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The Millennial church?: Defining the NewSpring virtual church

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THE MILLENNIAL CHURCH?: DEFINING THE
NEWSPRING VIRTUAL CHURCH

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication, Technology, and Society

by
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Accepted by:
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Abstract

NewSpring Church is an interesting case study in understanding the rich complexities, which comprise a church community. Through the use of Relational Dialectics Theory, this study has found five dialectical pairs which exemplify the characteristics of the NewSpring community: Flawed/Perfect, Individual accountability/God's responsibility, Church is faith/Faith is beyond church, Take risks/Accept destiny, Your God/Everyone's God. These dialectics found only partially reflect the values and beliefs of the Millennial generation, providing a new wrapping on the old, traditional ideas of the church. Therefore, NewSpring needs to reflect and adapt in order to maintain its relevance and livelihood in the future. A focus needs to shift from theology to lifestyle and values in order to attract this upcoming generation. The Millennial generation's values go back to the basics, and consequently, the NewSpring community needs to do the same.

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Introduction

This project outlines a research project, which involves a large Baptist Church in Anderson, South Carolina called NewSpring Church. I hope, through textual analysis, to provide an understanding that reflects dialectics present within the church. Utilizing Fairclough's elements of social practice as well as Charland's understanding of constitutive rhetoric, I will complete a textual analysis of the website NewSpring.cc. First, the core tenants of NewSpring Church as conveyed through their website will be outlined. Next, I will examine the theoretical foundations of sociology and relational dialectics. Then, a methodological summary of textual analysis will be conducted. Finally, I will explain my method, and expected findings.

Using Fairclough and Charland's understanding of creating church identity through traditions and history, this project sought to not only understand such identities, but also to note the dialectics present in the NewSpring Church member's own identity. This project also looked into meaning as dialogue, as postulated through Hall's circuit of culture. The narrative paradigm informed this research as church identity is created through utilizing stories, both in the biblical text and in the traditions of church members. With a focus on textual analysis, and looking into meaning as a dialogue, this project endeavored to examine the identity and membership of NewSpring's virtual church.

Inspiration from this project stemmed from my relocation from Minnesota to South Carolina prior to beginning my graduate education. I was initially, and

continue to be, struck by the openness of South Carolinians regarding their religious beliefs and practices. In my time in South Carolina I have shared more about my religious beliefs and practices than I did throughout the 23 years I lived in Minnesota. Although religion is often considered a private matter, it has exerted significant influence in the public sector. For example, the current debate over gay marriage stems from certain religious institutions' interpretation of marriage as between solely a man and a woman. Not only is religion an approved topic of conversation in South Carolina but also, the Baptist church has become something from which South Carolinians draw from as a sense of shared community values and history. The unique culture presented in a Baptist church captured my interest immediately, and it gradually became a pastime of mine to go "church shopping" at different services to compare and contrast between my conceptions of church and the Baptist manifestations of community worship. Given my leisurely pursuits into ethnography in this area, expanded and more thorough research, as presented in this thesis, was a natural extension.

Reflexivity

As in any research project with sensitive, subjective discussions it is crucial for the researcher to disclose their perspective in the spirit of full disclosure and as a means for findings to be contextualized. In its many forms reflexivity can be understood as recognition of self, recognition of other, reflexivity as truth, and reflexivity as transcendence (Pillow, 2003). Through acknowledging my religious perspective I hope the reader can understand all of the above forms of reflexivity in order to provide a richer contextual understanding of the findings of this study.

I was raised in a large ELCA Lutheran Church in which my family often simply faded into the background. Upon my instances of attending worship I continue to gravitate towards the comfort of such services. However, currently, I no longer consider myself entirely aligned with any particular religious affiliation. Religion in my home state of Minnesota is a topic almost entirely relegated to the private sphere and only on rare occasions is discussed in the company of those whom one is entirely sure shares their religious convictions.

Prior to college, I had not given much thought to the veracity of my religious beliefs. The teachings of the Lutheran church were what I knew, what my parents believed and therefore they were what I believed. Only when I entered college and enrolled in a requisite general education class called "Introduction to the Bible" did I begin to question the truth claims of the Lutheran, and more broadly, Christian church. The course exposed the Bible as a

contradictory historical document rather than the literal word of God. Since that course I have become increasingly critical of the Bible as evidence for the truth of an individual or community's claims. Despite this upheaval in my spiritual foundations, I continued throughout my college career to attend weekly Lutheran church services on campus, and spent three summers working as a counselor at the Bible Camp I attended as a child.

Another college course I enrolled in shaped my current religious affiliation as a non-denominational spiritual individual who ascribes to everyday spirituality. The course titled "Rhetoric of Spirituality" examined the spiritual everyday as evidenced in popular culture. This course opened my eyes to seeing spiritual aspects outside of the church or other faith-based communities. This realization aided me in seeking out the spiritual everyday, emphasizing growth of my individual faith as a hybrid rather than a perfect mold of a particular religious doctrine.

Since ending my undergraduate career my spirituality has continued to evolve. I no longer explicitly align with solely the Christian doctrine, but continue to attend ELCA Lutheran services on occasion due to my comfort with such church services. I do believe that a God exists, but I also believe that God is beyond human conception or metaphors. I also believe that all religions have merit and are equally valid. Consequently, I do not believe that one religion holds all philosophical and epistemological answers, but each religion instead holds truth, which satisfies the religion's followers. Consequently, I prefer to keep my

religious beliefs private, and come in with a partial negative bias towards those who emphasize their beliefs as the singular truth. However, I also ascribe to the belief in an open mind towards the other and differing religious traditions and I have consequently made ardent strides to preserve such an open mindset throughout the research process.

Millennials and the New Church

With a generation of Millennials, defined as those born after 1980 (Pew Research, 2010), who are more spiritual, but less religious than previous generations, the need for religious organizations to adapt their message and method in order to survive and thrive can no longer be ignored. Many Millennials are calling themselves “spiritual but not religious”, which emphasizes the distinction this generation has made between spiritual values and the politics of religious organizations. Eighteen percent of Millennials were raised in a religious tradition, but now consider themselves unaffiliated, compared to only 13 percent of Generation Xers (Pew Research Institute, 2010, p. 88). However, this generation prays just as much as previous generations, and those who do claim membership of a religion affiliate just as strongly with their church community as Generation Xers, claiming they are “strong members of faith” (Pew Research Institute, 2010, p. 89). Therefore, Millennials are more wary of committing to a particular religion, but once committed are equally engrossed in the religious community as older generations.

On the other hand, one in four Millennials do not have any religious affiliation (Pew Research Institute, 2010). This is compared to 19% of Gen Xers who do not have any religious affiliation (Pew Research Institute, 2010). However, of the individuals who do have an affiliation, 68 percent consider themselves a part of the Christian tradition. NewSpring Church’s lack of denomination, as Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Catholic or any other Christian

denomination is a nod to this trend. Rather than alienate those who seek a particular denomination, as simply a church, it embraces the Millennial trend of focusing on principles rather than partitions.

As a result of the Millennial's lack of identification to religious denominations, church loyalty is low among most Millennials. Many members of this generation go "church shopping" to a different community every week prior to committing to a community. Furthermore, the willingness of this generation to change religious affiliations suggests there is also a willingness to change church communities. Rather than the individual fitting themselves to the community, the burden of change falls upon the religious community to fulfill the needs of the individual, constituting a Millennial religion.

The Millennial generation looks to methods outside of the church for fulfillment. Areas typically believed to fall within the religious realm are now self-sufficient. These areas include marriage, parenthood, and helping others in need. Marriage as a self-sufficient category outside of the church could be due to the upbringing of this generation. Six out of ten members of this generation were brought up by a single parent (Pew Research Institute, 2010). Whereas older generations have looked to the church in maintaining a successful marriage, Millennials are seeking outside advice in hopes of succeeding where their parent's marriages failed.

For this generation, many influences may be drawn upon, including: peer group, social media, popular culture as well as family upbringing. Peer groups

provide a measure from which to draw personal fulfillment. These influences, as well as others, emphasize the globalized, public forum, which is natural to this generation. No longer are localized, singular knowledge provided by the church sufficient for these individuals. Instead, Millennials draw upon a variety of factors, with religion being one of the multiple factors upon which opinions, ideals, and experiences can be filtered. Therefore, a connotative difference exists between the two values of helping others and living a religious life. Consequently, religion is no longer is a lifestyle paradigm, which includes core values, but instead religion is a separate category, another component one must balance in everyday life.

Community foundations as well as personal development, occur through the teachings and discussions provided in a religious institution. Therefore, the study of religion both in the past and present are not only merited, but also necessary. NewSpring Church provides an exemplary contemporary institution, one that is seeking to maintain community tradition while adapting and growing in such a way that requires a community to not only reflect upon, but also discuss their dialectical foundations. These dialectical foundations define a community, such as NewSpring, by aligning itself within a continuum of opposing ideals. Such discussions are crucial to maintaining the life and vitality of NewSpring. In discussing dialectical foundations the church can better address whether they are truly adapting with generational values or simply providing a new wrapping

on old ideas. These discussions provide an example for churches and other religious institutions on how to revitalize and thrive in the twenty-first century.

NewSpring Church

NewSpring Christian Church is an independent church, which does not align with any organized religious denomination. This church is also a South Carolina based institution with seven locations or “campuses” across the state and two campuses to be completed in 2013. Each campus holds two services on Sunday mornings; services can also be accessed live online and in an online archive. The core values of NewSpring are (“New here?: Our vision,” 2012):

- “found people find people”
- “saved people serve people”
- “growing people change”
- “you can’t do life alone”
- “you can’t out give God”

The community-oriented values of NewSpring emphasize the role of the religious community in making a positive change in the world. Furthermore, the role of discipleship is also center stage through the notion of continued service to the community as well as seeking out those with whom to share their religious convictions.

Basic beliefs advocated by NewSpring Christian Church include stances regarding: God, man, eternity, Jesus Christ, and Salvation among others. The official church stance is that God is creator of the universe, Jesus Christ is the son of God who lived a “sinless human life and offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of all men by dying on a cross,” and the holy spirit is equal

with God and his son and exists to provide “the Christian with power for living, understanding of spiritual truth, and guidance in doing what is right” (“New here?: Our beliefs,” 2012). Together, this trinity provides salvation and eternal security to devout followers of Jesus. Such followers are deemed “saved”, and are promised eternal life in Heaven for their faith, while those who are “not saved” are condemned to Hell. Although Christian followers are provided forgiveness and man is made in the image of God, man is simultaneously inherently sinful and is only “saved” through the sacrifice of Jesus. Christian followers are forever forgiven of their sins, but should still strive to improve themselves and make their lives a testament to God. Through the Bible, which, NewSpring believes was written by man with divine guidance; Christians can find Truth and seek guidance.

NewSpring seeks to adapt and change, but in the process hopes to maintain the sanctity and traditionalism of belonging to the Christian Church. For instance, the worship area itself looks more akin to a concert venue than a Church; however the message and format of the service retains a traditional theme. This dialectic of change and traditionalism also translates into the dialectic between the messages of the church in website materials and the worship services themselves. It is these dialectics that I will focus upon throughout this project. NewSpring’s contemporary adaptations, such as the concert-like atmosphere, online worship service availability, and the multitude of

online materials to attract new members and aid current members in their spiritual journey make the church an ideal case study.

This church is an exemplar of the route churches frequently take to attract Millennials; working with technology to attract those to whom the internet is second nature. Millennials, those who were in their pre-teens to twenties in 2000, are the least likely of the past four generations to attend church on a regular basis (Pew Research, February 2010). However, the lack of religious institution attendance is not due to a lack of faith, as members of the Millennial generation pray just as much as their ancestors (Pew Research, February 2010). However, Millennials are also likely to see evolution as a logical theory and support gay marriage (Pew Research, February 2010); both beliefs that have been opposed by many religious institutions. Consequently, in order to preserve and enlarge the population of a religious institution, not to mention the sense of community provided by the church, leadership must adapt to modernize and make attractive the beliefs and teachings of the church. One such way of doing this is to seamlessly incorporate multimedia presentations into services, bringing glitz to centuries old religion. The incorporation of multimedia outlets and a strongly built interactive website also provide ample material to study the dialectics between the traditional format and messages of the worship services with their online counterparts. NewSpring also seeks to remain relevant by creating sermon series with catchy titles and taglines many would find worthy of promotion in Hollywood. In the age of sound-bytes and fleeting attention, NewSpring is

working with the contemporary culture to cultivate a new crop of believers. Furthermore, the size indicated by the number of campuses indicate the prevalence and resonance of the message with the citizens of South Carolina, a state where 52.18 percent of the population considers themselves religious in comparison to the national average of 48.78 percent (Sperlings Best Places, 2010). The success of the church lies in the change the church both promotes and practices, maintaining relevancy during times when one only has fleeting attention.

Theory: Sociology of Religion

Although religion has been studied through sociological, economic, rhetorical, political, and historical lenses, the sociology of religion provides the most markedly intimate investigations of religion in the practical implications of becoming and evolving as a member of a religious institution. The sociology of religion has provided glimpses and in-depth examinations of how religion affects the individual as well as how the individual affects religion. Despite such examinations, neither religious institutions nor individuals can be examined as independent units. Instead, both religious institutions and individual values provide crucial backbones to the human character and consequently affect how one goes about living and acting in everyday life. Within this section I will first look into how one can justify the study of religion. Then, religion will be defined and a brief examination of religious symbolism will occur. Next, I will look into previous research regarding dialectics within a religious community. An examination into the context of ministry will follow, as well as differentiations between different religious sects. Then, I will look briefly into the study of leadership. Next, basic promises to followers of a religion will be discussed. Next, essential motives of religion will be dissected. Following such an analysis will be a look into the tension between the individual and the community in creating individual identity. Finally, the tautology between religion and society will be examined.

Rationalizing the Study of Religion

Although religion is often considered a private matter, it has exerted significant influence in the public sector. Consequently, the study of religion affects both the private and public lives of individuals, which makes the field a fruitful area of study. Religion is a window into both meaning and action on an individual and cultural level. Seminal anthropologist Clifford Geertz in a sociological religious investigation titled “Religion as a Cultural System” explains that religion is a two-stage operation, which consists of an analysis of systems of meanings as well as relating those systems to the social and psychological structures (1966). However, those from a sociological background continue to place focus upon the social structures, and the action within the social realm propelled by religion. “For an anthropologist, the importance of religion lies in its capacity to serve... as a source of general, yet distinctive conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them” (Geertz, 1966, p. 40). Service is the vehicle through which religions make their presence known and felt to those outside of their congregation. It is through service that social structures are altered, rather than through preaching at the pulpit. Philosopher-Historian Michel Foucault noted in “Hermeneutics of the Self” that, particularly within the Christian tradition, “everyone, every Christian has the right to know who he is, what is happening to him” (1980, p. 169-170). In other words, religions are a reflection of an individual’s beliefs in a community setting. It is through these convictions that epistemological questions and questions regarding transcendence can be

answered. Foucault's parsimonious definition engages both meaning and action in religious communities. The knowledge a Christian, or any other religious individual, must possess provides meaning, while the "happening" occurring stems from action(s).

Religion also gives an outlet for meaningful manifestations of emotions. Geertz (1966) stated that, "religious concepts spread beyond their specifically metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience-intellectual, emotional, moral- can be given meaningful form" (p. 40). Individual ideas become manifest in the transcendent nature of religion. Experiences, which cannot be separated from emotion, are given meaning and context through religious systems. Furthermore, "a dialectical approach allows us to take seriously the power of culture, material, objects, and symbols" (Riis and Woodhead, 2010, p. 153-154). Religion, emotions, and culture cannot exist in a vacuum, but instead are intertwined with a multitude of dialectics within them. Where the individual and religious communities fall within each dialectical tension defines the community's beliefs, actions, transcendent understandings and comprehension of emotional daily experience as part of a macro-level analysis of epistemological questions. Religion is then essentially focused upon the meanings and action, known only at face value to outsiders, but holding crucial value to those within the religious community.

To those outside a particular religious community, the motivations of the community may prove baffling. Studying religion allows those outside a particular

religious community to better understand the motivations, and actions of individuals when such motivations and actions are beyond common sense. “The religious perspective differs from the common-sensical in that it moves beyond the realities of everyday life to wider ones, which correct and complete them, and its defining concern is not action upon those wider realities, but acceptance of them, faith in them” (Geertz, 1966, p. 40). One’s religion provides a framework to transcend daily details and instead focus on the bigger picture.

Religion is not merely contained within church walls, but the values presented and practiced within a religious community extend to the daily lives of individuals. Prominent sociologist Robert Bellah noted in 1970, “now less than ever can man’s search for meaning be confined to the church” (p. 42). The church is merely a physical manifestation of religion, but the motives, actions, and emotions of a religious community act both at an individual and community level. Consequently, the intersection of individual and community motivations is best understood via an examination of the sociology of religion, of which I will present below.

