A History of Nondenominational Churches in Denver and Beyond, 1945–2000

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A History of Nondenominational Churches in Denver and Beyond, 1945-2000

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ABSTRACT

From 1945-2000, nondenominational churches in America developed from a scattering of independent congregations to one of the largest groups of churches in the nation. Few scholars have studied these churches as a cohesive movement. And many think they burst onto the American scene around the 1990s, though statistics suggest otherwise. Two questions, therefore, need to be addressed: What is the historical genealogy of nondenominational churches in modern America? And, is there a recognizable nondenominational church identity?

This study explores these questions in three ways. First, I survey the origins and development of Protestant denominationalism from the Reformation through the early twentieth century. I also provide important sociological perspectives on churches and sects, a working definition of a nondenominational church, and several examples of nondenominational churches from nineteenth-century America.

Second, I bolster national statistics about nondenominational church growth by presenting a quantitative analysis in one geographical area: metropolitan Denver. My findings challenge the notion that nondenominational churches only emerged around the turn of the twenty-first century. At least since the fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century, nondenominational congregations have increased steadily in numbers. In the postwar era, they matched and later outpaced every other group of churches.
Third, I trace the local histories of four nondenominational churches in Denver from 1945-2000. Utilizing church records, newspaper articles, and oral histories, I tell each of their stories and describe the characteristics and values they embodied. I suggest that these four congregations are representative of four subtypes of nondenominational churches: Bible churches, prosperity churches, Jesus People churches, and seeker churches. I also contend that their traits and experiences within the cultural context of Denver are emblematic of larger national trends across the postwar era. Finally, I argue that each subtype of nondenominational church helped to construct, shape, and deepen a recognizable nondenominational church identity. This identity is grounded in three core traits: conservative doctrine, evangelistic conviction, and an independent spirit.
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INTRODUCTION

On February 2, 2000, a group of people gathered to discuss starting a new kind of church in downtown Denver, Colorado. Instead of a traditional Sunday morning service, the church would meet on Sunday nights. Their gathering would include dinner, they would have different preachers every week, and the church would not take up an offering. Moreover, the congregation would not place its leaders at the top of an organizational structure but at the bottom of “a reverse pyramid of authority.”¹ Most importantly, this new church would attempt to appeal to a distinctive demographic that included the poor and homeless; social outcasts like “ punks, skaters, goths, and ravers”; and iconoclastic artists who rarely felt at home in a traditional church setting. It would be “the church for the left-out and right-brained.”² And it would be called Scum of the Earth Church.

The name was odd and even offensive to some Christians. But it came from the Bible. The New Testament includes a letter written by the apostle Paul to the Corinthian church in the first century CE. In it, Paul challenged rival apostles with these words:

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong!


² Ibid., 17.
You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.³

In this passage, Paul described how people treated him and the other early apostles with derision and contempt. But they had embraced that role believing it likened them to how Jesus himself was treated. This is how the first leaders of Scum of Earth Church viewed themselves and their own mission in the twenty-first century. Pastor Mike Sares wrote:

Scum is an appropriate name for a church trying to connect with people who have been outcast by the rest of society or by churches. Many can identify with the name Scum because they’ve endured this kind of treatment before. The name also serves as a reminder of our need for God and redemption.⁴

Within a few years, Scum of the Earth developed a well-known reputation. Not only were their skater-culture stickers plastered all over downtown Denver, but local magazines and national news organizations had also taken notice. In 2006, CBS News highlighted Scum of the Earth as part of a series on “New Faces of Faith.”⁵ In 2010, the church adorned the cover of Denver’s Westword magazine with the caption: “O Scum All Ye Faithful: Christianity Gets the Punk-Rock Treatment at This Church.”⁶ Yet despite


⁴ Sares, Pure Scum, 18.


their famous name and community, there is one element of their narrative that is often overlooked. Scum of the Earth Church was and still is nondenominational.

