Honor, Shame, and Redemption: Explicating the American Evangelical Right's Moral Worldview Regarding Same-Sex Marriage and Abortion

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Honor, Shame, and Redemption: Explicating the American Evangelical Right’s Moral Worldview Regarding Same-Sex Marriage and Abortion

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD Program
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
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August 2017
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ABSTRACT

With the rise of the New Religious Right in American politics, same-sex marriage and abortion emerged as the seminal political issues in a burgeoning culture wars narrative. While previous literature in the sociology of religion and political science fields has examined conservative evangelical political mobilization around these issues, this literature has not adequately considered the primacy of theology in determining these critical political commitments of the evangelical right. This dissertation utilizes aspects of James Wellman’s concept of moral worldview, Ann Swidler’s ideas on the cultural toolkit, and Christian Smith’s subcultural identity theory to explore the formation of conservative evangelical social identity. In contrast to other works, however, this project asserts that theological orthodoxy directly dictates the most salient issues of political mobilization for members of the evangelical right. Key evangelical theological themes distill into three ideological frames that govern the conservative evangelical moral worldview and their political issue priorities. These ideological frames of moral purity/innocence, personal responsibility, and obedience to authority filter and limit the range of cultural tools available to conservative evangelicals in their experience of the world. Using content analysis to show how evangelical right leaders utilize these frames in their rhetoric, this project demonstrates how same-sex marriage and abortion emerge as the pivotal issues in the conservative evangelical mind. It argues that conservative
evangelicals do not sort their sense of tribal identity into two categories of *us* and *them*, but rather three discrete categories of *us*, *them*, and *potentially us*, bringing the redemptive aspect of evangelical theology into their classification, reclassification and engagement with “the Other.” Combining the use of ideological frames with factors of threat and taboo, this dissertation demonstrates how evangelical theology directly produces moral claims and explicates how same-sex marriage and abortion have become a new political orthodoxy in an increasingly polarized American political landscape.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2014, in the midst of swelling momentum for LGBTQ rights in America, the Texas Republican party embraced “ex-gay therapy,” a discredited psychological approach, in their party platform. The platform explicitly stated:

“Homosexuality must not be presented as an acceptable alternative lifestyle, in public policy, nor should family be redefined to include homosexual couples. We believe there should be no granting of special legal entitlements or creation of special status for homosexual behavior, regardless of state of origin” (Wolfson 2014, par. 3). Declared invalid or harmful by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, the World Health Organization, and many other major medical organizations, the move was largely viewed in other parts of the country as reactionary and out of touch with the overall direction of the country. However, the heel-digging stance of the Texas Republican party provides a good example of the increasingly embattled and defensive stance of the “evangelical right” in American politics, especially on their signature issues: same-sex marriage and abortion. The evangelical right has waged an almost four-decade crusade to protect what they define as moral values in American culture.

What would motivate members of the evangelical right to continue their battle against certain moral changes when the momentum is so large? Why is there so much resistance to science and to the perspectives of the medical community on things like ex-
gay therapy? Why has the social change that has swept America not permeated this subculture as rapidly as other portions of the society? What is it that cements the cultural vision of protestant conservatives and how do they sustain the cultural views with the next generations? Will they succeed? What is it that animates the passionate perspectives of true believers in the conservative evangelical world?

While there has been considerable literature relating to the rise of the New Religious Right and conservative evangelical influence, the current scholarship has not been sufficient to answer certain questions. Much of the literature has focused either on the theological commitments of conservative evangelicals (and understanding how those commitments reinforce subcultural boundaries within the community), or, separately, on the political commitments of the evangelical right and how these play out in American society. Though they have given credence to the importance of theology in the evangelical moral worldview, scholars have not taken the role of theology seriously enough in its influence on the key political commitments of the evangelical right. They have not sufficiently explored certain questions on the relationship between evangelical theological orthodoxy and the political orthodoxy of the New Religious Right. How do theological commitments and moral politics directly interact? How does private theology become public policy? The previous literature also has not addressed why certain issues have mobilized evangelicals and other moral issues have not. How are the theological precepts of conservative evangelicals directly connected to a moral “pecking order” which emphasizes same-sex marriage and abortion beyond all other political issues?

Theology is central to the evangelical mind, and, for the evangelical right, political commitments flow directly from the centrality of theological orthodoxy. My
central argument is that crucial tenets derived from evangelical theology form ideological frames that govern issue choice and activism in the political arena and are the determinative factors in the selection of same-sex marriage and abortion as the two key political issues for the evangelical right. I will propose a structural framework that demonstrates how this theology directly translates into political ideology. Where the literature has not sufficiently explained this process, my framework will offer a different approach that builds on some of the previous ideas. I will describe the network of connections between evangelical theology and evangelical moral politics, articulating how the pieces of the evangelical moral worldview fit and work together to create a cohesive political ideology. This interdisciplinary framework can help scholars in the fields of sociology of religion, political science, and religious studies to better understand the moral worldview of conservative evangelicals, while also speaking to the curious educated public at large.

The worldview of the evangelical right is multi-dimensional, and I will explore this worldview through the lenses of political science, sociology, and psychology in this chapter. The evangelical world brings a unique milieu of social processes, political motivations, and psychological orientations. Always at play in these processes is a blend of boundaries between individual and collective identities. Whether examining the social structures, political motivations, or psychological inclinations, the interweaving of individual and collective identity complicates the picture for explication. While social identity, with in-groups and out-groups, can dictate behavior, individual motivations depend on the cultural toolkit the individual has to draw from (Swidler 1986). Though there is significant overlap in the toolkit of conservative evangelical individuals, the
increasing diversity of the surrounding culture makes it hard to maintain complete hegemony of the evangelical right worldview, especially with younger followers.

The moral worldview of the evangelical right is complex, but revolves around certain symbolic boundaries and values that are absolute in the minds of believers. In order to understand this worldview, scholars have attacked the issue from a variety of directions. Some have looked at psychological orientations of groups or individuals, including authoritarian tendencies, the group psychology of cohesion, or the psychological implications of certain views of sexuality related to religion. Political scientists have taken a different tack, looking at regional differences, ideological polarization, or political utility in trying to explain the attitudes toward same-sex marriage and abortion. Sociologists have looked more closely at relationships between tension and collective identity or explanations relating to social capital. Political scientists and sociologists have overlapped in looking at the importance of purity, segmented gender roles, and regional differences in how the evangelical right’s influence is dispersed.

In looking at the literature related to evangelical right identity in this chapter, I will trace sources from the fields of sociology of religion, political science, and psychology of religion. I will begin by looking at the sociological literature on the construction of evangelical identity and the formation of subcultural boundaries, particularly looking at the strength of the evangelical subculture within the public sphere in American society. Next, I will look at political science literature on the culture war hypothesis, focusing on increasing political polarization as well as grievances, victimhood, collective defense, and values. Finally, I will examine sources from
psychology of religion focusing primarily on authoritarianism and the authoritarian personality. All of these elements may play a role in the political choices and commitments of the evangelical right, but throughout this overview, I highlight the primary role of theology in the mind of the evangelical and the rhetoric of conservative evangelical leaders, while I fit together many of these concepts with that theological commitment to tell a story of political mobilization.

I will begin by examining sociological thinking on the nature of subcultural identity and boundary setting within and between groups. A large part of this discussion is over secularization and whether American culture would follow the direction of European culture in secularizing. Conservative evangelicals have provided an apt example of how secularization has not taken hold in the same way in America that it has overseas.

SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION AND THE EVANGELICAL SUBCULTURE

One of the principal issues to explore in understanding the influence of the evangelical right in the political arena is why the evangelical subculture has been so strong and resilient in the face of cultural change in the United States. Different theories have emerged to try to explain the essence and durability of the evangelical subculture.

Christian Smith and Michael Emerson provide an overview of Smith’s “subcultural identity theory” of religion in American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving (1998). Using a mixed methods approach, Smith’s team conducted a three-year national-level study. They began with 130 semi-structured interviews, categorizing respondents accordingly, before connecting these findings to a subsequent national phone
survey of evangelicals as well as key observations by researchers in congregational visits (Smith & Emerson 1998, 221-224). The resulting subcultural identity theory is principally a response to what the authors refer to as the “sheltered enclave theory” (1998, 75) – the prevailing theory of secularization prevalent for much of the late 20th century and based largely on Peter Berger’s classic work from 1967, The Sacred Canopy. Berger held the view that religion was declining in the modern world, and that modernity and religious faith were hostile and negating to one another. He also held that pluralism undermined the very nature of religion, and therefore, in an increasingly pluralistic and modern cultural milieu, religion would eventually die out.

One of the earliest and clearest counter-arguments that emerged to challenge Berger’s thesis came from Rodney Stark. Stark labels Berger’s secularization theory the “old paradigm” and presents a “new paradigm” based on rational choice theory and the concepts of rational action based on “other-worldly” rewards (Stark & Finke 2000). Stark’s theory relies heavily on the concepts of tension and competition in “the religious economy” model in understanding how religions come to thrive: “Rather than eroding the plausibility of all faiths, competition results in eager and efficient suppliers of religion, just as it does among suppliers of secular commodities, and with the same results: far higher levels of overall ‘consumption’” (2000, 36).

Christian Smith embraces Stark’s focus on tension, and used the idea of a “mixed economy,” but articulates the concept of tension through a slightly different vernacular, particularly focusing on felt needs. In seeking to better understand the conservative evangelical movement in America, Smith lays out a theory that seeks to explain the relative strength of evangelicalism within American culture. Smith and Emerson (1998)
provide a clear alternative to Berger’s secularization theory, claiming that perceived conflict lies at the heart of evangelical purpose:

American evangelicalism, we contend, is strong not because it is shielded against, but because it is – or at least perceives itself to be – embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it. Indeed, evangelicalism, we suggest, thrives on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat. Without these, evangelicalism would lose its identity and purpose and grow languid and aimless (89).

In Smith’s theory, “collective identity is socially constructed through intergroup distinctions marked by cultural boundaries” (1998, 97). Cultural boundary-setting allows a religious group or movement to portray the prevailing culture or another group as a dire threat to its existence, thus necessitating strong cohesion and corporate action to “defend the faith.” Smith explains that collective identity is formed and reinforced through processes of social interaction, in which “identity-signifying symbols are collectively generated, displayed, recognized, affirmed, and employed to mark differences between insiders and outsiders” (1998, 92). From this perspective, customs, worldviews, theologies, cultural peculiarities, rituals, and other social occurrences take on great importance as a way of creating and setting boundaries with outgroups. This boundary-setting exercise builds subcultural unity and strengthens the cause. Socially-constructed boundary markers allow and embolden groups to “fight back” from their embattled (or at least the perception of embattled) position against those “negative reference groups” (Smith & Emerson 1998, 105) who would dare to differ from and challenge them. In this way, out-group conflict builds in-group strength (1998, 115). This subjective tension allows religious groups to construct potentially fictitious portrayals of the world, crafting
narratives that mobilize the troops. This theory points to homosexuals and abortion providers as the critical negative reference groups for conservative evangelicals.

James Wellman (1999) utilizes Christian Smith’s subcultural identity theory in order to argue that denominational religious elites try to mobilize members of conservative religious denominations against homosexuality, and particularly against allowing homosexuals to be ordained within their traditions. He contends that “homosexuality may be the ideal object of tension for evangelicals and fundamentalists within religious organizations” (Wellman 1999, 187).

Gay, Ellison, and Powers (1996) also talk about subcultures, tying the concept of subcultures to specific religious denominations in American religious life. Seeking to identify particular denominational subcultures, they focus their research on attitudes related to “pro-family” issues such as gender roles, abortion, and homosexuality (3). Gay, et al. (1996) began by analyzing differences in central tendencies specifically related to attitudes on “pro-family” issues in different denominations in order to hypothesize specific subcultures (6). Their findings confirm two clear core denominational subcultures: conservative and liberal. They establish that conservative evangelical denominations (such as Southern Baptist) had significantly more heterogeneity on issues such as gender roles than they did around issues such as abortion, homosexuality, or extramarital sex (1996, 12-13). They recommend further study of the roles of elites in enforcing conformity through fellowship ties and social network dynamics in conservative congregations (1996, 14).

James Wellman (2008) also probes the relative homogeneity of the evangelical subculture (as compared to the liberal subculture) in Evangelical vs. Liberal. He
conducted qualitative interviews of congregants in both liberal and evangelical churches in the Pacific Northwest. He looks at how “liberal laypeople are a less homogeneous group than evangelicals are…Evangelicals are preaching to congregations in which they perceive greater moral consensus” (Wellman 2008, 78). Wellman (2008) attempts to explain a cultural model based on the metaphor of an onion. He hypothesizes that core allegiances make up the core of the onion, moral values make up the next layer, then comes moral projects and eventually aesthetics. The onion image provides for moral continuity with core allegiances to certain political issues, but does not allow for the myriad individual differences we see in actions, particularly in non-evangelical, non-ideological settings, thus only working in the case of conservative congregations. It seems to have limited scope in explaining why particular issues are so important.

Another extremely important theory of culture in the field of sociology of religion is Ann Swidler’s theory of the “cultural toolkit” (Swidler 1986). Swidler claims that people have different cultural tools from the different experiences they have and cultural fields they reside in. They can choose the tools that best fit a situation because culture is not “a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction…both individuals and groups know how to do different kinds of things in different circumstances” (Swidler 1986, 277). Swidler’s theory works well for most cultural settings and allows for the complexity of action we see in moderate settings. Swidler also makes a key distinction in her article. She says that the cultural toolkit model works differently in different time periods. In times of settled lives, “cultural resources are diverse…and normally groups and individuals call upon these resources selectively, bringing to bear different styles and
habits of action in different situations” (Swidler 1986, 280). However, when times are “unsettled” and tumultuous, she describes what happens in culture differently:

   Bursts of ideological activism occur in periods when competing ways of organizing action are developing or contending for dominance. People formulate, flesh out, and put into practice new habits of action. In such situations, culture may indeed be said to directly shape action…These explicit cultures might well be called “systems.” While not perfectly consistent, they aspire to offer not multiple answers, but one unified answer to the question of how human beings should live. In conflict with other cultural models, these cultures are coherent because they must battle to dominate the world-views, assumptions, and habits of their members (Swidler 1986, 279).

This important distinction of unsettled cultures connects back to Christian Smith’s subcultural identity theory, bringing in the idea of competition and direct action in times of unsettledness. This would seem to have important implications for evangelicals who feel embattled by social threats.

   In addition to cultural theories that seek to explain conservative evangelical obsession with “pro-family” issues, other sociologists have also looked at the topic from the point of view of politics and how religion itself functions politically in shifting cultural sands. Robert Bellah (1967) originated a concept of American “civil religion” that other scholars have widely explored and critiqued. Based on the term originally coined by Jean Jacques Rousseau, Bellah described the symbols, beliefs, and ritual expressions of patriotism in the United States in religious terms, similar yet distinct from Christianity or other religions. Bellah (1980) also speaks of the resemblance of the concept of civil religion to the ideas of public piety or “political religion.” Robert Wuthnow (1988) accepts Bellah’s concept of civil religion in American society, but argues one must further divide this concept into two forms: conservative civil religion and liberal civil religion. Wuthnow states that American civil religion is deeply divided:
Like the religion found more generally in the nation’s churches, it does not speak with a single voice, uniting the majority of Americans around common ideals. It has instead become a confusion of tongues speaking from different traditions and offering different visions of what America can and should be. (1988, 244)

Conservative civil religion seeks to reify an American countermemory of Christian origin and divine legitimacy, placing the United States in a place of profound privilege within the “kingdom of God,” a special place within God’s divine order (Wuthnow 1988). Conservative civil religion places a high emphasis on Christian evangelical beliefs as well as conservative religious values. In a sense, American conservative civil religion wraps divinity in the American flag, privileging militaristic, nationalist, and Christian (particularly Protestant) discourses about a purported “Christian nation.”

POLITICAL ACTION – AND REACTION: THE CULTURE WARS

From the views of political scientists, much of what makes the evangelical right so interesting is its ability to motivate and mobilize passionate political activism among a large number of politically conservative, white voters in the United States. The rise of the evangelical right has been a relatively recent development, only really appearing since the late 1970s – largely as a reaction to the social change of the 1960s. The factors relating to the rise of the movement are complex; there is not one simple reason for the movement’s emergence. The evangelical right has mobilized people through the use of symbolic boundaries, creating categories that transcend the theological into the political. Very few groups have been as successful at motivating activists as evangelicals on the right have been over the last four decades or so.
In addition to conservative civil religion, political scientists have particularly focused on the “culture wars” in American society. A term originally coined by James Davison Hunter (1987), the culture wars thesis acknowledged the ongoing polarization of American politics around social issues such as abortion and homosexuality. Though the culture wars idea has been disputed by some (Fiorina 2006), many political scientists continue to look at American conservative evangelicals through the culture war lens. A particular interest for them has been the idea of authoritarianism among religious conservatives.

Mockabee (2007) proposed a new approach for looking at cultural conflict that not only encompassed the traditional moral issues of abortion and sexuality, but also included issues related to patriotism and group effect (221). Mockabee embraces the theories of increasing polarization in the American electorate (Abramowitz & Saunders 1998; Hetherington & Weiler 2009), further explicating James Davison Hunter’s (1987) description of the role of authority in an evolving culture war. He used a set of data relating to child-rearing practices in order to look at the relationship between authority, religion, and political attitudes. Mockabee used data from the 2000 and 2004 American National Election Study (ANES), hypothesizing that measures of authority would be a key factor in shaping political behavior (230). The analysis of social groups focused on the concept of “outgrouping” and its important role in all kinds of cultural identity politics (Mockabee, 230). The research also found that the authority-mindedness variable was a statistically significant factor in hostility toward gays and lesbians and abortion (231-234). Mockabee took this data and proposed a different approach that combined
religiosity and authoritarianism as a strong predictor of attitudes on moral issues, party identification, vote choice and social groups (221).

GRIEVANCES, VICTIMHOOD, AND COLLECTIVE DEFENSE

In *To The Right*, Jerome Himmelstein summarizes approaches that have been employed in order to explain the mobilization of groups:

Usually they rely on some combination of three causes: an increase in a group’s grievances; an increase in a group’s resources, organization, and opportunities for collective action; and heightened mobilizing efforts by social-movement professionals or entrepreneurs outside the group. (1990, 98)

“Grievances” provides an excellent description of the cultural ideology that surrounds the values-laden rhetoric of the evangelical right. As has been described, the rhetoric of the right mobilizes activism by playing on a constant sense of grievance, loss, and attack. One of the ways collective movements generate energy for the cause is by talking about the threat of opposing movements. Tina Fetner (2008) looks at the similarity between the rhetorical strategy of the religious right and the rhetorical strategy of the lesbian and gay community. She states: “Rather than referring to a potential to discriminate, the opposing movement pointed to people and rhetoric that actively attacked gay rights. Furthermore, the presence of anti-gay activism increased the sense of urgency of movement claims” (38). The evangelical right uses the specter of constant attack, constant depreciation of cultural values, to trumpet the message of alienation and embattlement. The movement is under attack, and adherents are kept in a constant state of readiness by the right’s rhetorical strategy. This strategy gives deep power to keep a movement base in motion even during times of apparent political setbacks (Diamond 1998, ix). There is an inherent
power of oppositional symbols that fuels movements and makes them almost unassailable - the more they are attacked, the stronger they can become - at least to a point. Leaders on the right highlight besiegement and the rhetoric of “special” rights for lesbians and gays (Diamond 1998, 172). Opposition to the granting of special rights becomes a huge mobilizing factor, as conservative evangelicals find a way to portray themselves as cultural victims. A loss of political and moral dominance then becomes a rallying cry of righteous victimhood (Watson 1997).

Perhaps nothing captures the sense of grievance experienced by evangelical conservatives better than their claiming of the tradition of the American Jeremiad. In this tradition, preachers and politicians have scolded an America “chosen” by God for breaking a covenant with “Him”; the sin and apostasy of Americans is bemoaned, bringing a call for repentance, forgiveness, and restoration of the covenant with God (Bercovitch 1978). The Evangelical Right has latched on to this narrative, offering their own interpretation to both the sins and the path of social salvation for America (Morone 2003, Noll 1990, Watson 1997, Wills 1990). With a message of “bringing the nation back to God,” conservative evangelical elites bemoan the broken covenant with God (Bellah 1975), pushing a revival of family values in order to gain God’s blessing for the nation again as a type of “New Israel” (Marsden 1980). In this narrative, the nation must return to God, turning from its wicked ways and repenting of its sinful nature - as defined by conservative evangelicals and their moral priorities. The Jeremiad reinterprets historic expressions of sin and redemption found throughout American history. The idea that sacred history reached its zenith in the “discovery” of the “New World” and the founding of America taps into a myth of American exceptionalism (Bercovitch 1978). In this
conceptualization, the ritualization and sacralization of the American Revolution makes the purpose of the nation inseparable from the purposes of God (133-34). The tradition provides a canvas for frequent reinterpretation of the nation’s sins and creates a ripe atmosphere for social justice movements, witch-hunts, and moral crusades. The Jeremiad rhetoric provides religious and political leaders with much flexibility to continually redefine the moral “problem” - and the groups to blame for it. Whether it was the cause of prohibition, the supposed white slavery of young girls¹, or the abolition or civil rights movements, the Jeremiad has provided ample opportunity for claiming divine power and purpose behind a group’s cause in American history (Morone 2003). The revivalism of the mid 19th-century taught Christians to be sanctified and perfected in their individual salvation and in their activism for God, telling them the moral imperatives they should follow (Noll 1990). Connecting to the moral traditionalism of the Puritan heritage (Liebman et al. 1983; Marsden 1990; Morone 2003) and the revivalism of the Great Awakenings, the Evangelical Right creates a new symbolic morality politics that reacts to 20th-century post-industrial society and post-materialist values (Himmelstein 1990).²

The emphasis in Protestantism on the individual person reinforces messages of individual liberty found in the Founders’ modernistic worldview. There is chronic

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¹ Morone (2003) describes the “white slave panic” of 1909-1910, where Americans conjured up the idea that innocent white girls were being grabbed off the street by villainous Eastern European immigrants who were forcing them into prostitution.