Defining Religion

Emile Durkheim (1915) began the search for creating a sociological definition of religion in his colonialist ethnography of the religious beliefs and practices of Australian native peoples titled *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Durkheim defined religion as “systems of ideas which tend to embrace the universality of things, and to give us a complete representation of

the world” (1915, p. 165). Transcendence is a key focus in this definition, which positions religion as a practice apart and aside from the distractions and discrepancies in daily life. Durkheim further elaborates on his definition stating, “a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden-beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, for those who adhere to them” (1915, p. 62). Here, Durkheim instead focuses upon the unity of the church community through rituals, which further enhances their closeness to the sacred. Despite the unified front presented in Durkheim’s definition of religion, the sociologist also noted a number of dialectical tensions, which define the religious community.

Dialectical tensions are prominent in Durkheim’s analysis, which range from sacred-profane, to natural-supernatural, among many others. The tension between the sacred and the profane, in which religious practices are sacred while daily life is proclaimed profane, was the focus of religious studies for decades following his analysis. Durkheim (1915) noted “all known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups profane and sacred” (p. 52). The real is the profane, whereas the ideal represents the sacred. The real and the ideal are presented as two exclusive categories just as the sacred and profane are defined exclusively. This dualistic thinking continued until the true nature of dialectic

tensions, as messy, always changing and overlapping categories began to be examined in the 1960s.

Geertz (1966), in his examination of the sociology of religion provided his own definition of religion as:

- 1) a system of symbols, which acts to
- 2) establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in men by
- 3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and
- 4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that
- 5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (p. 4).

Geertz's system of symbols emphasizes the importance of semiotics in understanding religious culture. Furthermore, including moods and motivations, as meaningful manifestations of emotion break with Durkheimian thinking of the dualist sacred-versus-profane, real-versus-ideal thinking. Geertz notes the importance of the daily application of religion as crucial for epistemological and transcendent meaning to be derived for individual followers. Such questions are also emphasized in noting the need for a general order of existence. The final emphasis in Geertz's definition is the factuality and realistic nature of religion. Truly believing in the factuality and realism of one's own spirituality is faith, which is pervasive in any religious tradition. Without truly believing in the message, ideals, and practices of a community, religion cannot be a catalyst to action on the individual or community level. The addition of faith and the pervasiveness of

religion to the sociological definition of religion continues to be pervasive today, but has been further elaborated upon through moving away from the establishment of the church or particular religious community to an emphasis on spiritual practices becoming a daily, individualized practice.

A distinctive shift away from the church towards an individualization of religion and/or spirituality began in the 1970s and continues to the present day as evidenced by the increasingly popular notion among Millennials of being spiritual, but not religious (Pew Research, February 2010). The implication being that spirituality provides applicability not provided by religious institutions. Further building upon daily application of religion emphasized by Geertz, this movement is best defined as “a cultural shift away from a conception of religion as a mandatory set of beliefs and practices incumbent upon all faithful, towards the conviction that individuals have to choose for themselves their particular path to salvation” (Aldridge, 2000, p. 213). This individualization of religion no longer seeks absolute unity, but instead is flexible, looking towards conversation rather than full compliance within a religious community. Bellah (1970) noted the necessity for such a change, “worship, to be maximally effective, must provide not only a symbolic reordering of experience but an element of consummation and fulfillment” (p. 210). In other words, worship must move beyond understanding to becoming fully integrated into the individual. Upon religious beliefs becoming fully integrated into the individual, the individual becomes the vessel through which the spiritual is manifest, rather than the institution of the

church. Nielsen (2001) stated how the spiritual everyday complements religious institutions, “the ambiguous qualities of the unbound sacred as a social force provide a dynamic element which ‘religion’ alone often lacks” (p. 128). Rather than overthrowing the need for institutions, the spiritual everyday allows for religious individuals to bring their motivations and consequent actions beyond the church walls. The spiritual everyday also emphasizes religion as a discussion between equals rather than a moral, authoritative hierarchy. “It is no longer possible to divide mankind into believers and non-believers. All believe something, and the lukewarm and those of little faith are to be found inside as well as outside the churches” (Bellah, 1970, p. 228). Belonging to a religious institution no longer is requisite to being an individual of faith; religion can be practiced inside and outside the church via action or discussion. Such discussions within religious circles in daily life continuously “reconfigure emotions by reconfiguring earthly and heavenly relationships, as well as vice versa” (Riis and Woodhead, 2010, p. 70). Through daily discussion, both inside and outside the church, the spiritual can be brought into the everyday, not exclusively the Sabbath.

Religious Symbolism

The symbolism within religious institutions has fascinated ethnographers due to intertwining rites and rituals of a community. Symbolism and semiotics extend beyond physical symbols to rhetorical symbols, particularly in rallying a religious community. Geertz (1966) stated, “religious symbols formulate a basic

congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other” (p.4). In other words, symbols and lifestyles of individuals are engaged in a tautology in which both the symbols are representative of a personal lifestyle while the lifestyle of an individual is built upon the meaning of a set of symbols. “Thus symbols mediate, express and shape social relations, and can take them in new directions” (Riis and Woodhead, 2010, p. 41). Symbols are crucial to both stability and evolving understanding of the role, actions, and beliefs of both an individual and a religious community.

The groundwork of symbolism proves to be simultaneously a block and a catalyst toward change. This contradiction is also present in the dialectic nature of symbols. Scholars of religious emotion, Riis and Woodhead (2010) stated, “a person’s relation to a religious object intensifies as its dialectical character unfolds” (p. 102). Therefore, an individual becomes more fully invested in the semiotic meaning of a symbol due to their need to make a stance between the dialectics presented. However, without such dialectics, there would be little which challenges those within the religious community. Bellah (1970) stated, “remaining in the state of everyday common sense, they see nothing in the service, but the literal, which may be instructive or not, but which is very seldom religiously transformative” (p. 210). In order for religion to become transformative, and consequently meaningful for followers, religion must transcend common sense in order to intellectually stimulate followers.

Symbolism in religious phenomenon is plentiful within a worship service. Sacraments, rites, rituals, and the format of the service all have provided excellent understandings into the culture of specific religious communities. Durkheim (1915) noted that “religious phenomena are naturally arranged in two fundamental categories: beliefs and rites. The first are states of opinion and consist in representations; the second are determined modes of action” (p. 51). According to Durkheim, beliefs are believed to be opinion rather than fact, yielding to the individual’s spiritual schema. However, rites are the ways in which opinions become manifest in both worship services and in individual lives. Symbolism in religion moves beyond rhetorical criticism to becoming a crucial source of common understanding for the religious community, allowing the fellowship to rally together and find solace in a group who understands their point of view.

Observed Dialectics

The conflicting, yet defining tensions of dialectics are always present in religion. Although often hidden in order to present a united front, dialectics are a natural aspect of religious communities. Geertz (1966) noted the hidden dialectics stating, “religious belief has usually been presented as a homogenous characteristic of an individual” (p. 36). However, as the study into religious dialectics continued, the connotation of dialectics evolved from entirely negative towards positive reconciliation of the natural tensions. Riis and Woodhead (2010)

noted, “the fact that dialectics are in balance implies nothing about how sound, beneficial or moral a regime might be” (p. 123). In other words, a stasis in dialectical balancing does not imply a stasis in leadership.

Realizing the importance of constant tensions between competing needs as crucial to the growth and development of a community was also noted by these scholars “Relations between a community, human agents, and symbols are not inherently balanced, and do not ‘naturally’ tend towards a state of equilibrium” (Riis and Woodhead, 2010, p. 124). Indeed, the nature of dialectics are in a constant state of unrest, allowing a religious community to flourish and grow in the debates on where a community should stand on such dialectics.

One such often-contested dialectic occurs between the sacred and the profane. This dialectic was outlined by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* “the sacred and the profane have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as two distinct classes, as two worlds between which there is nothing in common” (1915, p. 54). Whereas the sacred has been defined as the otherworldly, untainted by worldly contact or motives, the profane is framed as being of this world, attainable yet tainted by contact with the world. Despite the typical imagining of sacred and profane as polar opposites, Durkheim suggests the two may be intertwined, “religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things” (1915, p. 56). Furthermore, “a society whose members are united by the fact that they think in the same way in

regard to the sacred world and its relations with the profane world, and by the fact that they translate these common ideas into common practices is what is called a Church” (Durkheim, 1915, p. 59). In other words, the church is not simply where the dialectical stasis occurs, but is instead a constant reinterpretation of how the morals, values, and beliefs of a community fit into the sacred as well as the profane realm. The use of the word translation further emphasizes the lack of clarity in reconciling dialectics, as a methodological choice of interpretation rather than an absolute truth.

Like the dialectic between the sacred and the profane, Durkheim’s observed dialectic between body and soul has persisted. Durkheim (1915) noted that “in fact, the soul has always been considered a sacred thing; on this ground, it is opposed to the body which is, in itself, profane” (p. 297). The sacred-profane dialectic is the transcendent equivalent to the mind-body dialectic. In other words, the sacred embodied is the soul, while the profane embodied is the physical specimen of the body. In a similar vein, Durkheim noted, “therefore, the sacred character assumed by an object is not implied in the intrinsic properties of this latter: it is added to them. The world of religious things is not one particular aspect of empirical nature; it is superimposed upon it” (1915, p. 261). Religion has superimposed the sacred-profane and body-mind dialectic into the minds of religious followers. Therefore, although not naturally of a dualistic nature, in an attempt to differentiate the reality from ideal, these dialectics were created. It is

through the creation of these dialectics that the richness of a religious community can best be understood.

Another dialectic that occurs in the study of religious communities is that of the insider and the outsider. Walker (2004) notes, “the contemporary view that insider/outsider dialectic is always present, that the balance and the dynamics of that status consistently change and need to be negotiated initially and re-negotiated as the research proceeds” (p. 161). Ethnographers, and those initially entering a religious community consistently straddle this line, seeking to understand a community from the inside, yet belong to the group through adopting their shared values, beliefs, and vision for the future.

Dialectics, sociology, ethnography and religion prove to be complementary modes of understanding a religious community. It is through a reconciliation of these tensions that one can realize that unlike Durkheim, who noted that, “the religious life and the profane life cannot coexist in the same place” (1915, p. 346-347), not only do tensions exist, but they thrive under the constant shaping through conversation which takes place in the religious community. The taboos of a particular culture give a glimpse into how dialectics are portrayed and enacted. Taboos, norms, rituals, etcetera are manifestations where a culture stands between dialectics and how a community reacts to tensions. Though the difficulty of such fissures the community only grows stronger in its identity. However, identity alone does not entirely define a religious community, but also the context of ministry is crucial to an understanding of a religious community.

Context of Ministry

A tautology occurs between the context in which a religious community flourishes and the identity of a religious community. Walker (2004) described a “two-way, dynamic relationship between the church, or ministry and the context” (p. 164). The church affects the context just as the context affects the church. In removing the context from the message of the ministry, a symbol may be misunderstood. Riis and Woodhead (2010) stated, “when a religious symbol is plucked from its context in this way, it changes its associative meaning. Its original meaning can be profaned or reversed, or it can be amplified in a particular direction” (p. 193). Therefore, in order to understand the message entirely, the context must not be ignored, for without examining context emphasis can be misplaced or misunderstood.

The church/ministry affects the context in that the community creates the culture. Sociologist Max Weber (1922) noted, “the religion exercises a stereotyping effect on the entire realm of legal institutions and social conventions, in the same way that symbolism stereotypes certain substantive elements of a culture and prescription of magical taboos stereotypes concrete types of relationships to human beings and to goods” (p. 207). In other words, the religion, as an underlying principle, can cause the governing bodies and social context to be favorable to their message, ideas, and actions by transferring the religious community’s taboos and other cultural nuances into the public and social realm. Foucault (1980) noted that, specifically within Christianity,

“Christianity is a confession. That means that Christianity belongs to a very special type of religion, the religions which impose on those who practice them obligation(s) of truth” (p. 169). This confession within the church community extends beyond to defining social mores of those even outside of the religious community.

On the other hand, the context also has a hand in defining the church/ministry. Bellah (1970) stated that if religion and beliefs are not the same that, “what is generally called secularization and the decline of religion would in this context appear as the decline of the external control system of religion and the decline of traditional religious belief. But religion has not declined, indeed, cannot decline unless man’s nature ceases to be problematic to him” (p. 227). Therefore, a proposed secularization of society has not lead to the decline in religion, but has instead made the context for public displays of religion less tolerable. Nielsen (2001) further describes that in the way in which religion must evolve or perish, “the ambiguous qualities of the unbound sacred as a social force provide a dynamic element which ‘religion’ alone often lacks” (p. 128). In such a case, religions are shaped by a context, in which they must adapt and respond to the issues facing individuals in their daily lives. Without such adaptation, further differentiation between religious movements occurs.

Differentiation Between Sects

The motivation to differentiate often stems from a lack of adaptation by a religion to the social context relevant to believers. Riis and Woodhead (2010)

noted, “the power of a religious community may be enhanced when it offers emotional resources that help life both inside and outside the religious community, but is diminished when it offers less emotional satisfaction than other spheres of social existence or clashes unhelpfully with other emotional regimes” (p. 169). The power of a religious community lies in its applicability to the individual’s daily life. The more an individual adopts and enacts the religious beliefs within their life, the more sway the religious community has in asking for individuals to concur on community action. Weber (1922) emphasized the need for a community to maintain a monopolistic power by differentiating from other religions, “once a religious community has become established it feels a need to set itself apart from competing doctrines and to maintain its superiority in propaganda, all of which tends to the emphasis upon differential doctrines” (p. 70). In other words, through applicability to individuals and differentiation from other sects, religious power and prestige in society is ensured.

The differentiation between church and sect was emphasized in Weber’s work on the *Sociology of Religion*. Weberian scholar Aldridge best summated this differentiation in stating, “the church is inclusive. Church membership is socially ascribed at birth, which means that people belong to the church unless they choose to opt out. The sect is exclusive: membership is not ascribed at birth but achieved in adult life. People can become a member of a sect only by choosing to join it” (Aldridge, 2000, p. 33-34). Church is traditional and passed down among the family where as a sect is a conscious decision to belong to a

religious community, which mirrors an individual's beliefs, values, and actions. Hervieu-Leger (2001) further distinguishes between church and sect: "the church employs a regime of institutional validation of faith; the sect knows only the communal validation of faith with immediate reference to scripture; the mystical network, finally, orients itself towards the mutual validation of faith" (p. 171). The church is the Goliath to the sect's David. Essentially an underdog, the church is the brawn where the sect is the heart. Neither is inherently better than the other, in fact, most sects are the beginning of development of a new church. Aldridge stated, "the growth of sects into churches is also linked to the process of the routinization of charisma... As a religious movement grows, personal charisma is replaced by the charisma of office, which in turn gradually shades into bureaucracy" (2000, p. 35). It is through charismatic leadership that a sect can transition to a church, and eventually become another party in the tautology between religion and social context.

Leadership

The religious leader is not only an exemplar of a religious community, but also a representative of the religion's ideals. Weber (1922) noted, "it is the characteristic of the prophets that they do not receive their mission from any human agency, but seize it, as it were" (p. 51). Weber further stated in a more thorough examination of charisma titled *On Charisma and Institution Building* (1968) that, "charisma knows only inner determination and inner restraint. The holder of charisma seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands

obedience and a following by virtue of his mission” (p. 20). A religious leader must be willing to take their destiny into their own hands, and determination to continue their mission on their own terms. Weber further examines the religious leaders role stating, “prophets and priests are the twin bearers of the systematization and rationalization of religious ethics. But, there is a third significant factor of importance in determining the evolution of religious ethics: the laity, whom prophets and priests seek to influence in an ethical direction” (1922, p. 45). Not only must leadership be seized, but it must also be bestowed upon the leader. Without the approval of the laity, there is a leader without any followers, leaving little power to the leader. However, despite the importance of charisma, determination, and backing of the laity, one must not forget, “all religious powers do not emanate from divine personalities, and there are relations of cult which have other objects than uniting a man to a deity. Religion is more than the idea of gods and spirits, and consequently cannot be defined exclusively in relation to these latter” (Durkheim, 1915, p. 50). Religion cannot gain followers without presenting its message as crucial to the daily lives of those within the religious community. The message alone does not gain followers, but instead the personality or the charisma of the leader allows the beliefs, values, and actions emphasized in the community’s message to come to life.