As a nondenominational church, Scum has no formal ties to a denomination or institutional body. The leaders of Scum felt that the only way they could become the kind of congregation they wanted to be was apart from denominational affiliation. After all, a denomination had almost ruined them from the start. The nucleus of Scum’s original community had been a small group of Christians attending a local Presbyterian church. Corona Presbyterian Church was a traditional church that was part of the Presbyterian Church (USA) denomination.7 It also had a long and distinguished history in Denver. The church was founded in 1904, and Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower had been regular attendees in the 1950s.

In the late 1990s, Mike Sares took a part-time position as the singles ministry director at Corona. He soon befriended several musicians from a local ska band. These musicians were Christians and had started a Bible study that attracted a unique crowd of people from their weekly shows at local clubs. As the group got bigger, Sares and another leader invited them to meet at Corona. As more misfits attended—and it became clear that the church’s traditional style would not blend well with this crowd—Sares suggested starting an alternative worship service at Corona for these bohemian twenty-somethings. However, the new pastor at Corona did not agree with his vision and forced him to

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7 Corona Presbyterian Church is located in central Denver less than a mile from the capitol. In 2013, the congregation voted to leave the Presbyterian Church (USA) and join a new denomination called the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians. See: http://www.coronachurch.com/#/about-us/history (accessed December 30, 2015).
resign. Others supported Sares and the group and even raised money to help them launch what would become Scum of the Earth Church. But the message was loud and clear: the vision of Scum did not fit into the church categories of denominational leaders. When asked whether Scum could have flourished within a denominational setting, Sares answered bluntly: “It wouldn’t have worked.”

Scum’s story is unique. But its nondenominational character is not. Tens of thousands of nondenominational churches exist across America today. Some are like the Scum of the Earth congregation: nontraditional church expressions that have been launched in recent decades. Others have roots that go back fifty or a hundred years. There is great diversity within this group of American nondenominational churches. Some are small in attendees; others are quite large. For example, a little over a hundred people attend Scum of the Earth Church weekly. Several other nondenominational churches in Denver today have more than 5,000 attendees each week. A similar pattern exists in cities across the nation. Ethnically, many nondenominational American churches are majority white; but others are predominantly Latino, African-American, or ethnically diverse.

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8 Mike Sares, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, January 21, 2016.


Nondenominational churches also appeal to a variety of demographic, geographic, and cultural segments of the population. Scum of the Earth Church attracts young people who are often on the margins of mainstream society. Other nondenominational churches appeal to urban professionals or middle-class suburban families. Regarding doctrine or theological convictions, there is no uniform nondenominational statement of faith. Some nondenominational churches adopt an existing statement of faith, like the Apostles’ Creed or Nicene Creed. Many, however, create their own doctrinal statements. Some would characterize themselves as theologically evangelical, though most shed these kinds of labels.

This diversity raises an important question: is there such a thing as a nondenominational church identity? Put another way, is the label “nondenominational” useful as a category for churches that can be so dissimilar and that primarily describe themselves by what they are not? After all, if churches of different sizes, ethnicities, cultural makeups, and theological convictions all claim the descriptor “nondenominational,” then what does this word truly mean? Is nondenominational as an adjective only a statement about what a church is not? Or, put positively, what do churches affirm about themselves when they say they claim the label nondenominational? This is one of the questions at the heart of this dissertation.

Yet this is not primarily a sociological study about a new phenomenon that has burst onto the American religious scene in the last two or three decades. Unfortunately, many Americans and even some scholars have this impression about nondenominational church growth. There are two reasons nondenominational churches are often perceived as
a recent trend. First, denominational Christian churches have dominated the narrative of religion’s role in American history. We identify the colonial era with the Puritan pilgrims of New England, the Anglican faith of many forefathers, and even the Quakers who championed the value of religious tolerance. We think of the way Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians pushed the American frontiers forward and dotted so many nineteenth-century towns in the South and West with their steepled buildings and holy convictions. And we still see the influence of Roman Catholic missions, Dutch Reformed churches, and Lutheran parishes in the Southwest, Midwest, and Great Lakes regions. Even Mormons, who were once seen as outsiders, are now recognized as part and parcel of the American cultural fabric.

