods, practices and distribution networks established by nineteenth-century publishing houses such as the American Tract Society not only eased the spread of Christianity to Americans on the frontier; it would also eventually give rise to America’s secular advertising industry.²⁴¹ This speaks to the frequently comfortable relationship between American evangelicalism and American business. On the most basic level, one can observe the intersections of business and faith. An obvious

²³⁹ Ray Comfort. *The Blue Book on Evangelism*. (Living Waters Publications 2008)

²⁴⁰ Jeff Vanderstelt quoted by Matt Tully. “A New Identity.” *Crossway Blog*. April 23, 2015. <https://www.crossway.org/blog/2015/04/a-new-identity/>

²⁴¹ Nord. *Faith in Reading*.

example of this is the proliferation of Gideon Bibles frequently encountered in hotel rooms. The purpose of such volumes was to provide spiritual support for the traveling American businessman. In trying times, a business traveler could “put their hands on a Bible [rather] than on a telephone directory.”²⁴² Yet there was also considerable profit to be had in the exploitation of this relationship as tract and publication societies. Despite their “non-profit” designation, societies still produced millions of tracts and Bibles and in so doing, raised millions of dollars in funds and revenue.²⁴³ In order to do this, societies, in spite of the misgivings of religious leaders, increasingly funded literature which also entertained. This in turn prompted consumers to go out of their way to seek out specific narratives and enabled publishing houses to market products to specific tastes and demographics, creating literature a consumer could easily identify with, essentially establishing the beginnings of a multi-billion dollar media industry centered around Christian publishing and entertainment.²⁴⁴

Living Waters is one of the more successful inheritors of this historical phenomenon. Like Henry Parsons Crowell, Ray Comfort realizes the institutional drawing power that is harnessed when consumers identify with a product. In a very real, very physical sense, the distribution of the paper product essentially means the distribution of a circular, and they are often treated in a manner similar to other forms of ephemera. Yet tracts are also advertisements which offer a product—and in tract media, salvation is a product, seemingly free but in the fine print, an adherence to usually,

²⁴² RL Moore. *Selling God*, 18.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Stewart M. Hoover. *Religion in the media age*. (Routledge, 2006), 61-63.

fundamentalist doctrine. It requires, therefore, little stretch of the imagination to recognize that the distribution of tracts functions as a type of advertisement, but with an important distinction. A tract missionary already affiliates with the brand in the sense that they already identify as Christians and are unlikely to stray. Yet they function as more than just “consumers” of Christianity; they are also laborers seeking to win over as many new customers as possible. That makes them laborers as well as consumers. They are not just brand affiliates; they are also brand representatives. In this capacity individual(s) interact with potential customers on a person-to-person basis so as to both attract new customers. In so doing, they help to foster a deeper connection between the customer and the firm. In other words, they create and reinforce brand identity.

By employing the mechanics of branding and brand identity, publishers allow for the creation of an easily communicative and recognizable product: Christianity. This in turn is represented by the tract which essentially functions as an advertisement in the form of a paper circular. Distributing tracts is a highly encouraged missionary activity for new evangelicals and such action reinforces their newly acquired born-again identity. The comparatively low-impact evangelism offers an immediate and easy entrance into the calling of the Great Commission.

Therefore, the acquisition of this identity is wholly tied up in the act of distributing tracts, effectively rendering the distributor both a consumer of the product, and by extension, a loyal representative of the brand. Ensuring brand identity is, at its core, an effort to ensure loyalty to a firm and its products. The purpose is to create for the consumer a sense of uniqueness that is associated with the firm’s brand above all

others.²⁴⁵ This uniqueness is what the consumer derives from the brand's image and is ultimately what the consumer is purchasing. They're not buying the product per se. They're buying what a firm's specific product represents. More importantly, an advertisement which focuses on the establishment of loyalty to the brand, as opposed to a single or occasional purchase, creates a sense of affinity between the brand and the consumer. A customer who identifies with the brand is more likely to patronize them nearly exclusively.

²⁴⁵ Shiva Nandan. "An exploration of the brand identity–brand image linkage: A communications perspective." *Journal of Brand Management* 12, no. 4 (2005): 264-278.

Chapter 5

Conclusion:

The Paranoid Style of Gospel Tracts in the Construction of Hegemonic Identities

Chaplain Bill is the YouTube avatar name for Bill Rhetts. Bill is an ex-police officer with the LAPD and his past often serves as a personal touchstone for why he became an open-air preacher and tract missionary. In addition to his YouTube channel which hosts over 600 videos, he also serves as a director for the organization he founded, the Inland Police Officers Coalition Ministries, or IPOC. This 501(c)(3) organization, of which Rhetts is the dominant participant, describes its mission as “to glorify the Lord, edify the saints, and to evangelize to the lost.” Spaces where the “lost” can be found include: “community events, jails...hospitals, government buildings” and other public locations, mostly throughout the Southern California Inland Empire of Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. The website also offers visitors the opportunity to make tax-deductible donations which help facilitate the making of videos and purchases of tracts.²⁴⁶ The website’s mission statement also informs that Chaplain Bill is available for weddings and funerals provided that, in the former case, the couple “meets the Biblical criterion.”²⁴⁷

Chaplain Bill takes a particularly aggressive approach to open-air and tract evangelism. His practice combines both, and his background as a police officer shows in

²⁴⁶ “Our Mission” IPOC Ministries. <http://www.theexpositor.tv/our-mission/>

²⁴⁷ The website does not explain what this means but is likely meant to refer to heteronormative marriages.

his commanding tone and forward demeanor. His style is loud and brash. At times, it is also disruptive in that he makes it a point to actively insert himself and his message into noticeably non-receptive audiences which have included bar patrons as well as ordinary people standing in line at the DMV and county courthouses. Such intrusion seemingly stands in opposition both to the crowd-generating, soap-box style of many open-air preachers and the passive, person-to-person method of tract distribution. Rather than drawing a crowd or seeking one out, Rhetts, who refers to his Gospel tracts as “rounds of ammunition,” inserts himself into them and—amplified by a handheld bullhorn—begins to speak. “Good morning ladies and gentlemen, my name is Chaplain Bill Rhetts and I’m here to preach the Gospel to you.”²⁴⁸

It’s an aggressive style. It’s loud and brash and the audience by the nature of their location is essentially, though frequently unwillingly, captive. Few people have the flexibility to leave the line and return to the DMV at a time when the man with the bullhorn is not present. This is a contributing factor to the aggressiveness and intensity of Rhetts’ ministry. The other is his former profession. An ex-police officer, he does not shy away from sharing his history and in fact often includes it as a common theme in his messaging. The manner in which he reveals this takes a number of forms depending on the location, audience and message he’s trying to convey. For instance, When preaching in front of a parole office to a mostly Latino group of people he implies are parolees, he uses his back story to compare their (presumed) transgressions against the law to the

²⁴⁸ Bill Rhetts. “Preached endtimes and uneasy believerism at the DMV” Youtube.com April 5, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhYYeiORn-E>

universal human transgression against God's Law. In this, Rhett's includes himself. "You see I once was a parolee at large, never been to prison," Rhett clarifies. "But I've broken God's Law."²⁴⁹ However at other times, Rhett uses the Bible to justify violent police action, including his own admitted shootings, preaching and arguing that it was not done with "hate in the heart." Instead, he argues that the times he's hated people or acted towards them with malice constituted an authentic breach of the commandment against murder.²⁵⁰

The aggressiveness in his demeanor is particularly evident in his chosen locations. One notable evangelism video features three locations. It opens on the scene of a major traffic collision which Chaplain Bill tells us required the Jaws of Life to extract the victim. Rhett is standing between two fire engines, having already distributed Gospel tracts to the crowd. However, his prayer is cut short by an on-duty police officer who asks him to move to the sidewalk where he prays for God to "do a mighty work" to save the family of the crash victim, and all humanity from sin. The video cuts to a bus stop on a corner which is captioned "a crime ridding (sic) corner." "Let's replace the prostitutes, pimps and panderers with the preacher and let us preach the glorious Gospel of the Lord, Jesus Christ," he cries out.