Charisma was originally named by Weber, and is best understood as the ability to sway others through personality and ethos (1922). Furthermore, a charismatic leader is believed to be a ‘natural’ leader, and possess expert

knowledge (Weber, 1968). Charisma is what turns the laity into the leader, “as a rule, the ethical and exemplary prophet himself is a layman, and his power position depends on his lay followers” (Weber, 1922, p. 66). The followers present power to the leader as a result of the leader’s display of personality, ethos and knowledge as exemplary of the community. Although the leaders present an image as exemplary and charismatic individuals, ultimately, the leaders are merely puppets of the followers. “The authority of charismatic leaders depends entirely on the support of their followers. If the followers lose faith, the leader is left with no power of command” (Aldridge, 2000, p. 68). In the dualistic nature of the sacred and profane, the charismatic leader is believed to have a macro-level view of the daily occurrences in the church and society. Indeed, it is crucial that they maintain a certain distance, “in order to do justice to their mission, the holders of charisma, the master as well as his disciples and followers, must stand outside the ties of this world, outside of routine occupations, as well as outside routine obligations of family life” (Weber, 1968, p. 21). A dialectic facing leaders then emerges, the charismatic religious leader must be exemplary in that they must be outside of the daily minutiae in order to better understand the community problems on a macro-level, however the leader must also maintain roots with the people in order to maintain their applicability to followers. Charisma provides a precarious balance in the religious community in that it brings the message to life, but also must yield to tradition, “It is the fate of charisma, whenever it comes into permanent institutions of a community to give

way to powers of tradition or of rational socialization” (Weber, 1968, p. 28).

Charisma must have both roots and wings. It must acknowledge and honor the religious community’s shared history while continuously molding itself into an applicable form for the daily life of religious followers.

Beyond the individual embodiment of the leader, leadership occurs on a hierarchical level as well. Organizational communication scholar Beyer (2003) noted, “organizations thus tend to be quite clear about who is subject to their rules, when they are so subject, and where their most typical activity takes place. Moreover, organizations almost always articulate a clear purpose to which their activity is oriented” (p. 54-55). Church leadership must move beyond concentration on a particular individual, towards a community orientation.

Engaging the religious community allows followers to see the applicability of their faith and become more invested in the community itself. Weber (1922) described a lack of engagement for followers of religious communities, “ritualistic salvation, especially when it limits the layman to a spectator role, confines his participation to simple or essentially passive manipulations” (p. 152). Leadership in the church organization must move beyond rituals to diverse applications in order to emphasize active participation in the church organization. Religious studies scholar Ammerman (2003) noted, “religious organizations establish such narratives through elaborate sets of roles, myths, rituals, and behavioral prescriptions that encourage participants to perceive sacred others as their co-participants in life” (p. 217). In order for religious laity to become invested in the

church their participation must be consistent and meaningful. Without such investment for individuals, leadership falls flat and the religious organization loses steam. One way religious communities incite participation is through enacting rituals and norms. Durkheim, in his study of the native Australian religious practices, noted that “they do not prescribe certain acts to the faithful, but confine themselves to forbidding certain ways of active, so they all take the form of interdictions, or as commonly said by ethnographers, of taboos” (1915, p. 338). It is through religious norms that leadership is enacted within the church organization. In creating community standards leaders enact an orderly and decisive marker of membership in the religious community.

Religious Norms

Taboos, although rarely talked about in a community, prove to be crucial to understanding the actions, beliefs and values of a religious community. Hervieu-Leger stated that taboos are often created by institutional authorities in the religious community, “the institutional authorities define the rules and norms which, are, for individuals, the stable benchmarks of conformity to the faith... but this does not preclude the fact that, at their core, regimes based on the validation of faith differentiate themselves in response to the desire for religious intensity proper to the particular group” (2001, p. 168). In other words, although religious leaders provide benchmarks and norms for a particular group, like the nature of their leadership, their power in dictating the norms of the community are entirely contingent upon acceptance from religious followers. Beyond allowing

leadership to maintain power, religious norms aid in defining membership. Weber (1922) noted, “the rationalization of taboos leads ultimately to a system of norms according to which certain actions are permanently construed as religious abominations subject to sanctions...” (p. 38). Taboos are an extension of commonplace norms, but are given larger prominence as breaking a defining characteristic of action of the community. Taboos do not only dictate actions, and ideas but also dictate proper religious emotion. Riis and Woodhead (2010) stated, “consecrated symbols not only enable the community to have shared emotional experiences; they also restrict the range of emotions that are accepted as religious by the community” (p. 104). Taboos enacted by the community mute the emotional expression of the individual, creating instead a repertoire of accepted emotions to use within the religious community, therefore excluding some emotions deemed unfit for presentation within the religious community. Although, taboos restrict expression of individual autonomy, they also create a strong community identity. Hervieu-Leger (2001) stated, “... the coherence of the behavior of each of the members with regard to norms, objectives, and more broadly relations, to the world, as defined by the group, constitutes the principle criterion of the truth of a shared faith” (p. 168). Taboos create the truth of the shared faith, strengthening a sense of group identity and further differentiating one religious community from other religious communities.

Ritual also provides a means for communities to differentiate themselves and strengthen their group identity. Weber noted, “one path to salvation leads

through the purely ritual activities and ceremonies of cults, both within religious worship and everyday behavior” (1922, p. 151). Rituals and ceremonies within religious communities are on display both in worship and in religious adherent’s everyday lives. Through internalizing a particular religion’s beliefs and values, it is believed that individual salvation can be achieved. Bellah (2003) defined interaction rituals as involving “a group of at least two people physically assembled, who focus attention on the same object or action, and each becomes aware that the other is maintaining this focus; who share a common mood or emotion” (p. 32). The communal nature of rituals help to strengthen focus on common moods and emotions, contributing to validation of religious adherents’ opinions, beliefs, values, and actions. Durkheim (1915) sought to label religious phenomenon in stating, “religious phenomena are naturally arranged in two fundamental categories: beliefs and rites. The first are states of opinion, and consist in representations; the second are determined modes of action” (p. 51). Rites, also known as rituals, are actions derived from individualized religious opinions. In other words, rites are the modes through which action within and outside a religious community occurs.

A variety of sociologists ranging from Weber (1922) to Wilson (2001) have noted specific religious norms within the Christian tradition. Taboos in the Christian tradition are often understood as sins or transgressions. Weber (1922) stated, “transgression against the will of god is an ethical sin which burdens the conscience, quite apart from its direct results. Evils befalling the individual are

divinely appointed temptations and the consequences of sin, from which the individual hopes to be freed by 'piety' (behavior acceptable to god), which will bring the individual salvation" (p. 43-44). In other words, sins or transgressions are taboos, which are not enforced by the community, but instead are believed to be enforced by divine will. Within the Baptist vernacular, a defining sin is failing to uphold the Christian doctrine of accepting Jesus as savior. The process of accepting Jesus as savior is typically called being "saved". Wilson (2001) noted, the idea of being 'saved' on one's own is alien to all traditional religious systems, "An entire people, or a clearly designated section of it, was eligible for salvation" (p. 40). Those within the Baptist tradition differentiate themselves as eligible for salvation based upon their beliefs, consequently, eliminating the possibility for salvation to those who do not share their religious community's belief system. Through this differentiation, the community becomes not only a congregation of individuals, but instead is defined as a unified religious community. Those who fail to be "saved" are believed in the Baptist tradition to be committing the ultimate transgression for which individual retribution will occur in the afterlife.

While sins or transgressions are the religious manifestations of taboos, ideals are manifestations of goals upheld by the community. Nielsen (2001) noted, "the individual is required to perceive other individuals under the aspect of the sacred, and act accordingly, that is, in accordance with the rights appropriate for this new religious cult" (p. 129). Ideally, members of religious communities should parallel their individual behavior with behavior displayed and promoted by

the religious community. Another ideal within religious communities is working towards becoming more than a conglomeration of individuals, but instead become a family. Weber (1922) noted, “to this notion was added the principle of solidarity of the brothers in the faith, which under certain circumstances might approximate a universal communism of love” (p. 212). Religious communities strive to create and maintain a sense of love and acceptance, to move beyond petty earthly issues, towards transcendence and universal acceptance. This universal acceptance also moves into an individual’s wrestling with theological and epistemological issues. Durkheim (1915) stated that the individual, “does not regard them as a sort of ultima ratio to which the intellect resigns itself only in despair of others, but rather as the most obvious manner of representing and understanding what he sees about him” (p. 40). In other words, religious communities strive to provide a macro-level understanding of theological and epistemological issues as well as an outlet for expression of beliefs within a community of like-minded individuals. However, religion must be tailored in terms of a micro-level understanding to make sense of one’s everyday reality.

Promises to Followers

A Religion’s ultimate promise is to answer epistemological questions and make such answers applicable to the followers’ everyday lives. The promises of salvation as well as fellowship and community are recurring promises in many religious communities. Weber (1922) defined salvation as, “freedom from the physical, psychological, and social sufferings of terrestrial life” (p. 149). Salvation

is a promise that frustrations and difficulties, which occur on earth, will cease to exist in the future. However, such salvation is designated for only the few, “the idea of being ‘saved’ on one’s own is alien to all traditional religious systems. An entire people, or a clearly designated section of it, were eligible for salvation” (Wilson, 2001, p. 40). A religion differentiates itself by making claims to being the only lifestyle, which will ensure salvation at a later date. Bellah (1970) provided a definition of the quest for salvation as, “the search for adequate standards of action, which is at the same time a search for personal maturity and social relevance” (p. 43). Each religion through the norms, and consequently the lifestyle they promote for the religious community, seek out salvation by making the action towards achieving salvation both relevant and individualized.

Furthermore, the quest towards salvation must provide through worship, “not only a symbolic reordering of experience, but an element of consummation and fulfillment” (Bellah, 1970, p. 210). While the main focus of the salvation promise is based upon delayed gratification through removing sufferings in the future, salvation must also present a more timely gratification to followers. This gratification can be in the form of the doctrine and practices of the religious community being absorbed by the individual, or it may also be an outlet for members to lead fulfilling lives. Although salvation acts primarily as a promise for the distant future, the promise of fellowship or community provides immediate rewards to individuals within the religious community.

The communal ambiance and culture within the religious community are an essential promise made to members. Weber (1922) noted the emphasis of this promise in the religious community, “the principle of solidarity of the brothers in the faith, which under certain circumstances might approximate a universal communism of love” (p. 212). Belonging and acceptance into the religious community are gained without pretense and extends throughout the participation of the individual in the religious community. Hervieu-Leger (2001) further detailed the role of fellowship and conversation within the community in stating that major churches have two aims:

“Feed a theological consensus and an ethical minimum, capable of absorbing and encircling, without breaking them, the increasingly diverse trajectories of believers’ identities, and maintain, a sufficiently strong model of shared truth so as to avoid being overwhelmed by the aggressive offensive of small-scale communal orderings of meaning” (p. 174).

The stable foundation provided by fellowship within a community seek to create a common denominator from which individuals can individualize teaching, beliefs, and actions to best model their reality. Providing a useful model for reality as well as providing a lifestyle for followers are essential motives of religion.

Essential Motives of Religion

Salvation, while a promise is also an essential motive of religion. Weber (1922) stated, “our concern is essentially with the quest for salvation, whatever its form, insofar as it produced certain consequences for practical behavior in the

world” (p. 149). Religions gain momentum due to the delayed gratification promised by religions to eliminate suffering. The religious community proclaims itself as following the lifestyle from which one can achieve salvation. Religions consequently seek to make good on its promise and create a lifestyle and belief system conducive to salvation.

Another essential motive of religion is internalization and externalization. Internalization is defined as “the ways in which a community influences individuals’ emotional lives” (Riis and Woodhead, 2010, p. 109). In other words, internalization is the act of incorporating the values and norms of a religious community into one’s individual lifestyle. In order for a religious community to thrive their actions must extend beyond the community. Through internalization, community members become constant messengers, bringing life and humanity into the doctrine and norms of the religious community.

On the other hand, externalization is also a key motive of religion. Externalization is defined as “ the process by which an individual feels something for him or herself and is moved by it” (Riis and Woodhead, 2010, p. 109). Externalization involves taking absorbed values and beliefs of the religious community and heralding such beliefs to those outside of the particular religious community. Through externalization, community members are able to expand their influence on the religious community as well as expand the influence of the religious community in the social realm.

Externalization often takes the form of social action. Weber (1968) stated, “social action, which includes failure to act and passive acquiescence, may be oriented to the past, present, or expected future behavior of others” (p. 4). Both action and failure to act are considered social action, however regardless of whether one acts or fails to act will drastically change the ability of the religious community to exert influence within a larger society. Social action is strongly encouraged within religious communities and at times is reflexive of the individual. Weber (1968) noted, “religious good works with a social orientation become mere instruments of self-perfection” (p. 272). Social action allows individuals to further refine their obedience to the religious community by becoming an exemplar of the community. In becoming exemplars, they further perfect themselves in their own eyes as well as the community’s eyes.

Community/Individual Tension

While the individuals within a religious community present a united front, the clash between individual autonomy and community directives is a consistent dialectic. Geertz (1966) stated, “religious belief has usually been presented as a homogeneous characteristic of an individual” (p. 36). However, religious belief is individually adapted to fit the needs and understand the daily realities of the individual. Simultaneously, a tension exists because “for every purely personal relationship of man to man, or whatever sort... may be subjected to ethical requirements and ethically regulated” (Weber, 1922, p. 216). In other words, although religious beliefs, conversations and ideals can be individualized the

community exerts influence on such discussions based upon their ethical merit in accordance with the norms within the religious community. Riis and Woodhead (2010) described the inevitability of this tension stating, “relations between a community, human agents, and symbols are not inherently balanced, and do not ‘naturally’ tend towards a state of equilibrium” (p. 124). Riis and Woodhead extend the individual-community tension to include the similarities and discrepancies in semiotics as a point of contention. Ammerman (2003) also noted the tension between the individual and the community, “acting within and between structures, across time and space, we cumulatively build up a personal and collectively shape the solidarities of which we are a part” (p. 217). In other words, structures, such as those put in place by religious communities, affect the individual in terms of their personal and social development. The tension between community and individual results in a tautology between the community and the individual, ultimately making both parties dependent upon each other, yet in a constant struggle between autonomy and community directives.

The community affects the individual on a macro-level in that the community’s norms provide a frame of reference from which the individual should derive their beliefs, ideals and action. Nielsen (1999) discussed the importance of the community in producing the idea of the person. Nielsen stated that two elements produce the idea of the person, which include, “the soul of the collectivity” and “consciousness commune” (1999). The “soul of the collectivity” can be understood as the basic framework presented by the community. This

may include ideals such as brotherhood, care for others, humility, or other virtues touted by the religious community. The “consciousness commune” includes the community atmosphere provided by worship, fellowship or other activities by the religious group. This community atmosphere is enhanced a sense of collective understanding and consensus in which discussions with like-minded individuals can occur. The religious community then is a collectivity, which institutionalizes morality. Bellah (2006) noted, “what we have, then, from the earliest years of the republic is a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in collectivity” (p. 233). Religious communities institutionalize ideals and prescribe lifestyles to achieve salvation and live an ideal life. It is through these outlined lifestyles and ideals that society ultimately affects and shapes the individual.

On the other hand, the individual also affects the religious community. Bellah (2006) explained this most broadly in stating, “pluralism is within us as well as without us” (p. 488). In other words, a variety of religious ideals exist within the individual, and therefore shape the latitude of acceptance for a religious community. Individual identities hold power in that they must be structured in order for understanding to occur. The collectivity of individual identities is the catalyst for creating the framework of reality that is religion. Ammerman (2003) described identities as having “need to be understood as structured by existing rules and schemas, constrained by existing distributions of resources and power, but also malleable in the everyday reality of moving across

institutional contexts and among symbolic worlds” (p. 212). Identities are defining for individuals within the religious community, and thus religious communities must capture the essence and provide a brotherhood in which multiple identities can connect. Hervieu-Leger (2001) noted, “the contemporary landscape of churches is characterized by the development of groups and networks which make use of... supple and unstable forms of social affinity, founded upon the spiritual, social, and cultural proximity of the individuals who are involved” (p. 167). Churches, or other religious communities, must build their foundations upon the individual, taking an inductive approach to creating a religious community rather than a deductive approach. Therefore, “the individual soul is only a portion of the collective soul of the group; it is the anonymous force at the basis of the cult, but incarnated in an individual whose personality it espouses” (Durkheim, 1915, p. 299). The individual soul is the foundation for the collective soul created by the religious community. Furthermore, “before all, it (religion) is a system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it” (Durkheim, 1915, p. 257). Consequently, religion is an extension of the individual, adopted into a collectivity in order to assert more influence both on the individual’s life, but also to make a larger impact on societal values and actions.