Despite the changes that the twentieth century brought to American culture, as recent as the 1970s, denominational Christian churches—those formally associated with an institutional body or tradition—remained at the heart of American religious culture.¹¹ Their clergy’s pronouncements carried weight, virtually all politicians identified with a denominational church, and most Americans affiliated with them. In 1972, half of all Americans (49.8 percent) identified themselves with the five largest Protestant denominations: Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, or Episcopal. In fact, a total of 86.8 percent of Americans identified with Roman Catholicism or some Protestant

¹¹ Definitions regarding denominational and nondenominational are explored in depth in Chapter One. At this point, I am including Roman Catholicism as a “denomination” though I later describe how the term is typically used to refer to churches within the Protestant tradition.
Thus in 2018, most Americans over the age of forty-five grew up with some connection to an institutionally affiliated church. As a result, many Americans have little personal history with nondenominational Christianity or an awareness of its longer history in the nation’s past. The popular perception is that nondenominationalism is a new movement that began in the 1990s or 2000s when congregations like Scum of the Earth and large suburban churches garnered attention in the media.

A second reason nondenominational churches in America are perceived as a recent development relates to the work of sociologists and historians. For most of the twentieth century, scholars have relied on quantitative data to dissect trends in American Christianity. Much of that data has failed to recognize the growth of nondenominational congregations. Because they are not connected to any regional or national institutions,

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12 In the General Social Survey (GSS) of 1972 86.8 percent of Americans self-identified as affiliated with Roman Catholicism or a Protestant denomination. The specific breakdown is:

Roman Catholicism: 25.6 percent of Americans
Protestant: 63.9 percent of Americans
- Baptist: 31.3 percent of Protestants, 20.0 percent of Americans
- Methodist: 22.4 percent of Protestants, 14.3 percent of Americans
- Lutheran: 13.4 percent of Protestants, 8.6 percent of Americans
- Presbyterian: 7.7 percent of Protestants, 4.9 percent of Americans
- Episcopal: 3.2 percent of Protestants, 2.0 percent of Americans
- Other denomination: 17.9 percent of Protestants, 11.4 percent of Americans
- No denomination: 3.5 percent of Protestants, 2.2 percent of Americans
- No answer: 0.7 percent of Protestants, 0.4 percent of Americans
Jewish: 3.3 percent of Americans
None/other/no answer: 7.1 percent of Americans

nondenominational churches have been undercounted. Nevertheless, sociologists first noticed a decline in denominational church attendance in the late 1960s and 70s. Initially, it was not clear how to account for this trend. Mainline Protestant denominations that tended to have liberal theology seemed to be declining much quicker than conservative ones. These conclusions came at a time in the late 1970s and early 80s when evangelicalism and the religious right flourished. Theology and political engagement therefore became the focus of investigations into religious trends. In the 1980s and 90s, many sociologists focused on the growth of megachurches, particularly in suburban areas.\footnote{Megachurches are traditionally defined as churches with weekly attendance over 2,000 people. See John N. Vaughan, \textit{Megachurches and American Cities: How Churches Grow} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).} Others studied widespread shifts in national civic and community engagement and suggested these changes were most indicative of a new religious landscape.\footnote{See, for example, Robert N. Bellah [et al.], \textit{Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) and Robert D. Putnam, \textit{Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).} Still others detected how postmodernism was raising philosophical and theological questions about institutions, authorities, and metanarratives.\footnote{Postmodernism challenged the idea that metanarratives—universal theories, ideologies, framing stories, or objective truth claims—such as Christian revelation or Enlightenment rationality, shaped human reality.} All of these factors were transforming American Christianity. The question of where these changes were leading was debated vigorously by sociologists, church leaders, and skeptics who believed that religion was irreversibly on the wane in a secularizing society. But before the year 2000,
few students of religion had isolated nondenominationalism as a significant influence on the changing practice of American Christianity.\textsuperscript{16}