² Liebman, Wuthnow, and Guth (1983) argue that the New Religious Right has three major sets of themes: economic libertarianism, militant anti-communism, and social traditionalism. I make the case that the ideology around this moral and social traditionalism is the most central of these three themes in understanding the primary motivations of the Religious Right, especially considering the decline of communism in the last couple of decades and the shift in RR rhetoric toward other “foreign thems.”
tension between a view of sin as only found in the individual and a view of sin as a systemic problem in the structures of society (Emerson & Smith 2000, Green 1996, Hertzke 1988, Howard-Pitney 2005, Morone 2003, Watson 1997). The evangelical right continually interprets social ills as consequences of individual sins and failings, and the sins and failings of particular groups of people. In this interpretation, they have found multiple dangerous “others” on which to blame the social problems in America. The reactionary rebellion of the evangelical right against individual sinners essentially becomes a response to a half-century of structural societal changes driven by the social gospel and culminating in the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Morone 2003).

Morone points to four “moral flaws” historically recurring in the demonization of groups in America: violence, substance abuse (or drink), sloth, and sex (2003, 452). From this historical perspective, the evangelical right’s construction of the other hearkens back to the Puritan heritage of finding the fearful “them”: “The Puritans groped back to the tried and true - they found terrible new enemies to define them. The saints constructed their “us” against a vivid series of immoral “them”: heretics, Indians, witches. Each enemy clarified the Puritan identity” (33). These categories have been used to “other” particular groups, especially in racializing the identities of immigrants coming into American society (Fredrickson 2002; Omi & Winant 1994; Winant 2004), perhaps driven partially by status anxiety and the fear of further loss of cultural and economic hegemony (Morone 2003). By drawing on a sense of resentment and frustration, conservative evangelical leaders attempt to restore a kind of “countermemory” (Burlein 2002) of America’s lost glory and holiness. This resentment and contempt toward the rest of society emerges from the loss of Protestant cultural hegemony in American society and leads to an
attitude of grievance, embattlement, and victimization (Noll 1990; Smith & Emerson 1998; Watson 1997). While others such as Fetner have observed the force of the aggressive rhetoric toward the enemy, it is this loss of cultural hegemony that truly creates the sense of fear among grassroots members of the evangelical right.

The particular grievances of the Evangelical Right take on a variety of symbolic causes that speak to deeper social structural and cultural descriptors of the religious conservative subculture (and especially the conservative evangelical subculture). The Puritan heritage of “responsible self-control” lends itself to the narrative of constraint and order versus the chaos and irresponsible behavior framed around the non-Christian elements of the culture (Himmelstein 1990, 105-6). This concept of defending a natural, responsible order is prevalent in evangelical messaging. Sara Diamond looks at the distinctive messages of conservative evangelical leaders like Chuck Colson - and how these leaders frame marriage as a fundamental structuring social institution. The change in the definition of marriage to include members of the LGBTQ community is not a legal and technical process, then, but rather an affront to a central organizing social structure: heterosexual marriage. In this view, there is one order, one structure, and only one way to be responsible within the culture. (Diamond 1998, 171). Religious orthodoxy is paramount to the evangelical right - the epistemic authority of right belief in the authoritative Scriptures towers over and above denominational loyalty (Hunter 1987; Hunter, 1991; Jelen 1991; Wilcox 1992). Largely because of the shift from denominational loyalty to a loyalty to a particular political worldview, there has been realignment of religious identity along conservative and liberal ideological lines (Wuthnow 1988).
THE LANGUAGE OF VALUES AND DUALISM

Ted Jelen discusses Samuel Huntington’s theory of American political culture, where he describes three distinct approaches to understanding the political traditions in American society (1991, 8-17). Jelen outlines the paradigms of The One (the perspective that American political culture generates a consensus of values), The Two (a dualistic perspective where an advantaged class tries to maintain that advantage), and The Many (a pluralistic perspective where the particularist aspects of a myriad groups come to the fore and compete in their activism). Wuthnow’s and Hunter’s arguments connect with “The Two” dualistic perspective in that they contend there has been a polarizing, dualistic shift along conservative and liberal lines in American religious and political identity with the rise of the Religious Right and evangelicals as a large subset of this movement (though Wuthnow is more nuanced in his approach).³

Regardless of the paradigm of political culture one holds, the central battleground rhetoric for the evangelical right has centered on the language of values. One of these central values for evangelical conservatives is the centrality of the Scripture, or the Bible. The Scripture is seen as a blueprint for family values and as the source of the appropriate structure and order for shaping everything from families to politics. Beyond the commitment to order and scriptural authority, evangelical conservatives have asserted multiple other key grievances against shifting American society: “family” issues around

³ Wuthnow later moved away from his polarization thesis in The Quiet Hand of God (2003), where he noted that a majority of mainline Christians tended to identify more as moderates, acknowledging that previous survey research methodology conducted had likely pushed respondents to self-identify in a polarized manner beyond what they might have otherwise.
which to mobilize activists. In this, they move toward the afore-mentioned demonization of the other. Central to all of these value-based arguments are the concepts of group ideology and subcultural identity. Soper describes group ideology as “the set of values, ideas, and beliefs which gives meaning to the social experiences of adherents, defines group objectives and legitimates group formation” and that religious ideology is the “primary impulse for evangelical activism” (1994, 1-2). Group ideology calls for a strong commitment to place the values and norms of the ideology above everything else, promoting deep moral claims about how the world should be. This connects with Smith and Emerson from the sociological world, who as we previously discussed, focus on the forging of collective identity through embattledness and how evangelicals sustain ideological unity.

THE POLITICS OF GENDER AND EXISTENTIAL THREATS TO MORALITY

Framing arguments against feminism, evangelicals have attacked the shifting gender roles in society as the breakdown of God’s will for the traditional family (Balmer 1989; Diamond 1995; Diamond 1998; Himmelstein 1990; Hunter 1991; K. Luker 1984; Marsden 1980). Sara Diamond identifies the “moral order of behavioral norms and hierarchies on the bases of race and gender” as one of the central unifying themes of evangelicals and the New Religious Right (1995, 6). The connection to moral traditionalism continues with the themes of sexual purity, sexual self-control and maintaining innocence that infuse the rhetoric of leaders of the evangelical right (Balmer 1989; Diamond 1998; Morone 2003; Wills 1990). Evangelical conservatives also villainize the “secular humanists” in society, using secularism as a symbol for
godlessness and irresponsible immorality that does not have to be accountable to God (Diamond, 1989), and some have argued that there has been a deep increase in polarization between the religiously devout and the irreligious (Hunter 1991). By opposing gay rights, conservative evangelicals bring together attacks on sexual impurity, shifting gender roles, chaotic social structures, secular morality, and “irresponsible” behavior in a single hot-button issue that mobilizes members to political and social action. Abortion is the other key area of mobilization for the New Religious Right as a whole and evangelical conservatives in particular. Bringing together narratives of “rights” for “unborn children,” the defense of “innocent” life, and the protection of victims of irresponsible sexual behavior, the Religious Right, including evangelicals and Catholics, has mobilized an effective crusade around this highly polarizing topic (Balmer 1989; Diamond 1989; 1995; 1998; K. Luker 1984; Morone 2003; Reed 1996; Watson 1997; Wills 1990).

For evangelical groups that combine an “end-times” perspective with their exclusivist views, apocalyptic inclinations can lead to an even more extreme position. In connection with conforming orthodoxy, exclusivist cultural systems demand moral purity. Religious delineations of moral purity frequently revolve around expressions of sexuality (Armstrong 2000; Douglas 1966; Lifton 1999; Marsden 1980; B. Moore 2000; R. I. Moore 2007). In Moral Purity and Persecution in History (2000), Barrington Moore examines the important connection between certain forms of Christianity (particularly Calvinism), sexuality, and persecution. Moore compares this to Catholic understandings (in the Hugenots), identifying similar discourse around moral purity and how this discourse encourages hatred and persecution of those identified as impure. But
strains of the threat to moral purity can be seen passing down in American history to the current generation of evangelical culture warriors. Ultimate threats become the animating principle of motivating action by adherents.

Ultimate threats weave together with cultural narratives as elites attempt to garner public support. In *Lift High the Cross* (2002), Ann Burlein traces the connection between white supremacy and the American Christian Right, particularly focusing on the Christian Identity movement (in this case, in contrast to Focus on the Family). Utilizing Foucault’s (1977b) idea of *countermemory*, Burlein illustrates how the religious conservatives construct fictional historical narratives of innocence that serve their political purposes in mobilizing adherents to their movements. Burlein summarizes the concept of countermemory as “an alternative way of remembering history and empowering people to stand up” (4). In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) focuses on how social power *produces* desire, and Burlein builds on this insight by illustrating how conservative religious leaders seek to determine what should be valued and cared about by followers (25). She describes how conservative leaders engender commitment, disseminating countermemories that converge through reading the national present within biblical narratives of cultural trauma…(disseminating) countermemories that act less by prohibiting the pleasures of the modern world and more by engendering desire for the “Bible-based family.” (Burlein 2002, 24-25)

Cultural leaders are able to forge myths of origin which ignore historical failings and rewrite alternative histories in a sort of “paradoxical postmodern politics” (25). By constructing fictional histories, elites can emphasize whatever ideas they want to reconstruct a nationalistic or culture mythos that guides future action. Cosmoganies and other myths of origin become tools for erasing historical mistakes and papering over
injustices, bigotries, or other shameful acts within the cultural system. Countermemories, then, become powerful tools for movements to build social capital and unquestioned loyalty from a credulous public, especially in apocalyptic conditions.

In addition to conforming orthodoxy and moral purity, the scapegoating of the marginalized other functions as a key cultural tool for exclusivist cultural systems. Exclusivist systems tend to demonize certain groups in society, dehumanizing members, portraying them as enemies of the nation, group, or cult, and blaming societal ills on members of these marginalized groups. Once a collective identity has been dehumanized, all acts of violence are legitimated, as Barrington Moore describes: “To create this moral approval (for cruelty) it is necessary to define the polluting enemy as nonhuman or inhuman, that is, outside the range of human beings to whom one owes the slightest obligation as fellow creatures” (2000, 57). Rene Girard describes what he describes as the scapegoating mechanism, the human inclination to blame a minority group for social problems or catastrophes: “Ultimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society” (1986, 15). Girard gives examples of how the mechanism has operated in major historical epidemics such as the Black Death: “Thanks to the mechanism of persecution, collective anguish and frustration found vicarious appeasement in the victims who easily found themselves united in opposition to them by virtue of being poorly integrated minorities” (1986, 39). Lifton sees this scapegoating dehumanization as a form of demonization that will “press toward the dispensing of existence, an absolute division between those who have a right to exist and those who possess no such right” (1999, 26). Juergensmeyer labels this process as
the satanization of “the faceless collective enemy,” (2003, 178) constituting a polemic of cosmic war against evil, and Goldhagen (2009) refers to the demonization and dehumanization present in eliminationist political ideologies.

The most extreme of evangelical rhetoric tends to run toward the eliminationist language of scapegoating and blaming groups for the ills of society. As mentioned, secular humanists, the LGBTQ community, Satanists, abortion doctors, and other groups are singled out as existential threats to the culture. Constant attention is given in how to combat these threats in the culture. Most of the time this is not through violence, but as abortion clinic bombings and other acts have shown, the rhetoric is not without effect on individuals who are inclined to violence. The connections between dehumanizing and embattled rhetoric and acts of violence are frequently debated. Most conservative evangelicals do not resort to acts of violence or eliminationist attitudes - they tend to use the political process to try to enact change through peaceful means. Cults and other more marginal groups tend to advance the rhetoric more in the direction of apocalyptic violence. However, as conservative evangelicals feel that they are losing more and more power in the culture, some of the rhetoric can tend to advance toward more existential terms. Sara Diamond (1989, 1998) has explored the Christian Right movement in general (with strong emphasis on the evangelical aspects) at the intersection between sociology and political science. Examining issues of gender, race, dominion thinking, and eschatology, Diamond looks carefully at the movement’s goals and aspirations for political power.
AUTHORITARIANISM, MOTIVATION, AND THE EVANGELICAL MIND

In addition to the interlaced arguments of sociologists and political scientists, psychologists have also weighed in on the workings of the evangelical mind and proposed explanations for political and cultural perspectives. Psychologists such as Gordon Allport (1967) have examined the purpose for religious identity. Allport discussed the difference between intrinsic religious motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsically oriented persons see religion as an end in-itself, while extrinsically oriented persons see religion as a means to an end (Allport & Ross 1967, as cited in Wulff 1991). Religion can be seen as a means to a political end as one example. Evangelicals may be all over the spectrum of orientations on this, or perhaps the extrinsic goals of political leaders in the churches override any intrinsic instincts of parishioners.

In the field of political psychology, Robert Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger (1996) look at religious fundamentalism as a motivation for political activism, and particular the role of authority in general for deeply conservative protestant activists. They propose authoritarianism as the central cause of prejudice and correlate a religious fundamentalism scale to a new Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale. They measure fundamentalism in terms of the militancy and dogmatism of religious attitudes rather than as a direct measure of religious literalism or orthodoxy. In some ways, this idea connects to embattledness and tension in the formation of group identity, but is looking at the individual’s psychological state in the midst of this tension. In The Authoritarian Specter, they directly criticize the extrinsic and intrinsic categories of Allport, claiming that the questions in the intrinsic scale do not really measure what Allport is defining as intrinsic religious motivations. They see authoritarian religion
(including the content of particular religious belief systems) as the driving force behind religious prejudice rather than looking at the two types of motivations.

This seems to connect to the work of Erich Fromm that Kenneth Pargament (1995) alludes to. Pargament proposes two forms of religion – authoritarian religion and humanistic religion. From this perspective, where there is authoritarian religion, it projects human qualities onto God and people worship out of human weakness. Where there is humanistic religion, it is about achieving the greatest human strength rather than the greatest human powerlessness. Conservative evangelical theology highly emphasizes the authoritarian themes of human weakness and reliance on the all-powerful God. Obedience to God is one of the central animating ideas of the theology of the evangelical right, so it would seem to lend itself to the psychological tendency toward authoritarianism, whether it be the political authoritarianism of Altemeyer and Hunsberger or the authoritarian religion of Pargament.

WEAVING THE DISCIPLINES

While Christian Smith’s (1998) subcultural identity theory (and the related work in the field) provides an excellent framework for understanding the intensity of embattledness and the formation of “the other” by conservative evangelicals, the theory does not clearly explain exactly how evangelicals have come to select particular “pro-family” issues to mobilize around politically. Political theories centered around civil religion and political mobilization also shed some light on the militancy and moral code of conservative evangelicals, but the dualistic emphasis of all of these theories leaves much to be explained. Authoritarianism in the psychological identity of individuals can
be linked to religious fundamentalism and dogmatism in religious distinction, but does not explain much of how theology links to the content of political passion.

I hope to explore not only the “in-group” and “out-group” designations so common in evangelical circles, but also the potentiality factor of conversion that seems to permeate their thinking in the political realm as well. This “potential conformity” has been largely ignored in the literature, and I suspect that it plays a considerable role in evangelical thinking – even to the point of being a separate category about some of the “others” in the evangelical mind. Also, I hope to shed more light on how evangelicals actually have chosen the particular issues of abortion and homosexuality for political activism and how this is related to the ideal family norm in the minds of evangelicals.

The primary goal of the evangelical right is to transform the culture through the transformation of family to its idealized state. They see family as the primary social structure for social change. My research will focus on uncovering the possible reasons for the prioritization of the issues of same-sex marriage and abortion and how theologically driven narratives may expand on the existing research, illuminating new understandings of the conservative evangelical mind.

In the coming chapters, I will trace a different explanation for the political commitments and passion of the evangelical right. Understanding the theology of the evangelical right means understanding some of the personalities and the history of the movement. In chapter 2, I explore a bit of the historical emergence of the movement, the cultural context for its growth, and the major theological themes that animate evangelical life. These themes provide key ideas for understanding how theology can transform into ideological lenses for political life. Chapter 3 puts forward a new theory, shifting
conformity theory, which describes how conservative evangelicals classify others and draw boundaries. I will describe how theological elements transform into ideological frames, which fit closely to an ideal archetype of family itself. This family archetype drives a cycle of political mobilization that produces passionate commitment to a limited number of moral and political issues. In chapter 4, I provide a more detailed exploration of the hypothesized ideological frames present in the conservative evangelical moral worldview and look at how a sense of threat and social tension empower these frames in the evangelical world. In chapter 5, I examine the findings from my content analysis of the rhetoric of particular prominent conservative evangelical leaders and describe how these findings match up to the proposed model. In chapter 6, I consider how the revised model is mobilized, asking questions about related issues and why they have not mobilized evangelicals in the same way. I also assess two other key political issues for evangelicals (capital punishment and healthcare reform) and ask key questions about how (and whether) these relate to my model. Finally, in chapter 7, I conclude by looking at the limitations and significance of the project as well as the implications for future study of the evangelical right.
CHAPTER TWO: CRISIS, CROSS, AND CONVERSION

As subcultures define themselves, they create and maintain boundaries that delineate the guiding principles for the subculture and what makes “us” us, but also define themselves against other groups- and what makes “them” them. The conservative evangelical subculture is no exception to this demarcation. Clearly the evangelical right forms principles around religious belief and theology that determine us and them in the religious sphere within the broader American culture, but there has been much discussion and debate about how perspectives from conservative evangical’s religious sphere actually affect perspectives in the political sphere. I believe that the theological tenets that underpin private evangelical thought are the central factors in shaping their public identities as well. Understanding the evangelical right in America means understanding how American morality shapes and is shaped by the movement. In Hellfire Nation, James A. Morone describes how the political intertwines with the moral and theological: “Political life constantly gets entangled in two vital urges – redeeming ‘us’ and reforming ‘them’” (2003, 3). In exploring how it shapes the molding of American citizens, he continues:

But morality helps Americans answer those subversive questions at the heart of every community: Who are we? Who belongs? Here’s where liberalism, community, and morality reach their American symbiosis. Moral images set the boundaries around the liberal political process, around the American “us.” (11)

Through the eyes of some scholars, however, the theological distinctions of conservative evangelical church-goers stop at the congregational walls and these
perspectives do not flow directly into political and social commitments of conservative evangelical citizens. These citizen activists are motivated more by pragmatic concerns and some sort of vulnerability to unexamined devotion to conservative political leaders’ agendas. While I agree there may be some validity to the pragmatic motivations of conservative voters, it is my contention that for members of the evangelical right, theology is the center of their lives and is the heart of all they do and this theology shapes the entirety of their moral worldview. For conservative evangelical believers, I argue that theology not only delineates us and them in the religious sphere, but also directly defines us and them in the political sphere. While I will explore political mobilization, social boundaries, regional influence, and other factors in the rise of evangelical political influence, the exploration of theology will be central to my argument about how and why group boundaries are formed and mobilizing political issues develop. I will argue that the moral worldview of politicized evangelical America emerges directly from many of these theological themes. In this chapter, I will outline many of the central theological themes of conservative evangelicalism and describe how these themes overlapped with the emergence of evangelical leaders and their message in the rise of the New Religious Right.

Conservative evangelical theology truly centers around the word *evangelical*- it is based in “evangelizing” other people. The English connotation of the original Greek root of the word is “good news”. Good news about what? Essentially, it is good news because the news is presented as a universal solution to a universal problem: the issue of human sinfulness. In conservative evangelicalism, sinfulness is seen as a complete corruption of human nature by the imperfection of vices and disobedience to God,
especially those vices that violate historical Protestant piety in the sexual arena. At its most base form, Protestant evangelism is about creating urgency about the totalizing crisis of human sin, a crisis identified and emphasized by a group of people through the Christian scriptures- and then presenting a universal solution to that problem. David Bebbington summarizes the four elements of evangelical theology the best. He identifies four key elements of evangelical theology: 1) Biblicism; 2) Crucicentrism; 3) Conversion, and 4) Missionary Activity (Wellman 2008, 11). Two of these elements (biblical authority and crucicentrism) build the intellectual case for the need for good news. The other two elements (conversion and missionary activity) are about what to do with the good news once it is understood and intellectually accepted.

Biblicism is the concept that the Christian Scriptures serve as sole authority for both belief and action. Crucicentrism is the central focus on the belief in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross as an atonement for the sin of humanity. Conversion entails the necessity for each person to make a personal choice to “follow” Christ in his or her full life. Missionary activity brings the responsibility to share the pressing need for conversion with other individuals. These four concepts encapsulate a moral worldview that ultimately hinges on the moral emergency of human sin and the need to eliminate this crisis in order to restore relationship with the purity and innocence of God. The cross is the strongest symbol of this two-sided message of crisis and solution. As James Wellman notes: “What is the meaning of the cross? What is the core consequence of Jesus’ life and death? For evangelicals, the truth of Christ is the recognition of sin, the need of repentance, and the hope of salvation through the cross” (2008, 120). In order to
understand the implications of Bebbington’s four themes for the moral worldview and political positions of evangelicals, I want to walk through each of them more fully.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

The centrality of the Scripture was a central element of the Protestant Reformation, and evangelicals tend to hold to a very literal version of this doctrine of the central authority of the Bible. For evangelicals, the Bible becomes a historical, factual document that is authoritative not only in matters of meaning, purpose, and philosophy, but also in matters of history, science, and reason. George Marsden describes well this doctrine of the “final authority of Scripture” which emphasizes the “real, historical character of God’s saving work recorded in Scripture” (1984, ix-x). These adjectives capture a lot of the sentiment in conservative evangelical culture: a personal commitment not only to God, but to the Bible being the final word in matters of moral authority in one’s life. The Bible’s words are authoritative for guidance for moral ethics, and should extend into every area of one’s life. Even though conservative evangelicals see these words as literally authoritative, they are in fact engaging in a process of interpretation that takes large parts of the Scripture literally, but not all of it. They can acknowledge the poetic language in Psalms or Song of Solomon, and they can apply symbolism to textual analysis, particular in books like Revelation. But they take Genesis and other chapters much more literally than other traditions, and they hold other evangelicals to a strict conformity to their method of interpretation. Conservative evangelical insistence on adherence to “biblical” teachings (as interpreted by evangelical leaders and doctrine) make the belief system virtually unquestionable within the community. As Randall
Balmer states, evangelicals tend to “define their position as ‘Christian’ or ‘biblical,’ and every other view as somehow less so” (2000, 7). Other terms for this conservative evangelical worldview of the hyper-reliability of the Scriptures include the “inerrancy” or “infallibility” of the Bible- the perspective that it is a document that is (at least in its original form) without error regarding matters of faith, life, and salvation (Gallagher 2003, 50). Holding to a particular view of biblical authority is the first absolute among absolutes for evangelical life and leadership. It is the initial distinguishing mark of us and them for the community, and the epistemic foundation for all of the other theological principles. As Mark Noll notes in his chapter in the George Marsden edited book Evangelicalism and Modern America, “Evangelical Bible scholars live in Christian communities where fidelity to Scripture is both a badge of honor and an excuse for recrimination” (1984, 109). Christian Smith tempers this slightly, saying that evangelicals “appeal primarily to the Bible and secondarily to their personal relationship with God” (Smith 1998, 24). Smith does stress the absolute importance of theological orthodoxy for the evangelical population: a “right view of the Bible is the lynchpin of all theological orthodoxy” (25).