Religion-Society Tautology

Community-individual attention occurs inside the religious community, however on a more macro-level religion and society are at odds. Religion affects

society in that, “there are cultural codes embedded in national cultures and that those cultural codes, however transformed over time, are ultimately derived from religious beliefs” (Bellah, 2006, p. 335). Cultural codes, which include norms and values, are based upon the influence of certain groups on society. For instance, the issue of gay marriage became a hotly debated topic for the 2012 election. The religious communities to which individuals belong, ultimately shapes how voters react and interpret the issue (Salmon, 2009). Therefore, religion is exerting influence upon the larger society by dividing societal reaction and leading those within the community towards civil action, which will ultimately affect the societal definition of marriage as a whole. Religion exerts a large influence on society largely due to its application and importance in the lives of the individual. Therefore, “the study of religious identities should take place at the intersection where individual and social meet the sacred” (Ammerman, 2003, p. 224). Religious identities are complex in that they are derived from the individual, the sacred (aka: the religious belief system) as well as the social climate for such a religious identity. Understanding the complexity of religious identity is crucial to an understanding of religious culture, ideals, and values.

On the other hand, society also exerts influence upon religion. Nielsen (1999) noted, “society perpetually raises the level of our moral being” (p. 202). The collective groupthink enacted through societal pressures are constantly driving religious communities to raise their level of morality through mirroring such efforts in the lifestyles, values, and beliefs they promote. Recently, the

debate over same-sex marriage has caused various religious groups to take a stance on the issue, whereas previously the issue was simply glazed over or muted rather than articulated. For instance, ELCA Lutherans voted to allow gay clergy in 2009 but do not accept homosexual relationships as marriage, and American Baptist Churches strictly defined proper sexuality as solely heterosexual relationships in 2005 and denies homosexual clergy (Pew Forum, 2012). Due to the societal debate on the topic, religions are forced to amend their social stances based upon current interpretations. For instance, some Christian sects have come out to support gay marriage stating that scripture emphasizes love for all individuals. On the other hand, other Christian sects have emphasized the “sin” of homosexuality as a driving force in their refutation of gay marriage. In such a case, society is exerting influence on religion by forcing communities to further refine and define their stance on particular social views. Nielsen also stated, “society supplies both the mold for the categories as well as the dynamic energies which go into religious practices; together they are fused in society itself” (1999, p. 204). In other words, the pre-existing taboos, norms, and values of a society are also mirrored and enacted within religious communities. Religious communities cannot renounce their citizenship from the society in which the community is founded and therefore, must yield to larger societal nuances. Ultimately, religion is believed to be reasonable because it represents the current world situation, but the world-view presented is done as a reflection of

religion. This tautology between religion and society is a constant dialectic, which provides a rich context for study.

Research Gaps and Rationalizing Method

Ultimately, studying the sociology of religion is a complex, interwoven tangle in which society, religious communities, and individuals are knotted together. All of these parties are mutually dependent upon each other yet are in a constant struggle for power over both the individual psyche and societal control. It is these dialectics, which are always present and provide a rich context for study. When studying the sociology of religion, Geertz simplified the procedure, “the question then comes down to, first, what is the ‘religious perspective’ generally considered, as differentiated from other perspectives; and second, how do men come to adopt it” (1966, p. 26). In other words, in taking a sociological approach to the study of religion, one must consider on the macro-level of the religious perspective being touted, and the micro-level of how individuals adopt the religious perspective as their own. The process of adopting a religious perspective is not without conflicting ideas and tensions occurring in both the community and within the individual. In the next section, I will examine Relational Dialectics Theory in detail.

Theory: Relational Dialectics Theory

One experiences a constant pull in different directions in daily life, whether it is from religious commitments, wants, or relationships. Relational Dialectics theory seeks to better understand these tensions in interpersonal relationships, which simultaneously place strain upon and enrich relationships. In this section I will first define dialectics and examine the role of dialectics in communication. Next, I will provide a summary of Relational Dialectics Theory. Then, a brief look into religious research applications of Relational Dialectics will occur. Finally, I will look into the strengths and limitations of this theory.

Communication and Dialectics

The ubiquitous role of communication in defining ourselves, others, and communities is not lost in the realm of dialectics. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) noted, “communication is the vehicle of social definition; participants develop a sense of self, partners develop a sense of their relationship, and societies develop a sense of identity through the process of communication” (p. 42). Words are not simply vehicles for meaning, but instead create and develop existing identities. “An utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 119-120). Communication can be analyzed as a creation and addition to individual as well as a community. Furthermore, communication, like dialectics, is a constant process in which, “there are no ideal

goals, no ultimate endings, no elegant states of balance. There is only an indeterminate flow, full of unforeseeable potential that is realized in interaction” (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996, p. 47). In other words, communication is a never-ending process, which juggles tensions upon shifting groundwork. In order to maintain balance, constant movement, renegotiation and change must occur.

Defining Dialectics

Dialectics have been discussed as early as Marx’s work regarding the delicate balance between oppressors and the oppressed. However, Relational Dialectics theory was first postulated in the 1980s as a response to critiques of Social Penetration theory and Uncertainty Reduction theory that relationships are messy. This theory addressed complexities that were not addressed prior in interpersonal theories created in the 1970s. Given the complex, non-linear nature of Relational Dialectics, this theory is inherently qualitative. Therefore, early research as well as current research often uses interview or focus group methodology. Although Relational Dialectics theory began in interpersonal communication, the theory has branched out to leadership studies, cultural studies and organizational communication. This theory has provided and continues to provide immense opportunities as a micro-level, thorough examination of relational complexities.

Dialectics are complexities, which occur within interpersonal relationships, as well as on a community level. Bochner, Ellis and Tillman-Healy (1998) state, “dialectic begins with the view that every idea is based on relationship; we can

think of something only by connecting it to something else” (p. 46). Furthermore, “to commit to relational dialectics view is to accept that communication events, relationships, and life itself are ongoing and un-finalizable, always becoming, never being” (Baxter and Montgomery, 1998b, p. 179). In other words, dialectics are a continuous process of renegotiating identity between the polarizations of defining characteristics. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) parsimoniously summate the ubiquity of dialectics by stating, “in short, every utterance is positioned at the boundary between the already-spoken, proximal, and distal links can be identified with respect to the not-yet-spoken” (p. 28). Through constant communication, opposing tensions become redefined, shaping both the interpretation of the past, the “already spoken”, and future interpretations, the “not yet spoken.”

Dialectics occur in the social realm as well as the individual. “From the perspective of relational dialectics, social life exists in and through people’s communicative practices, by which people give voice to multiple (perhaps even infinite) opposing tendencies” (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996, p. 4, parenthesis in original). The defining line between individual and community discourse is consistently blurred in that social lives are enacted through individual practices. The tautology between individual and society is on display in examining dialectics, “our own discourse is gradually and slowly wrought out of others’ words that have been acknowledged and assimilated” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345).

Social discourse affects the individual in the same way that individuals affect social discourse.

This blurring of boundaries and shifting of definitions, however, is not a sign of weakness or failure. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) stated, “contradictions are inherent in social life and not evidence of failure or inadequacy in a person or in a social system. In fact, contradictions are the basic ‘drivers’ of change” (p. 7). Furthermore, “unity (is) not an innate one-and-only, but a dialogic concordance of unmerged twos or multiple” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 289). Instead of contributing dialectics to the demise of an individual or institution, it is a sign of flexibility and adaptation in the face of ever-changing circumstances and situations. Dialectics provide definition as well as ambiguity, proving dialectics themselves create tensions.

Summary of Relational Dialectics Theory

Relational Dialectics Theory, first introduced by Leslie Baxter in 1990, understands that relationships are defined by contradictions of simultaneous contrasting needs. A more parsimonious summation of this theory is provided by Lowery-Hart and Pacheco in stating, “relationships are a give and take process in constant motion” (2011, p. 55). These simultaneous contrasting needs are dialectics. Dialectics are forces that can and do exist simultaneously. Dialectics differ from dualisms in that dualisms are two polar opposites that cannot coexist, whereas dialectics are two opposites that can and do coexist.

Central to dialectics are: contradiction, totality, change, and praxis. Baxter and Montgomery (1998a) defined contradiction as “the dynamic interplay between unified opposites” (p. 4). Contradictions are tensions that co-exist but define each other as opposites. Totality occurs when contradictions are dependent upon each other and cannot exist in isolation (Baxter and Montgomery, 1998a). Baxter and Montgomery further defined totality in stating, “by totality, dialectical theorists mean the inseparability of phenomena” (1998a, p. 10). For example, connection and autonomy are opposing tensions, but connection helps to define autonomy in that without one you cannot have the other. Change is defined as “a difference in some phenomena over time” and “an interplay of stability with instability” (Baxter and Montgomery, 1998a, p. 7). In other words, change is the constant renegotiation of dialectical tensions, which simultaneously lead to stability and redefinition. A final key concept of Relational Dialectics theory is praxis, which are the choices individuals make in the context of the given tensions and how these decisions influence dialectics. Baxter and Montgomery (1998a) defined praxis as:

“focus on the simultaneous subject-and-object nature of the human experience. Individuals both act and are acted on their actions in the present are constrained and enabled by prior actions and function to create the conditions to which they will respond in the future” (p. 10).

Praxis is the practical actions taken by an individual in order to reconcile their conflicting needs as well as the ways in which dialectics define one’s

everyday encounters. For instance, in reconciling autonomy and connection the individual who is feeling stifled while living at home may seek to gain more autonomy by moving out, but may also feel distant from their parents and later seek to speak with them on a regular basis in order to regain a connection. Contradiction, totality, change and praxis all seek to define characteristics of all dialectics, however, dialectics can be distinctly categorized as either internal or external.

Internal dialectics occur when dialectics occur in an interaction within a relationship. Such dialectics include connection-autonomy, certainty-uncertainty and openness-closedness (Baxter, 1990). Connection refers to the need to gain rapport and further a relationship with an individual. In contrast, autonomy is the need to be independent of others. Rawlins also describes this dialectic as freedom-independence, which, describes, “the patterns of availability, obligation, absence, and co-presence characterizing friendships in the light of the voluntaristic ethic underlying friendships in American culture” (1992, p. 272). An individual moving out of their parent’s home as mentioned above best illustrates this dialectic.

Certainty is a thorough understanding of a concept, idea, or potential future action. In contrast, uncertainty is a lack of understanding or approximation for a given concept idea, or future action. For example, an individual who is moving to another part of the country would have certainty regarding the area from their previous travels or narratives from others who have previously or

currently inhabit the area. However, the individual would also have uncertainty as to how their personality, beliefs and lifestyle would fit into the culture in their new location. Openness is the want to disclose information about one's self. In contrast, closedness is the want to keep information to one's self. For example, if a woman were to meet an attractive man at a bar, she would likely want to disclose information about herself in hopes of the man reciprocating and perhaps building the foundations for a romantic relationship. On the other hand, the woman would not want to disclose too much information because she may "scare him off" or reveal less desirable attributes or behaviors.

External dialectics occur when one compares one relationship to other relationships. Common external dialectics include: inclusion-seclusion, conventional-unique and revelation-concealment (Baxter, 1990). Inclusion-seclusion is the equivalent of the internal dialectic of connection-autonomy. Inclusion is the want to include an individual in one's personal life. Conversely, seclusion is the want to keep others at a distance. Conventional-unique is the equivalent of the internal dialectic of certainty-uncertainty. Conventionality is the desire to stick to a pre-determined social schemas or relational routines. Conversely, uniqueness is the desire to try something out of the ordinary. Revelation-concealment is the equivalent of the internal dialectic of openness-closedness. Revelation is longing to disclose to other individuals. Conversely, concealment is the longing to remain distant from other individuals. Rawlins (1992) describes this dialectic as expressiveness-protectiveness in which one

experiences, “opposing tendencies to speak openly with a friend and relate private thoughts and feelings, and the simultaneous need to restrain one’s disclosures to preserve privacy and avoid burdening one’s friend” (p. 273). These external dialectics further expand this theory to more than two parties in order to provide a broader application of the theory.

Criticisms of Relational Dialectics Theory

Miller (2005) provides six potential characteristics of good qualitative theories, which include an examination of whether the theory is: accurate, internally and externally consistent, broad scope, parsimonious, fruitful, and beyond common sense. Relational Dialectics theory meets nearly all of these criteria. This theory is accurate because the dialectics postulated can be seen and encountered on a daily basis. However, Relational Dialectics is largely a mental, non-verbal process, which makes the theory difficult to test and falsify. For instance, individuals may censor themselves in which the researcher would be unable to thoroughly understand dialectics present. Relational Dialectics Theory is not internally consistent but is externally consistent. This theory is internally contradictory because the nature of the theory talks about contradictions in relationships, and therefore discusses opposing wants and needs. Relational dialectics is externally consistent because it does not contradict other widely held theories. Rather, this theory builds upon content shared via the Social Penetration Theory’s stages. Like Social Penetration Theory, Relational Dialectics Theory examines the concept of self-disclosure.

Furthermore, Relational Dialectics Theory is broad in scope because it can be extended to organizational communication, interpersonal communication, cultural studies, spiritual studies and a variety of other specialized areas as all focus upon relationships. This theory is also parsimonious because complex, contradictory tensions are simplified into three primary dialectics, with three corresponding external dialectics. Relational Dialectics has proven thoroughly heuristic, noting that since the advent of this theory hundreds of applications and studies have been carried out. Finally, Relational Dialectics goes beyond common sense. Common sense would claim that contradictions could not coexist harmoniously. This theory postulates not only the coexistence, but also the inevitability and advantageous depth provided by such contradictions.

Applications

Relational Dialectics Theory has proven to be an exploratory endeavor. Research applications range from interpersonal communication to organizational communication to health communication and many other fields. Research applications in religious tensions will be outlined below.

Religious tensions.

Thatcher (2011) began with addressing two discourses outlined in the founding documents of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA): spiritual pluralism and Christianity. A constant tension occurred with group members who knew the strength of religion in the addiction recovery process, but had a simultaneous

need to be accepting of any religious or spiritual affiliation of others in order to maintain a safe and approachable environment.

Through mixing the discourses of spiritual pluralism and Christianity, a member of AA was able to reconcile and apply both discourses, which aided their recovery. Whether an individual chose to center specific discourses over time or combined the discourses of spiritual pluralism and Christianity, members of the AA group often sought to dismiss tensions regarding the sensitive topic of religion. Thatcher noted, “each perspective is limited by a bias towards unity” (2011, p. 403). Through seeking unity of the group the tensions are ignored, and consequently continued as an underlying tension for fear of alienating a member. While Thatcher may have unearthed the tensions in such a unified group, these tensions continued to be ignored in the pursuit of welcoming and comforting Alcoholics Anonymous members.

Another piece on religious discourse through the lens of relational dialectics occurred when Golden (2010) noticed the relational dialectics coming into play in her own experience while her grandmother was dying. Consequently, Golden’s auto-ethnography was an individual example of the certainty-uncertainty, control-lack of control, and autonomy-connection dialectics occurring during a difficult time. Like a religious community, Golden’s smaller community of close family members experienced simultaneous need to control and let go, accept and rebuke, connect and disengage. It is through complexities such as

these that the intricate beliefs, values and actions of a religious community can be better understood.

Strengths and Limitations

The strength of Relational Dialectics Theory lies in its heuristic and depth. This recently developed theory has successfully built upon post-positivist theories to provide a richer understanding of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. Whether in spiritual communication or ethnographic methodology, this theory has provided a stronger understanding of the constant needs and pressures felt by individuals every day. Relational Dialectics Theory provides an over-arching framework in many areas of communication, however, needs to be further elaborated by the researcher to provide substantive new insights. Relational Dialectics has and will continue to be a successful backbone in interpersonal communication research.

Relational Dialectics Theory provides an excellent platform for the micro-level analysis required to understand a religious community. The sociological study of a religious community can be better understood through examining dialectics. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) stated, “social norms, rules, roles, and scripts define the player and patterns of interaction that give substance to a culture at any one moment and that also serve to perpetuate it” (p. 170). The social realm of a religious community is built upon norms, but is constantly being renegotiated through the interactions of individual community members with one another. Furthermore, “rituals and ceremonies... are usually complex enough to

allow, simultaneously, for both the assertion of social values and the expression of... unique perspectives” (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996, p. 165). Rituals and ceremonies allow both individual and community expression of beliefs and often are the site of dialectics in praxis. Religion allows both for individual and community expression, “self and community are enacted in public and private contexts; and there are both political and existential expressions of character” (Rawlins, 1992, p. 277). The expression of self and community is constantly reflected at NewSpring Church. This expression is what provides life to the religious doctrine, and ultimately makes the church a case worth studying.

Limitations are largely related to the lack of methodological structure outlined by the theory. Therefore, studies in this theory have varied methodology, which can create confusing results. Relational Dialectics Theory also is limited to studies utilizing inductive reasoning. This theory must be applied with a focus upon application. One cannot “prove” Relational Dialectics Theory exists, instead this theory must be examined as a lens for analysis rather than a tool during data gathering.