²⁴⁹ One of Rhett's favorite tracts to distribute is an orange and black slip of paper titled, "Violation." Made to look like a parking violation or some other type of police citation, the "Violation" tract, not unlike the "Million Dollar Bill" features the Ten Commandments and the proscribed punishment for violating them.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEEObB9RRnA&list=PLrAI6E39sq_zc-My4oV8qk3lkQ7WsYnNy&index=107

²⁵⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSH8nZctkw&list=PLrAI6E39sq_zc-My4oV8qk3lkQ7WsYnNy&index=89

Rhetts is soon confronted by a man who, according to the caption, “owns the corner.” “I’m saying no to the prostitution...,” he tells him. Eventually, the man withdraws, but not before offered a tract, and Rhetts aims his bullhorn at a nearby gas station and calls out to a man tying his shoes in front of a gas pump. “You may have put those shoes on this morning...but a mortician may remove them tonight.” Eventually, a bus pulls up to the stop. As the doors open, Rhetts asks with his bullhorn, “Does everybody know Jesus on that bus? Repent now, for the Kingdom of God is at hand...” He passes out tracts as the passengers disembark. The final location in the video is the entrance to an adult book store. “What are you doing hanging out in front of the adult book store?” he asks. The man he addresses is noticeably offended. “What makes you think I’m hanging out...I work here...” Not apologizing for the mistake, Rhetts begins his sermon on the sinful nature of working at an adult book store and of humanity in general. “They were unresponsive to the Gospel,” a closing caption reads.²⁵¹

It should be noted that in the aforementioned video, almost everyone Chaplain Bill preaches to and interacts with is either black or Latino. The only exceptions are himself, and the police officer who asks him to move to the sidewalk. The optics of a forceful, white, ex-police officer aggressively preaching hellfire to people of color are hard to miss. The racialized subtext, whether or not he realizes it, is especially prevalent when Rhetts makes a show of why he’s on that particular street corner; it’s rampant with crime,

²⁵¹ Chaplain Bill. “Major Collision Jaws of Life, Pernanai Shop, cried out @ Bus Stops (the sinner’s prayer)” October 7, 2014.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfQFMLmtaoQ&list=PLrAI6E39sq_zc-My4oV8qk3lkQ7WsYnNy&index=127

“prostitution and pimps.” Rhetts’ language is deliberately provocative, even hostile and the descriptors he uses to castigate the spaces in which he is preaching are rife with adjectives indicative of a white gaze towards marginalized spaces. This becomes all the more apparent when he approaches the book store employee and assumes the man, who is black, is just “hanging out.” This fusion of the language of morality, emerging from an agent of the white power structure, is itself a constraining force. “Crime ridden” and immoral spaces are determined partially by the presence of black and brown bodies.²⁵² Therefore, Rhetts’ style and choice of locations, in conjunction with his often referenced history as a police officer, must necessarily be a policing of marginalized bodies and spaces.

This racial and class subtext appears in other videos as well and, as mentioned, many also display a significant degree of physicality and encroachment into the space of those whom he approaches. In one, Rhetts approaches a person sitting on a sidewalk and covered in a blanket and hooded sweatshirt. “I gotta get this girl on camera. Who’s under the hoodie?” Rhetts asks, thrusting a tract inches from their face. He waves it there until the individual takes the tract and covers themselves again. The name of the video is “Witnessing to a hoodlum.”²⁵³ Another video is entitled, “A smoking beggar asks for money for food.” Rhetts gives him a gift card so he will not “buy cigarettes” and also

²⁵² George Yancy. *Black bodies, white gazes: The continuing significance of race*. (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

²⁵³ Bill Rhetts. “Witnessing to a Hoodlum?” The description on the website makes light of the use of the term. “Hood·lum / 'hoodləm, 'hoodləm/ A noun - a person that wears a hoodie. OK I made it all up, she’s not a hoodlum” *Youtube.com*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shjSeubDkBc>. April 22, 2017

extracts a promise to read a Gospel tract.²⁵⁴ It's unlikely that Rhetts would say that his ministry specifically targets marginalized communities. However, a great number of his evangelism locations are places where marginalized individuals, particularly people of color, are likely to be found. This is especially true of his videos which take place in urban centers throughout the Inland Empire. The vast majority of those whom Rhetts aims his forceful ministrations at are, by virtue of demographics, black and Latino. This is not universal. In addition to preaching in front of courthouses, DMV and parole offices, Rhetts also preaches in bars and taverns and many of these locations feature a slightly more diverse assembly. Many of his more popular videos feature Rhetts antagonizing bar patrons—he would call it witnessing—and leaving tracts before usually being chased out by the proprietor. Furthermore, like many other street preachers, Rhetts also frequents college campuses, city centers, areas of commerce and tourist attractions. However, a disproportionate amount of his videos features him preaching in neglected areas or to underserved communities, particularly throughout the Inland Empire.

Though at times extreme, the outreach mannerisms of Chaplain Bill provide a template by which we can address the question of identity and how it manifests in the culture of tract missionaries. In essence, Chaplain Bill gives us a perfect example of a performed, American nationalist masculinity manifested through the practice of Gospel tract evangelism. Street preaching and tract evangelism are not always so intense, or obviously problematic from an ethnic or gender perspective. In fact, many tract evangelists prefer a passive style of witnessing. Nevertheless, there is a degree of

²⁵⁴ Chaplain Bill. "A smoking beggar asks for money for food." April 21, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hid7OiR9XpE>

intensity in even the most passive of tract evangelism in that it requires the missionary to penetrate secular society with a message which is oftentimes itself confrontational. To be sure, the Gospel narrative in its original form is essentially about confrontation. However, for many such missionaries and ministries, confronting sin and secularism necessarily requires confronting those values held dear to secular society, values such as multiculturalism, reproductive rights, and LGBT equality, among many others. Unsurprisingly, this means aligning one's self or one's organization with conservative political causes and affiliations. It also means possessing an outlook which sees itself as a necessary counter to the negative values of secularism and also as a beleaguered underdog. This is an aligning of one's identity with American cultural hegemony, a hegemony which is Christian, nationalist, masculine and white. However, it is also a framing of an identity which sees itself as culturally fraught and besieged by conspiracy.

By and large, the founders and leaders of the major publishing houses are white, American males. There are some exceptions. Trish Ramos, who is affiliated with Living Waters, is a woman and Ray Comfort, though a white male, is not an American by birth. He emigrated from New Zealand. Most ministries publish Spanish-language content and Living Waters has a director of Latino outreach, Michael Esparza. For that matter, many other publishing houses including Chick Publications and Crossways/ATS, as well as smaller publishers such as GLOW, have an intensive multilingual outreach program featuring tracts in languages spoken around the globe. As such, it's not as if these ministries don't provide outreach to a global and multicultural audience. It's that the content and intent is reflective of a traditionally conservative American, white

evangelical outlook which is skeptical of multiculturalism as a socio-political worldview. To be sure, tract ministries by and large do not openly espouse views which might be classified as white nationalist or identitarian. However, the social and political positions they lay out in their tract literature and online publications are often reflective of the values held by the dominant, white American, evangelical outlook. Whether taking a stand against reproductive rights, marriage equality or the teaching of evolution in public schools, the social views presented in many tracts read evoke the policy positions taken by any number of conservative political organizations. Put simply, the identities spoken to by tract literature are those which belong to the dominant racial and gender echelons of society. The heavy emphasis on traditional gender and purity roles, as well as a rejection of perceived globalism, points to an outlook which articulates both whiteness and masculinity.²⁵⁵ Even though some individual missionaries and publishing employees may themselves be non-white or female, the imagery and messaging of the literature itself promotes a vision of America and the world which is aggressively nationalist, and heavily diminishes the role of intersectional movements and identities which are themselves depicted as contrary to an authentically moral society.