Biblical authority and theological orthodoxy work hand in hand to create an atmosphere where alternate points of view are not acceptable, and are in fact rejected actively and disciplined within the community. In this sense, conservative evangelical interpretations of the scriptures serve as ways to enforce a particular order in both thinking and action. It is no longer the leaders telling people how to act and what to think – it is God telling people how to act and what to think. This transference of authority back and forth creates a devotion to orthodoxy among evangelicals that is passionate and
difficult to question intellectually. By stating that certain biblical interpretations are absolute, the center of authority is very literally moved externally— to the Scriptures, and by extension to the spiritual leaders and to God.

External authority is very important to the evangelical mind and culture. Morality needs to be grounded in something other than human reasoning – a reasoning from a human nature that they see as fully corrupted by human sin and prone to shifting on a whim. They see God’s order – and the Bible as representative of this order – as eternally unchanging. Throughout American history in times of cultural change and turmoil, the reflexive desire to hold on to the values of the past has emerged as a central theme in evangelical rhetoric. From the Great Awakenings to the political activism of the New Religious Right, the call to return to the stability of God’s authority and order has found its clearest expression through appeals to the Scripture.

How does the intense focus on biblical literalism affect the themes that evangelical right tends to emphasize? The doctrine of biblical authority is particularly important because the moral worldview of the evangelical right tends to flow directly out of the narrative generated by a selection of literally-interpreted texts. This textual literalism leans heavily on the numerous passages about the consequences of human imperfection and disobedience to God. The conservative evangelical narrative selectively traces this theme of human sinfulness that is not acceptable to God. The story of depravity and sin drives the worldview- and is unassailable by other sources of knowledge because the Bible is held as the ultimate and only authority. Sin is the next element of the evangelical theology, then, that I want to explore.
THE CONCEPT OF SIN

If the Bible is the central authority for the evangelical right, then sin is the central theme derived from that authority. Christian Smith points out in his research that evangelicals tend to be the “least likely to believe that humans are entirely good…and most likely to take the very strong view that humans are entirely sinful” (1998, 22). Sinfulness grounds the conservative evangelical understanding of humanity and what it means to be human. It is a story told about the “problem” of the corruption of human nature- and one that is focused on individual decisions and responses to that problem. Morone highlights the Puritan – and neo-Puritan – emphasis on “controlling thyself” (2003, 17). This emphasis on self-control is most clearly expressed in conservative Protestant (and particularly evangelical) obsessions with unacceptable expressions of sex as the most powerful sin. As he says, “In short, neo-Puritans have always saved the hottest jeremiads for pelvic matters – carnality, gender roles, the well-regulated family, and the sex-race tangle” (Morone 2003, 17). Wellman points out that evangelicals tend to approach sin from a place of individual shame and guilt – as opposed to more liberal Christians, who see sin as a problem of justice in social institutions (2008, 118). For these evangelicals, then, the shame and guilt over sin translates to shame and guilt about sex, since sin tends to be viewed primarily through that lens.

As the evangelical right re-emerged as the New Christian Right in the 1970s and 1980s, their theological center was shaped around the sinfulness of the nation and protecting the family and “family values”. Evangelical identity rooted itself in an ideology of sin and orderliness around the family – especially “a narrowly defined sexual morality, support for traditional gender hierarchies, and belief in the superiority of the
male-headed, nuclear family” (Fetner 2008, 8). Sara Diamond echoes this, describing the Christian Right as a “social movement focused fairly narrowly on questions of proper family structure and ‘moral,’ that is, sexual behavior” (1998, 7).

The problem of sin is juxtaposed against the execution of Jesus as the perfect, sinless human being (and fully God as well) who was punished unjustly. This all-or-nothing juxtaposition of totally sinful humanity against totally innocent God shapes the theological worldview of evangelicals toward all human beings who have not chosen to accept the salvation narrative. In other words, it defines “us” and “them” in a way that is entirely based on acceptance and adherence to the evangelical account of human guilt versus godly innocence. Purity and innocence weave together in this narrative, especially in the sexual realm. God’s purity and innocence are placed over the all-defining guilt of human nature, but only for those that accept the evangelical story about the nature of humanity and God.

In contrast to more liberal forms of Protestant Christianity, so much of the conservative evangelical concept of sin centers around individual responsibility for self-purity and for taking care of one’s family, and not for corporate social responsibility to the community. The concept of sin is about the individual’s choice to be disobedient to his or her God. Group “thems” are about groups of individuals whose common commitments are to something that is seen as an individual sin in and of itself (e.g. atheism or the LGBTQ community).
THE NECESSITY OF PERSONAL CONVERSION

The problem of individual sin leads to the solution of atonement theology for conservative Protestants, and especially for evangelicals. Guilt and shame lead to a need for salvation – a saving of the individual from the consequences of sin itself. These premises demand from evangelicals a theology of payment for sin: the death of Jesus on the cross substitutes for the death of the individual sinner (Wellman 2008, 118).

Atonement theology is all about the response of the individual to the narrative of salvation. In this sense, it is a focus on personal responsibility – or “response ability” to the salvific message and to God. This is how the theme of personal responsibility wraps into the themes of biblical authority and theological orthodoxy. For evangelicals, personal responsibility is not about thinking for oneself and challenging ideas in order to be responsible; the responsibility is completely centered around responding to Jesus’ sacrifice and the crucicentrist narrative.

The need for conversion is inseparable from the acceptance of the evangelical narrative about human sin. It represents two sides of the same coin; the acceptance of the reality of sin and the cross is represented by the action to convert to a different worldview that should transform an individual’s entire life. As Christian Smith comments: “distinction with the world is something more consistently lived and breathed by evangelicals, than consciously contemplated” (1998, 125). The question is no longer what you want to do in life: it is a question of what God’s will for your life is. Evangelicals see themselves as called by God to convert from the former ways and follow a completely new path. In many ways, this is why those individuals who have lived some of the most “sinful” lives in the past but converted to evangelical Christianity
are most celebrated in the community. It is the contrast with the past human nature (now them) and the new identity (now us) that is most appreciated and most magnifying of the crucicentric narrative. From personal conversion comes the need for more public and bold proclamation of religious belief, what I turn to in the final element of missionary activity.

MISSIONARY ACTIVITY

The evangelical narrative of personal salvation comes together in the previous three themes: the universally-applicable message of the cross demands a personal response from every human and is cemented by a theologically orthodox interpretation of the Bible. Once these propositions have been fully embraced by the evangelical mind, the need to make these beliefs public is just an extension of the message itself. Wellman summarizes this well: “The evangelical moral worldview obligates those who believe in this core relationship to Jesus Christ to share this news with others – because it is the truth and it is the only truth that will save one’s soul” (2008, 200).

With the emergence of the New Religious Right, the private world of sin and the sinner became much more of public interest once again- just as it has in different times in American history. Morone talks about this aspect of the “redeemer nation” and American politics: “moral politics rush into the private sphere, denying the boundary between public and private. The lawgiver suddenly has everything to do with vice and virtue. Private behavior becomes a public problem” (2003, 10). This interweaving of public and private spheres is essentially missionary activity as social action – a form of missionary activity intent on transforming the cultural landscape rather than just converting
individuals to be believers. This two-pronged approach of personal evangelism interwoven with cultural change is central to the evangelical right resurgence in American politics. Moral politics seems to work this way in the mindset of the evangelical right; they are simply an extension of the personal commitment to God and fighting against sin in the world. This attitude of “pietism gone public” is very different from the social justice focus of liberal Christians. The mentality is really applying individual moral expectations publicly, rather than reforming institutions to be more just in some fashion.

The shift toward a bold and unashamed partnership between personal evangelism and political advocacy has really come about as the evangelical subculture has become more embattled in the throes of cultural change. The four elements of evangelical identity come together closely in symbolic markers with other groups, including other types of Christians. As Christian Smith points out, “Evangelical boundaries with other types of Christians are most often drawn using the all-important symbolic markers of a ‘personal relationship’ with Jesus Christ and obedience to the authority of the Bible” (1998, 124).

Building on biblical authority to make the case for the theology of sin and the cross, evangelicals easily transition to calls to action—conversion, evangelism, political advocacy, and cultural change. It is seen as an extension of the call to take the good news into the world and transform it for God’s purposes. The call is to purity, responsibility, action, and God’s order. This order— and the implications for appropriate gender responsibilities within it— is what I turn to next.
GENDER ROLES AND CONSERVATIVE EVANGELICALISM

Gender roles and the organization of families (and congregational leadership roles as well) in a more traditional Puritan fashion is a particularly important aspect for conservative evangelicals, and worth some additional attention. Sally Gallagher points out that family has become a “central metaphor for evangelical identity” (2003, xi). I agree strongly that family is at the center of the evangelical mind. The ideal family archetype is a central symbol that animates evangelicals and their concept of social change as well as the preservation of their values. She continues: “Ideas not only of the church as family but of a gendered order that resonates through all creation run deep within this tradition…it also reflects deep beliefs about the nature and person of God, the order of creation, and personal identity” (xi).

The authority and headship of the man in the household is one of the central organizing principles for conservative evangelical family structure. Psychologist and author James Dobson is one of the principal figures shaping the theological positions on the subject. Dobson has focused on financial responsibility, family decision-making, direction and supervision for all family members, and spiritual guidance for children as key roles to be carried out by the father. As Gallagher notes, “Dobson unambiguously affirmed men’s leadership and authority. Hierarchy is necessary for both the psychological and social well-being of the family” (2003, 54). Dobson’s early works focused even more on the financial responsibility of the man for his family; but pragmatically, as more and more households have turned to two working parents due to income needs, Dobson has somewhat softened this position and turned attention to other aspects of male headship and leadership in the home.
Gallagher summarizes the key responsibilities of this model of masculine home leadership:

Although a small number of evangelicals reject the notion of husbands’ headship for a model of marriage based on egalitarian partnership, most evangelicals talk about a husband’s responsibility for family leadership as the foundation of evangelical family identity. The cornerstone in that foundation is his responsibility for decision making. In practice, husbands were described as being responsible for initiating and moderating family discussions, making final decisions, being primary decision makers, or casting the tie-breaking vote on difficult decisions. (Gallagher 2003, 97)

Sara Diamond identifies a moral order around hierarchies, especially gender hierarchies, as one of the key themes of conservative evangelicals (1995, 6).

THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW RELIGIOUS RIGHT

So much of cultural change is about the cycle of action and reaction to perceived shifts in the cultural milieu. The rise of the New Religious Right (largely led by evangelical leaders) is no exception. The rise of the Right is in large part a reaction to the shift in sexual mores and the messages of personal liberation from traditional standards – and sources – of morality that emerged in the late 1960s. As sexual exploration increased, both in bedrooms and in the public eye in the media, religious conservatives hunkered down in their moral bunkers and began to plan a counterattack to shore up the “family” values that they saw as under assault. As they lost hegemony and perceived cultural power in the American landscape, they pushed back against shifting sexual mores and emphasized the permanence of puritanical biblical interpretations against the deluge of cultural change. Much of the narrative highlighted events of social unrest and tried to fully identify cultural change in general with social chaos and a lack of order,
stoking fear in evangelical adherents who value order and propriety as a reflection of God’s purposes in society. As the New Religious Right formed and grew, it centered around a new clarion call of the American Jeremiad- a call to repentance in the nation which identified chaos as a turning of God away from blessing a previously chosen nation (Bercovitch 1978, Morone 2003). As previously discussed, this call came from a distinctly individual point of view- not a call to social justice or a change to structural inequities that one might see on the left; but rather, a call to individual purity and obedience to God that would allow God to forgive a nation as a whole for the sins of the time. This narrative took every act of disorder, tumultuousness, and moral exploration or redefinition in the cultural landscape and redefined each of these events or perspectives as a reflection of God’s judgment on the nation for increasing levels of sinful living and rebellion against God’s ways. This totalizing narrative found fertile psychological ground in the fears of individual evangelicals looking for certainty and stability in the midst of the seismic epistemic and moral shifts of modernity in the early 1970s. As ethical values shifted to a more internal source, conservative evangelicals felt the need to buttress the bulwark of biblical authority against the rising tide of anti-authoritarian thinking.

As the media provided accounts of shifting morality and resistance to events like the Vietnam War, religious conservatives began to develop antipathy toward the individuals and groups represented in this pushback against traditional morality and the status quo. While the primary identity for religious conservatives (and evangelicals in particular) had been a religious one, the call emerged to engage in political action to counter the moral slippage fueled by the perception of a leftward moving political sphere.
Since the cultural moral shift was framed as the consequence of a new threat – an assertive and unashamed political liberalism – religious leaders felt compelled to call for an equally assertive and unashamed political and moral response. Leaders emerged (particularly leading evangelical pastors) to forge the message and lead a counter-offensive campaign against the social change. The conservative movement as a whole was caught up in this moral response to the winds of political change. As Himmelstein notes, “The resurgent radicalism of the 1960s – black rebellion, the student movement, the counterculture, the opposition to the war in Vietnam – shattered the easy consensus that had dominated American politics since the mid-1950s” (1990, 70). Particular theological and political leaders took the lead in shaping the moral agenda and message of the movement. Some of the most influential leaders in the movement were Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, James Dobson, Ralph Reed, D. James Kennedy, Phyllis Schafly, Edwin Feulner, Jr, and Chuck Colson. Falwell, Kennedy, and Robertson were all ministers who projected their messages toward transforming American politics and moral culture. In addition, influential new leaders such as Richard Viguerie, Paul Weyrich, Howard Phillips, Jesse Helms, and John Terry Dolan spearheaded the overall rise of a new and more vibrant and influential political right (Himmelstein 1990). The more political-minded wing of the New Right helped to forge populist political fervor together with evangelical political fervor for the beginnings of a potent coalition. Turning the rhetoric of personal evangelism to the redemption of the public sphere, each of these figures helped to propel the movement forward. The election of Ronald Reagan as US President in 1980 also emboldened the New Religious Right, as they gained more influence over potential Supreme Court picks and had a president who would give them
an audience. Many evangelical leaders and followers switched allegiance from historical commitments to the Democratic party over to new commitments to the Republican party as the Republicans began to take up the mantle of evangelical social issues. Himmelstein points out that the “broader moral resonances” of the social issues provided the most fertile environment for the New Religious Right to really take hold (1990, 108).

Through the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, the influence of the evangelical right grew, as figures such as Southern Baptist leader Al Mohler, presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, and President George W. Bush were endearing figures to evangelicals. From direct mail strategies and mobilizing techniques, evangelicals set a pattern that liberals began to learn from as they organized to promote progressive social change (Fetner 2008). The mobilization efforts of evangelicals were remarkable and helped to propel the movement forward at a rate previously unseen. What made the political mobilization ultimately successful? In The Restructuring of American Religion, Robert Wuthnow states:

At the same time that many influential elements in the mainline denominations were moving to the left, religious conservatives were quietly marshaling their own resources. During the 1950s and 1960s an infrastructure was built that gave religious conservatives a strong set of interdenominational ties, a growing body of skilled leaders trained in evangelical colleges and seminaries, and increasing access to the media. Much of this growth was made possible by the fact that evangelical leaders repudiated the earlier separatism and sectarianism of fundamentalism and its tendencies toward militancy and anti-intellectualism. By the early 1970s, evangelicals had emerged as a distinct segment of the American religious community and had attracted an increasing number of persons who were dissatisfied with the trends at work in the more established denominations. However, this growth also subjected the evangelical community to influences from the larger culture. And it responded in ways that were to alter its public role radically by the end of the 1970s. (12)
By using new techniques being developed in the broader secular culture, religious and political leaders harnessed the power of grassroots change in order to promote the agenda of a return to Judeo-Christian values. Fledgling organizations such as James Dobson’s Focus on the Family grew exponentially and were able to use their mailing lists to coordinate grassroots contacts by members to all levels of state and national government on specific legislation. This highly effective technique magnified the influence of the movement regardless of their actual numbers, even though these were substantial.

THE RHETORIC OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The rise of the New Religious Right – and the evangelical influence within it – flowed out of a fear of cultural change, framed around the idea of the destruction of the family (or their idealized version of it). Conservative evangelicals responded to this fear by returning to themes embedded in their theology: the authority of the Bible, a public pietism, a call to personal responsibility, and a reclamation of God’s order (and obedience to this order). In the next chapter, I will put forward a hypothesis of what these themes are and how they connect directly to the principle animating social issues for conservative evangelicals: same-sex marriage and abortion. I will make an argument that these themes form ideological frames that guide the political worldview of the evangelical right, and I will trace how these frames shape the formation of the identity of self and other in the evangelical mind.
CHAPTER THREE: SHIFTING CONFORMITY THEORY AND THE EVANGELICAL CYCLE OF POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

The theological beliefs of the evangelical right drive the daily lives of the members in the pews. They help to give purpose and meaning to the spiritual path of these parishioners. But the question remains: How do the theological commitments of conservative evangelicals influence their political perspectives? In examining this question, several other questions emerge. How do culture, theology, and political viewpoint interrelate? What view of culture best describes how the theological tenets of conservative evangelicals suffuse their lives? How do conservative evangelicals view the people, groups, and institutions they come in contact with?

In this chapter, I will postulate a model that attempts to explain the moral worldview of the evangelical right and how dedicated political commitments emerge from this worldview. I will look at the symbolic boundaries that protect the cultural commitments of conservative evangelicals and how these boundaries bend and shift. In doing this, I will interlace sociological perspectives on cultural identity formation (Wellman, Swidler, Smith & Emerson, Stark, Emerson & Smith), postulate ideological frames that emerge from conservative evangelical theology, propose ideal types (Weber) that adhere to these frames, and examine the engagement strategies use to apply these types to others through their social and political activism.
MORAL WORLDVIEW AND SUBCULTURAL IDENTITY

In framing my model, I am using a particular concept of culture proposed by James Wellman in *Evangelical vs. Liberal* (2008). Wellman’s model looks at subcultures from the point of view of their *moral worldview*. He defines a moral worldview as “a narrative system of symbols that guides and shapes action and produces truth claims” (35). Wellman sees religion itself as a force that is constantly creating and negotiating social and symbolic boundaries, and this process forms tensions and ends up including and excluding people and groups of people (34). For this view of culture, subcultures are defined as embodying a “distinctive moral worldview with values, actions, and goals” (25). The conservative evangelical subculture is very effective at drawing and redrawing these social boundaries in a way that develops and highlights relational tension. In other words, the moral worldview not only shapes ethics and values for the subculture but draws the clear symbolic boundary lines between who is in – and who is out.

Wellman uses the term *evangelical* to describe conservative Protestant parishioners, but I argue that the term tends to be too broad due to the diversity of self-identifying evangelical church-goers.⁴ I prefer the term conservative evangelicals as a more exacting description – referring to the theological conservatism of the largely white unified subculture. David Bebbington’s (1989) quadrilateral provides a clear delineation

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⁴ James Wellman uses the term *evangelical* as “the overarching term for conservative Protestant church-goers, to include Pentecostal and charismatic Christians as well as Christians in the American fundamentalist tradition” (2008, p. 8). I use the term *conservative evangelical* or *evangelical right* similarly to David Gushee’s (2008) description of the evangelical right:center in American politics.
of attributes that distinguish the key theological tenets of this subculture. Bebbington’s quadrilateral delineates four beliefs emphasized in evangelicalism:

- **Biblicism** (seeing the Scriptures as the sole authority for belief and action),
- **crucicentrism** (the belief in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross as atonement for human sin),
- **conversion** (the need for a personal decision to follow Jesus Christ), and
- **missionary activity** (the obligation to share with others this need for conversion).

(Wellman 2008, 11)

I argue that the evangelical right maintains high conformity around interpretations of these four beliefs, bringing interpretations of the Bible and the cross into their sociopolitical views.  

I utilize Wellman’s concept of the moral worldview and draw on two other key sociological theories in my approach: Smith and Emerson’s (1998) subcultural identity theory and Ann Swidler’s (1986) theory of the cultural tool kit. In *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (1998), Christian Smith suggests a theory that seeks to explain the strength of evangelical Protestantism in American culture. He claims that evangelicalism flourishes in an embattled atmosphere, thriving “on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat” (Smith & Emerson, 1998, p. 89). In subcultural identity theory, constructed and reinforced cultural boundaries function to help portray other groups as threats to the existence of the conservative evangelical subculture, which produces deep tension within it (Smith & Emerson 1998, 97).

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5 While “end times” eschatology is an important feature for some portions of the evangelical right, major groups such as the Southern Baptist Convention place very little emphasis on eschatology in their primary theological teachings. Because this theological element is not central to a large number of conservative evangelicals, I have not included it as a principal identifying aspect.
In the cultural tool kit theory, Ann Swidler claims that people have different cultural tools from their experiences choose the tools to use that best fit a particular situation:\(^6\)

The symbolic experiences, mythic lore, and ritual practices of a group or society create moods and motivations, ways of organizing experience and evaluating reality, modes of regulating conduct, and ways of forming social bonds, which provide resources for constructing strategies of action. (Swidler 1986, 284)\(^7\)

Since conservative evangelicals develop a mobilizing tension by portraying themselves as embattled victims of “them” (various versions of the outside, attacking culture), they create a continual sense of threat from those outside of their cultural boundaries – a sense of threat that is sustained by the continual anxiety-producing rhetoric of elites. This sense of continually unsettled embattledness is interwoven into a rhetoric of victimization from the evangelical right: a belief that these communities are actually victims of a hostile secular American culture (Watson 1997). I combine

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\(^6\) Wellman claims that his “onion” model of evangelical identity differs from Swidler’s toolkit model, but they are not necessarily incompatible. When you take into account the limited number of cultural tools available to each individual, Swidler’s model can complement the onion model of culture rather than present a completely different perspective of culture.