Method: Textual Analysis

This project seeks to understand the culture of NewSpring through examination of its sermons. Taking a cue from cultural studies scholars, I will utilize textual analysis as the way in which to best parse out the interaction between leadership and membership in constituting and creating an identity. Cultural studies has developed as a paradigm under which communication scholars have intervened in a wide variety of areas ranging from sociology to psychology to feminist studies as well as a variety of other fields (Hay and Couldry, 2011). This interdisciplinary field has subsequently utilized a variety of qualitative methods such as ethnography, interviews, focus groups, and textual analysis. Hay and Couldry (2011) stated, “cultural studies is understood as projects and interventions organized from and about historical conjectures, often with an eye towards developing strategies for analyzing, theorizing, and intervening in the present” (p. 474). With an eye towards the historical development, present theorizing and future project direction, I will develop a chronological understanding of textual analysis, presenting this method as it has evolved and how textual analysis will be completed specifically in this project.

Early Textual Analysis

Textual analysis grew out of the tradition of rhetorical criticism and has since been adopted in other fields within the humanities. Early textual analysis operated under “the underlying epistemological assumption... that the facts of text and context precede and should therefore govern one’s interpretation”

(Flaherty, 2002, p. 479). Textual analysis was understood as a process of decoding where one particular meaning needed to be ferretted out by scholars. However, textual analysis as interpretation died around the same time as the author.

In Roland Barthes' influential essay "The Death of the Author" Barthes stated, "In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run' at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath..." (1968, p. 147). In other words, texts result from a complicated entanglement of multiple factors, of which no meaning is fixed. Barthes (1968) also noted, "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (p. 146). Barthes' acknowledgement of the context as crucial to understanding has also led to the distinction of discourse from rhetoric.

Distinguishing Discourse

Discourse figures into society through genres (ways of acting), discourses (ways of representing) and styles (ways of being) (Fairclough, 2003). Therefore, discourse provides a discussion regarding how a culture operates on an individual level. Fairclough (2003) stated, "discourses not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), they are also projective, imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in particular directions" (p. 124, parenthesis in

original). Discourse also is shaped by knowledge within a society. O'Farrell (2005) stated, "Foucault also holds that knowledge is always shaped by political, social, and historical factors-by power- in human societies. It is absolutely essential to examine the relationship between knowledge and the factors that produce and constrain it" (p. 54). In a similar way, rhetoric acts a discursive formation in that it "does more than link narrators and narrates; it also produces statements that stand as knowledge within its boundaries, and contingently established by the narratives that are ascribed to tradition" (Charland, 2003, p. 129). Rhetoric is a specialized form of discourse in which a particular community carves out its own ideals, ideas and cultural constructs through language. These often created to appeal to existing members and attract new members of a culture or community through creating shared meaning.

Semiotics

The study of semiotics arose with the distinction between rhetoric and discourse. No longer was meaning inherent, but instead language became the vehicle for meaning to be shared, shaped, and signified. Saussure is widely considered a key foundational scholar for semiotics in his distinctions between sign and signifier (Bouissac, 2010). The sign is defined as the meaningful units of understanding while the signifier is the language utilized to convey a sign (Bouissac, 2010). This distinction between sign and signifier and consequently language and meaning led to a science of understanding meaning, which became known widely as semiotics.

Stuart Hall has led semiotic approaches to studying media and culture, focusing on the process of encoding and decoding. Hall stated that “what are called ‘distortions’ or ‘misunderstandings’ arise precisely from the lack of equivalence between [encoding and decoding] in the communicative exchange” (1980, p. 169). In other words, when there is a lack of shared understanding, the choice of language used leads to disconnect in meaning between encoding and decoding. Furthermore, “discursive ‘knowledge’ is the product not of the transparent representation of the ‘real’ in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions” (Hall, 1980, p. 169). Knowledge does not always translate in language as each word carries multiple connotations, and therefore has the potential for disconnect in shared understanding.

In Barthes’ (1971) discussion of textual analysis he noted, “The text can be approached, experienced, in reaction to the sign...the text is radically symbolic: a work conceived, perceived and received in its integrally symbolic nature is a text” (p. 3). In other words, texts are by nature symbolic and shaped entirely by language. Therefore, semiotics is not only present, but actively shapes the analysis of the text. Barthes also states, “the text is that social space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder” (1971, p. 7). Semiotics rejects the idea of language as a safe, stable means of communication. Instead, language is understood as a node in a complex network of meanings, which make up a culture.

Circuit of Culture

Meaning is made through a complex web of factors within the context of a culture. Stuart Hall's circuit of culture suggests, "Meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes or practices (the cultural circuit). Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we 'belong'" (Hall, 1997, p. 3). In other words, it is through culture that one situates oneself individually and in relation to others. According to the circuit of culture, culture consists of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation. Representation consists of the public understanding of a culture, how a group portrays themselves to outsiders. Identity is shaped by ideology. Identity is not only formed by what a group embraces, but more so, "a culture forms its identity in relation to what it rejects" (O'Farrell, 2005, p. 91). However, identity is changing and more malleable than ideology as "ideology makes the assumption that there are unchanging objects in the world waiting to be discovered by these universal, knowing subjects" (O'Farrell, 2005, p. 98). In other words, identity is the adaptable version of ideology, flexing in the face of new information in order for a culture to remain relevant. Production, consumption, and regulation involve the economic forces of culture in which ideals are molded into ideal representations and identities attractive to members of a particular culture.

Within this project, the circuit of culture informed my analysis in that it acknowledges a complex web of factors, which contribute to understanding a

particular community. However, my focus remained on representation of the NewSpring community through the virtual church as a means for identifying characteristics of community members.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality can be understood as both an interpretive practice and a textual strategy. As an interpretive practice, intertextuality is the phenomenon of the text as a discussion based upon shared ground negotiated in a text.

“Althusser maintains that reading is a form of ‘production’... meaning is something created rather than discovered” (Smith, 1989, p. 496). In other words, meaning is a negotiation between the text’s author and reader. Althusser described this moment of realization for the reader when they realize their power in engaging with the text as interpellation. “An interpellated subject participates in the discourse that addresses him” (Charland, 1987, p. 138). The dialogue between the author and reader occurs after the epiphany of the reader in interpellation, however this dialogue does not always equate to full understanding. Hall (1997) stated, “meaning is a dialogue-always only partially understood, always an unequal exchange” (p. 4). Therefore, determining meaning from a text occurs in the middle ground between the author and reader, which is based on shared experience. Consequently, the meaning of a text is always negotiable and changing, something created not discovered. This negotiation cannot be extracted from the context in which a text is written. Consequently, Althusser noted, “it is impossible for even the most careful author

to be the sole determiner of the text's meaning" (Smith, 1989, p. 498). On the other hand, "the task of the reader of critic, then, is to identify the 'problematic' of the text" (Smith, 1989, p. 496). The problematic is the topic up for discussion, the issue at hand. Ultimately, texts are determined by an unspoken problematic at work, and meaning occurs as a product of discussion between the reader and the text.

Intertextuality also has the potential to act as a textual strategy. In this instance, intertextuality becomes "a stylistic device in a manner that shapes how audiences experience those texts" (Ott and Walter, 2000, p. 434). Intertextuality in this context can be seen through parodic allusion, creative appropriation or inclusion, and self-reflexive reference (Ott and Walter, 2000, p. 435). In each of these categories one text is referenced within another text. The cross-reference of texts can also extend to interdisciplinary. Barthes (1971) stated "the Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation... but to an explosion, a dissemination" (p. 3). In other words, intertextuality is understood within the context, or dissemination of other texts and academic disciplines. A text may exist simultaneously in differing academic realms, which serves to enrich analysis.

Textual interaction has been understood through two opposing metaphors, a chain and a network. As a chain, "individual texts rely upon prior and/or subsequent texts in order to function appropriately" (Solin, 2004, p. 273). However, as a network "ideas and claims flow freely between domains" (Solin,

2004, p. 289). Whereas discussions on the circuit of culture provide an elaboration on the network analogy of textual interaction, the chain metaphor can be elaborated by the concept of the plot in the narrative paradigm.

Within this project I utilized intertextuality through looking at the website and supporting materials mentioned within the sermon. In this way I was better able to gauge not only beliefs, values and actions as articulated by NewSpring leadership, but also saw how such beliefs, values, and actions were evident to those outside of congregational membership. Although the sermons constituted the majority of the analysis, the supporting materials provided further reimbursement of what was articulated in the sermons, and showed how beliefs, values, and actions were articulated differently between internal and external audiences.

Narrative Paradigm

The narrative paradigm asserts that we are all storytelling creatures and understands rhetoric as playing to the tendency for humans to indulge in storytelling. This paradigm “seeks like any other theory of human action, to account for how persons come to believe and behave” (Fisher, 1985, p. 357). Furthermore, this paradigm is not a theory, but rather a more broad understanding of human nature. This paradigm “does not deny the utility of traditional genres... it does insist however that regardless of genre, discourse will always tell a story...” (Fisher, 1989, p. 56). The narrative paradigm notes the need for rhetoric and discourse to maintain a cohesive and believable storyline.

Narrative paradigm describes whether a story is cohesive or free of contradictions as probability, while the logic or believability of the storyline is referred to as fidelity. Both probability and fidelity are important to the creation and staying power of a culture's discourse and rhetoric. Chaland (2003) states, "rhetoric, while not disciplinary, nevertheless 'hangs together' as a domain of knowledge even though it does not cohere conceptually" (p. 119). In other words, rhetoric caters to the fidelity of the cultural narrative. The narrative paradigm informs textual analysis through providing "a philosophical statement that is meant to offer an approach to interpretation and assessment of human communication" (Fisher, 1989, p. 57).

However, the narrative paradigm also has been critiqued as providing "assumptions of similarity" (Lucaites and Condit, 1985, p. 105). The broad understanding of looking into narratives as a means through which to understand texts fails to acknowledge differences in reading three different narrative functions. These three narrative functions include: the poetic function, the dialectical function, and the rhetorical function (Lucaites and Condit, 1985). The poetic function of narrative seeks to express beauty and "operates in a universe of the author's own making" (Lucaites and Condit, 1985, p.92). The dialectic function "aspires to the status of fact. That is, the stories that they relate represent argumentative claims as to the nature of the universe, and they require empirical verifiability" (Lucaites and Condit, 1985, p. 93). In other words, dialectical narratives look to distinguish between what is "true" or "false". The

final function is rhetorical. “A rhetorical narrative is a story that serves as an interpretive lens through which the audience is asked to view and understand the verisimilitude of the proportions and proof before it” (Lucaites and Condit, 1985, p. 94). Rhetorical narratives seek to engage an audience to act based upon enacting a particular judgment. Charland (1987) also provided a critique stating, “narratives suppress the fact that, in a very real sense, no person is the same as he or she was a decade, or a year ago, or indeed yesterday” (p. 139). Narrative paradigm fails to account for changes in community identity, and instead perpetuates doctrine and is slow to change.

The narrative paradigm also fails to take into consideration the importance of context in interpretation. Lucaites and Condit (1985) state “the audience’s assumption is that the speaker has no special self-interest in the narrative, and his or her credibility is at least theoretically presumed” (p. 102). In other words, the speaker of the narrative has assumed credibility in all aspects, despite the context. The narrative paradigm’s biggest weakness is its “focus on form to the exclusion of function” (Lucaites and Condit, 1985, p. 103). Narrative paradigm places a focus on stories as the medium for understanding not only cultures, but also discourses. Furthermore, “to treat all narratives as if they were only poetic is to encourage attention to criteria that are significant for accommodating the poetic form/function interaction but to ignore or underplay other criteria more relevant to other types of narrative form/function interactions” (Lucaites and Condit, 1985, p. 104). In treating all narratives as similar, more detailed analysis

is ignored in favor of preserving a sense of verisimilitude. As a result “studies of narrative must be judged according to how useful they are in enhancing critical awareness of human interaction” (Lucaites and Condit, 1985, p. 105). Rather than broadening the scope of the narrative paradigm as a philosophical statement, the details regarding different forms of narrative should be emphasized and evaluated in scholarly research on this theory.

As storytelling individuals situated within a narrative culture it is impossible to ignore the importance of narratives in shaping community identity. NewSpring Church not only utilizes narratives to build a sense of community and group identity, but also uses narratives as a key concept in teachings. Parables taken from the bible are identified as truth and such stories are crucial to NewSpring’s choice of doxology. Not only is NewSpring’s identity shaped by parables, but the unique narratives created by the community to define and characterize membership also shape it.

Tradition, History and Rhetoricians

Both history and traditions are crucial in understanding a culture through textual analysis. Charland described the difference between history and tradition as, “history is an accumulation of contents. Tradition is repetition. We read histories; tradition speaks to us. We write histories; we perform traditions” (2003, p. 126). In other words, traditions and histories are mutually constitutive; traditions are performances of history while history results from accumulation of traditions and actions. Furthermore, “traditions are prescribed, and their force in

as much as they are traditions is not secured through critical reason, but through a sense of duty or rightness and social sanctions. Indeed, it is this force that gives tradition meaning” (Charland, 2003, p. 122). Traditions inform cultural studies as they uphold a standard of duty or rightness in a community. The performances of traditions through historical norms should be understood as the context through which community ideals and social practice can be analyzed. It is through action and interaction, social relations, persons (with beliefs, attitudes, histories, etc.), the material world, and discourse that social practices culture can be understood (Fairclough, 2003). Through reconciling history, traditions, and social practices a culture can be understood. In the realm of textual analysis, such understandings cannot be understood as isolated texts, but instead must be read as a discussion of identity and definitions.

Constitutive Rhetoric

Charland’s piece on the Quebecois emphasized the use of rhetoric as a means of identity building. Charland (1987) stated “ not only is the character or identity of ‘people’ open to rhetorical revision, but the very boundary of whom the term ‘people’ includes or excludes is rhetorically constructed” (p. 136). In other words, rhetoric shapes both the definition of a particular group as well as the identity of the community. Charland also noted “ this rhetoric paradoxically must constitute the identity ‘Quebecoi’ as it simultaneously presumes it to be pre-given and natural, existing outside of rhetoric...” (1987, p. 137). Interpretation and

boundaries are both discursively created, and therefore rhetoric is evident in identity building as well as constituting definitions.

Despite the apparent freedoms of the reader being in a discussion with the author, constitutive rhetoric still maintains restrictions. Charland (1987) states, “the subject is a position within a text. To be an embodied subject is to experience and act in a textualized world” (p. 142). In other words, whereas the subject holds steadfast to a particular point of view presented in the text, the embodied subject reacts and engages in constitutive rhetoric.

Constitutive rhetoric is powerful through “existing not in the realm of ideas, but in that of material practices. Ideology is material because subjects enact their ideology and reconstitute their material world in its image” (Charland, 1987, p. 144). This rhetoric goes beyond talk to insinuating action. Furthermore, “the constitutive nature of rhetoric establishes the boundary of a subject’s motives and experience, a truly ideological rhetoric must rework or transform subjects” (Charland, 1987, p. 148). This is particularly visible in NewSpring sermons as they constantly seek to rework or transform audience member ideology as well as emphasize to the audience their agency and the importance of spreading the church ideology.

Like Charland’s constitutive rhetoric, NewSpring Church utilized language to not only identify community characteristics, but to also define the community itself. Constitutive rhetoric notes the tautology between definition and identity in which definition of a community is understood through the community’s identity

and vice-versa. Texts build identities, as in the case of the sermons at NewSpring. Through these orations a community is simultaneously defined and characterized. In my analysis I sought to find the nuances in these definitions and characterizations through finding dialectical pairs.

Project Method

In this project I hope to examine the social practices of NewSpring Church textually. Utilizing Fairclough's elements of social practice as well as Charland's understanding of constitutive rhetoric, I will complete a textual analysis of the website NewSpring.cc. The church website provides online videos of entire services from present through January 2010. These videos are available for public consumption and those who traffic to the website.

This project focused on sermons provided online as well as related online materials referenced in the sermon. The sermons examined lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to 70 minutes, averaging out to approximately 60 minutes in the sermons examined. In the sample only nine web pages of material were referenced. Each referenced web page was two to three paragraphs, or approximately 150-400 words. The virtual church allows for more stable analysis and observation than live sermons. The researcher is able to replay a sermon multiple times in order to fully comprehend the sermon message as well as the common traditions and histories shared by the community. The virtual church also prevents me from influencing discourse through my presence or participation. Furthermore, time restraints or issues related to location logistics could be subverted. Finally, the virtual church is Millennial-friendly in that an individual who is curious is able to indulge their curiosity without enduring the extra attention given to new members at the church. Related online materials referenced in the sermon are relevant to the research in that such materials are

part of the context and therefore also a part of discursive practices. The online materials referenced in the sermon are to be read intertextually and therefore, were read in such a manner.