The Paranoid Style of the Evangelical Outsider

How does this core identity manifest among tract culture and enthusiasts and how does it interrelate to the social geographies of race, nationality and gender? One way to

²⁵⁵ One possible exception to this might manifest in areas of class. Many publishers and individual tracts express skepticism or at least ambivalence towards the attainment of wealth.

answer this is to examine the thematic worldview many tract societies take when defining themselves in opposition to secular culture. It's one that this project has narrowly applied to Chick Publications but is prevalent to varying degrees in other works as well.

Essentially, this worldview is often marked by a penchant for the conspiratorial, or what historian Richard Hofstadter termed the paranoid style. Though related to conservative political movements, the paranoid style is more than a mere strategy in mobilizing conservative political action. It is also intrinsically tied up in conservative evangelical history, organization, thought and literature. It is not in and of itself a religious movement, though it certainly carries a high degree of religiously-motivated currency. Instead, the paranoid style would best be viewed as an aspect of nationalist behavior, or perhaps its own nationalist type. Such paranoid nationalism in evangelical thought and identity can even appear to be one among other defining characteristics. To say that it is the primary defining characteristic would be too much. After all, American evangelical Christianity is still Christianity. The core religious attribute is still centered on interpretations of love, grace and salvation. However, the means by which those are acquired, within the context of their relationship to the sinner in contemporary secular society, do take on a conspiratorial tone.

Conspiratorial tropes and narratives both touched on here and in the second chapter are important because they have long constituted an American political identity which is often itself tied up in evangelical religion.²⁵⁶ This was not lost on Richard Hofstadter who wrote famously on this phenomenon in his 1964 article, "The Paranoid

²⁵⁶ James Davison Hunter. *American evangelicalism: Conservative religion and the quandary of modernity*. (Rutgers University Press, 1983), 43.

Style in American Politics.”²⁵⁷ The well-known essay lays out the argument that politics in America, particularly right-wing politics, are marked by a style of rhetoric aimed at inflaming paranoid passions. This style, which Hofstadter dates from at least the Goldwater presidential campaign, was proved exceptionally effective at motivating small groups of people to action based on the premise that they stood as a traditional bulwark against an increasingly hostile world. Said Hofstadter, “I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind...In the paranoid style as I conceive it, the feeling of persecution is central and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy.”

Though Hofstadter’s essay situates the contemporary style well within the Cold War/HCUAA era, he does draw historical linkages to colonial era Protestant rhetoric. Quoting late eighteenth century Massachusetts preacher Jedidiah Morse, Hofstadter draws a correlation in theme between the religious rhetoric of Morse and other like-minded preachers and the contemporary conspiratorial rhetoric of his writing. Morse invokes the specter of nameless “foreign” entities bent on undermining a pure and authentic American Christianity. In this, Hofstadter sees the early seeds of anti-Catholic, anti-Mormon, anti-Mason and anti-Semitic movements which would continue to ebb and flow over the course of the next two centuries.²⁵⁸ Moreover, these conspiratorial narratives also frequently utilized and engaged with their European counterparts, evoking

²⁵⁷ Richard Hofstadter. “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” *Harpers Weekl*, 1964.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 9. Manifesting in political rhetoric surrounding anti-Communist activity such as the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg trials.

fears of a global Illuminati order, and the infiltration of governments by Jesuits. The core similarities, however, rest not in direct correlation between American and European conspiracies, but rather in the overall theme and dominant narrative device. Specifically, this refers to the belief in a “gigantic... [global] conspiracy as a *motive force* in historical events.” This line of thought would find particular resonance among similar ideas prevalent in certain conservative Christian communities.²⁵⁹

The purpose of this conspiracy is to recognize identities which threaten the dominance of traditional power. As these identities are considered to be representative of a corrosive secular culture, they are seen as aligned with demonic forces which are tirelessly at work in the world. Oftentimes, approaches to these issues take on a historical color while remaining (a)historical. This means that the signifiers of a diseased world mark a departure from an imagined past where people were more religious and public social life was Christian, and thus better. This is why so many publishers view multiculturalism as a scheme to import lifestyles and cultures deemed dangerous to an authentic and pure Christianity which mostly existed in the past but has since receded amid the onslaught of modern and secular temptations.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 29-30. Hofstadter argues that these ideas found particular purchase throughout the Millerite movement of mid-nineteenth century. The Millerite movement emerged when former Army Colonel William Miller prophesized that the world would come to an end on October 22, 1844. When the apocalypse failed to arrive, some members became disillusioned with Miller. Those who remained would eventually form what would become both the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Seventh Day Adventists. Hofstadter argues that the Millerite movement and its offshoot all exhibited elements of this paranoid style. More to the point, he argues that those groups – the fringe of Protestant Orthodoxy for the time – shared this in common with more mainstream Protestant organizations in Antebellum America.

Moreover, this is also reflective in the contemporary animosity towards “globalism” often articulated by populist figures that have been able to harness the disaffected outlook of white, evangelical voters. In this instance, “globalism” implies an anxiety towards outside influences which are both cultural and economic. Globalism is responsible for lost jobs and wages, and also a social landscape changed so drastically that it appears nearly unrecognizable. In a sense, this is not a new phenomenon. In the earliest days of the American Colonial period John Winthrop himself was using his sermons to warn against the dangers religious declension posed to the nascent colonies. It also manifests as nineteenth century Protestant movements confronted Catholic immigration and the emergence of new religious movement such as the Latter Day Saints. E.D Howe’s polemic against the LDS not only attacked the ritual and scriptural practices of the Mormon Church; it also lumped them together with attacks on secular authors such as Voltaire, seeing both European Enlightenment thinkers and Joseph Smith as cut from the same, elite intellectual cloth. Nearly a century later, under the specter of the Cold War, these attitudes, once reserved for primarily anti-Catholic rhetoric, began to morph into a decidedly anti-Communist direction.²⁶⁰ Rather than evoking fear of Catholic infiltrators, the true threat posed to America was from communism and it was a threat against which only conservative Protestants could stand up against, as even liberal denominations were held with at least some degree of suspicion. These voices coalesced

²⁶⁰ Though anti-Catholicism was by no means extinct, as evidenced by the early literature of Jack Chick as well as popular anxieties over the Catholicism of John F. Kennedy.

and organized into organizations such as the John Birch Society and the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade.²⁶¹

Of course, the mantle of the conspiratorial worldview was not borne by Protestants alone. Within their own tradition, Catholics might point to the pre-war, anti-Semitic radio invective of Father Coughlin, and few Jews were unaware of the tenacity by which Roy Cohn prosecuted the—also Jewish—Rosenbergs. However, these manifestations paled in comparison to the overwhelming degree by which the “paranoid style” fused conservative, largely white, Protestantism with conspiratorial, us versus them, Protestant Christianity. This was true during the 1950s and remains true today as upwards of eighty percent of self-identified white evangelicals voted Donald Trump into office amid the candidate’s many appeals to “conspiracy theories.”²⁶² Indeed, in the final days of the election cycle, the Trump campaign released an advertisement decrying what it insisted were the machinations of a cadre of “global elite” sitting at the mechanisms of power. This ad, widely decried as anti-Semitic as it juxtaposed images of prominent Jews with the conspiratorial voice-over, served to hit all the aforementioned conspiracy tropes.