\(^7\) While Swidler’s theory works well for most cultural settings, she also makes a key distinction in her article, asserting that the cultural tool kit model works differently in different periods of time. In times of settled lives, “cultural resources are diverse…and normally groups and individuals call upon these resources selectively, bringing to bear different styles and habits of action in different situations” (Swidler, 1986, p. 280). However, when times are “unsettled” and tumultuous, ideological activism can take priority, creating a mobilizing tension that enables culture to directly shape systematic habits of action, seeking not multiple answers, but “one unified answer to the question of how human beings should live. In conflict with other cultural models, these cultures are coherent because they must battle to dominate the world-views, assumptions, and habits of their members” (Swidler, 1986, p. 279). Emerson and Smith further build on Swidler’s framework of the cultural “toolkit” in *Divided by Faith*, delineating particular cultural tools that evangelicals employ.
Swidler’s insight about the difference between unsettled and settled lives with Smith’s theory of subcultural identity in order to support my thesis that ideological frames shape the conservative evangelical political worldview: it is a continually unsettled subculture wherein ideology is frequently enlisted as a means of creating tension. Those who attend church on a regular basis tend to be most connected to the ideological frames emerging from this subculture due to the level of exposure to the ideology they regularly receive.

The moral worldview of the evangelical right is deeply rooted in specific concepts of biblical interpretation and literalism. While regional, racial, and gender differences certainly make an impact on the subculture, I argue that theology is at the root of most of the cultural boundary lines that emerge – and that ideological “frames” that emerge from the theology are the key to understanding the alignment of political views within the subculture. Same-sex marriage and abortion emerge as pivotal issues for evangelical right because of how theology is interpreted. I assert that these issues come to the forefront of the evangelical right subculture because the issues signify complete nonconformity to three ideological frames that shape the subculture’s moral worldview. I propose three ideological frames: 1) moral purity/innocence (Balmer 1989, Diamond 1998, Liebman, et al 1993, Marsden 1990, B. Moore 2000, Morone 2003, Watson 1997, Wills 1990), 2) personal responsibility (Emerson & Smith 2000, Himmelstein 1990, Morone 2003, Watson 1997), and 3) obedience to authority (Bartkowski 1995, Bartkowski & Ellison 1995, Bartkowski 2000, Hunter 1987, Hunter 1991, Wilcox 1992), due to the theological significance and cultural inculcation of these ideas in the conservative evangelical subculture.
MORAL PURITY/INNOCENCE

The emphasis on moral purity in the evangelical right, especially around sexuality, connects with roots deep in the Protestant reformation, including reformers like John Calvin. In *Moral Purity and Persecution in History* (2000), Barrington Moore examines the important connection between Christianity (particularly Calvinism), sexuality, and persecution. Moore shows how Protestant reformer John Calvin wraps the concept of moral purity in the practice of sexuality:

> In his major text Calvin devoted a great deal of attention to the concept of purity. He did so in very much the same way as the Old Testament. In both, purity had to do mainly with sex. Religiously approved sexual behavior was pure; so was virginity or complete continence, according to Calvin… ‘(God) requires of us purity and chastity.’ Thus purity and chastity are synonymous. (B. Moore 2000, p. 36)

Moore points to the biblical figure of Adam as an image of evil for Calvinism, a man corrupted from moral purity by giving in to temptation in the Garden of Eden. Moore compares this to Catholic understandings (in the Hugenots), identifying similar discourse around moral purity and how this discourse encourages hatred and persecution of those identified as impure. Conservative evangelicals embrace the focus on sexual purity and tend to demonize and exclude those whom they identify as outside that moral and social boundary. The singularity of belief as a form of purity of thought, and the singularity of moral action in sexual purity are very important to maintaining the boundaries of the subculture.

Sara Diamond (1998) talks about the close connection between images of pure sexuality and the conservative evangelical worldview directly. One of her most potent
examples involves the male evangelical group “Promise Keepers.” In reviewing some of their literature, she addresses the issue:

Another article by a Christian psychology professor titled ‘Sex under Control’ assures readers that ‘most Christian men face a lifelong struggle controlling their sexuality.’ He notes that the use of pornography, sexual fantasies, and masturbation are particularly difficult to avoid. (Diamond 1998, 232)

The obsession with eliminating sexual fantasies and sins that begin in the mind permeates the evangelical literature for men. Diamond points out that the messages create an issue for the evangelical men involved in Promise Keepers: “Archaic attitudes about sex set the Promise Keepers far afield from the secular culture and make it inevitable that PK men will have to struggle to repress their responses to ubiquitous sexual imagery” (232).

Diamond relates the need to control sexuality – and families – to the opposition to same-sex relationships. Thoughts about sexuality need to be controlled, by both men and authority figures – which tend to be one and the same. She puts it this way: “Variability in family relations means that the behavior and thoughts of men and women – especially women – cannot be tightly controlled by central authority” (1998, 172). In this example, she links sexual purity and authority in the evangelical mind. This is a frequent theme in much of conservative evangelical rhetoric and literature.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The concept of personal responsibility and accountability to God for individual actions is at the heart of much of conservative evangelical theology. Emerson and Smith (2000) talk about this in their concept of accountable freewill individualism: “White conservative Protestants are accountable freewill individualists. Unlike progressives, for
them individuals exist independent of structures and institutions, have freewill, and are individually accountable for their own actions.” (76-77) In this brand of evangelical theology, the individual is totally responsible for his or her own sins, and conservative evangelicals tend to always interpret social ills as distinctly individual problems; issues that can only be solved by individual changes and individual strategies for making change. I argue that conservative evangelicals essentially see not only individual people, but also organizations, groups, and nations as individuals as well. Thus, these institutions or groups can be evaluated through the same lens of individual personal responsibility.

The lens can even turn to an unborn human being. While it may seem odd to refer to the fetus as “responsible,” I take the concept of responsibility and project it to the evangelical understanding of the “unborn child.” This connects to George Lakoff’s discussion of responsibility related to the “strict father morality” of the conservative religious worldview presented in Moral Politics (2002) and Don’t Think of an Elephant (2004). He links conservative morality (using an analysis of James Dobson’s rhetoric) to the concept of appropriate “dependence” and “independence” – total dependence for the youngest children building to independence in maturity as an adult. Being independent (and rebellious) as a child is considered immoral and irresponsible (and a rebellion against God’s ways); in the same way, being dependent as an adult is considered immoral and irresponsible (Lakoff relates this to conservative attitudes about social programs). Thus, there is a sense of appropriate dependence within the concept of personal responsibility in the evangelical mind.
OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

One part of obedience to authority is the need to conform to the tenets of a specific belief system in order to gain acceptance into a cultural community. Literally understood as “right belief,” orthodoxy has played a major role in the development of most of the major world faiths, especially in the monotheistic ones. Rodney Stark examines the importance of conformity and orthodoxy in monotheism, pointing out how Christian claims against the heretics and the Jews waxed and waned throughout the Church’s history, depending on the level of demands for conformity and orthodoxy at the time (2001, 157). Demands for orthodoxy permeate various expressions of Christian theology in the West, especially in conservative evangelicalism (Bebbington 1989, Diamond 1998, Hunter 1987, Morone 2003, Smith & Emerson 1998) and also in more marginal militant movements such as the Christian Identity movement (Burlein 2002). Orthodoxy permeates the history of monotheism in particular, and conservative evangelical theology tends to focus heavily on the jealousy of the monotheistic God.

The image of God as the heavenly “father” brings in the aspect of gender roles into the structure of obedience. The role of the child is focused around dependence within the conservative evangelical family structure. Absolute obedience to parents and is sacrosanct in conservative evangelical childhood education. Patterns of discipline are designed to inculcate the child with a need for evangelical values and acceptance, and, ultimately, create a need for personal salvation.

Bartkowski and Ellison point out that one of the central features of evangelical parenting is the “belief that human nature – including the nature of children – is fundamentally sinful, and the related concern with punishment and salvation” (1995, 22).
In the conservative evangelical parent-child relationship, authority is what matters and independent thought is a threat to authority. Moral authority is found in the biblical text, and respect for the authority of parents is understood to be connected to the development of respect for authority outside the home. Children must learn respect for authority in order to respect “superiors” outside the family, and also for them to be able to operate as “superiors” in future leadership roles (Bartkowski 1995). While Gallagher (2003) and Wilcox (1998) have discussed some shifts in gender roles as well as “positive encouragement” aspects of conservative evangelical parenting styles, the structured patriarchy of the model family remains central to the conservative evangelical worldview. The principal responsibility for conservative evangelical children is obedience; obedience to God, and obedience to parents as the way to show obedience to God. Maintaining obedience is the way to maintain order; and the maintenance of order is central to the evangelical worldview.

Conservative evangelical gender hierarchy is about the preservation of the traditional family structure in a world that is seen through the lens of sin and chaos. Personal stories of conversion to the faith are framed around a realization of “the disconnection of culture and society from God’s order for the world” (Brasher 1998, 38). The subculture becomes a shield against the sin and disobedience of the outside world. Evangelical leaders focus on the immorality of the demise of the family structure:

The traditional family and marriage as defined from the dawn of time are among the few institutions that have, in fact, stood the test of time. If we now choose to stand idly by while these institutions are overthrown, the family as it has been known for millennia will be gone. And with its demise will come chaos such as the world has never seen before. (Dobson 2004, 18)
The focus on masculine, authoritarian leadership extends to congregations; conservative evangelicals take the gender hierarchy seriously enough to not allow women ministers or leaders in their pulpits, particularly where strict biblical literalism reigns supreme (Balmer 1989, 23). The desire to challenge God’s ordained order is seen as an affront to biblical and divine authority by conservative evangelicals, and this affront is the essence of independent disobedience when God is calling for dependent obedience.

SHIFTING CONFORMITY THEORY

Taking into account the three ideological frames, I make the case that nonconformity to these frames is not a binary: it is one option of three, which results in shifting conformity to a subcultural identity. While western Protestant thought tends toward dualistic formulations, the theological evangelism of the evangelical right works so diligently toward the conversion of “the other” to the conservative evangelical worldview it complicates the way dualism is understood. While Christian Smith’s theory describes subcultural identity theory as having a dualistic, “us vs. them” boundary system, my theory sees a more complex interaction pattern with the public sphere. I argue that ideological frames do guide action, and that nonconformity to these frames is but one option of three. My model suggests that, instead of a strictly dualistic set of choices, the element of potentiality relating to the centrality of the evangelistic mission necessitates that evangelicals have three different classification categories that govern

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8 I also agree with Sally Gallagher (2003) that ideology restricts the cultural tools that can be chosen by evangelicals, but I describe how ideological frames guide the process in a different way than her description.
their actions toward other individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions in the public sphere. I designate these categories as: 1) **conforming** (or **honorable**), 2) **nonconforming** (or **shameful**), and 3) **potentially conforming** (or **redeemable**). These three categories are distinct from one another, but a reclassification of individuals, institutions, organizations, or groups is continually occurring among the categories. The classification categories serve as mental symbolic boundaries for designating the difference between the self and the other. This three-part delineation is similar to Eviatar Zerubavel’s (1993) three “sectors” for social segregation/social exclusion in *The Fine Line*. In Zerubavel’s concept, social boundaries for moral acts or group inclusion are set between the *appreciated/included*, the *indifferent/tolerable*, and the *intolerable/excluded*. Zerubavel uses examples of particular sexual acts as moral boundaries that vary depending on group identity.

Individuals, institutions, or groups can be seen as not conforming to norms of purity, responsibility or obedience, but yet still redeemable in the future. The future potentiality allows the other to be viewed in a favorable light as a target of evangelistic endeavor rather than someone or something to be avoided. Once there is active resistance seen to the conversion of worldview, however, the other is likely to shift into the nonconforming, or shameful, category. This wraps the concept of shame (and innate badness of self) into being different from the dominant subculture. Nonconforming people or groups tend to be shunned by evangelicals, and defensiveness overshadows the proclivity to evangelize these individuals. Conforming people or groups are accepted into the community readily due to the cohesion in worldview to the ideological frames.
Figure 1 illustrates how the shifting conformity between categories relates to the ideological frames:

Figure 1: Ideological Frames and Shifting Conformity
From the ideological frames, how do we determine which issues get magnified in the political and moral arena? While institutions, groups, and individuals are classified, how do public issues come to the forefront of the evangelical mind? The key to this designation is understanding the centrality of the heteronormative family archetype to the evangelical mind. Evangelicals see the family as the basic building block of social structure, the most sacred institution in the eyes of God, and the most important goal of social change. Preservation of an idealized form of family is the central story of conservative evangelical thought. So the questions to ask regarding the ideological frames of conservative evangelicals are reflected best in figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Conformity and Issue Selection

IDEAL TYPES AND THE CYCLE OF POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

By asking questions around adherence and deviance from moral norms as well as the level of existential threat, we can begin to determine which issues will emerge as the key political issues for mobilization. So why do abortion and same-sex marriage emerge
as the seminal issues on the evangelical right? I propose that there are particular discursive symbols within the rhetoric around these topics that function as “ideal types” relating to the idealized family norm for conservative evangelicals (Weber 1949). These are: the *unborn child*, the *homosexual*, and the *institution of marriage*. I contend that each of these symbols or ideas is socially constructed by the evangelical right and aligns with my proposed ideological frames – as either an ideal *positive* or ideal *negative* symbol of family morality. I suggest that in the conservative evangelical mind, the *unborn child* signifies a complete purity and innocence, responsibility, and obedience to (dependence on) God. The fetus, or unborn child, then, takes on an almost “holy” position in the moral worldview of conservative evangelicals. An abortion of an unborn child is then seen to be the destruction of something truly holy, pure, godly, and the *most* valuable life to be preserved – and from this perspective, the most offensive act of the destruction of life that is possible.

On the other hand, the *homosexual* (and relationships between *homosexuals*) signifies complete impurity, shamefulness, irresponsibility, and disobedience to God to the conservative evangelical mind. It is the binary opposite of the kind of holy lifestyle conservative evangelicals believe that they are called to live. This relates to the third and final symbol, the *institution of marriage*, which signifies a structure that transforms what would be impure, shameful, irresponsible, and disobedient acts (outside of heterosexual marriage) into a sexuality that is completely pure, innocent, responsible, and obedient to God. Through this symbol system, marriage essentially becomes a force for the sanctification of heterosexual sexuality – a “baptism” of sex that makes it instantly pure after the ceremonial exchanging of vows before God. From this perspective, the union of
a same-sex couple is seen as a violation of the very function of marriage regarding sexuality. It is seen as a perversion of the holiness and purpose of the marriage bed.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the ideal types in relation to the frames as applied to the archetype of family:

Figure 3: Ideal Types of the Ideological Frames
I contend that these three ideal types of the ideological frames are the reason that same-sex marriage and abortion have become the central political issues for the evangelical right. The symbols of the unborn child and the institution of marriage represent the closest pictures of the ideal family as framed by innocence, purity, obedience, and responsibility. The symbol of the homosexual (in juxtaposition to marriage) or the physical threat of fetal annihilation provide the highest levels of threat. Combining these elements mobilizes the evangelical right, then, around same-sex marriage and abortion as the preeminent political issues. Emerging from the theology to ideological frames, the ideal types drive passion around the protection of the holy from destruction by the ungodly.
Ultimately, these elements all come together to form a cycle of political mobilization around public issues that resonate with the ideal family archetype. The evangelical mind assesses issues through the lens of the ideal form of family, embodied in the three ideological frames of moral purity/innocence, personal responsibility, and obedience to authority. This image of family, combined with salient public issues, becomes a litmus test for the definition of the self and the other, as expressed by the trinary categories of *us*, *them*, and *potentially us*. As perceived shifts in conformity by an individual, group, or institution occur, then that classification is re-evaluated. Ultimately, those issues that continue to be assessed and re-assessed as most closely adhering to the ideological frames and the family archetype continue the cycle of mobilization. Figure 5 below illustrates this process.

Figure 5: Evangelical Cycle of Political Mobilization
CLASSIFICATION AND DIFFERING ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

After classification of the self and the other, what patterns of engagement do evangelicals use to determine their actions? The patterns of action members of the subculture make toward others vary. The evangelical penchant for a posture of individual conversion means that there is not indifference to the potentially conforming, but instead, there is an active engagement in conversion strategies. This emphasis on prospective conversion to conformity affects the cultural tools that evangelicals choose in relation to individuals, groups, or institutions that are designated as potentially conforming. In other words, the categories serve two functions: 1) they enforce orthodoxy to the ideological frames, and 2) they differentiate potential candidacy for orthodoxy to these frames.

Utilizing engagement strategies of inclusion, exclusion, or conversion, members of the evangelical right unconsciously classify and react toward individuals, groups, and institutions within the broader culture. In relation to external (meaning non-evangelical or non-Christian) individuals, groups, or institutions, one’s view of oneself is always considered as conforming to ideological frames.

Inside the pews of the evangelical church, classification of both the individual self and the other can still shift between the categories. Evangelicals relate experiences of incredible love and compassion within a church community. When they are inside their community, evangelical believers focus on the idea that “all have sinned” and that no one has “arrived” yet; humility is preached toward other Christians. Therefore, within the community, both the self and the other are seen as potentially conforming, allowing for tremendous grace to be offered for slips of sinfulness. This dynamic also explains the differences in reaction when ministers are caught in acts of “sin,” versus those outside the
church caught in similar acts who become targets of vitriol by the evangelical community.

What is seen as hypocrisy by some outside the church is in fact a shift of classification – for both the self and the other. In this way, a compassionate response to the internal sinner, but not the external one, is entirely consistent to the evangelical mind. In cases where the other is considered conforming or redeemable, inclusion is warranted. In cases where the other is considered potentially conforming, conservative evangelicals utilize a strategy of conversion toward the other.

For example, when conservative evangelicals are attempting to evangelize other individuals, they consider themselves to be conforming, while the other individuals are only potentially conforming. Groups such as Jews and Catholics are typically seen as potentially conforming, necessitating a conversion strategy that allows for some common purpose. This also illustrates how groups can shift within the evangelical worldview; in the past, conservative evangelicals frequently considered Catholics to be nonconforming, reflecting a historical shift from conservative evangelical hostility toward Catholics to an agenda of common political attitudes and goals with Catholic groups on some issues (Wuthnow 1988).

In cases where the other is considered nonconforming, conservative evangelicals utilize one of two strategies: active exclusion (strategies including strong disparagement, political attack, etc.) or passive exclusion (strategies including withdrawal, non-engagement, or potential group separatism). For instance, when conservative evangelicals encounter an individual who is strongly committed to a cause they vehemently oppose, they will frequently reclassify the other individual from potentially
conforming to nonconforming and seek to either disassociate with the person (passive exclusion) or express strong opposition to them (active exclusion).

Alternate engagement strategies also offer new insight into differences in conservative evangelical views toward the government. Separatist conservative evangelical groups tend to view governmental institutions as totally nonconforming (passive exclusion); while groups in the New Christian Right engage forcefully in political advocacy (conversion) in order to redeem a potentially conforming institution. This explains how different conservative evangelical groups with similar theologies can reach very different conclusions about political engagement. Figure 6 illustrates the different engagement strategies in relation to categorization.

![Figure 6: Conservative Evangelical Engagement Strategies](image-url)
Christian Smith (1998) argues that one of the distinctions between fundamentalists and evangelicals is that fundamentalists withdraw from social and political activism while evangelicals consistently engage. I disagree with his assessment. As I have detailed here, evangelicals both engage and withdraw, but this engagement is based on decision-making that is largely dependent upon their current classification for the individual, group, or institution they are considering. This is an important distinction in my perspective of the evangelical moral worldview.

TENSION AND CONFLICT

The fact that the evangelical right is so driven by a sense of victimhood from the outside culture means that no matter what political losses come in the arena of same-sex marriage or abortion, it simply motivates conservative evangelicals to fight for the cause even more passionately. Each loss of social hegemony further underscored the narrative of being under moral assault. While the cultural tools for fighting back may vary, especially by region of the United States, the sense of embattledness continues to spur on the resistance to the advance of same-sex or abortion rights. The victimhood and grievances of the evangelical right have been a rallying cry to nurture the sense of threat around same-sex marriage and abortion as issues for action.

In the next chapter, I take a deeper look at the ideological frames, what they mean, and how they relate to political mobilization for evangelicals. I particularly relate these to the sense of social crisis that pervades the evangelical subculture and how the perceived loss of cultural values drives the rigidity of the formation of these frames.
CHAPTER FOUR: WHEN THEOLOGY BECOMES IDEOLOGY

The moral decline of a nation that was once great and blessed by God – this is a core message seen in the rhetoric of the leading figures in the evangelical right over the last several decades. It is a call to arms to defend morality, virtue, and right living in the face of an advancing and insipid immorality that threatens Christianity and the nation as a whole. This selective call back to the Bible and to biblical authority continues to lead conservative evangelicals to church on a regular, often weekly basis. These strong and committed believers have flocked to churches and mega-churches where I believe a transformation has taken place; theology has directly transformed into political ideology. In this chapter, I will explore in more depth my hypothesis about the ideological frames that I believe are at work in the mind of the 21st century conservative evangelical.

What is an ideological frame? As mentioned in Chapter 1, Soper captures the concept of ideology well when he defines ideology as the set of “values, ideas and beliefs which gives meaning to the social experiences of adherents, defines group objectives and legitimates group formation” (1994, 1-2). Ideological frames, then, are a set of thought frames that guide and limit the choices available to the mind and are structured out of these values, ideas, and beliefs. They direct and restrict the number of rational choices for the committed evangelical, in this case, to choices that follow directly from the translated theological values. I argue that these frames take theological belief and guide
it directly over into political belief and political action related to same-sex marriage and abortion.

I believe that the focus of political action by members of the evangelical right is governed by three ideological frames which dominate their way of viewing the world. These frames are: 1) moral purity/innocence, 2) personal responsibility, and 3) obedience to authority. I contend that both important issue selection and level of political passion are directly tied to these frames, which are derived from theological themes embedded in the conservative evangelical core religious worldview.

While I touched briefly on the three proposed frames in Chapter 3, I will explore them much more fully in this chapter, before moving on to test and examine whether these hypothesized frames may be present in evangelical rhetoric in Chapter 5, especially related to the subjects of same-sex marriage and abortion.