Exclusions for this project included discussion boards and social media. No discussion boards were available on the website, instead discussion took place in social media venues such as Facebook or Twitter. However, this project did not include the discussions on social media. An entire project could be devoted to the impact of discussions, which take place on social media websites. Including such sites would broaden the scope of this project too far for the parameters of the project and decentralize the dialectics from solely NewSpring to including non-members and inviting outside criticism. Social media venues allow anyone, including non-members of NewSpring, to weigh in on discussions, rhetoric, or current events within the church. Therefore, discourse could sway away from thoughts of administration or members towards those who may entirely disagree with church doctrine or values. Consequently, social media venues are unable to be monitored and have the potential to drastically differ from the message on the NewSpring Church website.

This research included online sermons and their corresponding online material for three consecutive sermon series, which occurred between May 20, 2012 and September 9, 2012. The first sermon series, titled “Weird”, includes six sermons between the period of May 20 and July 8. The next sermon series, titled “Let Em Know”, includes two sermons between the period of July 15 and July 22.

The final series, titled “House Party”, includes seven sermons between the period of July 16 and September 9. In total, fifteen sermons were analyzed with the ancillary material.

Analysis focused on the dialectics that define what it means to be a member of NewSpring as seen through sermon message and material. First, I viewed the three sermon series in their entirety on the NewSpring Church website (Newspring.cc). During each sermon, I was on the lookout for themes in terms of what characteristics are highlighted as exemplary of community members. Upon noting a characteristic three different times it was constituted as a theme. After my first viewing of all of the sermons I narrowed the themes based upon which themes were mentioned most often. The five most mentioned dialectical pairs were selected for further investigation and analysis.

Upon my second viewing of the sermon series I further focused upon the five most mentioned dialectical pairs by viewing the sermons again in their entirety with particular emphasis on the chosen dialectical pairs. In this viewing, I also looked into the surrounding website material at the end of viewing each sermon series in order to gain a better understanding of the context provided by the website to the understanding of the church as a whole. Surrounding website material was defined as: 1) materials available on the website directly mentioned in the sermon, 2) materials available on the website which are in conjunction with the sermon theme (e.g. video on marriage if speaking about romantic or committed relationships), 3) copy on web pages which directly states

positions regarding characteristics of membership or sermon themes. In subsequent viewings, I sought to fill gaps in my argument and find exemplary quotes for analysis.

Using Fairclough and Charland's understanding of creating church identity through traditions and history, this project sought to not only understand such identities, but also to note the dialectics present in the NewSpring Church member's identity. This project also looked into meaning as dialogue, as postulated through Hall's circuit of culture. The narrative paradigm informed this research as church identity is created through utilizing stories, both in the biblical text and in the traditions of church members. With a focus on textual analysis, and looking into meaning as a dialogue, this project endeavored to examine the identity and membership of NewSpring's virtual church.

Findings

Through this research I found that the polished, united front presented at NewSpring is in reality balancing upon a constant renegotiation of dialectics. The dialectic I expected to be the most prevalent is that between tradition and twenty-first-century applicability required for Millennial church attendees. This dialectic was most blatantly manifest through the use of multimedia productions in a traditional worship service format during Sunday services at NewSpring. However, such formatting proved to be simply a new wrapping on the old ideas of the church rather than dialectic in itself. I also expected to find traditional dialectics outlined in the Relational Dialectics Theory, however I did not assess such traditional dialectics in detail. My main focus of this project was to look into the dialectic between traditional and new media within NewSpring, and I hoped to find more detailed and specific dialectics throughout the research process in which I could better explain and understand this phenomenon.

Dialectics Defined

Upon review of the three sermon series, five dialectical pairs were persistent. Those dialectics were:

1. Flawed/Perfect
2. Individual accountability/ God's responsibility
3. Church is faith/ Faith is beyond church
4. Take risks/ Accept destiny
5. Your God/ Everyone's God

These dialectics were mentioned at least ten times throughout the fifteen sermons (three sermon series) examined. In the following section each dialectical pair will be better defined through exemplary quotes from the sermons examined. Within each section, I will discuss their significance and implications.

Flawed/Perfect

This dialectic states that members of the congregation are, as humans, flawed. However, they are also created in God's image and therefore have the potential for perfection. Senior Pastor and founder Perry Noble stated "we are never going to figure this out, not in this lifetime" (Noble, 05/20/12). NewSpring members are reminded of their flawed human nature at every service. It is this imperfection, which binds the community together, as those who have sinned in the eyes of God. Noble says, "Sin will always take you further than you intended to go... stay longer than you want to stay... pay more than you wanted to pay" (07/06/12). Furthermore, "If we get lazy and begin to neglect what God has called

us to we will always drift away from God. Always.” (Noble, 07/06/12). Sinning is an inevitable action for congregation members, moving them farther away from the ideal as seen in Jesus. Sinning and living away from God is understood as the default action for the entire human race, not exempting NewSpring members.

On the other hand, “when you met Christ that sin was paid for... grace doesn’t make sense, but it is Jesus’s gift... it is not what you did it is what you are doing” (Noble, 07/06/12). Echoing Weber’s definition of salvation, members of NewSpring, specifically those who are “saved”, are flawed, but through Jesus are given the potential for perfection. Solely through following Jesus can perfection be obtained, “We cannot pursue sin and Jesus... if you are currently pursuing sin you are not pursuing Jesus, it is impossible” (Noble, 07/06/12). This quote sums up the dialectical tension posed in Flawed/Perfect. Durkheim’s findings on the sacred-profane dialectic persist within NewSpring. Members are constantly seeking to move towards the sacred, but struggle to reconcile living within the realm of the profane. NewSpring members are admonished weekly for pursuing sin, yet they also seek to pursue Jesus. Noble noted that following both sin and Jesus simultaneously is impossible, yet members walk that line everyday.

Individual Accountability/ God’s Responsibility

NewSpring members are told simultaneously to make a conscious effort to build a relationship with God and be accountable to God, but are also told to let go and let God take control of their lives. Anderson Campus Pastor Clayton King stated, “sometimes we don’t see God move until we move” (King, 06/10/12).

NewSpring members are charged with taking control of their own life, and consciously pursuing a relationship with God. The concept of ownership contrasted with membership is consistently referred to as a key difference between NewSpring and other churches. Noble sums up this concept by stating, “We don’t have members, we have owners, because members have rights and owners have responsibility” (Noble, 05/20/12). The emphasis on individual responsibility in a relationship with God places agency and responsibility on the individual. In this way, members are asked to take control in their destiny.

On the other hand, members are also told to surrender control of their life. Anderson Youth Pastor Brad Cooper said, “God takes you to the unfamiliar... go with him to uncharted, unfamiliar places... step away and let God take the glory” (Cooper, 07/15/12). Ultimately, NewSpring members are asked to both consciously pursue God and be held accountable for their individual relationship with God while also being asked to let God be accountable for one’s life, advocating complete trust and turnover of control to God.

Church is Faith/Faith is Beyond Church

This dialectic emphasizes both the importance of the church in building faith as well as the necessity to apply faith beyond the church setting. As Riis and Woodhead (2010) emphasized, the power of a religious community is enhanced when it offers emotional resources both inside and outside the community. NewSpring takes on the burden of being emotionally relevant to its members and through evangelism to those outside of the congregation.

Noble states, “the first step we usually take away from God is a step away from the church” (05/20/12). What could be considered NewSpring’s essential motive would be to go above and beyond to announce the important role of the church in growing in faith. Noble acknowledged the current trend among Millennials to consider themselves “spiritual, but not religious”. He stated, ““It is becoming popular to say ‘well, I love Jesus, but I don’t love his church’ that is not an option!” (Noble, 07/29/12). To NewSpring, there is no disconnect between God and the church, instead the church is merely an appendage to God’s message and will. The church is also crucial to faith for its fellowship. Noble articulated one of the core values in stating, “That is why God gave us the church, because we can’t do it alone” (09/02/12). Church is defined by NewSpring as an extension of God himself, and as an important social network for growing in faith.

On the other hand, as individuals are held accountable for their individual relationship with God, members are often told that attendance is not enough. Anderson Campus Pastor Jon McDerment stated, “Just sitting in a pew, sitting in a place and coming is not what Jesus wants” (07/22/12). Noble further elaborated in stating, “You can attend church but not walk with Jesus... if we walk with Jesus we become more passionate, we become more humble, we become more desperate....” (05/20/12). Attending church is not enough to be considered among the faithful. Instead, members are simultaneously adored for attending church and admonished for only attending church and not moving

above and beyond. This alternation of adoration and admonishment provides a complex, but rich understanding of the expectations of church members.

Take Risks/Accept Destiny

NewSpring members are encouraged to be autonomous and take risks in their daily lives while simultaneously accepting and submitting to the destiny laid out by God. Anderson Campus Pastor Clayton King stated, “maybe the reason you do not yet have your story is that you have not yet taken your risk” (06/10/12). In order to live a fulfilled and faithful life members must take a step towards the unknown. It is in stretching through taking risks that faith and a relationship with God can grow. Stated more succinctly, “Why not make a dent before we die?” (King, 06/10/12). NewSpring members are asked to be courageous through sharing faith, and living like Jesus. The entire sermon series “Weird” focuses upon this courage to depart from the norm, and make a dent through taking risks to live a more Godly life.

On the other hand, members are also told to accept and submit to the destiny laid out for them by God. As Ammerman (2003) noted, identities need to be understood as structured by rules and schemas. In a similar way, NewSpring encourages members to understand their destiny through the schema of their divine destiny. Noble stated, “God really does want more than what you are currently experiencing... he custom designed you and me with a potential in mind” (07/08/12). Members are told that God has laid out a destiny, which leads to their best life potential, and to accept this destiny will result in a fulfilling life.

Anderson Campus Pastor McDerment further elaborated this dialectic in stating, “surrender to the necessity of change” (07/22/12). NewSpring members are asked not only to accept destiny, but also to surrender to it and change their lifestyle to fit with the divine plan. While NewSpring members are reminded of their autonomy, they are also reminded of their dependence and submission to God.

Individual God/ Everyone’s God

This dialectic focuses on the assertion that God is focused on the member as an individual, and that God focuses on everyone whether regardless of whether others believe or do not believe. Anderson Campus Youth Pastor Brad Cooper stated, “He is a pursuant, tenacious, fierce, ferocious, come after you Jesus... he does not sit on the sidelines... Jesus goes after the one” (07/15/12). NewSpring is adamant that God focuses upon members individually. Members are expected to have an individual relationship with God, in which both the member and Jesus pursue each other intentionally and fiercely. King stated, “We forget to factor God into the equation... when we forget to factor God into risk, God does not forget about you” (06/10/12). God is meant to be a large part of a member’s life, and God is depicted as personal, caring and interested in the individual.

On the other hand, NewSpring members are also frequently told that God wants everyone to be saved. Noble stated, “a person connected with Christ will always have a heart for people far from him” (08/19/12). Members are asked to

bring in more people to share the church's message. Members are asked to reach out to others and repeatedly told that God cares for the individual as well as the multitudes through the NewSpring core value that "found people find people" (NewSpring, 2012). McDerment stated, "found people, find people... everything in growing as a believer begins and ends with evangelism" (07/22/12). Although members are encouraged to individualize God they are simultaneously asked to mainstream God to reach out to those outside the church. NewSpring leadership seeks to mobilize and streamline Nielsen's (1999) areas of the soul of the collectivity, the ideals displayed by the community, with the consciousness commune, the actions and beliefs enacted by the community. By preaching evangelism as key to member identity, NewSpring seeks to draw upon both the soul of the collectivity and the consciousness commune in order to make their God everyone's God.

Dialectic Implications

Flawed/Perfect

Flawed.

NewSpring members are understood as being inherently flawed human beings. In casting members as flawed, members are considered to have a fundamental inadequacy. NewSpring members are working with a handicap and are ultimately being set up for failure. A member's flawed nature is understood as a default that members must consciously work against. As Noble stated, "If we get lazy and begin to neglect what God has called us to we will always drift away from God. Always." (07/06/12). Members' fundamental inadequacy occurs when members are not consciously seeking perfection. However, this failure becomes the common trait on which the community is built.

The NewSpring community then creates a goal to consciously rebuke their fundamental flaws. In this way, members are called to action and attention in consciously seeking perfection. Member's flawed nature is understood as a cycle which is often underestimated, "Sin will always take you further than you intended to go... stay longer than you want to stay... pay more than you wanted to pay" (Noble, 07/06/12). Sin and the flawed nature of humans is a constant conversation at NewSpring. Because humans often default towards sin and their inherently flawed nature, members are asked to transcend humanity and move closer towards divinity.

Perfect.

The perfection dialectic is tied to the concept of grace. Grace is the free gift from Jesus, upon his crucifixion and resurrection, of forgiveness and a new slate. Grace is divine aid as well as a means for Christians to achieve perfection. This characteristic also provides a hope for the perfection potential. Through faith and engagement in church activities members are able to follow Jesus. In following Jesus members start to imitate Jesus. In imitating Jesus members move away from sin and have the ability to overcome their fundamental inadequacy. It is only through the concept of grace, advocated within the church that members can become perfect in the eyes of God.

Flawed/Perfect.

The Flawed/Perfect dialectic shows a member's current state rather than their potential future. Members are presently flawed, but as a church member they have the potential to overcome their flaws and move closer towards the perfection ideal. The church could also be understood as a Flawed/Perfect filter. Members come in as sinners, but it is through filtration into the church, members can follow Jesus and overcome flaws. NewSpring filtration can include a number of processes ranging from education, to baptism, to participation as a volunteer. Through this process members are consciously rebuking their flawed nature to move towards perfection. The church then becomes the community of likeminded and similarly situated individuals looking to improve themselves in the eyes of God.

NewSpring could also be understood as a mediator. The church is believed to be an extension of God itself. Therefore the church can be seen as a way in which a member can achieve their perfect potential. The church mediates the message between a perfect God and a flawed church membership through scripture and conversation (through prayer). In this way, the church is the no-man's-land between flawed and perfection, a place where a standstill is acknowledged but moves towards change and action in achieving perfection.

The Flawed/Perfect dialectic is a statement regarding the church's vision. While in the past and present NewSpring membership and leadership are flawed, the future holds the potential to move closer to perfection. The church's vision is to reduce the polarity of this dialectic and instead close the gap on the inherently flawed nature of humans and the potential for perfection members have in the church. This dialectic also highlights a NewSpring core value that growing people change. Members grow through the church in discussions, education, as well as adopting church ideas and values. As an appendage to God, becoming part of the church is the first step towards following Jesus and, therefore the first step towards achieving one's potential for perfection.

Individual Accountability/ God's Responsibility

Individual Accountability.

Individual accountability implies individual agency. Therefore, members of NewSpring are told they have the ability to change or improve situations. On the other hand, members are also held responsible for contributing to a negative

situation. Individuals are given autonomy and control in their personal lives, particularly in their relationship with God.

Members are accountable for answering to God for both their sins and good deeds. God is portrayed as passive, staying away in individual affairs until actively pursued by the individual. Therefore, the member must actively engage and encounter God. Noble stated, “Until we deal with what God is dealing us we will not move forward in our walk with Christ” (09/02/12). Dealing with what God deals members can occur through becoming active in church activities, becoming more educated in Jesus’s teachings in the Bible, or through keeping in conversation with God through prayer. Members must initiate a two-way relationship with God, both pursuing God’s aid in decisions as well as listening to God’s wisdom and requests.

In maintaining individual autonomy and accountability, God is also cast as a judge, with the church member as the accused. With accountability comes judgment for their actions, aligning closely with a distant, temperamental God portrayed in the Old Testament. Members must answer for both their sins and good deeds, and upon answering they are absolved of responsibility through grace. Then, the sins as well as the good deeds become God’s responsibility.

God’s Responsibility.

Members are asked to surrender control to God, in spite of their individual agency. Campus pastor Clayton King stated, “Our job is to obey, God is in charge of the outcome” (06/10/12). Members are told not to worry, but instead to

let God worry. Furthermore, agency is removed from the individual and given to God. Members are instead asked to relinquish control to God, following God's advice as spoken through the church mediator, knowing that God will provide.

In passing responsibility, worry, and agency to God, God is portrayed as a caregiver who will provide for an individual's needs. God is the means through which families are fed, and members are safe and satisfied. The only prerequisite to become taken care of by God is to be "saved", through believing that Jesus is the son of God and Christ died for the sins of all. In becoming "saved" an individual is able to both count on God as the decision-maker in their lives, but also as their caregiver. Members are asked to relinquish control of their lives in order to gain membership into the care of God.

Church is Faith/ Faith is Beyond church

Church is Faith.

NewSpring directly refutes the common Millennial trait of claiming they are "spiritual but not religious". NewSpring positions organized religion through the church as the ultimate expression of spirituality. Noble stated "It is becoming popular to say 'well, I love Jesus, but I don't love his church' that is not an option!" (07/29/12). The un-churched are not true believers as being a part of a church, such as NewSpring, is crucial to faith.