These attitudes, given voice in so many tracts, stem from the perception of a generalized spiritual declension within a society which heretofore was imagined to be culturally Christian. This imagined America, once marked by a civic piety which wholly

²⁶¹ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, 75

²⁶² Sarah Bailey. “White Evangelicals Voted Overwhelmingly for Trump, Exit Polls Say.” *The Washington Post*. November 9, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/11/09/exit-polls-show-white-evangelicals-voted-overwhelmingly-for-donald-trump/?utm_term=.816379e4a875. It should be said that considering the broadness of the term “evangelical,” it is difficult to know for sure whether individuals voted based on more traditional conservative motivators such as abortion, or were spurred on by Trump’s conspiratorial language.

embraced the public recognition and worship of Christ, or at least a quiet acquiescence to civic Protestantism, is seen to have become morally eroded.²⁶³ A litany of reasons is given for this. Sometimes it stems from the abolishment of prayer in public schools or the state-mandated teaching of evolution. Other times it manifests in a reactionary rejection of increased social acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities and individuals. Frequently, there is also an anxiety of mainstream multiculturalism, particularly if said multiculturalism is inclusive of traditions deemed “non-Christian” such as Islam or, in the case of Chick Publications, Catholicism. Yet all of these, in varying degree depending on the publication society, are evidence of an ongoing declension which itself is a marker of the end of times.

One of the more prominent contemporary examples of this is Chick Publications’ 1986 tract, “Why No Revival?” Comparing contemporary Christians unfavorably against the zeal of early Christian martyrs, “Why No Revival” states in no uncertain terms that the milquetoast appearance of the contemporary church is due in no small part to privileging the trappings of the world over that of the spirit. One panel in particular artfully depicts this by showing a Bible on a coffee table, sandwiched between a Playboy magazine and the TV Guide. Lax biblical teachings from churches far removed from a proper embrace of traditional Christianity exacerbate this problem. “The Bible issue is ridiculous,” says a denominationally disingenuous Protestant preacher, attempting to conceal a demon’s tail. “Fanatics in the past like Moody, Spurgeon and

²⁶³ Richard John Neuhaus. *The naked public square: Religion and democracy in America*. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986).

Livingston...called the King James Bible the infallible Word of God...They were the lunatic fringe! Frankly I'm glad we threw it out of our church...I've never liked it! It was full of errors...we're better off...trust me." Throughout the tract, the narrative and imagery depict the virtuous figures of early Christian history, against the lazy and uniquely American Christianity Lite of the present day.

The culprit behind the declension depicted in "Why No Revival?" is who it normally is in Chick narratives—the Catholic Church. "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers...", a caption citing Second Corinthians 6:14 reads, referencing an image of a grim and unsavory-looking Catholic bishop. He offers his benediction. "May Mary Immaculate, the patroness of the United States bless you and intercede with Her Son for you. Amen." The next panel continues the theme. "Because of compromise, a watered down Gospel and pastors afraid to preach against sin, we are into the great 'falling away' spoken of in Second Thessalonians 2:3. Persecution is on the horizon...we are in trouble." Finally, the point is driven home. A panel depicts a country church house on fire. "A picture of things to come," the caption reads ominously, evoking the imminent events of the Tribulation and the role of the Catholic Church in its hastening.

Not all ministries are as explicitly anti-Catholic, but the conspiratorial narrative is a frequent companion to many end times tracts. GLOWonline is an acronym for "Giving Light to Our World" and is associated with the Georgia Cumberland Conference of the Seventh Day Adventists. Many of their tracts contain themes which are reflective not only of a belief in the incipient end of days, but also in the conspiratorial nature of the forces that will usher it in. "Signs" is a small pocket tract which despite the glossy,

powerful imagery on the front is actually mostly text. The cover image, however, evokes a very specific imagery and tone. The title “SIGNS OF THE TIMES” rests prominently above the main image, three stacks of gold coins and line graph designating negative movement in the market. These are superimposed over business section newsprint. The subtitle reads “ECONOMIC CRISIS AND YOUR FUTURE.” Its narrative follows the economic misfortune of “Jim and Sharon” and their young family who lost everything in the economic collapse of 2008. Why has this, as well as certain national security disasters happened? The tract explains

...[T]he Bible describes an urgent time when a world power declares that ‘no man [can] buy or sell’...If this scenario sounds like a conspiracy theory, then you’re right, it is. But the conspiracy is not about money. It’s about your heart. Two supernatural powers are battling for your affections. They covet your devotion, allegiance and worship. In one corner, Satan is willing to secure these any way he can. In the opposite corner, Jesus Christ leaves the choice to you. Satan will use earthly powers to force your hand, while Jesus will only accept a decision compelled by love. What is important to notice is that any use of force to coerce your conscience is not a plan from God. It is a plan from Satan. The clever conspirator will use the economy to mask his goal of coercion. His awful scheme is to place people in such dire circumstances that in the interest of earthy security, they will abandon regard for the Word of God and offer worship and allegiance to a false, earthly power²⁶⁴

The culmination of the narrative implies that the 2008 economic collapse, which was orchestrated by Satan, will be a precursor to the prophesied end times as described in both Ezekiel and Revelation. At this point all humanity will be forced to make a choice to either follow the Word of God, or, out of self-preservation, choose to buy and sell in violation of the Ten Commandments. “These loyal people are described as ‘those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus’...Which side will you choose

²⁶⁴ “Signs of the Times: Economic Crisis and your Future.” *Glow*. Pacific Press Publishing Association. 2009.

today?”

These themes are prevalent because they speak first and foremost to those who are, or feel, marginalized by society at large. A conspiracy theory gives answer to why such marginalization occurs. Rather than stemming from the nebulous, intangible forces of capital and globalization, conspiracy provides an easily locatable culprit who serves as a focal point for anger stemming from marginalization.²⁶⁵ Chick Tracts provides in the form of the Catholic Church such a scapegoat for lower-middle, and working class, mostly white evangelical Christians. Often negatively affected by global economic trends resulting in the loss of labor opportunities, such communities sometimes display a rejection of secularism and multiculturalism and an embrace of perceived traditional values. These attitudes have been noted most recently in the degree of support among white evangelical Christians of President Donald Trump. They are also present to one degree or another in the products of evangelical publishing societies. By utilizing familiar and resonant tropes and images, many publishing ministries successfully tap in to those attitudes.