A NATION UNDER THREAT

To look at America today is to witness a nation struggling against forces as dangerous as any military foe it has ever faced. The threats, however, come not from without but from within. Families are disintegrating, fathers are abandoning their children, abortion is the most common medical procedure in the nation, and young people attend schools that are not safe and in which they do not learn. In the inner city illegitimacy is rampant, drug deals are openly conducted on streetcorners, hopelessness is the norm, and children are shot by marauding carloads of juvenile gang members. (Reed 1996, 9)

In this quote from Active Faith, early Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed perfectly captures the embattled tenor of rhetoric from the evangelical right over the last 35 years. The narrative of national decline and departure from the ways of God permeates pulpits and political speeches on the right. In the passage above, we see multiple pieces of this
narrative of internal threat: the disintegration of the traditional family and a rebellion against conformity to God’s ways and order in the family; the loss of safety for our children; a reference to “illegitimacy” as a catch-all for personal irresponsibility in both sexual activity and parenting; a focus on the failure of fathers in the patriarchal order (as ordained by God), as they abandon children. Reed paints a bleak picture of American culture that serves as a foundational and fearful narrative that fuels the Christian Coalition’s agenda for reforming America through the political system.

In this brief excerpt, we see all three of the themes I propose are ideological frames for the evangelical right. The loss of moral purity and innocence in the culture is the major theme of this passage. References to abandonment of children and illegitimacy highlight the theme of personal responsibility and how the evangelical right paints all social issues as issues of personal shortcoming. And the focus on the breakdown of society, the disintegration of the family, and the importance of masculinity and fatherhood points to an overarching patriarchal narrative: peace comes when there is obedience to God’s ordained structures and authority (family, church) and chaos results when there is rebellion against God’s ways and God’s ordained authorities. I move on to look closer at these three hypothesized frames now: moral purity/innocence, personal responsibility, and obedience to authority.

THE LOSS OF INNOCENCE

America’s loss of innocence, holiness, righteousness, and moral purity is perhaps the greatest message of the day from both theological and political leaders on the evangelical right. Within this conservative evangelical imperative, perhaps the most
prevalent tendency is the need to execute sexual control – control over the sexual choices – and orientations – of religious adherents in the churches. This God-given demand for moral purity saturates the messages from evangelical pulpits on a weekly basis. American evangelical Christianity has a strong tradition which emphasizes the need to continually control and repress the natural human impulse for sexual activity. A biblically-framed battle between the “spirit” and the “flesh” is a frequent theme of evangelical sermons and translates into sex education messages at home for evangelical children as well as sex education school curriculum battles across the nation, and particularly in the Bible Belt. The themes of sin and repentance continually get viewed through the lens of sexuality- while there may be other sins and transgressions that humans do against a holy God, in the theology of the evangelical right, that divine holiness tends to be viewed as an ideal type of sexual purity.

In politics, the tradition of the American Jeremiad shows up across centuries of political rhetoric (Bercovitch 1978). The idea that America is a divinely chosen nation that has fallen away from the straight and narrow path, especially in its sexual morality, suffuses a particular religio-political worldview. From this perspective, America is being called back to a former pure and sanctified morality, and the blessings of God will be withheld until the country obeys God and returns to its former pure and holy ways (or idealized and imagined pure and holy former self). The narrative of America as God’s chosen nation that hinges on faithfulness to God’s character and will has resurged in the rhetoric of the evangelical right over the past several decades. The idea of a broken covenant with God is powerful; it provides the backdrop for narratives of American
exceptionalism as well as a divine character to calls for personal moral change and sanctified living.

In addition to the theme of repentance, the call to moral purity is interlaced with a sense of grievance, threat, and besiegement. I highlighted some of these themes in chapter 1: the evangelical right finds meaning and passion in the idea that they are under siege by a constant deterioration of cultural values and forces that are opposing the will of God (Himmelstein 1990, Diamond 1998, Fetner 2008, Watson 1997). We also see that in Ralph Reed’s rhetoric above. The sense of being under attack creates fear and drives a need for a consistent, uniform, and tenacious response to the perceived threat. This helps to solidify the ideological frame in the minds of believers and makes it difficult to challenge. The symbolic morality of refraining from sexual sin becomes an imperative as a way to oppose the continually advancing immorality in the outside culture. The narrative is one of advancing moral decline; the only way to oppose this decline is to recommit to wholesome “family values” and a return to a time of innocence in America when God blessed the country and there were fewer problems. This imagined time of previous innocence is really a counter-memory (Burlein 2002) that serves to inspire a resistance to cultural change and a rallying cry for a politics of blame and scapegoating. By framing a narrative of cultural decline, leaders can vilify the agents and factors to blame for this decline. Christian Smith (1998) also discusses how this happens: “Viewed from the perspective of committed faith, the relative success of a religious group might be understood as the result of spiritual consequences or the blessing of God” (67). He goes on to describe how the sense of perceived threat generated by religious leaders can create cohesion and strength within a subgroup’s identity:
Certainly, many religious elites – no less than secular ones – tend to fabricate enemies and exaggerate the strengths and threat of their perceived opponents, precisely in order to bolster members’ commitment, solidarity, and financial contributions. But whether fabricated and exaggerated, or actual and factual, recognizing that outgroup conflict typically builds ingroup strength helps us to understand better the bases of the persistence of religion in the pluralistic, modern world. (Smith 1998, 116)

The evangelical right’s call to moral purity and a return to innocence is almost always wrapped in this sense of threat from the impure and corrupting surrounding culture. It is a call to arms against the steadily advancing immorality that threatens the very core of being an evangelical Christian – and a true American as well.

In *What If America Were Christian Again*, evangelical pastor D. James Kennedy captures this idea very succinctly:

> In less than forty years, our culture has gone from the strong family values of a society with a Christian consensus to a society that glorifies violence, illicit sex, and rebellion. We have severed ourselves from the roots of what made us great in the first place. We have gone from *Leave it to Beaver* to *Beavis and Butthead* in some thirty to forty years. (2003, 3-4)

This quote from Kennedy echoes the narrative we have seen: disorder, sex, and a rebellion against authority threaten values that are framed not only as family values, but also as the essence of what it meant to be American- a need to return to a “Christian consensus” that supposedly previously existed in American society. In this case, the idealization of largely the post-World War II monolithic American culture (here framed as the time of *Leave it to Beaver*) wraps morality, purity, and innocence in the vintage garb of 1950’s patriarchal, white American society. This provides an even more concrete idealized memory from the past to point to as a time of peace and prosperity. It whitewashes and ignores the social injustices of the time period and pretends that it was a utopian time of God’s blessing for believers and for America.
In *Hellfire Nation*, Morone (2003) explores some of these tendencies in American political culture as well. As he describes well, “Visions of vice and virtue define the American community” (2003, 4). The politics of sin has been a strong theme throughout American history, whether focused on sexuality or on things like the temperance movement. Ultimately, these two themes share the common vision of bodily holiness and purity. The idea that the human body is “God’s temple” suffuses evangelical theology and merges into narratives about appropriate substances to drink, eat, or smoke much less what sexual partners one should have. This idea of *appropriateness* – right things and wrong things to expose the body to – is very important to this mentality. Sex and marriage must fit into this space of appropriateness and must be controlled at all costs. As Morone says about these: “Sex and marriage mark the intimate frontier between us and them” (17). By making sexuality the designator of us and them, leaders on the evangelical right are able to exercise control over the behavior of members of their worldview. If one deviates from the sexual norm, one risks becoming *them* to family, church, and community. This potential rejection is a powerful motivator for orthodoxy and orthopraxy and provides a substantial amount of control over the behavior of evangelical adherents.

Prominent evangelical ministry leader Jerry Bridges talks about these concepts of self-control, moral purity, holiness, and the human body. Consider this passage from *The Pursuit of Holiness*:

Our physical bodies and natural appetites were created by God and are not sinful in themselves. Nevertheless, if left uncontrolled, we will find our bodies becoming “instruments of wickedness” rather than “instruments of righteousness” (Romans 6:13). We will be pursuing the “cravings of sinful man” (1 John 2:16) instead of holiness. If we watch ourselves closely, we can see how often we eat
and drink just to gratify physical desire; how often we lie in bed in the morning simply because we don’t “feel” like getting up when we should; how often we give in to immoral looks and thoughts simply to satisfy the sin-tainted sex drive within us. (2006, 107-108)

The “sin-tainted sex drive” must be controlled- both through the discipline of the self and the accountability of the church community. Within conservative evangelical rhetoric, there is a constant theme of control and accountability for one’s thoughts - as well as one’s actions - within God’s divine will. Bridges also echoes a theme here that Morone pointed out: the body as a temple of God. He frames this as bodily contrast of instruments – instruments of wickedness or instruments of righteousness. This stark dualistic worldview of the human condition and sin itself is typical of the evangelical mindset.

Other outspoken conservative evangelicals such as Southern Baptist leader Al Mohler also decry the growing openness about sexuality in the culture. In Desire and Deceit, Mohler states: “Sex has lost its public shamefulness; moral boundaries have been pulled down in the name of moral “progress”; and overt sexuality now drives much of our entertainment, advertising, and cultural conversation” (2008, 14). In talking about the sin of lust, he continues:

Tracing the idea of lust through Western thought, (Simon) Blackburn rejects the common association of lust with excess. Lust is not really about excessive desire, argues Blackburn, but rather a desire for sexual pleasure as an end in itself…Sexual desire for its own sake is sexual desire stripped of the Creators glory and stolen from its moral context. What Blackburn celebrates, Christianity rightly condemns…. (Mohler 2008, 15)

In this passage, Mohler attacks the idea that sexual craving and desire should be the end goal of sexual encounters. He sees this idea as counter to the moral context of God’s order and the institution of marriage itself. To seek pleasure above God’s call to holy
living is seen as one of the deadly sins. Mohler’s narrative attacks an open expression of sexual freedom as a threat to America and to the spread of the Christian message and culture.

Moral purity and innocence are powerful ideas within the movement, and with the call to live an individual life of purity comes the call to live a life of *personal responsibility*.

RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

What does it mean to be personally responsible within the conservative evangelical worldview? What about systemic social and cultural explanations for societal problems? Due to its emphasis on individual repentance and conversion and the call to individual relationship with God, conservative evangelical theology tends to reject systemic explanations for social problems. The evangelical reading of the Bible places a heavy emphasis on the responsibility of the individual for his or her own actions and the idea that each individual will be accountable to God at some future date. As mentioned in chapter 3, Emerson and Smith (2000) have a concept they call *accountable freewill individualism* when they talk about white conservative Protestants in American culture. This is that same mindset that discounts systemic explanations for problems because they see individuals as existing outside of institutions, structures, and systems (76). They trace this tradition within evangelical thought back to the Free Church tradition after the sixteenth-century Reformation and the Great Awakenings and fundamentalist movements that railed against Social Gospel teachings (77). The most important aspect of this freewill-individualist worldview, however, is the accountability aspect of this personal
responsibility: “Individuals do not simply have the freewill to make the choices they deem best. They are individually accountable to family, other people, and, most important to God for their freely made choices” (77). It is a black and white choice between right and wrong through this mentality. Divine will for individual action trumps all. From this worldview, sin simply exists entirely separately from social structures and inequities. Social ills are framed as acts of irresponsibility by individual actors on a neutral stage with two choices: be obedient to God’s ways or be disobedient to God’s ways. Sin is seen as an individual problem between an individual sinner and a holy and judging God. There is a contempt toward more liberal theologies that consider power relations or the social ethics of poverty or other areas. Whether they emphasize issues of race, gender, or class, theologies that delve into inequities and the dynamics of social power or group explanations of phenomena are simply seen by conservative evangelicals as excuses for a lack of personal responsibility by an individual. From this perspective, anyone who disagrees with this idea can not only be marginalized, they can also be painted as irresponsible themselves.

Leaders on the evangelical and political right come together to attack the relativism of the liberal culture as a symbol of irresponsibility and rebellion against God. Chuck Colson, well-known former special counsel to President Richard Nixon and evangelical activist, frames the loss of personal responsibility as a loss of God and a loss of objective truth in American culture, referring to existentialist readings on college campuses:

These existentialists (Camus and Sartre) argued that since there is no God, life has no intrinsic meaning. Meaning and purpose must be boldly created though an individual’s actions, whatever they may be. This relativistic view of truth
perpetuated a subculture whose password was “do your own thing” – which for many meant a comfortable spiral of easy sex and hard drugs. Personal autonomy was elevated at the expense of community responsibility. Even as many pursued these new freedoms in search of fresh utopias, some acknowledged the void left by the vacuum of values. (Colson 2007, 48-49)

It is interesting how the right-wing media also lends itself to individual explanations for moral issues, particularly in the economic realm. In this way, conservative evangelicalism and conservative media dovetail together. Leading conservative commentators claim that poverty is a result of personal irresponsibility and that the economic arena is a neutral playing field that favors and privileges no group, regardless of what evidence may be presented to the contrary. Those who fail financially in American society are painted as lazy and irresponsible, regardless of social structures, cultural barriers, or factors beyond the control of an individual. For example, take this statement from Fox News host Bill O’Reilly’s radio show The Radio Factor in 2005:

It's hard to do it because you gotta look people in the eye and tell 'em they're irresponsible and lazy. And who's gonna wanna do that? Because that's what poverty is, ladies and gentlemen. In this country, you can succeed if you get educated and work hard. Period. Period. (O’Reilly 2005)

In rhetoric like this, privilege of race, gender, or class is ignored and the narrative of guaranteed personal success through a solid work ethic is celebrated.

Much of the focus on personal responsibility tends to focus around parenting and the process of teaching children. A narrative of the increasing irresponsibility of youth in America is growing and this narrative magnifies the overall emphasis on personal responsibility for adult believers and citizens. For example, in Culture Shift, Al Mohler states: “Our kids are growing up to be pampered wimps who are incapable of assuming adult responsibility and have no idea how to handle the routine challenges of life” (2011,
There is a glorification of physical corporal punishment in parenting in some of this rhetoric as well. Many parenting leaders such as James Dobson point to a demonization of physical discipline for children as child abuse and blame this change in American culture for an inability for youth and young adults to exercise personal responsibility. Evangelical parenting leaders such as Dobson paraphrase Proverbs 13:24 (the “Spare the rod and spoil the child” verse) and present a narrative of a crisis of discipline in American parenting. If only there were better parents and not a culture of permissiveness, our children would not be “soft” and rebellious. This passage from Dobson on discipline from *The New Strong-Willed Child* is typical of this narrative:

Brace yourself now, because I’m about to recommend something to you that will be controversial in some circles. You may not even agree with it, but hear me out. On those occasions when you find yourself and your strong-willed child in one of those classic battles of the will, it is not the time to discuss the virtues of obedience. You shouldn’t send Jack or Jane to his or her room to pout. Time-out doesn’t work very well and time-in is a total failure. Bribery is out of the question. Crying and begging for mercy are disastrous. Waiting until tired ol’ Dad comes home to handle matters at the end of the day will be equally unproductive. None of these touchy-feely responses and delaying maneuvers are going to succeed. It all comes down to this: When you have been challenged, it is time for you to take charge—to defend your right to lead. When mothers and fathers fail to be the boss in a moment like that, they create for themselves and their families a potential lifetime of heartache. Or as Susanna Wesley said, “No indulgence of [willful defiance] can be trivial, no denial unprofitable.” Therefore, I believe a mild and appropriate spanking is the discipline of choice for a hot-tempered child between twenty months and ten years of age. (Dobson 2004b, 58)

There are multiple points to consider in this seminal passage from Dobson on conservative evangelical discipline. From his perspective, parenting is frequently about a battle of wills and submission to authority. He refers to “tired ol’ Dad” coming home from work—clearly reflecting the evangelical penchant to assume the man works outside the home and the woman is home with the children. Not choosing to use physical
discipline is choosing to “fail to be the boss” in the key moment. This view of parenting focuses less on the process of teaching or equipping, and more on the importance of maintaining behavioral conformity through a position of authority. Bartkowski and Ellison (1995) point this out in their study of evangelical parenting as well; learning to respect parents and build responsibility in the home is important and reflects the development of responsibility – and responsiveness – to God-given authorities outside the home. This is the essence of the rhetoric of personal responsibility in the church and in the conservative evangelical household. It is about the idea of developing an ethic of individual responsibility (as delineated by the church) and the individual accountability to measure and maintain that responsibility.

When it comes to pivotal social issues like abortion, a similar logic is applied. Social explanations for unwanted pregnancies (including a lack of sex education and access to birth control, etc.) are rejected by the evangelical right. For them, the issue boils down to the personal sexual irresponsibility of individual women – and the irresponsibility of individual doctors who provide immoral services to these women. I will explore this idea more and look at some of the supporting texts for this in chapter 5.

ORTHODOXY AND OBEDIENCE

The imperatives of personal responsibility and moral purity are intricately linked to a particular reading of the Bible. This reading of the Bible highlights the sovereignty and supremacy of God’s will and the concept of absolute obedience to God within divine order– as interpreted through the Bible and personal experiences. This concept of divine authority also extends into the patriarchal family structure and the authority of church
leaders in the evangelical mind. As mentioned in Chapter 3, much of the emphasis on
divine authority is rooted in the idea of orthodoxy, or right belief. For the conservative
evangelical mind, obedience has as much or more to do with belief as it is does with
action. Beliefs matter, and taking captive the thoughts in one’s mind is essential to being
obedient to God. From their perspective, God can see all- and disbelief is a sin in and of
itself.

This kind of belief-guarding leads to a hyper-vigilant pursuit of orthodoxy and
orthopraxy as well. Social structures and institutions like marriage in contemporary
society are interpreted through a divine lens, such as James Dobson’s introductory words
in *Marriage Under Fire*:

> Behold, the institution of marriage! It is one of the Creator’s most marvelous and
> enduring gifts to humankind. This divine plan was revealed to Adam and Eve in
> the Garden of Eden and then described succinctly in Genesis 2:24, where we read,
> “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his
> wife: and they shall be one flesh” (KJV). With those twenty-two words, God
> announced the ordination of the family, long before He established the two other
> great human institutions, the church and the government. (Dobson 2004a, 7)

The institutions of marriage, the church, and the government- these are the institutions
held up by Dobson as God-ordained institutions to be revered, protected, and defended
from corruption by the non-Christian culture. He presents this as the imperative of
obedience to God’s will- and personal accountability does not just entail personal action
here- it also involves the institutions of society.

For conservative evangelicals, the family structure and gender itself are part of
submission to authority within God’s plan. James Dobson is one of the most outspoken
leaders promoting an essentialist gender difference perspective and discussing gender as
something designed by God for divergent household roles dictated by biology. Dobson’s
view fits into the gender “complementarian” perspective prevalent within conservative evangelicalism. This perspective focuses on differences in function and role between the genders, granting men the role of teaching and leading in both the family and in the church, and grounding this view of complementary genders in biblical texts. The complementarian view differs from a strict “patriarchal” view in that it sees more equality of roles/function for women in the workplace. A good example is this passage from *Bringing Up Boys*:

> Consider again the basic tendencies of maleness and femaleness. Because it is the privilege and blessing of women to bear children, they are inclined toward predictability, stability, security, caution, and steadiness. Most of them value friendships and family above accomplishments or opportunities. That is why they often dislike change and resist moving from one city to another. The female temperament lends itself to nurturance, caring, sensitivity, tenderness, and compassion. Those are the precise characteristics needed by their children during their developmental years. Without the softness of femininity, the world would be a more cold, legalistic, and militaristic place.

Men, on the other hand, have been designed for a different role. They value change, opportunity, risk, speculation, and adventure. They are designed to provide for their families physically and to protect them from harm and danger. The apostle Paul said, “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8). This is a divine assignment. Men are also ordained in Scripture for leadership in their homes, to be expressed within the framework of servanthood. Men are often (but not always) less emotional in a crisis and more confident when challenged. A world without men would be more static and uninteresting. When my father died, Mom said with a tear in her eye, “He brought so much excitement into my life.” That characteristic is often attractive to women.

When these sex-linked temperaments operate as intended in a family, they balance and strengthen one another’s shortcomings. (Dobson 2001, 27)

In this passage, Dobson emphasizes several key elements I argue are part of the ideological frame of obedience to authority. He wraps the concepts of masculinity and leadership together -and he proclaims this masculine imperative for leadership as
“ordained by Scripture” and a “divine assignment”. In other words, God is masculine, the Bible is His divine authority, and the Bible dictates that men should lead in the household as a mirror of God’s divine leadership in the lives of evangelical followers. There is frequently this penchant for looking for toughness and masculinity in political and religious leadership on the evangelical right.

From the overtly political side, the activism against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in the 1970s and early 1980s provides a good example of how a traditional patriarchal family structure, built on a foundation of conservative religious belief, can inform political action. Himmelstein discusses these anti-ERA activists:

They believed that the only safeguards for women in a male world are the privileges and protections that they can claim from men within the family. From this perspective the family, when it works, requires men to support women and thus protects women from having to compete in a working world dominated by men and male values. (1990, 106)

While the extremity of some of these views may have faded over the decades due to economic stresses changing the need for women to work outside the home (Dobson 2001), the view of God’s ordained order within the family has not shifted that much among the members of the evangelical right. There is still a strong emphasis on male headship and responsibility within the family and an extension of this masculinity-focused perspective to the political arena, even in areas like the rhetoric around gun control and family/home protection.

In the frame of obedience to authority, we see the conservative evangelical core value of biblical inerrancy. As Wellman points out, “To question the authority of scripture for evangelicals is by definition to fall into error and, worse, to risk apostasy” (Wellman 2008, 102). Evangelicals do not typically admit that all scriptural readings are
an interpretation; part of the worldview of external authority that they cherish does not allow for acknowledgement of the subjectivity of interpretive lenses. Scripture is predominantly seen as something to be taken at face value without deeper considerations. In this way, it fits into a paradigm of command and obedience. In a poetry reading, the text is never seen as a command, but rather as a work of art open to different interpretations. In the evangelical paradigm, however, the Bible is seen as an unquestionable framework for external imperatives, and obedience to a literal interpretation of these imperatives is what it means to be a committed and orthodox member of the subculture. Honorable leaders who are seen as followers of God and the Bible- in the home, in the church, and in the political sphere- demand a special reverence in the evangelical mind. As Sara Diamond notes, the Christian right brings an “ideological fervency and authoritarian group dynamics” that is different than many other movements (Diamond 1989, vi). This tendency toward authoritarian leadership lends itself to simple answers to complicated questions and creates a fertile intellectual ground for ideological frames and limited moral choices.