NewSpring goes even farther in the assertion that church is faith by burdening the church with a duty to make God's will manifest. The church then becomes the ultimate authority in deciphering God's will. Consequently, through

positioning the church, as God's will manifest, dissention or discussion becomes blasphemy, resulting in a simultaneous strengthening of church ethos and weakening of opposing ideas. However, the church is made of humans and therefore fallible, but the disconnect between human fallibility and disconnect from the divine is ignored by the church hierarchy.

As the church becomes God's will manifest, church becomes the paradigm under which faith is molded rather than faith becoming the paradigm under which the church is molded. Faith occurs within the church, and the church construct becomes a mold for individuals to grow in faith within the confines of the church. The all-encompassing nature of the church also becomes an argument for evangelism in that in order for one to be "saved" they must be a part of the church. Members are asked to bring in others to the church paradigm in order to develop their faith. Without the construct of the church, faith is unable to be fully realized.

Church is faith also highlights a core value of NewSpring that "we can't do it alone". Noble stated "That is why God gave us the church, because we can't do it alone" (09/02/12). A crucial part of church is the group support provided by like-minded individuals. In this way, faith is understood as fellowship and group support is needed. In the NewSpring community a sense of fellowship and shared goals emerges, seeking to overcome individual flaws as well as embolden the church through having the church define faith.

NewSpring has the potential to alienate Millennials and non-members. Emphasizing that church is faith elevates the church opinion to becoming God's will incarnate. Therefore, a sense of ethnocentrism becomes prevalent within the church. NewSpring members see NewSpring as the ultimate church and superior to not only other religious beliefs, but other churches as well. Those who are outside of the church are deemed not true believers, alienating Millennials who still consider themselves spiritual, but are not active in a particular church. The emphasis on church as faith also undermines emphasis on an individual relationship with God, as an individual relationship is no longer valid without the backing of a church community.

Faith is Beyond Church.

Faith being beyond church encourages an individual relationship with God. In line with the individual responsibility characteristics, an individual is asked to take initiative to grow outside the church. Variety is encouraged as a way to further an individual relationship with God. Through worship, prayer, volunteering and other outlets, members are encouraged to individually pursue ways to grow in a two-way relationship with God.

Furthermore, evangelism is emphasized as a way to bring faith beyond the physical confines of the church. Members are called to action to recruit those outside of the church and those who are "in need of being saved". Evangelism brings faith beyond the church through asking members to seek those unlike themselves and move them towards the church. Although members are asked to

move their faith beyond the church, through evangelism they are also asked to move back towards the church paradigm in order to encourage faith within the mold of NewSpring.

Church is Faith/ Faith is Beyond Church.

NewSpring members are adored for attending church. Through church attendance members are told they are carrying out God's will. Furthermore, they are understood as stellar members of faith, and true believers due to their attendance. However, on the other hand members are also admonished for not going above and beyond church attendance. It is understood that anyone can attend a church service, but few exceed expectations. Members can go above and beyond church attendance through strengthening their individual relationship and/or becoming evangelists for NewSpring. However, it becomes a requirement for members to act beyond church attendance. Consequently, over-achievers become the norm and church members are continually asked to stretch and incorporate church values, ideals and actions into their daily lives.

In simultaneously asserting that church is faith and faith is beyond church, evangelism becomes necessary. Evangelism brings others to the church paradigm. In this way, the church becomes a net, gathering those who are scattered and bringing them together to mold individual faith. Church becomes the first step in working towards faith and faith is incomplete without the church.

Take Risks/ Accept Destiny

Take Risks.

NewSpring members are expected to step out of their comfort zone. In moving towards the unknown, Campus Pastor Clayton King stated, “normal people play it safe, weird people risk it all” (06/10/12). The necessity of taking risk is the focus of the entire “weird” sermon series. Members are asked to depart from the norm of sin, staying away from God, divorce and other negative statistics to become exemplary in the eyes of God. For members, risk equals courage. Through being weird, members are told they will take on a moral leadership role. Through courageous acts of risk, individuals can become more faithful and have a closer relationship with God.

Accept Destiny.

Members are told that they have potential laid out by God that they must fulfill. It is only through fulfilling their potential that members can move towards perfection. God has an individual plan laid out from birth for each individual, and through accepting destiny members can have a fulfilling life. Noble stated, God really does want more than what you are currently experiencing... he custom designed you and me with a potential in mind” (07/08/12). Through accepting individual destiny, NewSpring members can exceed their own expectations and live up to the high hopes God has for them.

In accepting destiny members are asked to change and grow in order to better fulfill their potential. NewSpring’s core value, that growing people change,

suggest that while members need to accept destiny they also need to change and grow in order to fulfill that potential. In this way, taking risks in order to grow becomes the first step in moving towards a fulfilling destiny as laid out by God. Campus pastor Jon McDerment said, “surrender to the necessity of change” (07/22/12). NewSpring members are asked to accept destiny rather than fight it through surrendering to God. It is only through removing individual agency, pride, and goals that God’s destiny for the individual can be fulfilled.

Take Risks/ Accept Destiny.

With this dialectic church becomes both an outlet to take risks as well as a facilitator in fulfilling individual destiny. The church becomes an outlet to take risks in that they provide a variety of ways to become involved, as well as express opinions in existential discussion. Within NewSpring membership, individuals can utilize bible studies, groups, and volunteer. Through reaching out to other members and making their individual presence known, members can take a risk and step outside of their comfort zone. Members can also stretch themselves through mission trips or outreach taken by the church. Through volunteering outside of church or taking on a project in an impoverished area, members can take a risk in evangelizing to those outside of the church through lending a helping hand as well as announcing their beliefs and attempting to bring in others outside the church. NewSpring gives members the chance to live a “weird” life in God both within church membership and through outreach.

The church also becomes a facilitator in finding and fulfilling individual destiny. The church is a facilitator in an individual's relationship with God by calling individuals to be "saved" and begin a relationship with Christ. Through baptism in the church, an individual can become legitimized as a member of God's family. This facilitates individual relationships with God by legitimizing members through baptism, and asking individuals to recommit to God weekly with the alter call at the end of the service. The church also facilitates individual destiny by offering many opportunities for serving God through utilizing individual talents. Members are able to aid the church, and by extension God, in a variety of capacities from helping with children's education, leading adult education, providing musical talents in the band, or even aiding in traffic congestion on Sundays. No task is given more weight and each aspect of volunteering is praised as a way for individuals to use their individual talents for the glory of God. In utilizing individual talents members fulfill their destiny, and do so in order to aid the church. Finally, the church also acts as a facilitator through the messages within the sermon. Sermons often claim to be a sign to act from God. Sermons also are the means to understanding God's will and individual destiny. In listening to the weekly message members allow the church to be a facilitator of God's will, ultimately shaping a members' understanding of their individual destiny.

Individual God/ Everyone's God

Individual God.

In making God individualized, the individual becomes valued. In positioning God as the pursuer members are told they are worth pursuing. Anderson Campus Pastor Brad Cooper said, "He is a pursuant, tenacious, fierce, ferocious, come after you Jesus... he does not sit on the sidelines.... Jesus goes after the one" (07/15/12). By individualizing God, God becomes invested in individual needs such as health and wellbeing. This image encourages members to be their best and be aware of the value of their individual contributions both inside and outside the church.

Conversely, God does not forget about the individual so individuals are advised to not forget about God. Campus Pastor Clayton King stated, "We forget to factor God into the equation... when we forget to factor God into risk, God does not forget about you" (06/10/12). God is always remembering the individual member, therefore members are asked to reciprocate. The two-way relationship members are asked to maintain with God focuses on quality over quantity. As God places a high premium on a relationship with the individual, individuals are asked to place a high premium on their relationship with God.

Everyone's God.

In depersonalizing God, God becomes meant for the masses. Through mainstreaming, God becomes all things to everyone, the Alpha and the Omega, beginning and end. This depersonalization is what legitimates the dialectics

within the church. If God, and consequently God's appendage, the church, is seeking to be everything to everyone concessions must be made and the vision must be of a wide scope. Consequently, the church, such as NewSpring, must encompass oppositional characteristics, values, and opinions in order to become utilitarian, embodying the greatest appeal for the greatest number of people.

Through positioning God as everyone's, evangelism can also be legitimized. Noble stated, "a person connected with Christ will always have a heart for people far from him" (08/19/12). If God is meant for everyone members have not only the option, but also the requirement to spread the word to everyone. NewSpring's core value that "found people find people" emphasizes evangelism and growing the church. NewSpring members are asked to share their God with everyone, as God can be all things to all people. The all-consuming nature of God further emphasizes the fact that those outside the church are lost and in need of direction in their faith.

Individual God/ Everyone's God.

This dialectic simultaneously personalizes and depersonalizes God. God becomes all things to all people, while God is also depicted as being interested in the health and wellbeing of the individual member. The irony then becomes that the individual is asked to join the masses in following Jesus. In this way, the individual becomes devalued and quantity becomes more important than quality in terms of relationships with God.

Through this dialectic the church becomes a means to make God everyone's. The church provides structure to the Christian message, and is meant to be the tangible result of God's will. In attracting individuals through message, promotion, and worship the church seeks to make God come alive and engage the interest of the individual. Members of NewSpring engage in a sense of fellowship, and a sense of being a part of everyone, through the church. The numbers of NewSpring are staggering, and simply being a part of the crowd enforces the idea that God is for everyone.

The church also serves as a reminder of the value of an individual in the eyes of God. Members are encouraged to personalize their church experience through engaging in bible study, volunteering, member support groups and other outlets for involvement at NewSpring. Sermons often showcase stories of individuals being "saved", providing a personalized and humanized side to being a member of the masses in attendance. NewSpring regularly calls upon the individual member whether through volunteering within the church or reaching out and evangelizing to those outside the church. The individual is showcased as having value to God, and therefore having value in the church as well. This sense of individual impact encourages members to remain active in the church and to push themselves towards a stronger relationship with both God and the church.

NewSpring: The Millennial Church?

Millennial Religion

In researching the dialectics provided, the question remains whether such dialectics reflect the beginning of an evolution towards a truly unique kind of Millennial spirituality or whether NewSpring simply embraces new media methods, but fails to evolve for the upcoming generation of churchgoers. Pew Institute's research of social trends show that religion is less important to Millennials than it is to Generation X (2010). Whereas 40% of Millennials say religion is important in their life, 48% of Generation Xers say religion is important to them. This statistic reflects that the church has less influence on the ideals and lifestyle of Millennials.

For this generation, many influences may be drawn upon, including: peer group, social media, popular culture as well as family upbringing. Peer groups provide a measure from which to draw personal fulfillment. Through social media, Millennials are able to have a more in-depth understanding of how they compare to their peers in terms of career, opportunities, and relationships. Psychologist Peg Streep called this comparison the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), where Millennials are more likely to change their minds or their careers for fear of missing out on personal fulfillment, missing a career niche, or even being unable to find a partner (Streep, 2012). Streep (2012) notes that Millennials would rather be unemployed rather than trudge through a job in which they find no fulfillment. I

These influences, as well as others, emphasize the globalized, public forum, which is natural to this generation. No longer are localized, singular knowledge provided by the church sufficient for these individuals. Instead, Millennials draw upon a variety of factors, with religion being one of the multiple factors upon which opinions, ideals, and experiences can be filtered.

Furthermore, “living a religious life” tied with “having a high paying career” for fifth in the priorities of Millennials (Pew Research Institute, 2010). “Living a religious life” was below priorities such as “being a good parent”, “having a successful marriage”, “helping others in need” and “owning a home” (Pew Research Institute, 2010). These higher ranked factors can be interpreted both optimistically and pessimistically. The higher factors of “being a good parent”, “having a successful marriage” and “helping others in need” are common topics of discussion at NewSpring Church. In this way, the church is still relevant in that it discusses topics important to this upcoming generation. However, pessimistically, it can be seen that Millennials now separate values once fulfilled by the church to being fulfilled outside of the church. Thus rendering NewSpring as a section of one’s life rather than a paradigm under which to lead a fulfilling life.

Fulfillment Outside the Church

The Millennial generation looks to methods outside of the church for fulfillment. Areas typically believed to fall within the religious realm are now self-sufficient. These areas include marriage, parenthood, and helping others in need.

Marriage as a self-sufficient category outside of the church could be due to the upbringing of this generation. Six out of ten members of this generation were brought up by a single parent (Pew Research Institute, 2010). Whereas older generations have looked to the church in maintaining a successful marriage, Millennials are seeking outside advice in hopes of succeeding where their parent's marriages failed.

Helping others in need is also an interesting value, as this is a core tenant of evangelism. Churches, such as NewSpring, emphasize that evangelism is the greatest form of helping those in need as it provides a direct relationship between God and those in need of aid. However, Millennials placed helping others above living a spiritual life. Many Millennials seek out ways in which to make a positive social change and cure social injustices. Joshua Stanton, Associate Director for the Center for Global Judaism, and a Millennial himself, emphasized:

“We are a generation overwhelmingly dedicated to social justice. Where there is injustice, we want to respond, whether in-person, online, or through power of the purse -- even when it is that of a teenager who gives what little he can. This impulse can be religiously motivated, much as it has been for me. Yet for many, it is rooted in a fundamental belief in the goodness of people.” (Stanton, 2013).

Therefore, a connotative difference exists between the two values of helping others and living a religious life. Consequently, religion is no longer a lifestyle paradigm, which includes core values, but instead religion is a separate category, another component one must balance in everyday life.

Despite Millennial utilization of multiple sources for defining and achieving their important values, this group is “no less convinced than their elders that there are absolute standards of right and wrong” (Pew Research Center, “Millennial: Full report”, p. 86). These absolute standards of right and wrong are more progressive and liberal than those of earlier generations. For example, Millennials do not see the act of premarital sex as morally disdainful. Barton Gingrich, a Research Assistant at the Institute on Religion and Democracy, noted that premarital sex has become “the Millennial generation’s acceptable sin” (Gingrich, 2013). Millennials seek to keep church and morality out of their sex lives, with 80 percent of unmarried Millennials engaging in premarital sex (Gingrich, 2013). This generation looks to religion as a means through which to pursue social justice, provide to outcasts, and provide an understanding to existential questions rather than to guide their sense of sexual morality. Like many conservative churches, NewSpring refutes the progressive, liberal values common among Millennials, instead emphasizing “traditional” values and embracing the religious community norm of guiding members in morality and action.

Consequently, NewSpring, in order to become the Millennial church, needs to accept its insignificance. Rather than claiming to be everything and claiming to be of central significance in members’ lives, NewSpring should move towards fulfilling a niche. In focusing their mission, this church can specialize and embrace its new position as a category rather than a paradigm. NewSpring

needs to more fully embrace the “faith is beyond church” dialectic by continuing to offer suggestions for individual spiritual growth as well as accepting a variety of backgrounds and commitment levels of church members. This church must realize its place as a resource rather than legislation for how members live their lives on a daily basis. Without embracing spirituality as outside of the church, NewSpring falls short of constituting a new Millennial religion.

Regaining Member Loyalty

One in four Millennials do not have any religious affiliation (Pew Research Institute, 2010). This is compared to 19% of Gen Xers who do not have any religious affiliation (Pew Research Institute, 2010). However, of the individuals who do have an affiliation, 68 percent consider themselves a part of the Christian tradition. NewSpring Church’s lack of denomination, as Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Catholic or any other Christian denomination is a nod to this trend. Rather than alienate those who seek a particular denomination, as simply a church, it embraces the Millennial trend of focusing on principles rather than partitions. Simply labeling itself NewSpring Church, this community, through the process of naming, seeks to be inclusive and embrace those who do not affiliate with a particular faith.

Despite this diplomacy, NewSpring faces an uphill battle. Many Millennials are calling themselves “spiritual but not religious”, which emphasizes the distinction this generation has made between spiritual values and the politics of religious organizations. 18 percent of Millennials were raised in a religious

tradition, but now consider themselves unaffiliated, compared to only 13 percent of Generation Xers (Pew Research Institute, 2010, p. 88). However, this generation prays just as much as previous generations, and those who do claim membership of a religion affiliate just as strongly with their church community as Generation Xers, claiming they are “strong members of faith” (Pew Research Institute, 2010, p. 89). Therefore, Millennials are more wary of committing to a particular religion, but once committed are equally engrossed in the religious community as older generations.

NewSpring already draws upon their base of “strong members of faith” by embracing their zeal and providing outlets for members to be involved in the community. However, in order to evolve to a representative Millennial church, this community must be more accepting of those who are less likely to commit to the church. Given the transient nature of those who claim to be “spiritual but not religious” NewSpring must be more accepting of one-time guests, repeat guests, and those “courting” the church. Noble called out the latter group for not doing enough rather than embracing their repeated interest in the church. NewSpring is alienating those who are “spiritual but not religious” by calling them out on not doing enough. Instead, this church needs to embrace such guests and not push for greater commitment until the prospective member is comfortable and thoroughly prepared for the responsibility of membership at NewSpring.