A conspiratorial worldview is one element which makes many tracts so overwhelmingly provocative. While individual missionaries may prefer a more passive approach to evangelism, there is nothing passive about the doctrinal and narrative content of the tracts themselves. From the perspective of a tract, there is no moral middle ground. One either accepts their message and abandons a sinful lifestyle, or one is ultimately cast

²⁶⁵ Dieter Groh. "The temptation of conspiracy theory, or: Why do bad things happen to good people? Part I: Preliminary draft of a theory of conspiracy theories." In *Changing conceptions of conspiracy*, pp. 1-13. (Springer New York, 1987).

into damnation. Eventually, the world itself will face the same fate and it takes a provocative method of delivery to shake a sinner into that awareness. As such, tracts which utilize such narrative, especially those pertaining to the Revelation, tend to be more heavily detailed, thus allowing the reader to identify with the emotional and narrative elements of the story. Detailed depictions of the final days scare, captivate and entertain the reader and keep their attention for the duration of the tract. The intended result is to embed a specific narrative and vision in the mind of the reader. This vision is in service to the doctrine which, as with all Chick Tracts, is presented at the end of the pamphlet. However, the vivid , realistic and emotionally provocative story creates a lens through which the final doctrinal explanations and proscriptions can be read. Those tracts especially concerning end times prophesy and the Revelation of John are where this most often occurs although they are not absent from the more “ordinary” Gospel tracts which engage the variety of contemporary issues deemed socially problematic: lgbtq+ rights, feminism, multiculturalism, evolution, and so forth. The content of tract literature when combined with aggressive or invasive missionary practices speaks to a general presumption of correctness which is further supported by congruence with conservative politics. Missionary attitudes and activities are influenced by a culturally evangelical reading of one’s scriptural role, which is in turn supported by a usually conservative interpretation of current events and social trends.

Provocation through the use of images and narratives deemed bigoted by secular society certainly plays a role even if it is not the expressed purpose. Chick Ministries publishes such a high degree of vitriol towards so many different groups that it has

earned itself a designation as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.²⁶⁶

However, the religious element must not only be seen as an excuse; it is also a motivation. Many Gospel tracts also need to be provocative because the generation of animosity, regardless of whether or not it is justified, fulfills a central characteristic of what Scripture tells those who ascribe to the worldview of the ministry and like institutions. For them, this is what it means to be a Christian, particularly a Christian in the nascent end times. Scriptural grounding for this phenomenon is found in the book of Matthew who illustrates this by intimating that the persecution will continue until the "...Son of Man" comes.

However, just as important as the fulfillment of Jesus' prophetic words in Matthew is what can be seen as a parallel to the doings of the Apostles following Jesus' death and Resurrection. The book of Acts is in many ways a ledger of persecutions against the earliest followers of Jesus. These include the flogging of Peter and the stoning of Stephen, as well as Saul/Paul's transition from persecutor to persecuted. The Apostles are fulfilling two essential elements of Jesus' words. They are fulfilling the Great Commission by spreading the Gospel, and they are experiencing Jesus' warning of enmity at the hands of the larger population.

This helps to clarify why so many white evangelicals can see themselves as marginalized while simultaneously enjoying an immense degree of actual political power in America. To be Christian is to be a perpetual outsider. As long as there is a secular

²⁶⁶ Leah Nelson. "Pastor Apologizes for Hate Filled Handout." November 2, 2011. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2011/11/02/pastor-apologizes-hate-filled-halloween-hand-out>

society, which is to say as long as the world exists prior to the Resurrection, Christians will be outsiders. Vance Harner of the Moody Bible Institute voiced this very sentiment when he wrote, “In this era of the Insider, it may shock us to remember that the greatest Outsider of all time is Jesus Christ...If we follow him, we shall be outsiders too.”²⁶⁷

Indeed, its echoes are still felt today as conservative pundits and candidates find common cause with groups, individuals and newsmakers that imagine traditional values and norms are slipping away at an ever-increasing pace.

“Man was created in the image and likeness of God; but through the sin of Adam, man fell into sin and is, therefore, lost apart from Christ. Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Operating in tandem with a Christianity which pays considerable attention to elements of the Scripture—which resonate with conspiracy tropes—are the ways in which certain evangelical discourses perform normative or even dominant identities. A Christianity which sees itself as in opposition to the secular world also sees itself as the dominant social and philosophical force, at least in the final outcome of the dispensations of history. The concepts of dominance and submission emerge in the Scripture itself in passages which are often quoted in ministry publications. Chick Publications references Philippians 2:10: “That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth.”²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ R. Laurence Moore. *Religious outsiders and the making of Americans*. (Oxford University Press, 1987), 150

²⁶⁸ Y.T. Wee. “The Soul Winners Handy Guide”
http://www.chick.com/reading/books/253/0253_35.asp 1999

Such an approach to religious understanding locates Christianity within a very specific arena and genders the religion, and Christ himself, as masculine. This is a concept well established within white evangelical circles and was articulated by some of the more prominent leaders and personalities. For instance, this was a particularly common theme in the sermons of Billy Sunday. “Sunday railed against the sissified Jesus of the feminized crowd. Jesus was no dough faced, lick-spittle proposition...[he] was the greatest scrapper who ever lived.”²⁶⁹ This understanding of Jesus as inherently masculine is also described in tract literature. Most notable perhaps is Chick Publication’s “The Sissy?” Like many Chick tracts, the plot follows a standard narrative structure in that a sinner mocks Jesus, is rebuffed by a passing Christian, is told the message of the Gospel and ultimately becomes saved. In this instance, the sinner is a gruff trucker named Duke who brags about brawls he’s been in and, upon seeing a “Jesus Saves” sign on a parked semi truck at a truck stop, declares Christ “a sissy.” He’s overheard by the rig’s owner: another trucker, clean cut and heavily muscled, who asks buys dinner at the truck stop diner and asks Duke why he called Jesus a “sissy.” “In my book, any man who turns the other cheek is a chump!” Naturally, the Christian trucker manages to save Duke by ultimately convincing him of Jesus’ masculinity. This is further reinforced by the tract’s crucifixion imagery which features Jesus’ torn and bloodied, yet heavily muscled and toned body.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Stephen Prothero. *American Jesus: How the son of God became a national icon*. (Macmillan, 2003), 94.

²⁷⁰ Jack T. Chick LLC. “The Sissy?” 1978

Performance of Spiritual Privilege

Such attitudes manifest not only in printed and online literature and testimonials, but also in the active outreach behavior manifest in certain individual missionaries. Pastor Jed Smock, who heads a traveling university outreach ministry, regularly gives a sermon entitled “Sex-Ed with Brother Jed.” This provocatively-titled sermon, which emphasizes heteronormative relationships and chastity until marriage, is performed loudly and aggressively, with suggestive hand gestures, and usually draws a crowd. Jed Smock and many of the missionaries who travel with him are aware of non-normative identities and relationships and often even utilize the language and jargon of social justice movements and intersectionality. Yet the manner in which they do so is important because of the aggressive, confrontational and often masculinized performativity exhibited. This, in conjunction with the aforementioned markers of dominant identity, helps to both create and reinforce an attitude which can be seen as a sort of spiritual privilege. The term privilege here is important because its manifestation on missionary behavior is reflective of more established understandings of the term, particularly as articulated by Peggy Macintosh in her important 1988 essay on the subject. Macintosh’s essay was nominally about the role of privilege in race though it has since been expanded to encompass social relations regarding gender, class, religion, sexuality and all the intersectionalities thereof.²⁷¹ It should be recognized, however, that there is an important distinction to be made between religious privilege, and the concept of spiritual privilege grappled with

²⁷¹ Kimberle Crenshaw. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stanford law review* (1991): 1241-1299.

here. Of course, as with other structural identities and power relations, both ideas do intersect with and influence one another.

Whereas religious privilege, like racial and gender privileges, describes the stratified relationships and social interactions between dominant and minority religious groups within a community, spiritual privilege appears more directly as the intrapersonal manifestation of spiritual superiority. It is not directly reflective of a socio-religious dynamic but instead a theological position which may not even be consciously realized.

The dominance of Christianity as the default religious culture in America also extends to American secular culture. The secular-religious dynamic here is, by virtue of the dominant culture, a Christian one which extends beyond the theorized civic Protestantism of the Civil Religion.²⁷² This is how avowed atheists can celebrate Christmas and not consider themselves religious, or how vacation time in America largely coincides with historically Christian festivals. Christianity and its secular inverse are normalized and thus, by virtue of their prevalence, participate as culturally dominant forces in the religious makeup of America.