IDEOLOGY AND RHETORIC

In conclusion, I argue that these three ideological frames – moral purity/innocence, personal responsibility, and obedience to authority – guide and restrict moral choices, commitments, and priorities in both the religious and political spheres. Taken together, they shape and mold the symbol of the family archetype – an idealized norm of heterosexual, monogamous family that serves as a litmus test for the evaluation of issues in the public moral arena. These ideological frames emerge directly from the
theological world of evangelicals and serve to guide political views and commitments. As we move to chapter 5, I will explore specific influential texts from particular evangelical leaders regarding two primary issues of the evangelical right: same-sex marriage and abortion. I will see if the rhetorical analysis supports my assertions and examine whether other themes may also be present in the ongoing narrative regarding these pivotal issues.
CHAPTER FIVE: SAME-SEX MARRIAGE AND ABORTION AS EVANGELICAL ORTHODOXY

Same-sex marriage and abortion have become synonymous with the political commitments of evangelicals in America. These two issues are really flip sides of the same coin: a theological commitment to purity, holiness, personal responsibility, obedience to legitimate authority, and biblical precedence in the lives of true believers.

In this chapter, I will lay out my findings after examining numerous texts from leaders on the evangelical right and considering how the moral worldview of evangelicals is shaped, reflected, and reinforced by these texts. I used the HyperRESEARCH program to code the texts and explore the themes that emerged, particularly focusing on seminal works on the topics by James Dobson, Albert Mohler, Tony Perkins, and Randy Alcorn. After looking closely at some of the leading voices on the evangelical right, the most dominant rhetorical theme I found encompassing both topics was the message of potential calamity and existential crisis. Evangelical leaders frame both issues as matters of cultural emergency, where any compromise will result in a slippery slope that descends to absolute moral chaos. I will discuss how this narrative of potential cultural collapse infuses energy into the movement and is the key to understanding the strength of conservative evangelical activism. While these political issues are frequently interlaced together, I will begin by looking at same-sex marriage.
PERVERSITY AND THE PROTECTION OF MARRIAGE

In the opening pages of *Marriage Under Fire*, James Dobson outlines a worldview of marriage and cultural change prevalent in the Evangelical Right. His words help to shape a catastrophizing narrative on the state of American culture and who the Right blames for this moral condition:

To put it succinctly, the institution of marriage represents the very foundation of the human social order. Everything of value sits on that base. Institutions, governments, religious fervor, and the welfare of children are all dependent on its stability. When it is weakened or undermined, the entire superstructure begins to wobble. That is exactly what has happened during the last thirty-five years, as radical feminists, liberal lawmakers, and profiteers in the entertainment industry have taken their toll on the stability of marriage. Many of our pressing social problems can be traced to this origin. (Dobson 2004a, 9-10).

In this excerpt, we can see several key themes that emerged in my analysis of texts from evangelical leaders on the right. The concept of marriage is wrapped in purity and innocence, as well as social order and authoritative structure. It is portrayed as a foundation that is incomparably fragile – without this foundation, the entire human social order crumbles. This lack of stability not only threatens the norm of heterosexuality in the culture, but the safety of children, private and public institutions, and even governments. Any process of loosening moral standards and cultural change that challenges the heterosexual, monogamous norm of the lifelong marriage commitment threatens the will of God in both individual and corporate identity. The defense of the fragile foundation of the social order then becomes a culture war bugle call for soldiers on the Evangelical Right. From this perspective, the battle is not just about the defense of church, nation, or family; it is the defense of a basic human social order first delivered by God in the book of Genesis. Any cracks in the social foundation are seen as catastrophic...
events. These cracks are always the beginning of a slippery slope toward increasing moral decay and disobedience to God that will consume American culture and lead to every form of evil. In my findings, I saw this theme of the fear of catastrophic cultural change in attitudes toward both same-sex marriage and abortion. The slippery slopes of both arguments are integrally connected on the journey down the hill.

Let’s look at a few of these arguments, beginning with some more of James Dobson’s words on marriage:

A life in keeping with God’s design and instruction brings the greatest possible fulfillment, while any deviation from His design invites disaster. This is why the Bible warns against all harmful forms of sexual behavior, including premarital sex, adultery, prostitution, incest, bestiality, and pedophilia. Homosexuality is only one of the several ways we can wound ourselves and devastate those around us. Ironically, homosexual activists strive with all their energies to achieve “freedom” from the shackles of moral law and traditional institutions. But the Scripture teaches that true freedom and genuine fulfillment can be found only when we live in harmony with our design. (Dobson 2004a, 18)

The catastrophic language in this passage is obvious: “deviation…invites disaster,” “wound ourselves and devastate those around us,” freedom from the “shackles of moral law.” Dobson manages to wrap homosexual sexual orientation into a conglomeration of sexual practices ranging from sex before marriage to sex with children or animals. This conflation of sexual identity with certain hot-button extremes of sexual activity is a common theme on the Evangelical Right. Any deviation from evangelical norms in the moral realm is seen as an invitation for the descent into absolute moral chaos. In this way, it does not just tap into anxieties about sexuality that run deep in evangelical interpretations of the Bible; it also taps into the existential angst of a terrifying collapse of social order. Order, structure, and authority are so important to the moral worldview that this harnesses other people’s sexual identity and activity to the most basic need of
personal safety and order in the world. Deviation from God’s plan invites existential destruction; the advance of activists on the left demands the defense of order, responsibility, authority, holiness, and all that is right about the world. Any sexual freedom, sexual orientation, identity, or expression that refuses to conform is seen as disobedience to God and to God’s authority rather than an expression of individual authenticity. Throwing off the “shackles of moral law” imputes motives of divine disobedience and moral irresponsibility to these alternative, non-conforming expressions and identities.

Southern Baptist leader Albert Mohler echoes this theme of catastrophic social damage due to moral decay. While many leaders on the Evangelical Right rely primarily on biblical authority-based arguments to make their claims, in Desire and Deceit, Mohler also brings in other literature in order to try to add more legitimacy to this claim:

Looking at the history of Western civilization, William and Ariel Durant argued that one of the first achievements necessary for the establishment of civilization is the restraint of sexuality. As they put it, sexuality is like a hot river that must be banked on both sides. Sadly, what we see in the latter half of the twentieth century is the unbanking of that river…Pitirim A. Sorokin, founder of the department of sociology at Harvard University, argued that heterosexual marriage is the foundation of civilization itself. You simply cannot build or maintain civilization without heterosexual marriage, and without heterosexual marriage being understood as the norm. Unless heterosexual marriage is protected by law, custom, and habit to the exclusion of every other arrangement, civilization is impossible. Sorokin made this point more than fifty years ago. Even from such a distance, he saw this age of perversity arising, and he argued that this age of rebellion would destroy civilization. (156)

Several key ideas emerge in this passage. First of all, Mohler’s key word in talking about deviation from heterosexual marriage is perversity. Mohler references the “restraint of sexuality.” This concept that sexuality needs to be channeled, restrained, restricted – it animates the Evangelical Right. The symbol of the unbounded river is an image of
catastrophic destruction and flooding. The rhetoric of civilization foundation is found here as well. And heterosexual marriage is once again presented as antithetical to same-sex marriage. They cannot coexist in this worldview: it is “to the exclusion of every other arrangement.” There is no pluralism of ethical standards here. There is conformity to sexual norms as defined by conservative evangelicals around authorities of the Bible, law, and tradition, and there is non-conformity to these norms – or “perversity” as Mohler references it. Mohler presents the ethical landscape as one shaped by stark moral choices, diametrically opposed to one another, with existential consequences for those who make the wrong decisions. He continues:

That is the great question of our day – whether or not this civilization will indeed wake up once marriage is clearly understood to the critical battleground and the primary target of attack. Today, we face a cultural crisis that actually threatens to reverse civilization and to embrace barbarism. Can civilization survive under these circumstances? I would have to argue that it cannot. There is no example in the history of humankind of a civilization enduring for long when an age of polymorphous perversity is set loose. (157)

Mixing in militaristic metaphors of battleground and attack targeting, Mohler frames the sense of crisis that animates conservative evangelical political action here. Reversing and removing civilization (“embrace barbarism”) is what is at stake in this apocalyptic vision. Once again, the structure and order of society are under siege, and it is sexual non-conformity and perversity that are to blame.

In the rhetoric of both Dobson and Mohler, we see the theme of moral crisis and the defense of the social order itself. For the leaders of the evangelical right, the fight against same-sex marriage is not just a political preference or an expedient issue for mobilizing constituents; it is an existential battle for the heart and soul of moral civilization and a cataclysmic crisis that demands passion, commitment, and action from
true believers. This narrative of catastrophic moral change emerges from the theology around marriage and sexual purity and also reinforces this theology as leaders package their words in the language of moral survival and terminal change. The catastrophic moral change particularly connects to children and the institution of the family as a whole. Take these words from Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council in his State of the Family address in January 2016:

The promise of strong efforts these past seven years to restore fatherhood and reestablish family life in our poorest communities has faded completely. Instead, national policies have sown confusion about the very definition of family. President Obama has extolled the virtues of fatherhood even as he has fought for same-sex marriage, in essence saying two same-gendered person can parent as well as a mom and a dad. This contradictory message is more than disappointing. For our children throughout the country, it is devastating. It reduces mothers and fathers to genderless caregivers. Our children deserve better: They deserve a mom and a dad. And we pay a price for this incoherent, ideological campaign by havoc in our homes and blood in our streets. That’s why we have to re-empower American parents. The decision of our courts on contraception for minors, abortion on demand and redefining marriage have gravely weakened the family. (Blue 2016, par. 3-4)

Perkins’ stark language references “blood on the streets” and “havoc in our homes,” all because of an epidemic that reduces caregivers to genderless status. This argument, centered in the primacy of gender roles in the nuclear family, brings the health and well-being of children into the motivation for moral action.

Whether it is references to blood on the streets, the destruction of civilization, or epic battles for the soul of the culture, the level of rhetorical fervor from leaders on the evangelical right is extraordinary. Take this statement from Dobson regarding the

*Lawrence vs. Texas* Supreme Court decision:

It was this regrettable decision that has created the present turmoil throughout the nation. It has emboldened rogue commissioners, mayors, and legislators to begin overriding laws prohibiting homosexual marriage. They have been passing out
marriage licenses like candy. These minor bureaucrats now have things going their way, and they are going to strike while the iron is hot. This is why we are in the state of peril that faces our nation today. Like Adolf Hitler, who overran his European neighbors, those who favor homosexual marriage are determined to make it legal, regardless of the democratic processes that stand in their way. (2004a, 41)

The hyperbolic comparison of activists and government officials to Nazis underscores the sense of grievance and threat that exists in the rhetoric of conservative evangelical leaders. This sense of threat is what helps to reinforce the subcultural boundaries of the evangelical subculture. It gives energy to the delineation of insiders and outsiders – and potential insiders.

In my examination of evangelical texts, common themes emerged over and over. These included marriage as a divine institution, the slippery slope into cultural chaos and loss of order, the theme of consequences: legal, moral, and divine, government interference in traditional values through court activism, the fragility of God-ordained marriage, the undermining of biblical authority, and homosexuality as sin and sexual impurity in the world, the safety of vulnerable children in the face of the homosexual agenda, and the blaming of liberals and Hollywood celebrities for the current crisis. This passage from James Dobson in Marriage Under Fire captures several of these themes:

Why will gay marriage set the table for polygamy? Because there is no place to stop once that Rubicon has been crossed. Historically, the definition of marriage has rested on a foundation of tradition, legal precedent, theology, and the overwhelming support of the people. After the introduction of marriage between homosexuals, however, it will be supported by nothing more substantial than the opinion of a single judge or by a black-robed panel of justices. After they have reached their dubious decisions, the family will consist of little more than someone’s interpretation of “rights.” Given that unstable legal climate, it is certain that some self-possessed judge, somewhere, will soon rule that three men or three women can marry. Or five men and two women. Or four and four. Who will be able to deny them that right? The guarantee is implied, we will be told, by the Constitution. Those who disagree will continue to be seen as hatemongers and
bigots. (Indeed, those charges are already being leveled against Christians who espouse biblical values!) How about group marriage? Or marriage between daddies and little girls? How about marriage between a man and his donkey? Anything allegedly linked to “civil rights” will be doable. The legal underpinnings for marriage will have been destroyed. (49-50)

Here we see a number of themes that emerge in the narrative of the evangelical right when it comes to homosexuality and marriage. Dobson’s words here are the classic slippery slope argument: once you have crossed a certain boundary there is “no place to stop.” He defends heterosexual marriage as resting on not only divine will, but also tradition, law, and popular opinion. This latter appeal to general popular opinion works as a foil to his attack on how this assumed perspective can be over-ruled by the few in a court of law. In this way, he is presenting individual representatives (“some self-possessed judge”) of one branch of the system of American democracy as somehow undemocratic. They reinforce an “unstable legal climate” where everything is at stake.

We can see the themes of cultural chaos, the fragility of marriage (“the legal underpinnings will have been destroyed”), the proposed threat to children (“daddies and little girls”), and the appeal to the Bible, citing “biblical authority” behind heterosexual understandings of marriage. He clearly questions the authority of man-made institutions, contrasting these human decisions to what God has ordained. The language about the “dubious decisions” of judges helps to highlight this perspective on eternal and unchanging divine moral authority in contrast to questionable and changing human authorities.

Dobson’s rhetoric seems extreme: comparing bestiality and pedophilia as analogous to same-sex marriage blurs moral lines and creates a sense of catastrophic legal consequences for any change in sexual ethics. By appealing to all things “perverse”
in the evangelical sexual mindset, he activates an intense fear response based on this moral worldview. A deviation in sexual orientation becomes a direct descent into complete and total sexual depravity. This also taps into the conservative evangelical theological concept around sin: all humans are sinful and any sin at all separates the individual from God and requires repentance, humility, and a cleansing by God. This “all or nothing” view of the nature of sin makes the evangelical mind more open to slippery slope arguments; if God rejects human beings completely for one sin, then each and every sin must be connected to deeper issues.

Who is to blame for the advance of legitimacy for same-sex marriage in the perceived culture wars on the evangelical right? The blame can spread to a variety of subjects, but this passage from Dobson captures many of them:

We’re in a very difficult situation now. It’s tough. It’s hard swimming against the tide of political correctness, the liberal media, the entertainment industry, Congress, the libraries, and the cultural forces making fun of us. It is not pleasant to be called “the religious right,” “the far right,” “religious extremists,” and “fundamentalist right-wing crazies.” None of us likes that. But being ridiculed and marginalized is the price we must pay to defend what we believe. Jesus told us that it would be that way. (2004a, 87)

The blame finds multiple cultural targets here, including academia (political correctness), the “liberal” media, Hollywood, politicians, and intellectual public institutions. Dobson highlights name-calling as offensive, yet implies that this marginalization is part of the evangelical cross to bear for being faithful to fighting for God’s ways in the world. This theme that liberals of all stripes, especially those of an intellectual, entertainment, or media ilk, runs through much of the narrative of blame on the right. These industries make for an easy “Them” to fit into the culture wars narrative. The fight for maintaining
a worldview of purity, holiness, and righteousness must have opponents that represent the forefront of cultural change and moral questioning.

THE UNBORN CHILD AND THE DESTRUCTION OF INNOCENCE

Same-sex marriage is one front on the lines of the evangelical-declared culture wars, but another dramatic front is abortion. I examined sources from leading figures on the evangelical right framing this topic as well. While there are a number of leaders on the right who write on this sensitive and passionate topic, one particular source has served as a primer on the topic. This book has been used as a training manual for numerous prolife advocacy organizations for framing both the prolife arguments and combatting prochoice arguments. I want to begin by looking at the themes that emerged from this source and expanding these to compare to other sources as well.

This leading source for prolife arguments for several decades is Randy Alcorn’s *ProLife Answers to ProChoice Arguments*. Early in the book, Alcorn outlines the argument between prochoice and prolife positions:

*If the prochoice position is correct*, the freedom to choose abortion is an expression of equal rights, fairness, and justice. Abortion is a necessity, making society a better place for all. If we ever went back to a society in which abortion was not freely available, it would be a gigantic step backward in the history of human rights. *If the prolife position is correct*, the 3,753 abortions occurring every day represent 3,753 human casualties. And though none of these deaths is reported on the evening news (though the same unborn child killed by a bullet would be), each aborted child is just as real and just as valuable as other children. If these unborn are really babies, then America has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world. If abortion does *not* kill children, the prolife mentality is at best a nuisance and at worst a serious threat to women’s rights and personal liberty. If abortion *does* kill children, the prochoice mentality is responsible for the deaths of 1.3 million innocent people each year, more than the combined total of Americans who have died in all wars in our history. This is not
a case where “it doesn’t make a difference who’s right and who’s wrong.” No matter who is right or wrong, the stakes are enormously high. (2000, 38)

This passage frames the debate between prochoice and prolife positions, at least from Alcorn’s point of view. Particular words here stand out, and the rhetoric leads a particular direction. “Human casualties” evokes images of the victims of armed conflict or attack, especially when compared to a pregnant woman who might lose a fetus due to a gunshot wound. The key idea in this passage is the statement that “1.3 million innocent people” are being killed each year. In talking about the unborn child as the epitome of an innocent person, Alcorn refers to Americans killed in wars throughout history, an interesting comparison considering he only mentions the American casualties of these wars. This is the point I want to make: the unconscious cultural assumption in our culture is that the American lives lost in the war are innocent lives; Alcorn emphasizes that the unborn children are the same thing: innocent casualties of murder or of an organized assault against them.

This theme of the innocence of the unborn child runs throughout Alcorn’s rhetoric as well as the other evangelical leaders who speak on abortion. He quotes Dr. Landrum Shettles, a retired OB-GYN physician from New York: “I believe it is wrong to take innocent human life under any circumstances” (54). He states that “any civilized society restricts the individual’s freedom to choose whenever that choice would harm an innocent person” (110). Or even his argument countering a Planned Parenthood argument for inequality to access for abortion is wrapped in this language: “It is not unfair for some people to have less opportunity than others to kill the innocent” (146). He continues in this vein in attacking Planned Parenthood, painting them as advocates of eugenics and the
destruction of the weak, the poor, and the handicapped through abortion itself. This emphasis wraps in the language of what we understand innocence to be— we protect those innocent victims that cannot protect themselves. Even in looking at the law (and the implications of the *Roe vs. Wade* decision), Alcorn leans on the concept of protecting innocent life as a higher moral calling:

> That harmful acts against the innocent will take place regardless of the law is a poor argument for having no law. There are laws against burglary, rape, and armed robbery, yet every one of these crimes continues to happen in our society. That these things still happen should not convince us to make them legal. Laws should discourage bad things from happening, not conform to them simply because they happen. (157)

Do we see this same them outside of Alcorn’s work? Definitely. Take this example from evangelical leader Pat Robertson:

> Thou shalt not murder— not have judicial executions— but you shall not murder. Killing is taking away somebody's life. People should be secure in their life. That is one of the principles of the Declaration of Independence. We hold these truths to be self-evident that God has endowed us all with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that we have life, the right to life. Life has become more and more cheap in the society we live in. But God says you shall not murder. In my opinion, abortion is murder. Once you begin to understand that the taking of an innocent life is murder, then that raises the bar from a 'constitutional right' to something that needs to be stopped. (Robertson n.d., par 3-4)

Robertson emphasizes *innocence* in his definition of murder here. Abortion is the taking of an innocent life, therefore it is murder; murder is evil in the eyes of God, therefore abortion is evil.

In *Personal Faith, Public Policy*, Harry Jackson Jr. and Tony Perkins (president of the Family Research Council) talk about several issues related to what they frame as the value and sanctity of life. In this, they lay out a biblically defended view of abortion:

> Abortion is wrong based upon God’s injunction not to murder human beings. An unborn child is a person with a calling and destiny ordained by God. In the eyes
of God, killing an unborn child is just like killing an adult, because life begins at conception – a fact that even science confirms. Scripture makes clear that God acknowledges and has His hand upon the unborn (Job 31:15; Ps. 139:13-14; Isa. 44:2, Jer. 1:5). (2008, 65)

What separates the murder of human beings from things like war in the eyes of Perkins and Jackson? They state: “War, at its root, is based in the sin nature of man and should be strenuously avoided. Unfortunately, there are times when war cannot be avoided. In a fallen world, war is sometimes the only option we have to defend innocent life” (2008, 51-52). This distinction between killing human beings in war and the defending of innocent life against being killed is the key concept behind the conservative evangelical of “sanctity of life” issues. It helps to explain why these same leaders frequently support the death penalty as a punishment for certain crimes or support war as a way to try to resolve world conflicts. Physical violence against human beings is not the objection; it is the loss of innocent lives that is the moral outrage. In this fashion, evangelical prolife advocates see their primary mission as the protection of the innocent. This fits snugly with the perceived divinely dictated purpose to defend holiness, purity, and innocence as a calling. Their theology posits a God who is quick to destroy the guilty and steadfastly defends the innocent: those who have chosen to follow in faith – or those who are too young to make that decision yet.

This is a critical distinction in understanding the evangelical mind in relation to both abortion and same-sex marriage. Alcorn explicitly talks about the difference that this innocence makes in moral decisions:

There is a vast difference between punishing a convicted murderer and killing an innocent child. It is twisted logic to say that if one believes that innocent children should not be put to death, he is a hypocrite to believe that a convicted murderer should be put to death. Unlike the murderer, the child has
committed no crime, no jury has found him guilty, and he is not being executed by the state. He is innocent and is being put to death by a private and subjective decision. (2000, 254)

Perhaps a better description of the conservative evangelical prolife movement would be the “pro-innocent life” movement. The defense of innocence dovetails perfectly with the theological defense of humans made in the image of a God that is holy, blameless, and innocent.

THE ARGUMENT FROM PERSONHOOD

So, what arguments do prolife evangelical leaders make beyond the call to defend innocence? From my research, I found that leaders tend to follow four lines of reasoning: 1) arguments regarding science and personhood; 2) arguments regarding the law and the limits of personal rights; 3) arguments regarding health and safety of those involved, and 4) arguments regarding moral issues, social implications, and biblical foundations for morality. Many leaders share these arguments, but they are perhaps summarized best in Alcorn’s book, which is why it has been used as a messaging training document for so many prolife groups.