Church loyalty is low among most Millennials. Many members of this generation go “church shopping” to a different community every week prior to

committing to a community. Furthermore, the willingness of this generation to change religious affiliations suggests there is also a willingness to change church communities. Rather than the individual fitting themselves to the community, the burden of change falls upon the religious community to fulfill the needs of the individual, constituting a Millennial religion. The transient nature of the “spiritual but not religious” should be embraced by NewSpring as a group to which they must narrow their focus to fulfill a niche in the Millennial’s life. In accepting “church shopping”, members changing communities, and temporary membership, NewSpring could fully embrace the willingness of Millennials to research, and seek out a church, which fulfills their personal needs. Through being more accepting of those with lower commitment to the church NewSpring can enlist Millennials to ensure the legacy of the community.

Adapting Theology to Lifestyle

For the Millennial generation, belief in God is no longer taken for granted. Only 64 percent of Millennials stated that they were absolutely certain of God’s existence as compared to 73% of Generation Xers (Pew Research Institute, 2010, p. 96). Consequently, NewSpring should not assume that faith in God is commonplace in this upcoming generation. This information muffles the influence of the “Your God/ Everyone’s God” dialectic present at NewSpring. To a significant number of Millennials, God remains abstract and fabled. Therefore, NewSpring needs to further argue for the reality of God. Current sermons assume a belief in God rather than seeking to emphasize the reality of God.

NewSpring should further ground the sermon message in the daily life experienced by Millennials. Through focusing on daily life and important values in equal doses as theology, the church could better constitute the Millennial religion.

Furthermore, the dialectic of God's responsibility/ Individual responsibility is muted with a lack of absolute belief in God. No longer can God be trusted to carry any burden, therefore self-sufficiency becomes key to this generation. With no absolute certainty of belief in God, all responsibility falls on the individual. Consequently, NewSpring needs to understand the need for self-sufficiency. In the current church community, Members are chastised for not putting absolute trust in God, but also chastised for not doing enough individually. This church needs to provide tangible outlets for giving back which teach self-sufficiency rather than dependency on generosity. Through emphasizing the individual responsibility dialectic and de-emphasizing the God's responsibility dialectic NewSpring can gain rapport and support from Millennials.

Although this statistic that absolute belief in God is down could be the beginning of the death of the church, it also provides an opportunity for reform and perhaps even reinvention. Rather than focusing on theology, NewSpring should focus on lifestyle choices and values. Such lifestyles and values are commonalities between Millennials and the current church structure. Ultimately, Millennials still value lifestyles that in the past have been under the church paradigm, such as family, marriage, and helping others. The discussion of theology, ontology, and epistemology are ultimately driving Millennials away from

the church. Instead NewSpring should go back to basics and draw upon the values this generation appreciates most.

Bible as Literal Word of God?

“Only 27 percent of Millennials believe that the Bible is the literal word of God as compared to 28 percent of Generation Xers and 33 percent of baby boomers at the same age” (Pew Research Institute, 2010, p. 98). This generation shows the new state of ambiguity as natural and fallibility as inevitable.

Consequently, NewSpring must move away from scripture-centered lessons about God towards broad, overarching characteristics. Current sermons work lessons or messages around biblical scripture. Furthermore, scripture is described as the literal word of God. In order to better engage with the Millennial, the Bible should be used as a supplement rather than the focus of sermons. Focus should be on lifestyles rather than theology and on the Bible as a parable rather than literal word of God.

Similar Beliefs in Afterlife

Millennials share similar beliefs in heaven, hell and an afterlife to other generations (Pew Research Institute, 2010). This generation is assured that life is not the end point and that more lies beyond death. This knowledge provides optimism that religious communities can still fill the niche of a support group with fellow believers. NewSpring is well adapted to this belief and uses the shared understanding of an afterlife as the core connection between members. This

church should continue to emphasize this commonality when constituting a Millennial religion in order to draw in Millennials.

Acknowledging Flaws: The Human Church

Twenty-nine percent of Millennials believe their religion is the one true path to salvation as compared to 23 percent of older generations (Pew Research Institute, 2010, p. 101). However, Millennials are more flexible in their interpretation of their religion. Seventy-four percent of Millennials say there is more than one way to interpret the teachings of their religion as opposed to only 67 percent of those ages 30 and over (Pew Research Institute, 2010, p. 101). This flexible interpretation can be associated with the finding that there is less literal belief in the Bible. Like biblical interpretation, religious interpretation is now understood as a human construct rather than divine will.

Consequently, NewSpring needs to embrace the understanding of church fallibility. In understanding that interpretation is flexible, NewSpring also shows understanding of its own flaws as a community. This church must be willing to amend and adapt interpretation of the Bible and/or the lifestyle promoted by the church. In doing so Millennials will further embrace NewSpring and better relate to the church more humane than divine.

Outside Church Walls

Millennials are similar to Generation Xers and Baby Boomers in their agreement of separation between church and state. In this way, it is equally difficult to convince Millennial to take risks, evangelize, and bring God out of

Sunday practices into the rest of the week as their older counterparts. Therefore, the dialectical focus of “God is church/God is beyond church” dialectic is still relevant. At NewSpring, externalization of one’s faith is an accepted and common practice. However, internalization is more accepted than externalization in western societies (Riis and Woodhead, 2010). NewSpring should not only accept externalization as successful evangelization, but should also consider the effects of internalization and personalization of the message. Externalization is just as unlikely as in the past to occur outside of church, so instead of pushing against western cultural practices, NewSpring should embrace the internalization process as an equally important step in the membership/ownership process.

Optimism

One of the hallmarks of this generation is the optimism they possess. Although they are the most educated generation in history, Millennials have struggled to gain employment (Jayson, 2010). Despite the staggering statistic that 37 percent of Millennials are unemployed or out of the workforce, nine in ten believe they have enough money or will meet their long-term financial goals (Pew Research Institute, 2010). The resilience and tenacity of this generation is admirable. Furthermore, this knowledge reflects upon the individual accountability/ God’s responsibility dialectic. Millennials do not blame themselves for their short fallings, but instead look to the current economic situation or other outside factors as to why they are unemployed. Therefore, less individual accountability is placed on the Millennial. Contrary to the lack of absolute belief in

God, there is an undercurrent of the idea that God will provide with their optimism for meeting long-term financial goals. While Millennials crave individual responsibility, with their high unemployment rate the reality is that they depend more upon God to provide than they care to admit.

NewSpring: The Millennial Church or New Wrapping on Old Ideas?

As outlined above, NewSpring has many adjustments and reformations to make in order to better align with Millennial values. NewSpring provides a new wrapping on old ideas, as the dialectics displayed within this community are more in line with older generations. In order to better reflect this up and coming generation NewSpring needs to embrace ambiguity and flexibility of interpretation in order to constitute a Millennial religion. Without such changes, the church could become less relevant and eventually fade from the cultural landscape. Furthermore, this community needs to understand the transient nature of spirituality as opposed to the rigid tradition of religion. Instead of claiming divine will, NewSpring needs to emphasize its humanity as a community. Finally, NewSpring should focus on lifestyle rather than theology. Although this generation believes in the afterlife, heaven, and hell, belief in God and literal interpretation of the Bible are not commonly believed. In order to adapt to this new generation, NewSpring should focus on living a good life rather than living a godly life. Although these are commonly aligned, NewSpring should rename and use more inclusive language to draw in Millennials.

The technologically savvy and social media methods are well adapted to this upcoming generation. The virtual church, through online broadcasting of services, allows individuals to participate with little commitment. These sermons are easily accessible, and all in one place. Furthermore, the website does

provide a strong sense of community and engages the user towards participation either in a service or at the church.

However, the ideals presented through the dialectics observed within this technologically savvy and easily accessible environment show that the message of NewSpring has still not yet adapted to Millennial ideals, ultimately falling short of constituting a Millennial religion. Although NewSpring touts change as a core value, in reality the ideas of NewSpring have not changed and continue to align more closely with older generations. Therefore, NewSpring needs to change ideas, philosophies, and include more flexible interpretations in order to gain followers outside of those Millennials who consider themselves to be of a “strong” faith. Adaption to this new generation is key for NewSpring as well as other churches in order to continue its livelihood and relevance for future generations.

Millennial-Church Tautology

Millennial and the church continue to further define and change one another. As seen in sociological studies of religion, the church affects the context as the context affects the church (Walker, 2004; Weber, 1922; Bellah, 1970). The church has profoundly affected Millennials in that they still believe in the afterlife. Weber (1922) noted that one of the key promises made to religious followers is a promise in the afterlife. This still remains a core component of the church, and still is reflected in the upcoming generation of Millennials.

Furthermore, a staunch belief that their religion is the correct religion, is reminiscent of the semi-divine status the church has presented since its

inception. The conviction of churches, such as NewSpring, in the correctness of their beliefs continues to be prevalent in the religiosity/spirituality of Millennials. This strength in convictions is also evident in the Millennial belief of absolute right and wrong. Although interpretations may be becoming more flexible, strength of convictions stems from the character of the church to Millennials.

The optimistic outlook of Millennials shows a strong belief in fate and understanding that God will provide. Although faced with hardship in the “great recession” unemployment, optimism remains among this generation that they will have enough money and/or will meet their financial goals. This optimism about the future is similar to the optimism of the church about the afterlife. Like the belief that better days lie ahead in heaven, Millennials believe that better days lie ahead beyond their unemployment. The optimism and tenacity of this belief reflects the church’s optimism as well.

Furthermore, values traditionally focused upon under the church paradigm remain important values for Millennials, despite their lower church participation. Areas such as marriage, family and helping others are the top three ranked values for this generation. More so than other generations, Millennials are seeking aid in these areas outside the church, which has dethroned the church as a central part of marriage and parenthood. Similarly, helping others remains of high importance, however not necessarily under the emphasis of evangelism. Instead, helping others has evolved into simply a tenant of good citizenship and humanism. These values, which are often fostered in the church, are still relevant

and important to Millennials. The fact that these values remain important emphasizes the impact churches, such as NewSpring, have had and continue to have in the lives of Millennials.

As a result of this upcoming generation, flexibility in biblical interpretation and community beliefs has become more widespread. For instance, in 2009, the ELCA Lutheran Church enacted a movement to allow partnered gay clergy into their communities. Through flexible and adapted interpretation of the Bible, this community has maintained their religious convictions while allowing for changes and embracing the changing public opinion on homosexuality.

Furthermore, the prevalence of discussion groups on Bible applicability and Bible questioning groups continues to grow. Groups such as ALPHA, as well as group Bible studies, which seek to emphasize the changing interpretations of the Bible have become prevalent in churches throughout the United States. Single parent groups are also becoming popular in many churches, in which divorced and/or widowed individuals are included in the church. Whereas literal interpretation of the Bible would ostracize divorced single parents, interpretation has become more flexible in order to include this group and provide support within the church community.

Additionally, there is now a burden of proof on the church to prove its continued applicability rather than on the individual church member. In other words, members are no longer shaping themselves to fit within the church community, but the church is proving its relevance and applicability in the

member's life. Whereas previously members were asked to fit the church mold, now the burden is on the church to prove it fits within the individual's life.

Millennials have also affected the church by bringing a focus on humanism and utilitarianism to the church. Through maintaining rigid standards of good and bad, the church seeks to provide the greatest good to the greatest number of people. Many churches have adapted to Millennial values by placing living a good life and helping others as central foci in their community values and actions. Church communities are focusing less on living biblically, and more on living well and living fulfilling lives.

The decline in denominational churches is in response to the lack of interest in church affiliation for Millennials. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research (2012) noted that "mainline protestant", once the most prominent denomination, has steadily declined over the past decade. Denominations have failed to provide satisfaction to this generation. As a result, churches like NewSpring have refrained from denominational membership in hopes of attracting a younger audience more focused on principles and message than affiliation or denominational membership.

This upcoming generation has already forced the church to embrace its humanity, including fallibility, but the full effects of this generation on religious communities are still to be seen. Millennials are the youngest defined generation and as such their impact on religious practices, spirituality, and the church are still not fully developed. Changes will continue to appear as this generation

matures to become policy makers, thought leaders, and, with their own children, nurture a new generation.

Limitations

Although this research has provided an in-depth look into the community characteristics of NewSpring, the findings should not be applied to the broader category of Christian churches. The dialectics found in this research could provide a starting point for future researchers, but should not be considered inclusive of other church communities.

The geographical location of this community should also be considered. South Carolina culture is more open in individual pronouncement of church activities. For instance, upon introduction, multiple individuals have asked what church I belong to. Church membership and activity is assumed, and is a crucial aspect of one's identity and social circle. Therefore, the dialectics evident at NewSpring may reflect a more traditional church because such tradition is also part of the South Carolina culture and expected in the area.

Finally, this research occurred over the course of a four-month time-span during the summer months (May through September), however the message may differ with different seasons and place more emphasis on certain dialectics during holidays, in the wake of current events, or based on the schedule of guest speakers. Therefore, the dialectics presented cannot be placed in order of emphasis. Instead, the dialectics presented must be understood as equally prevalent until a lengthier analysis is conducted.

Reflexivity Revisited

Throughout this research project I have still preserved my non-denominational spirituality, as well as my frustrations with individuals and institutions claiming a single truth in the face of a variety of experiences, realities, and values an individual encounters. However, this project has reminded me of the importance of the community in the spiritual-religious experience. Throughout this process, I have become more sympathetic towards the church. In examining the dialectics found in this research the common, human questions that surround the religious community of NewSpring are issues that I grapple with when trying to resolve my existential and theological questions. Seeing this struggle played out through dialectics made me more sympathetic and further emphasized my belief that an individual cannot live their lives adhering to absolutes. Rather than understanding these dialectical tensions as failure to show community solidarity, dialectical tensions provide depth and challenges, which stoke the fire of religion, making it a complex, dynamic journey experienced individually and as a community.

Although I cannot claim a spiritual epiphany from this project, seeing the struggles of NewSpring in defining their brand of religion/spirituality has helped me to better understand the community as well as feel more sympathetic to the members. Coming into this project, I originally reconciled to act more in line with the role of the social scientist. I had hoped to observe, as objectively as possible, the community of NewSpring Church as a cultural institution. However, in the

reality of the research, the indefinite and entirely subjective interpretation process required of me became not only apparent, but also vital. I found myself reaching from a variety of disciplines, as a cultural studies scholar, to create a more rich and fulfilling analysis. I continue to struggle with reconciling my want to be an open, objective social scientist and to utilize my experiences as well as the experiences of others as a cultural studies scholar to create a dynamic, immediately relevant understanding of the world around me. This struggle is my personal dialectic as a researcher, which has become evident in this project.

Rather than a change of principle, this project has given me a change of heart. In seeing the community dialogue as evidenced in the dialectics at NewSpring Church, I have become more sympathetic to the church community. Everyone is searching for answers regarding the afterlife, a higher power, and how to live their best life. Through the church, the answers to these questions become an infinite dialogue among members and create a sense of community. Although, at this time, I continue to prefer to struggle through these questions alone on most occasions, NewSpring has reminded me of the power of community in providing comfort as well as a cohort.

Future Research

Future research could expand upon this research by conducting a lengthier analysis of NewSpring in order to prioritize in terms of community emphasis on which dialectics are the most prevalent in defining the NewSpring community. Researchers could also expand from this case study and do a similar analysis with three to five churches to see if the dialectics found at NewSpring are exemplary or outliers. Through a similar method of textual analysis researchers could watch and listen to sermons online from other church communities to see if similar dialectics are found in those communities as well. With a larger sample size, conclusions and recommendations on how to adapt the church to the Millennial generation could be better supported and better developed into suggestions for improvement.

Researchers could also compare the dialectics of “spiritual, but not religious” communities and traditional church communities, such as NewSpring. Additionally, further research could be undertaken at different points in the Millennial life cycle to see how the church dialectics adapt as this upcoming generation matures. Finally, researchers could also examine each dialectical pair found individually with multiple church communities to compare and contrast how these dialectics are defined and applied in different communities.

Conclusion

NewSpring Church is an interesting case study in understanding the rich complexities, which comprise a church community. Through the use of Relational Dialectics Theory, this study has found five dialectical pairs which exemplify the characteristics of the NewSpring community: Flawed/Perfect, Individual Accountability/God's Responsibility, Church is Faith/Faith is Beyond Church, Take Risks/Accept Destiny, Your God/Everyone's God. These dialectics found only partially reflect the values and beliefs of the Millennial generation. Therefore, NewSpring needs to reflect and adapt in order to maintain its relevance and livelihood in the future. A focus needs to shift from theology to lifestyle and values in order to attract this upcoming generation. Millennials are a crucial aspect to maintaining the vitality of the church for future generations. This study has provided insights into the current constitution of the NewSpring community member as well as functional and interpretive suggestions as to how NewSpring could adapt to attract the Millennial generation. The Millennial generation's values go back to the basics, and consequently, the NewSpring community needs to do the same.

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