As such, the path towards salvation is easier for other Christians and secular folk with Christian, particularly Protestant, backgrounds. Thus, to participate in secular culture in America also implies at least some cultural participation in Christianity. Because there is a greater social attunement to the tropes and cultural customs of Protestant Christianity within society, the conversion process is easier for both missionaries and would-be converts, particularly if they are already familiar with the

²⁷² Robert N. Bellah. "Civil religion in America." *Daedalus* (1967): 1-21.

social background of evangelical culture. This manifests as privilege in two ways. First, by virtue of being a powerful branch of the dominant tradition in America, a large degree of missionary confidence, manifesting as aggressiveness, can be leveraged from the perceived normativity of Christianity itself. Living Waters provided an example of this in a recent Facebook Easter greeting posted by ministry affiliate Mark Spence. “Christianity begins where all other religions end, at death, and it starts with the Resurrection.”²⁷³ Posted in the form of a meme, the greeting garnered a great degree of affirmations for the sentiment in the form of personal testimonials and “Amen.” It’s significant because its tone and language demonstrate the approach these publications take towards multiculturalism, particularly as it relates to interfaith understandings. It’s not merely a belief that Christianity is correct; it’s a belief that the degree of correctness is so stark, so obvious, that to hold a different opinion is nearly unthinkable. This is why so many tracts portray non-Christian culture in a mocking fashion or why commenters on the aforementioned Mark Spence meme can wonder in bewilderment how one can be such a fool as to not believe in Christ’s salvation.

The second manner in which this social phenomenon manifests as spiritual privilege is also strongly bound up in the normativity of Christianity as the dominant religion in America. This inherent privilege rests in the social difficulty of obtaining salvation for people from Christian backgrounds, versus those from non-Christian backgrounds, or communities which are targeted, marginalized or vilified by tract

²⁷³Mark Spence. April 15, 2-17.
<https://www.facebook.com/OfficialMarkSpence/photos/a.817187861701240.1073741828.194233437330022/1336600409759980/?type=3&theater>

societies and individual missionaries. In essence, it is easier to cross the social barriers in order to obtain both welcome and salvation if one is already familiar with the cultural cues of the evangelical community. Moreover, the social stakes of conversion, while prevalent, are lower for someone who already hails from a Christian background as conversion within the larger religious culture is likely to decrease the degree of social stigmatization.²⁷⁴ In all likelihood, their families and social groups already celebrate Christian festivals, already participate in Christian life cycles and probably already identify openly as Christians. This certainly doesn't alleviate the necessity of a born-again individual witnessing to their family, and to be sure, tension and arguments may well break out. However, the bridge to understanding is easier to transverse if the recipient of the Gospel is already familiar with the message; certainly more so than if the missionary were attempting to describe the nuances, intricacies and importance of, for example, Dianetics and e-meters.

Performance of spiritual privilege in pursuance of missionary activity manifests in the aggressive demeanor of active street preachers, as well as the more subdued behavior of tract missionaries. Volume of voice or confrontation are not the sole mechanisms by which this phenomenon occurs. However, both are important as the greater and more excitable the voice of the missionary, the more powerful the self-perception of the speaker. The performance of the missionary is meant to wrest control of the space from

²⁷⁴ Robert W. Hefner, ed. *Conversion to Christianity: historical and anthropological perspectives on a great transformation*. (Univ of California Press, 1993), 119.

those being addressed.²⁷⁵ Despite a lower degree of intensity, this holds true for the more subdued practice of passing out tracts. Tracts as conveyances of God's Word speak for themselves. Their presence disrupts and wrests control of profane spaces, if only for an instant. The very act of penetrating secular boundaries with messages contrary to secular beliefs is seen as a necessary imposition on a world and worldview which is inherently, deeply, almost irredeemably flawed. While rooted in both the triumphalism and supersessionism of politicized Christian doctrine, evangelical spiritual privilege goes a step beyond those theologies by intersecting with other oppressive structures. In other words, these attitudes and activities can be performed with aggressive confidence because they represent the culmination of several social privileges, bound together with a sense of religious righteousness and the assuredness of salvation.

Many contemporary tracts and publishing societies locate their predictions and diagnosis of a spiritually ailing world within a very American context and, as such, might even be called Americana. This is certainly the case when considering famous tracts such as "Why No Revival?" The tract's tone and narrative mannerisms are unique to American culture. Though the Revelation is applicable to the entire world, un-saved Americans do seem to bear the brunt of God's judgment. This of course is not unique to Chick Publications. Living Waters' most popular tract is literally modeled on American currency with such a high degree of realism that its texture and religious message on the back are the strongest clues that the bill is not authentic. More to the point, the ministry

²⁷⁵ Judith Butler. *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. (Psychology Press, 1997), 13.

even has a patriotic-themed “Million Dollar Bill,” themed for distribution on or around Memorial Day, Veterans Day or Independence Day.

Gospel tracts are conveyances of a variety of overlapping meanings. At their core, they are religious documents—pamphlets describing the wages of inequity and the offer of salvation. Through the fusion of text and image, evangelical tract literature generally conveys many essential doctrinal and social positions in an easily digestible format. For instance, while a Chick Tract is unlikely to delve deeply into Rushdoony’s theories on contemporary historians as secular myth makers, it will publish any number of tracts decrying the erasure of God from the classroom, and thus the history books. In addition, many of these tracts offer their own historical narratives kept in line with the ministry’s cultural perspective. What, then, is the meaning being conveyed? The answer lies in the series’ overlapping strata of social and cultural meanings, all of which illustrate a delineation between two societies, secular and Christian. This recognition of separateness, when accessed in conjunction with resonate scriptural passages, takes the form of the paranoid style. This discussion of the language of conspiracy in conservative American Protestant Christianity is important because it speaks to a crucial theme in the identity aspects of tract evangelism, namely the manner in which religious identity intersects with national identity. The tracts also represent the construction of a system of trope and social beliefs which assist in the delineation of cultural borders. Its manifestation in narrative appears in the form of story lines, plot details and educational messages which position an evangelical worldview in opposition to the social values and norms of what is perceived to be the secular “World.” This is the ultimate message of this

project. For publishing ministries and for individual missionaries, tracts function as a set of tools designed to identify and delineate cultural divisions. While their overall purpose is one of outreach and redemption, the intent of the outreach is to pull the recipient out of a lifestyle designated as sinful and detrimental to a moral society. However, until God intervenes with the events of the Revelation, such a moral society is impossible; the World is too sinful. It has fallen too far into declension and perdition. Individual souls may be salvaged but not many; and the only way to reach them are by demonstrating, through performance and narrative, the strict division between the secular world of the Antichrist and the world of the spirit that is to come. Everything else is just bearing witness.

Epilogue

The missionaries who are directly affiliated with Living Waters Ministries can be seen preaching throughout much of the country and even in different areas of the globe. However, since the ministry is based in Long Beach, California it's not uncommon to find their preachers and tract missionaries in busy public locations throughout the Greater Los Angeles area. This is especially true on nice days and when the weather is particularly beautiful, the Huntington Beach Pier is a favorite preaching spot. Demographically this makes a large degree of sense. Located on the immediate left of Pacific Coast Highway, the pier which is itself a major destination for both tourists and locals draws enormous crowds. It's in a central location which hosts thousands of passersby for most of any given day. The temperate weather doesn't hurt either.