The arguments regarding the personhood of the fetus are some of the most important because they lay the groundwork for the moral argument that protecting the fetus is about protecting independent and innocent life, as compelling as protecting a child that has already been born. The personhood argument is framed in the language that is almost always used about the fetus- the phrasing of the “unborn child.” Prolife leaders like to point to physicians that have re-affirmed the idea that independent life begins at conception. They want to eliminate the scientific uncertainty around this point
so that the moral arguments they later use will apply fully to the unborn child just like they would to other independent human beings. But even in trying to demonstrate this point, Alcorn (2000) tries to hedge his bets and make a moral case that the prolife position should win out regardless:

If there is uncertainty about when human life begins, the benefit of the doubt should go to preserving life. Suppose there is uncertainty about when human life begins. If a hunter is uncertain whether a movement in the brush is caused by a person, does his uncertainty lead him to fire or not to fire? If you’re driving at night and you think the dark figure ahead on the road may be a child, but it may just be the shadow of a tree, do you drive into it, or do you put on the brakes? If we find someone who may be dead or alive, but we’re not sure, what is the best policy? To assume he is alive and try to save him, or to assume he is dead and walk away? Shouldn’t we give the benefit of the doubt to life? Otherwise we are saying, “This may or may not be a child, therefore it’s all right to destroy it.” (51)

For this argument to be compelling, the real question is whether this level of uncertainty about the question of personhood actually exists in the scientific medical community.

Alcorn picks and chooses a few physicians and other scientists to make the case for this perspective. He not only seeks out a select few physicians who take this position, he also connects his scientific argument to biologists such as Michael Behe, one of the leading proponents of Intelligent Design and opponents of evolution. By connecting the idea of intelligent design to scientific arguments about personhood, Alcorn alludes to a sinister purpose that he sees for abortion itself:

The unspoken but underlying premise of abortion is survival of the fittest. That dogma is being challenged as people reconsider whether there is in fact an intelligent Designer behind our intelligent design. By acknowledging a Creator some are beginning to return to the concept of a moral Judge who will hold us accountable for our actions toward the youngest and weakest of our kind. (29)

Intelligent design (as an alternative to evolution by natural selection) is not a widely accepted position among biologists. By connecting scientific arguments about the
beginnings of life and personhood to biologists such as Behe, who most biologists see as
drawing on theological concepts rather than scientific ones, Alcorn seemingly connects
medical arguments to questionable biological premises.

Alcorn presents a number of medical professionals that make the case for a clear
line of independent life beginning – with certainty – at the time of conception. This
contrasts prochoice biological arguments that life is a continuum (including the life of the
sperm and eggs), where the beginning point of life is not a clear-cut issue. There is not a
scientific consensus on the issue, but Alcorn backs up his case by pointing to expert
witnesses, genetic codes, the independent development of the fetus, and stages of human
development. He combats the acorn and oak tree analogies that some use, spending
considerable time on the development of particular body parts, especially the beating
heart. His central point here is summed up in one particular statement: “Personhood is
properly defined by membership in the human species, not by stage of development
within that species” (74). Alcorn’s terminology and arguments have been very prevalent
throughout the nation as prolife groups have shared resources.

One of the more interesting tacks that Alcorn uses is appealing through science to
the moral concept of the personhood of a meaningful life. He weaves together arguments
about biology with a moral argument about dehumanization, meaningfulness, and
discrimination in a very interesting passage:

But does the worth of a human being depend upon whether others think his life is
meaningful? Does the unborn transform from person to nonperson with each of
his mother’s changes of mind? And doesn’t every human being regard the life he
had in the womb as meaningful, since had it been terminated he would not now be
alive? Black people, women, Indians, Jews, and many others have been declared
nonpersons or persons whose lives are not meaningful. But for whose benefit?
That of the people in power, who have declared for their own economic, political,
or personal advantage who is meaningful and who isn’t. Whites decided that blacks were less human. Males decided that women had fewer rights. Not big people have decided that little people don’t have rights. Personhood is not something to be bestowed on living human beings, large or small, by an intellectual elite with vested interests in ridding society of undesirables. Personhood has an inherent value – a value that comes from being a member of the human race. For those who believe the Bible, this is linked to being created in the image of God. But even those who do not can hold to the position – though it is increasingly difficult to do so – that human life is valuable event when it is young or small or “less useful” to others. (82)

This passage presents some very interesting ideas that tack back and forth from the idea of personhood to moral arguments regarding the ethical use of power. Starting with the concept that every single person’s life is meaningful, Alcorn compares the oppression of African-Americans, women, Jews, and Indians to the termination of a pregnancy, in the process implying that the underlying motivation for abortion is the elimination of less meaningful life. Abortion thus is an unethical use of power to eliminate the powerless – because they are less human. This appeal to common humanity not only frames the fetus as the unborn child, but as the “little person” under assault by the big people. Another interesting aspect of this passage is that Alcorn then attributes the attitude of “ridding society of undesirables” to a nebulous “intellectual elite.” This intellectual elite is presented in contrast to those who follow the teachings of God and the Bible. Those who see humanity as created in the image of God are thus pitted against an intellectual elite determined to dehumanize certain elements of society so that they can be destroyed more easily. The reference to the intellectual elite parallels with others we saw in the rhetoric about same-sex marriage, like Dobson. This is the image of the liberal elite as the other, the enemy dead set on attacking the principles of life and the God-given traditions of heterosexual marriage.
Interestingly, it is the notion of personhood in relation to abortion that also brings in the slippery slope arguments we see with same-sex marriage. Rebecca Hagelin, former vice-president of the Heritage Foundation, penned a column for the online conservative site Town Hall in 2012 decrying the perceived rise of partial-birth abortions:

Decades ago, when Roe v. Wade was decided, conservatives and many religious folks predicted that the country had begun an inevitable slide towards a murderous future: a time when certain people—in addition to unprotected pre-born children—would be declared less valuable than others, their killing justified. Back then, liberal voices jeered at warnings of the slippery slope ahead. But those fears have become real. (Hagelin 2012, par. 1)

PERSONAL RIGHTS AND THE PROTECTION OF THE POWERLESS

Ultimately, Alcorn shapes the abortion narrative of the evangelical right as a message about being truly human—about the destruction of innocent personhood. This narrative is built on defending the science behind life beginning at conception. But it moves on to arguments about law, social implications, biblical foundations, and health and safety. In looking at the law, he focuses principally on the concept of rights, continuing to tie it into the concept of oppression. But legally, he frames it as one group of people affirming its rights over another, comparing abortion to the control of women by abusive men:

Whenever one group of human beings affirms its rights to determine the fate of other human beings, it is the beginning of oppression…Ironically, the same oppression that women have sometimes endured from men is inflicted upon unborn children in abortion. Some men have used their greater size and strength to justify their mistreatment of women, as if his size gives him the right to control another. Today some women use their greater size and strength to justify taking away the rights and lives of unborn children. (115)
This has become a leading argument for movement leaders across the country, who seek to pass “personhood” legislation at the state level. If they can extend legal rights to the fetus through the legal and legislative process, then this protection legitimizes a scientific view of the nature of the fetus as an unborn child. The clear message is that abortion is an abuse of power that needs to be constricted by the law. This framing does not take into account concerns about the woman’s body or rights herself – it communicates that any defense of the woman’s rights produces oppression of the unborn child’s rights, therefore, any right the woman has must be set aside in the name of the protection of the less powerful human.

What about the *Roe vs. Wade* decision and the current state of abortion law? Here Alcorn presents an idea that is virtually universal among evangelical leaders’ rhetoric: just because something is law doesn’t make it moral. Comparing current abortion law to the laws justifying slavery for hundreds of years, he states:

Civil law does not determine morality. Rather, the law should reflect a morality that exists independently of the law…If abortion killed children before the law changed, it continues to kill children since the law changed. Law or no law, either abortion has always been right and always will be, or it has always been wrong and always will be. (135)

From the evangelical view, the law is something that should be directed by outside moral forces, especially the Bible. From the argument of rights infringement, evangelical leaders also attack the prochoice concept of a woman’s right to privacy. Privacy is not a choice if the issue is always the destruction of the rights of the unborn child. The right to privacy is overridden by the need to protect human life. And the rights of a physician to provide medical advice get overridden as well.
Another key argument of Alcorn and the evangelical right is the examination of potential health and safety risks in the process of having an abortion. These extend beyond physical risks to psychological ones as well. Running through a litany of loosely supported claims, Alcorn connects other medical conditions such as breast cancer to abortions. He emphasizes the pain of certain procedures for the mother. Then he also references the impact on the psychological health of the mother, family members, extended family members, clinic workers, physicians, and society at large. The case for the health and safety of everyone involved provides a broader moral argument that he ties into the discussion of rights and the humanity of all involved.

MORALITY AND OBEDIENCE TO GOD

So how do the arguments of rights infringement, scientific defense of personhood, and the health and safety of those involved come together into a cogent defense of the prolife position? The crux of this argument tends to always come back to morality and a particular view of theology and religious authority. After building on logical premises of the personhood of the fetus and the limited nature of legal rights when they infringe on the rights of others, Alcorn reaches the base level of ethical motivation for the evangelical right: a moral compass directed by a literal interpretation of the Bible. This passage reflects exactly this view:

America was founded on a moral base dependent upon principles of the Bible and the Christian religion. If our goal is to keep religion from dictating the moral principles and laws of our country, we are hundreds of years too late. Virtually every significant document that defines the values of the United States of America – including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights – leans heavily on a belief in God and the moral authority of the Bible…It is impossible to reject the moral framework of the Scriptures, including the
sanctity of human life, and to simultaneously affirm the values of freedom and human rights that distinguish the United States of America…religion’s waning influence on our society directly accounts for the moral deterioration threatening our future. (168-69)

The loss of the biblical moral base in American society…this is a central message we see tying together arguments about both same-sex marriage and abortion. This runs to the idea of legitimate authority. The only real authority for moral choices for individuals, groups, or nations is the Bible – and a particular interpretation of the Scriptures. Focus on the Family’s key online resource for dealing with decisions about love and sex has an entire page dedicated to Bible verses that they believe speak to life beginning at conception. Their resource proclaims: “The Bible is far from silent on the topic of the sanctity of human life, especially preborn life in the womb. This resource provides just a few of the Scripture verses that speak to the value of preborn life created in God's image from the moment of fertilization” (Earll, par. 1). Here we can see the language around sanctity of life, as well as the unborn (or preborn) child. In this case, FOTF is actually trying to demonstrate the genesis of life through Scripture references instead of scientific evidence. This helps to show that at its core, this is a theological issue for conservative evangelicals.

In the end, the Bible is what the evangelical right appeals to for the case against abortion, because the Scriptures represent the preeminent authority for life, choices, and even facts about the world. While issues of personhood and rights are important, ultimately the defense of innocent human life comes back to a commitment to obedience to God and what they understand to be God’s Word to humanity. Obedience to God and to God’s values, ideals, traditions, and holiness is wrapped into reading the Scriptures
through a literal lens. And tied closely to this divine obedience is the concept of personal responsibility, especially in the sexual realm. Alcorn ties this in through the language of choices:

The poor choice of premarital sex is never compensated for by the far worse choice of killing an innocent human being. Abortion may cover up a problem, but it never solves it. The poor choice of premarital sex can be learned from, reconsidered, and not repeated. The poor choice of killing an innocent human being by abortion is more serious, more permanent, and more unfair. It causes one person to pay for another’s mistake. Furthermore, it forces the young woman to live with the guilt of her decision and gives her an even worse mistake to cover up. Not only the young woman, but all society suffers from the attitudes fostered by the abortion alternative. We send the message to her and to everyone, “The individual’s comfort and happiness come first – even if you have to disregard the rights of an innocent person to get it.” This attitude emerges in a thousand arenas, big and small, which cumulatively tear apart the moral fabric of society. (121)

In this text, Alcorn moves away from arguments about power and oppression or the scientific determination of the point life begins to the root of much of the evangelical right’s primary message in the culture: individual sexual morality. The language of choices here is the language of personal responsibility – a shift in focus away from law, health, or the destruction of the less meaningful back to a central focus of evangelical theology. Here we see the integral connection in the evangelical mind between the choice to terminate a pregnancy and the context of that pregnancy in the first place. It is not immediately clear why pregnancy outside of marriage would automatically be relevant to the abortion question. There is a presupposition of the reasons a woman would be seeking to terminate a pregnancy; and in this passage, clearly the assumption is that these reasons are grounded in cultural shame and an ideal of heterosexual Christian marriage. And the idea here is clearly that the young woman will regret her decision (“live with the guilt”); the insinuation is that she isn’t good enough to make this decision,
so it must be made for her. Alcorn implies the logical consequences of disobedience to God between the lines of this missive that exhorts the single mother to “learn from, reconsider, and not repeat” their presumed mistake. The act of terminating a pregnancy then is intricately linked to sexual purity as understood through the prism of conservative evangelical teachings on marriage. Abortion – the termination of an innocent life – becomes a societal ill brought about a lack of personal responsibility and an active disobedience to God’s teachings on marriage and sexual purity.

EXISTENTIAL THREAT AND EVANGELICAL ENERGY

In addition to the arguments against abortion, another aspect of the conservative evangelical texts parallels the rhetoric around same-sex marriage: the catastrophic language of potential calamity and cultural threat. Just as with other leaders, Alcorn’s preferred analogy was Nazi Germany and the Holocaust:

When my wife and I visited the Yad Vashim Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, we were most deeply touched by the children’s memorial. It has 1500 candles, with mirrors designed to reflect each candle a thousand times, representing the 1.5 million children killed in the Holocaust. We stood in the darkness hearing the names of individual children read one by one. I was struck by the number, because at the time it was the same number killed by abortion in America each of the previous few years. (301)

This sense of crisis – one on par with the Holocaust itself – animates the mind of the evangelical right regarding both abortion and same-sex marriage. From this point of view, we live in a culture besieged by immorality, irresponsibility, disobedience to God, impurity, and an attack on innocence itself. A continually reinforced sense of cultural embattlement is what generates the energy needed to buttress the subcultural boundaries and define in-groups and out-groups effectively for sustained social action.
EVANGELICAL ORTHODOXY IN ACTION

Conservative evangelical theology is based in a deep commitment to theological orthodoxy; an orthodoxy that always emerges from a highly literalist reading of the Christian scriptures. I make the case that the politically mobilizing (and polarizing) issues of same-sex marriage and abortion fit perfectly into a version of this theological orthodoxy. In chapter 3, I hypothesized three ideological frames that explain why these two issues rise to preeminence in the evangelical mind. These were: Moral Purity/Innocence, Personal Responsibility, and Obedience to Authority. As I looked at both of these moral issues, I did find these common themes running in the rhetoric for both. I also found several other common ideas: the symbol of the liberal elite (intellectuals, media, Hollywood) as the enemy, the distrust of the humanly created legal system as an arbiter of morality, the limited use of science to defend genetic moral arguments, and the crisis nature of engaging in culture war. How do these themes fit into my frames? As I pondered this, I saw that the attitudes toward the legal system and toward science are grounded in the concept of obedience to external authority. The evangelical right respects the findings of scientists or judges only to the extent that these findings conform to the ultimate biblical authority. For the evangelical mind, God’s ways take preeminence, period; in private, in public, in law, in science, in life. So, in this

9 The evangelical relationship with science and the Enlightenment is a complicated one. Marsden (1991) talks about four types of the Enlightenment and how one in particular was based in Scottish Common Sense thought, which was less based in more radical skepticism and revolution (128). This view of Enlightenment thinking has influenced the evangelical penchant to see science and Biblicism as inherently compatible, but even in the midst of this perceived compatibility, conclusions that contradict their interpretations of Scripture are discarded.
sense, the attitudes toward courts and scientific findings are a subset of the need for Obedience to Authority.

How do the crisis nature of the cultural conflict and the symbol of the liberal elite as enemy fit into the frames? Are they additional frames within this moral worldview? I looked carefully at these two elements and how they work within the conservative evangelical subculture itself. I realized they don’t really function as ideological frames; they both function in a different way. They are the energy around the strong boundaries of the subculture. The constant element of crisis and existential threat is the *engine* that fuels the maintenance of the boundaries, much like Christian Smith (1998) describes. And the liberal elite – whether it be “secular humanists” (Diamond 1989), the media, intellectuals, judges, or politicians – are the *foil* for the subcultural boundaries. They are the ever-present enemy that demands the sense of crisis and always presents catastrophic threat. To sum up, my ideological frames help to explain the *what* of the subject matter for the key political and moral issues on the evangelical right; but the crisis culture and the liberal elite help to explain *how* the ideology is fully mobilized and *why* it has maintained such energy and momentum over the decades. I turn now to examine this *how* and this *why* more fully. How does the model I have proposed get mobilized around the salient issues of same-sex marriage and abortion? What gives these issues such a sense of threat in the evangelical mind? And why have other issues not emerged as just as important for the evangelical right? In chapter 6, I will look at these questions as well as corollary political issues and how they relate to the proposed model.
CHAPTER SIX: MOBILIZING A MORAL WORLDVIEW

I have traced ideological frames that emerge from the rhetoric of leaders of the evangelical right and hypothesized how these frames fit together into a consistent moral worldview that prioritizes the issues of same-sex marriage and abortion in their political activism. Now the key question is: How is my model of shifting conformity to ideological frames mobilized around these political issues? And how does the model relate to other key political issues on the right? In this chapter, I will discuss how the model is mobilized with conservative evangelicals. In addition, I will look at why the issues of same-sex marriage and abortion have emerged as preeminent, as opposed to other moral issues involving seemingly similar facets, such as adultery or pornography. Finally, I will look at how (or if) my model applies to two other political issues as well: capital punishment and healthcare reform.

MOBILIZATION THROUGH CLASSIFICATION

The ideological frames that I identified in the analysis were: Moral Purity/Innocence, Personal Responsibility, and Obedience to Authority. I also identified the sense of crisis as the engine animating the use of these frames, and the liberal elite as the foil for the application of cultural boundaries. These frames fit together to form an idealized norm of family identity, or a family archetype, in the evangelical mind. In chapter 5, we looked at how the three themes emerge from the texts and in chapter 3, I
hypothesized how these fit together for a concrete worldview and talked about the cycle of political mobilization (see Figure 5).

We see the rhetoric of the preborn on unborn child in much of the messaging around abortion. And the institution of marriage is consistently presented as the foundational element of the idealized family in human society. We have seen how these concepts are articulated, but the key to understanding the mobilization of evangelicals around the frames is found in the classification of individuals, groups, or institutions.

Since the ideological frames I present are directly connected to theological orthodoxy, conformity of thought is the principal idea and mechanism for preserving boundaries. The classifications I observe in conservative evangelical attitudes are: 1) conforming (honorable), 2) nonconforming (shameful), and 3) potentially conforming (redeemable). The evangelical world is a world of shame and honor; personal redemption is the path out of shame to a place of honor before God. Because of this redemptive dynamic inherent in evangelical thought, the formation of the “other” is not just us vs. them, it is us, them, or potentially us. It is the potentially us category of status that provides the impetus for social and political evangelization to the conservative evangelical moral worldview. People, groups, and institutions can be redeemed to a place where they become innocent, responsible, and obedient to God as evangelicals argue was divinely intended. However, when a group, institution, or individual fights actively against this moral worldview, they are deemed shameful. Certain groups, especially organizations such as the ACLU or Planned Parenthood, become icons and rhetorical symbols of this shame. For the evangelical right, these organizations will never fall into the redeemable classification.
In his book *Culture Shift*, Albert Mohler describes the evangelical mindset in reference to living in the culture:

An honest evaluation reveals that many of the most cherished assumptions of our culture are in direct conflict with the teachings of Christ. We cannot accept the idea that we are what we consume and possess. We cannot accept the denial of human dignity that underlies this culture’s acceptance of the destruction of human life in the womb and in the laboratory. We cannot buy in to the cherished myth of autonomous individualism, and we cannot compromise with a worldview based on the assumption that truth is relative or socially constructed. At the same time, we remember that our Lord gave His church an evangelistic commission – to be witnesses of the gospel. Every single person we will try to reach with the gospel is embedded in some culture. Understanding the culture thus becomes a matter of evangelistic urgency. (2011a, xii-xiii)

In this segment of text, we see several elements I am talking about. The culture is in conflict with the call to obedience to the holy teachings of Christ. But even in the midst of counter-cultural beliefs, Mohler brings in the evangelistic urgency of being witnesses to those who might convert and conform to the correct way. The evangelistic commission of the church is extended into the realm of political transformation through social activism on the key issues of the day. Mohler frames the discussion around homosexuality as well. He frames the battle over same-sex relational acceptance in *Desire and Deceit*:

Those who oppose the normalization of homosexuality have indeed been presented as backwoods, antiquated, and dangerous people, while those advancing the cause are presented as forces for light, progress, and acceptance. Conservative Christians have been presented as proponents of hatred rather than as individuals driven by biblical conviction. The unprecedented success of this public-relations strategy helps to explain everything from why America has accepted homosexual characters and plotlines in prime-time entertainment to the lack of outrage in response to same-sex marriage in Massachusetts. At least we know what we are up against. Biblical Christians must continue to talk about right and wrong even when the larger world dismisses morality as an outdated concept. We must maintain marriage as a nonnegotiable norm – a union of a man and a woman – even when the courts redefine marriage by fiat. At the same time,
we must take into account the transformation of the American mind that is now so devastatingly evident to all who have eyes to see. (2008, 101-102)

This passage brings out so many interesting elements of the messaging around same-sex marriage. The us (conservative Christians) is defended against the demonization of the homosexual agenda, claiming that Christians are defamed as “proponents of hatred.” His contrast to that assessment points back to the legitimate authority – they are actually “driven by biblical conviction.” As he continues, he references two favorite nonconforming, shameful themes for the evangelical right – the entertainment industry and the courts. The entertainment industry is the enemy because they have promoted “homosexual characters and plotlines” while the courts have “redefined marriage by fiat.” Mohler calls back to the concept of external sources of morality by labeling those that believe as he does “Biblical Christians” and painting those who disagree with the particular moral worldview as dismissing morality as “an outdated concept.” In acknowledging that the battle is for the “transformation of the American mind,” he also hints that individuals can be seen as redeemable even in the midst of this cultural change. This “redeemability” is a shifting phenomenon. Take the reparative gay conversion therapy movement that took hold in the 1990s and early 2000s. The rhetoric around this movement presented LGBTQ individuals as redeemable and potentially conforming and presented options for a therapy group that supposedly would convert them back to heterosexuality. As these have lost influence, the rhetoric has shifted back to target LGBTQ leaders as enemies of a biblical morality and a shameful them to be battled at all costs. Dobson writes about this movement in Bringing up Boys: “I would be less than honest if I didn’t admit that homosexuality is not easily overcome and that those who try
often struggle mightily. But it would be equally dishonest to say that there is no hope for those who want to change. Credible research indicates otherwise” (2001, 117).