On one Memorial Day weekend, the pleasant breeze and mild climate has drawn enormous crowds of tourists, shoppers, surfers, sunbathers and beach goers. It has also drawn a moderate sized group of Living Waters missionaries including on this occasion, Ray Comfort himself. Comfort is not preaching. He is standing off to the side, engaged in idle conversation with his website manager. Every so often, someone will recognize him and say hello. He chats with them, shakes their hands, takes the occasional picture and hands out tracts.

To his right, standing on a box in the middle of the crowd is an affiliated missionary and his set up is very much in line with Living Waters' witnessing style. The box is in the center of a circle drawn in chalk. The crowd is instructed to remain on the

outside of the circle. The preacher opens with a non-religious line of questioning meant to engage the crowd. Each question an onlooker answers correctly is rewarded with a dollar. “What is the world’s smallest country?” he asks the crowd. “Vatican City” someone answers correctly and takes the dollar. “What is the only egg laying mammal?” another onlooker shouts the answer. “It’s the platypus!” One more dollar is awarded and so the questions continue until a crowd of about fifty people have lined up around the chalk circle. It’s at this point that the questions take on a religious flavor. The preacher calls for a volunteer and one steps forward. He’ll give the participant five dollars if they can answer all the questions correctly. He’s gearing up for the “good person test” and the questions are meant to measure the volunteer’s moral standing against a strict interpretation of the Ten Commandments. He begins. “Have you ever told a lie?” “Have you ever stolen?” “Have you ever looked upon a woman in lust?”

The test is impossible to pass and this is intentional. The standards for passing are so high that even authentic answers to the contrary still sound like lies. Under this standard, God’s standard he explains, white lies are still lies, downloading music illicitly is still theft and physical attraction is still lust and adultery. Such acts, no matter how small, “taint with sin” and separate sinners from God and salvation. All this is established well before the preacher intones against the usual issues of contemporary social immorality: abortion, evolution and LGBT rights. Ray Comfort calls this “preaching the law.”²⁷⁶ This means distilling the entire legal narrative of the Bible into a

²⁷⁶ Kirk Cameron and Ray Comfort. *The School of Biblical Evangelism*. Bride Logos 2004. 14-16

handful of narrowly interpreted commandments. To preach the law is to clue the sinner in to the stark reality of their eternal destination and the “Good Person Test” assists with that. Unsurprisingly the volunteer doesn’t pass, nor does the crowd who are soberly told of the eternal hellfire they will earn for the wages of their sins. There is however, a solution in the acceptance of the sacrificial crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This is called “preaching the cross.”²⁷⁷

After all this the preacher gives the five dollar bill to the volunteer to symbolize forgiveness amidst transgression. “God pays your fine” he shouts with genuine mirth. “And besides, you’ve been a good sport.” “Jesus saved me!” the volunteer shouts back but it’s unclear whether his proclamation is genuine or offered in jest. Instantaneous conversions are rare and both are playing to the crowd to one degree or another. In any event, the assembled crowd, smaller now than it was during the “preaching of the law” applauds. Some of it is in agreement and some is just to be polite but either way, it’s been a good show and applause comes reflexively. The preacher crosses the line of chalk and for the first time, enters into the crowd to hand out Living Waters’ signature tract, the Million Dollar Bill.

This project is about the public behavior of tract evangelists and the publishing societies whom they utilize in order to fulfill their commitment to the Great Commission. This means that it is also about evangelical identity. As such, it explores an avenue of evangelical studies that has not been widely engaged with because it’s easy to overlook ephemera. That is part of why these tracts are so important. They represent an aspect of

²⁷⁷ Ibid 18

evangelical culture that is often times overlooked by mainstream society; particularly in such instances where a tract is sitting on a public toilet, in a grease spot in the road, or littered on the pier. To be sure, this project has engaged with the well established study of print culture in American religion. It has also engaged with aspects of American evangelical theology, but neither of those are wholly what this project is about. This project is about how the behaviors of tract missionaries, their interaction with publication societies and the material of the gospel tract form a network which sheds light on important manifestations of American evangelical identity.

The first chapter offers a brief historical overview of the importance of print culture in American evangelicalism. It argues that a key element of establishing identity borders in the 19th century was the gradual inclusion of images in gospel tract literature. Use of images expanded the reach of publishing societies to a wider audience by associating images with scripture. Images capture attention and leave lasting impressions and associations. Not all of these associations were wholly theological. Many publications of the 19th and early 20th centuries fused images with polemic narratives, frequently targeting Catholics and Mormons. With images to reinforce such tropes, strict demarcations were established between those Protestant communities deemed acceptable, and other Christian and secular groups.

Of the major contemporary publication societies, Chick publications and their associated ministries are the most obvious heirs of this legacy and this is the focus of the second chapter. The Chick formula mixes image saturated comic books with particularly strong, anti-Catholic rhetoric. This viewpoint is present in most Chick tracts where

appropriate evangelical understandings of scripture are the overarching theological messages. Like their forbearers, Chick criticisms of Catholicism extend beyond theological differences and become reflections of the publication's authors' deeply ingrained prejudices and anxieties. Chick publications' narratives and images are aggressive and confrontational. They speak to a litany of social ills and troublesome groups who are targeted by any given tract. For tracts targeting Islam, they have "The Prophet." For the LGBT community, there is "Doom Town." For tracts about evolution, missionaries might pass out "Apes, Lies and Mrs. Henn", and for addressing the LDS, the ministry offers "The Visitors." However, even within almost all of these, Chick publications also pushes an underlying anti-Catholic sentiment which takes the form of innate fears of a global conspiracy headed by a cabal of Jesuits and the devil himself. These fears are also present in the imagery the publication society uses in the portrayal of antagonists both hellish and human. The imagery draws from classically anti-Semitic depictions of villains which include: hooked noses, demonic visages and swarthy skin. They mirror familiar and inflammatory visual representations of Jews and other maligned groups as a means of creating a visceral psychological reaction that frightens and jars the reader into attention. In so doing Chick Publications and other similar ministries provide a link between the identity polemics of the 19th century and contemporary, nativist fears of "globalists."

Not all societies are as aggressive or polemic as Chick Publications. This is often out of a concern that overly antagonistic outreach may repel would be converts rather than attract them. Chapter three expands the theoretical inquiries of the project by

examining attitudes missionaries and publishing societies carry about tract distribution itself. Beyond the ostensible intent at winning lost souls for God, the practice of distributing tracts helps to reinforce cultural identity through the practical, and religiously necessary, fulfillment of the Great Commission; a scriptural commandment in Matthew which provides the impetus for evangelism. However, fulfillment of this commandment poses a dilemma for would be missionaries as interaction with the impure, secular and often hostile world risks both social anxiety and the temptation to revert to a life of sin. Both of these serve as obstacles to the Commission's fulfillment. Tract distribution provides a method of evangelism where the nature of the medium allows for, and often encourages minimal interaction between the distributor and the recipient. In such instances, the power to facilitate conversion lies not with the missionary, but with the tract itself. Essentially an ephemeral representation of scripture, the gospel tract establishes a network of ritual communication between the recipient, the distributor and the Holy Spirit.

The penultimate chapter focuses more heavily on Living Waters Publications by specifically examining the ministry's money tracts as well as their stated motivations for distribution. The publisher's self-description as workers in the spiritual employ of God and the Kingdom of heaven establishes a cultural and organizational language where tract evangelism is viewed through the lens of currency and labor. This serves two purposes. First, it presents a set of images and cultural resonances which are easily recognizable by the public at large. Second, it inverts the ordinariness of money by using such a secular symbol as a method for entrance into a higher moral and spiritual state of being. In short,

the image of money behaves as symbol which helps to ease the interaction between one, saved community and the sin-mired secular world.

Living Waters Publications is an expansive organization. Its outreach activities are not limited to the distribution of gospel tracts. The ministry has an extensive educational branch dedicated to training missionaries to go preach the word in public arenas. It hosts numerous radio shows, webcasts and seminars as well as a studio dedicated to informative films and documentaries. Finally, Living Waters founder, Ray Comfort is a friend, co-author and business partner of actor Kirk Cameron noted for his starring role on the Eighties sit-com *Growing Pains* and his more recent appearances in numerous Christian films of high production value.

Living Waters is massive. However its organizational identity is tied to the distribution of gospel tracts and more often than not, the money tracts in particular. The Million Dollar Bill is the most recognizable product the brand offers. Yet it only functions properly when printed in conjunction with the ministry's heavily distilled theology, mentioned previously as "the Law" and "the Cross." It represents an ideal image of what Living Waters believes Christianity itself to be. Comporting one's self to the easily performed religious prescription on the back of the tract immediately re-identifies the willing recipient as a saved, bible believing Christian. For Living Waters however, this reordering of identity does not end with the initial conversion. A truly ideal conversion is continued by the convert themselves taking up their own individual tract ministry. As such, the very act of handing out tracts creates an identifying image of a Christian ideal. This ideal image is for all intents and purposes a brand; easily accessible

and identifiable. Therefore the distribution of tracts functions as a type of advertisement for Christianity and in so doing transforms the distributor into a representative of the brand.

Living Waters Publications is a well oiled organization marked by glossily produced products and a significant degree of media savvy. Its educational materials showcase the nearly uniform style by which their missionaries should comport themselves. Draw a circle, work the crowd with innocuous questions, and administer the “Good Person Test.” Preach “the Law,” then preach “the Cross” and finally, leave the circle to shake hands and pass out tracts. It’s polished, usually polite and the confrontational nature of the performance is mitigated. If someone is unable to preach in such a manner, or is shy about preaching at all, they can always fall back on the mostly non-confrontational methods of tract distribution.²⁷⁸ Not all missionaries exhibit such restraint.

Many independent missionaries and street preachers take on considerably aggressive and confrontational styles. This is the case of Chaplain Bill Rhetts whose ministry is discussed in the final chapter of this project. With a commanding and amplified voice Chaplain Bill doesn’t waste time with unrelated questions or banter. He cuts right to the point. “Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen, I’m here this morning to preach to you about Hell.” This is a common opening to his sermons which he films and posts on YouTube. What is also seemingly unique about Rhetts are the locations and communities to whom he chooses to minister. Based out of the Southern California

²⁷⁸ Ray Comfort. *The Blue Book on Evangelism*. Living Waters Publications. 2008. 108-109

Inland Empire, Rhetts displays his confrontational style in front of court houses and DMV offices. An ex-police officer, Rhetts can also be found in front parole offices and in neighborhoods he often describes as “crime-ridden.” In such instances Chaplain Bill, who is white, is frequently situated within communities of color. In those videos, Rhetts uses coded language to describe the immorality of the communities with references to pimps, prostitutes and urban crime. In one video he justifies his own use of police force to illustrate a point about the meaning of the biblical injunction against murder.

Much of Rhetts’ language also targets the usual markers of immoral secularity such as LGBT rights and abortion. Like many other street preachers and publication societies these references are informed by a worldview which places heavy emphasis on a belief that at least some degree of malevolent agency is behind these societal changes. Not all ministries and missionaries are as aggressive as Chaplain Bill Rhetts, nor as conspiratorially focused as Chick Publications. Nevertheless, there is an underlying belief that to one degree or another, Satan and the human forces he exploits are aligned against the forces of God and an authentic Christianity. Even the practiced missionaries of Living Waters usually devote some time to speak out against the moral pitfalls of a liberal society.

This paranoia is the final expression of identity discussed in this project and in some ways acts as a force binding together those other identities covered. This conspiratorial mindset has historical roots which reach back to the colonial period. Its effect is an epistemological demarcation of social borders between what are considered to be authentically Christian communities and those communities either insufficiently moral

or outright hostile to the transformative message of the Gospel. Historically and contemporarily, these messages have resonated with conservative and nativist elements of the social fabric and so it's no accident that such mannerisms show through in tract literature and in the behavior of many tract evangelists. Sometimes, as is the case with Living Waters, such sentiments are coded or downplayed. Other times it's more apparent. The communities Chaplain Bill frequents are evidence of this, as is the entire narrative outlook of Chick Publications which itself remains one of the few explicitly anti-Catholic Publishers who nonetheless remains relevant.

This political undercurrent in tract culture reflect the social and political fears of many white evangelical Christians; a demographic which in the wake of the US Presidential election of Donald Trump has reasserted itself in the national conversation.²⁷⁹ The damaging social forces depicted by publishing societies read like a laundry list of conservative anxieties over multi-culturalism, social liberalism and non-Christian traditions. Moreover, while the larger societies generally try to avoid direct references to the actual political climate, websites and social media pages of individual evangelists don't always shy away from noting actual partisan preference. Regardless, big publication societies do engage with such hot button identity issues and also contribute to a paranoid style in tract literature. In a sense this is almost unavoidable given their usually Premillennial Dispensationalist outlook. For the Apocalypse to transpire, a conspiracy against authentic Christians must presage the events of the

²⁷⁹ Sarah Bailey. "White Evangelicals Voted Overwhelmingly for Trump, Exit Polls Say." *The Washington Post*. November 9, 2016

Rapture and the Tribulation. Is it any surprise that such attitudes find fertile soil in the American nativist tradition?

These conspiratorial outlooks which influence the paranoid style in American politics and the anxieties of conservative American, evangelical Christians are themselves delineations of social boundaries. Conspiricist thinking all but requires a division between those who are aware of the conspiracy and those who are seen to remain ignorant; often having been duped by some collection of powerful agents. That this resonates with end times prophesy and reinforces political attitudes is unsurprising. Both reflect a worldview which sees Christianity and traditional American values as cultures laid siege by powerful and organized enemies. Therefore, interaction with secular society necessarily opens oneself up to the corrosive and dangerous forces aligned against bible believing Christians. For individuals and organizations who accept this line of thought, it can be tempting to withdraw as much as possible for secular society and simply await the Rapture and Tribulation while spending as much time as possible in the company of like minded friends and family.

Unfortunately, this is not a viable option, especially if one is serious about fulfilling spiritual duties of the Great Commission. Evangelizing the Gospel to the lost is the highest calling. Like Paul and his letters, the distribution of Gospel tracts is a mission which carries the potential to spread the Word to all corners of the globe. For publishing societies and missionaries, tracts are transformative and carry with them the power to change lives and reorient identities. Evangelism, especially in the face of the perception of persecution is an ideal performance of what it means to be a Christian because it tends

to illicit angry reactions from many segments of mainstream society. Tracts and missionary styles trend provocative because the reactions they incur heighten the sense of hostility emanating from the secular world. Preaching the Gospel in a tainted and hostile world aligns the identity of the missionary with the narratives of the Apostles. Any suffering incurred through confrontational encounters is a necessary sacrifice; especially compared to the trials of Christ and his disciples. To speak to the World of its condemnation is to speak to it out of love. It is akin to providing food for the hungry and is a key expression of agape. That hostility is often incurred in the process of evangelism is both necessary and preordained. That people become perturbed is seen as a manifestation of sin, rather than social imposition. What after all is a little social discomfort when measured against eternal torment? As the preacher at the pier told the assembled crowd; “I’m not here to bother you, I’m here to wake you all up. I’m here because I love you and I want to keep you out of hell.”

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