Dobson’s tone here is one of the “struggles” and “hope for change” for gay men and lesbian women. While still forcefully opposing the idea of the legitimacy of homosexuality, the rhetoric toward the men and women involved in this therapy is highly focused on redemption and potential conformity to the heterosexual ideal. This perception of gay and lesbian “ordinary” people as redeemable does not extend to gay rights leaders, however. Conservative evangelicals continue to view the movement leaders as shameful and nonconforming. When leaders of the reparative therapy movement drop out and denounce the movement, however, they are turned against quickly and become shameful and nonconforming once again. A good example of this is the immediate attack on Alan Chambers, the leader of Exodus International when it should down. Michael Brown, a leader in conservative evangelical circles and a columnist for Charisma News, said this of Chambers after the collapse of Exodus:

There is always a danger when one person becomes the face of a movement or denomination. When Alan Chambers offered an apology to the LGBT community for alleged harm done to them through Exodus International, he was not speaking for thousands of ex-gays or for hundreds of churches and ministries that are involved in ministering to homosexual men and women. He was speaking for himself (and perhaps for members of his board, some staff and some Exodus-affiliated ministries). Of course, the secular and gay media are presenting this as far more than the apology of one man—first, because it helps discredit the entire ex-gay movement, and second, because in recent years, Alan has increasingly become the face of Exodus and, by extension, of a vast and diverse movement. This is a real shame, and we need to guard against the “one man (or one woman) speaks for us all” mindset. (Brown 2013, par. 2)

Brown ended up serving on the board of advisors for the Restored Hope Network, which became the “new” Exodus in the wake of its demise. This organization continues to try
to do gay reparative therapy for gays. The movement also continues to have an organization that focuses on the “scientific” side of the equation, the Alliance for Therapeutic Choice and Scientific Integrity (formerly NARTH).

On the abortion front, Planned Parenthood, abortion-providing physicians, and other pro-choice advocacy groups are the shameful them to be opposed. The mother considering an abortion on the other hand, is highly redeemable and the primary target for convincing about the moral problems with it. In Alcorn’s book, he has an entire appendix dedicated to “Fifty Ways to Help Unborn Babies and Their Mothers” (2000, 343). The messaging is that the mother must be saved from her own bad decision before she makes it; saved from her irresponsible behavior and the inevitable lifelong personal guilt and shame prolife advocates insist will be the consequences of that decision. Even in rhetoric around an abortion that has occurred, the mother is usually not the target of anti-abortion activists; it is usually the clinic or the doctor that performed the procedure. This opposition against the shameful them can manifest itself in blockades of clinic doors and other protests.

Evangelical right leaders decry the new sexual tolerance of the culture and make connections between lust, pornography, and homosexual identity. Mohler states: “Our society has institutionalized lust, weaving the patterns of illicit sexual desire throughout culture’s interplay of media, entertainment, status, and advertising. Lust is now part and parcel of the modern vision of the good life” (2008, 20). Here he points to the liberal media as well as the entertainment industry, typical thems to be opposed vehemently. Whether it be academic elites that are corrupting students’ minds in the universities, or Hollywood elites that are filling the culture with perverse ideas, the image of the
powerful corrupting elite provides a forceful symbol of shame and deviance from the ways of God. Hollywood and academia are typically not seen as redeemable institutions; they are seen as the enemy which cannot be trusted and must be guarded against by limiting liberal education or certain media consumption for children.10

IDEAL TYPES

In chapter 3, I discussed the symbols of the unborn child, the homosexual, and the institution of marriage as ideal types of the ideological frames. I want to reemphasize that it is the perfect fit that these types have to the frames that make them such compelling symbols and ultimately make these political issues the ones that mobilize evangelicals so effectively, however selective that application of the frames may be. The unborn child represents an innocence and moral purity, uncompromised by human mistakes, a perfect pre-obedient, pre-responsible state. The fetus is fully dependent and reliant on the mother, not subject yet to tests of responsibility but appropriate to its place. The same applies for the institution of marriage- it is the most pure and innocent structure, foundational under God’s authority, and the example of expressing sexuality within God’s structures of responsibility. For the conservative evangelical moral worldview, homosexuality, on the other hand, represents an opposite type: extraordinarily impure shame and guilt, irresponsibility, and disobedience to God. These simple symbols

10 An exception to this view of secular academia is the existence of evangelical universities and colleges like Wheaton. Evangelical places of higher education have become a lauded alternative by conservative evangelical leaders looking to shield young people from those institutions that have “abandoned” their heritage as religious institutions and succumbed to the secular liberal culture. (Marsden 1991)
become powerful expressions of a basic way of thinking about ethics in the world. They trigger the boundaries and elicit the passion because they fit the frames that emerge from atonement theology and the workings of the evangelical mind.

Are there any other ideal types that may also fit the ideological frames well? Why have the issues of same-sex marriage and abortion become preeminent while issues such as adultery or pornography have not mobilized evangelicals to the same extent? Adultery and pornography certainly inspire concern among evangelicals, but they have not seen the same level of passionate advocacy as the opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion. What is it that is different about these issues? I believe the key is found in the power of the archetype of family itself. Family is not just an idea to evangelicals; it is a metaphor for one’s eternal inclusion in a relationship with God and one’s most important identity. The evangelical believer’s public calling is to make families more conforming to God’s ways and, in so doing, to transform the culture itself. The family is the basic unit of social structure in the evangelical mind, and the symbol of family is extraordinarily powerful.

I argue, then, that because the heterosexual, monogamous family is an archetype, the most divergent or adherent symbols to this idealized family norm drive action and mobilize the evangelical right. While the actions of one’s unfaithfulness in adultery or one’s consumption of porn certainly provide a challenge to the core frames of moral purity/innocence, personal responsibility, and obedience to authority, these behaviors do not hold the same power as the symbolic identities of the unborn child or homosexual or the powerful symbol of the institution of marriage. While the calling to purity and responsibility is the same, the contrast of symbolic identities is most powerful in the ideal
types I have identified, thus these issues activate evangelical moral and political commitment like no others. There is a sense of threat and taboo in the juxtaposition of symbols that creates a deeper level of anxiety within the evangelical mind. This anxiety activates these political issues in a different way.

Could opposing polyamory or another symbolic identity also emerge as a more central moral cause in the future? Perhaps. Those issues that contain strong symbolic identities with a sharp contrast to the ideological frames would be candidates to emerge as key political issues as well. At this point, the perceived threat to the family archetype from identities such as polyamory have not reached the same level as the other identities. As polyamory gains more cultural acceptance, I would argue that this could change quickly.

What does the model look like when applied to other issues that evangelicals may take a position on? I will look at two other issues in particular, beginning with capital punishment.

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Conservative evangelicals like to present themselves as consistently being biblically prolife, especially when they talk about abortion. I have framed this as pro-innocence rather than prolife, and the issue of capital punishment is one of the best examples of why this distinction is important. A 2016 Pew Research Poll speaks to the death penalty question. While non-white Catholics tend to oppose both abortion and the death penalty, white evangelicals were by far the strongest religious identity supporting the death penalty, with 69 percent in favor and only 26 percent opposed:
Figure 7: Pew Research Survey on the Death Penalty

The only identity with a greater percentage of support for the death penalty was politically identifying as a Republican, with 72 percent support. The position on the death penalty makes perfect sense in light of the ideological frames I have presented. Convicted felons are another deep symbol of the flip side of the ideological frames: irresponsible behavior, rebellion against authority, and guilt. Any potential errors in convictions or other factors do not sway the evangelical need to see the shameful, nonconforming opponent of God’s ways punished for their sins. Defending innocence means making murderers pay for their crimes with a likewise punishment of death.

There is no room for redemption or potential change with death row inmates according to this worldview. The evangelical tendency to see all misdeeds as individual affairs with no social component also factors into the view of the prison system and the court decisions. This black and white view of the law does not allow for arguments about bias.
within the criminal justice system, especially relating to race. All of this adds up to a strong preference in support of the death penalty among evangelicals for the same reason as they oppose abortion and same-sex marriage: the defense of innocence and the God-ordained destruction of the guilty and shameful.

HEALTHCARE REFORM

With the advent of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, health care law changed in the United States, expanding coverage for millions of Americans and providing subsidies for those who could not afford coverage. Conservative evangelical leaders have been some of the most vocal opponents of the law. Why is this the case? Wouldn’t expanding health care access to millions of people be a positive and moral effort?

Matthew Sutton’s book, *American Apocalypse*, proposes that the apocalypticism present in modern evangelicalism is at the root of this perspective. He argues that end times thinking and millennial theology shape evangelical thought on issues such as health reform, civil rights, and environmental policy. He contends that there is a pressing expectation of the end times and the second coming of Christ, the social improvements become secondary to the worldview of evangelicals.

Healthcare law is a complex issue, and I think the conservative evangelical perspective is less clear-cut than on issues of abortion or marriage. However, I do believe my model holds some explanatory power for the conservative evangelical perspective on healthcare reform. This application is primarily around the frame of personal responsibility. Conservative evangelicals believe strongly that each individual (and especially the head of a household) has the responsibility to provide the needs for
themselves and his or her family. This is a command from God and a factor of obedience to the legitimate authority of God as handed down through the Bible. The idea that the government mandates and subsidizes the purchase of an issue that would normally be up to the individual to be responsible to provide pushes up against the ideological frames. The government is not seen as a legitimate source of authority and nurturance in the evangelical mind. Government programs try to take the place of God’s church in providing for people’s needs. It is a question of reliance for needs on an authority that is not God. This is seen as irresponsible rather than independently responsible. This reliance is seen as a moral issue because it shirks responsibility by leaning on the corrupt government for needs that should only come from the legitimate place of authority in one’s life, God and God’s holy church. Interestingly, Vice President Mike Pence, a hero of the evangelical right, focused on this exact theme in promoting the Republican attempt to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. In a speech to Focus on the Family in June 2017, Pence stated:

And I can promise you, President Trump and I will not rest and we will not relent until we repeal and replace Obamacare and give the American people the kind of world-class healthcare they deserve, built on freedom, personal responsibility, free market competition, and state-based reform. That’s the American way to meet our healthcare needs in the 21st century. (Pence 2017)

This argument is also partially supported in what I found from different evangelical thinkers. Tony Perkins, the head of the Family Research Council, focused more on the clauses regarding free birth control but also touches on the free market in his remarks from 2013:

Obamacare is not the typical political virus that spreads from Washington, D.C. infecting the body politic. This is a rare strain of ’flesh-eating bacteria’ that if not stopped and stopped now threatens the very life of our Republic. We need to
defund Obamacare but also need to add conscience protections. Obamacare will subsidize abortion and lead to health care rationing, and defunding would stop that. But defunding alone will not stop legal mandates like the HHS mandate against religious businesses, charities and non-profits and religious universities, so adding conscience protections is essential as well. Religious employers should not be discriminated against because they oppose abortifacients or contraceptives. (Perkins 2013, par. 2-3)

Key to his comments here are the phrases “health care rationing” and “conscience protections”. Perkins and other conservative evangelicals portrayed the Affordable Care Act as taking away the influence of the free market by big government. He also ties the abortion argument in by focusing on the requirement for businesses to provide contraceptives. This emphasis on free market and personal responsibility pervades evangelical rhetoric on healthcare and other government programs. While all aspects of my model may not necessarily directly correlate, the concept of personal responsibility seems to be at the center of their worldview regarding this issue as well.

MOBILIZATION AND IDENTITY

In conclusion, I argue that the juxtaposition of symbolic identity lies at the center of political mobilization for the evangelical right. Forces of threat and taboo empower the cycle which activates energy around the issues of same-sex marriage and abortion. The symbol of the idealized family provides a powerful image through which to view potential public moral commitments. While other issues may arise in the future, my model provides an explanation for why these seminal issues have emerged thus far.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Theology is at the heart of the moral worldview and the political action of the evangelical right. Their moral worldview, indoctrinated in the pews and emboldened by their media consumption, leads to a political perspective that is held almost as sacred as their theology itself. In this sense, to be a conservative evangelical believer is to be an American patriot, defined most clearly through the lens of the issues of same-sex marriage and abortion. My theory articulates how the theology translates directly into a fiercely held political identity.

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS

The discussion of a topic with such broad implications would not be complete without acknowledgement of potential limitations of this theory and the research behind it. By choosing to look at rhetoric from leaders only within the evangelical right movement, I have tried to capture the motivating impetus behind the political passions there; however, this analysis is not exhaustive. I chose leaders that are at the forefront of evangelical life, but not all leaders can be equally reflected in this examination. There are subjective choices of organizations (e.g., Focus on the Family, Family Research Council, the Southern Baptist Convention) and leaders (e.g., James Dobson, Tony Perkins, Albert Mohler) that may or may not reflect the broad consensus of evangelical opinion. While I made every effort to examine the texts without bias, there is always a
chance that a theme or key insight might be missed. Every effort has been made to be accurate in following the arguments of the authors, but subjective judgments will always come in when coding these texts. In addition, the bulk of authors examined tend to be from the Colorado Springs evangelical area or from the South. There could be a regional factor to points of view regarding these political issues that is not being accounted for in the analysis (Silk & Walsh 2011).

In addition to possible regional factors in perspective, there are also potential differences due to race, gender, class, or age. My inquiry focuses heavily on the implications of theology on a group of people that are predominantly white. Theology is not formed in a vacuum; race, gender, and class differences shape theology and readings of the Bible. The theory does not give a large place to race in the construction of the political ideology, and there is always the chance that this factor plays a larger role in the importance of these issues. The same goes for gender, and gender is a particularly important issue with same-sex marriage. Are there differences in the way men or women evangelicals look at same-sex marriage? How does gender fluidity and the evangelical penchant to deny this fluidity factor into perspectives? And do evangelical women hold any different position than evangelical men regarding abortion? Even if they do hold a different perspective, is there permission within the subculture for them to own or communicate this perspective? Does it matter for evangelical women that the discussion is about a woman’s body? Class (and education level) is another important factor. Do white collar evangelicals hold the same perspectives as blue collar evangelicals? How does education level affect one’s perspective on biblical literalism and external authority? And what about age? Do millennials hold identical perspectives on these political issues
and, if not, are they less connected to the ideological frames? Does church attendance matter to reinforcing the belief system? How do conservative evangelical millennials shift perspectives (if at all) when they do not attend church as regularly? Does regular church attendance affect political perspectives on these issues in general?

In addition to these factors, we have seen the role of cultural crisis and cataclysmic rhetoric in the elite framing in the previous chapters. Is this rhetoric connected to apocalyptic theology (dealing with the end times)? How many of the churches that would describe themselves as predominantly conservative evangelical teach end times millennial theology as part of their essential message? Is the sense of inevitable societal demise a factor in the susceptibility of evangelical believers to the cultural crisis message? This would be an interesting element to investigate as part of further research as well.

All of these factors are potential limitations to the project and do suggest that further study could be warranted. This study should likely be conducted at the level of the people “in the pews”; everyday non-elite participants who self-identify as evangelicals.

METHODOLOGIES FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

While these are all legitimate potential limitations, I found the rhetoric from evangelical leaders to be quite consistent and focused predominantly on theological motivations for political action. A survey of conservative evangelical congregational participants (in different denominations across different national regions) could be one way to investigate the frames and whether they resonate at the congregational level as
fully as at the level of political leader. This survey would need to interrogate the underlying motivations for the political perspective without leading the answers. Perhaps a Likert scale-centered approach that examined different motivations would provide the best feedback. It would be very important to balance other demographic factors to make sure that the data provides an accurate overall picture of these perspectives at the non-elite level. Race, gender, class, and age need to be taken into account. And another challenge in doing these surveys is that not all self-identified conservative evangelicals are going to be attending congregations that identify in this way. How do you reach these people? The survey might also be more effective in looking at active participants in groups like Focus on the Family. Activists on this front would certainly have the passion for the political issues and a survey could look at whether the theological motivations are at the core of their commitments there. This would cross congregational and denominational boundaries, but might also leave out a number of evangelicals who aren’t involved in these parachurch organizations. Having a broader selection of participants within congregations would potentially allow for greater diversity in position on these issues and the ability to see if differences in core theological tenets might help explain any differences.

IMPACT IN THE FIELD AND FUTURE STUDY

My theory contributes to the scholarly discussion on evangelical subcultural identity and motivation by providing an alternate vision of the role of theological orthodoxy in political identity. It takes the “onion” view of culture (Wellman) and Swidler’s concept of cultural tools and melds these together, particularly highlighting
how ideological commitment comes about in the evangelical mind. By focusing on the concept of the evangelical subculture’s moral worldview, my theory grounds evangelical social and political action firmly in a reaction to the theology of substitutionary atonement and downplays other social and structural factors. My model demonstrates how theology directly generates moral claims that then become political commitments. I take the theological themes that dominate evangelical thought and explain how these themes form frames that limit choices and adhere to an idealized symbol of family identity. The cycle of mobilization I propose delineates how these frames (and the ideal types that emerge from them) work together to provide order and structure to the evangelical moral world. My model also provides a new concept of how evangelicals classify and set boundaries between themselves and the other; a trinary with potentiality included, rather than the typical framing of us and them. Future scholarly work would likely want to investigate the validity of the ideological frames and symbols at the non-elite level: regular church attenders in conservative evangelical congregations. Exploring the perspectives of ordinary church attenders could be particularly enlightening to see if some of the presuppositions of my research hold true at the parishioner level.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE POLITICAL ACTION

The model provides a strong basis not only for future research endeavors, but also for understanding how to advance or oppose conservative evangelical political commitments. For conservative evangelical leaders, understanding more clearly which symbols and arguments most resonate with the theological tenets of the people can help to hone the message and advance the cause more efficiently. Some arguments may be
more effective than others, and understanding how the movement of other individuals and groups between potentially conforming and non-confirming categories can motivate engagement or detachment can help leaders to craft messages that bring about the most productive political action. By understanding the most persuasive themes, leaders can emphasize the importance of things like personal responsibility as a God-given necessity to encourage more activism on the issues by those who may not be as engaged.

For more progressive political leaders, the model provides a different opportunity; the chance to examine the bases of the ideological frames and challenge these ideas as a more foundational approach to changing minds on the political issues. For example, one of the central frames is obedience to authority. This authority is framed as an external legitimate authority for the evangelical believer- God as interpreted through the Bible. If this is a central idea at the heart of the political commitment, then either challenging the believer to move the source of authority to an internal evaluation (education on conscience and ethics) or perhaps more likely, reinterpreting the external source of authority (challenging biblical literalism as the only way to interpret the Bible) would be a key approach to changing the political belief. Or on the front of personal responsibility, the frame could be reinterpreted to expand the understanding of what responsibility entails. Perhaps responsibility is not individual, but corporate at the core. By challenging a framing that involves honor and shame around responsibility, progressive educator activists could break the automatic tie between the idea and the conclusion. The pivotal point here is that until the ideological frame can be loosened, the thinking will not be changed. The frames constrict the number of choices and the cultural tools that can be used to evaluate the issues (Swidler 1986). Whether motivating conservative action or
more liberal political action, education is at the center of understanding, reinforcing, or changing the foundational beliefs.

IN CONCLUSION

The issues of same-sex marriage and abortion continue to be highly passionate and divisive political hot buttons in American society, and particularly with the election of President Donald Trump and the appointment of a new Supreme Court judge in 2017. The culture wars rhetoric and the level of political polarization continue to grow. By examining the critical symbols of the unborn child, the homosexual, and the institution of marriage, we have identified ideal types of the evangelical right’s moral worldview. Evangelicals perceive the legalization of same-sex marriage and abortion as the ultimate destruction of innocence, of responsibility, and of legitimate authority, calling them to an existential battle for the ethical salvation of our culture. They hold on to an idealized norm of family as a symbolic, structural, and constant imperative in an ever-changing culture around them. Understanding the evangelical moral worldview and the theological basis for their closely held commitments can illuminate the cultural context we find ourselves in and provide a roadmap forward for those who would take a position on these important issues.
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APPENDIX A: METHODS STATEMENT

In looking for potential primary sources for the textual analysis, I included particular criteria. I wanted to examine texts from authors leading the most influential groups on the evangelical right and also include the most seminal texts used in training people for the cause. Firstly, I wanted to capture texts from the leadership of influential entities on the evangelical right. I identified Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) as three of the most important entities in this regard. Two of these are “parachurch” organizations, engaged in public policy and advocacy, while the other is the single biggest predominantly white evangelical denomination in America. I chose James Dobson, the psychologist and founder of Focus on the Family as well as Tony Perkins, the head of the Family Research Council, as the key leaders of these two influential parachurch organizations. Because of my belief that the denominational influence of the SBC has not been sufficiently represented in previous research in the field, I wanted to make sure to include a published leader and ethical thinker from within the SBC as one of the authors to examine. The leader I chose was Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Out of the numerous published works from Perkins, Dobson, and Mohler, I chose those sources that spoke most directly to same-sex marriage and abortion as key ethical concerns. Secondly, it became clear the seminal text for pro-life activist training in America was Randy Alcorn’s book ProLife Answers to ProChoice Arguments. This book has been used by both parachurch and church groups alike to train activists for how to counter arguments and represent the pro-life position. By choosing the leading thinkers within the parachurch and denominational world, as well as the leading text for abortion opponents, I hoped to capture
the most read texts as a representative sample for what may be influencing evangelical non-

elite political actors.

I used Researchware, Inc.’s HyperRESEARCH program on an Apple Macintosh computer to code the chapters within the selected texts and identify the key themes and terms, looking to highlight the author’s intention with each passage. After capturing the chapters, I grouped these themes together where they fit, examining whether certain themes were actually a subset of others and how the arguments fit together. After distilling the coding, the seven themes emerged that I mention previously in the text: moral purity/innocence, personal responsibility, and obedience to authority, the liberal elite as the enemy, the distrust of the American legal system, science and genetic moral arguments, and the culture war crisis. I highlight all of these findings in Chapter 5.