A fresh analysis of survey data from 1972–2010 reveals new insights about the growth of nondenominational churches. Roman Catholic adherence during this period remained steady, mostly due to Latino immigration. But substantial changes took place among three important groups: the five largest Protestant denominational traditions, Protestant nondenominational Christians, and those with no religious affiliation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>1972</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Five Largest Protestant Denominational Traditions (Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal)</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant Nondenominational</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Religion</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textbf{Figure 0.1:} Self-identification of American Religious Affiliation (percentage of total population) from GSS (General Social Science) Surveys of Americans.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16} Some journalists had begun to take notice. In 1996, Charles Trueheart described “The Next Church” in the \textit{Atlantic Monthly} as a new generation of churches whereby “[c]enturies of European tradition and Christian habit are deliberately being abandoned, clearing the way for new, contemporary forms of worship and belonging.” He noted that one thing these churches have in common: “they whisper no word of a denomination.” See Charles Trueheart, “Welcome to the Next Church,” \textit{Atlantic Monthly}, August 1996 (278:2), 37-58, accessed January 6, 2015, \url{http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1996/08/the-next-church/376646/}.

\textsuperscript{17} “Religious Preference by Year (General Social Survey, 1972 - 2010),” Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), accessed December 8, 2015, \url{http://www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_101_t.asp}, and “Denominational Affiliation by Year (General Social Survey, 1972 - 2010),” Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), accessed December 8, 2015, \url{http://www.thearda.com/quickstats/qs_102_t.asp}.  

9
These statistics demonstrate a steady decrease in denominational church affiliation congruent with a rapid increase in those with nondenominational or no religious affiliation (often called the “nones”). Other surveys such as the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) from 1990-2008 and the Pew Forum’s U.S. Religious Landscape Study in 2007 and 2014 show similar trends. Considering this data, many have focused on the rise of the “nones,” people who often describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” But the surge of nondenominational Christianity is just as significant. Mark Chaves, a sociologist at Duke University, asserted that by 2006, about one in five Protestant Christians and congregations were nondenominational, up sharply in less than a decade. He observed, “if the unaffiliated congregations were all in one denomination, they would constitute the second largest in number of participants (behind only the Roman Catholic church) and the largest in the number of [U.S.] congregations.”

Barry Kosmin, co-author of the ARIS study remarked in 2012: “The rise of non-denominational Christianity is probably one of the strongest trends in the last two decades. . . . It is nearly as sharp an increase as the no-religion response.”

So sociologists are taking notice. In fact, in 2010, researchers undertook the first genuine attempt at accurately counting nondenominational churches and adherents in

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The data from this study revealed that in metropolitan Denver alone there were 190 nondenominational churches, more than any other religious grouping (compared to 127 Southern Baptist churches, 111 Mormon churches, 91 Catholic churches, and 60 United Methodist churches). These numbers concur with the survey increases and Chaves’ findings. Yet, many still assume that nondenominational churches in the U.S. are a recent phenomenon, the spirit of a new twenty-first century age. Is this a valid historical conclusion? Or does the spirit of nondenominationalism stretch further back in the nation’s history?

One might therefore conclude that the rise of nondenominational churches is a new trend with little historical antecedence before the late twentieth century. Fortunately, in recent years, historians have given fresh attention to twentieth-century American Christianity. Many new studies explore the various dimensions of post-World War Two Protestantism, particularly evangelical strands. But none have investigated nondenominational church growth as a unique phenomenon. Robert Wuthnow, in his *The Restructuring of American Religion* (1988), described the “declining significance of denominationalism” but few followed his lead in exploring how nondenominational churches have filled in the gap and represent a movement worth its own historical examination.

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If the first question to be explored relates to whether a nondenominational church identity exists, there is a second question that this dissertation will address: *what is the historical genealogy of nondenominational churches in modern America?* What led to its phenomenal growth at the end of the twentieth century? I argue that the roots of nondenominational churches are much deeper than is often acknowledged. Nondenominational churches did not suddenly appear in the 1990s or 2000s; neither the numbers nor the history of this movement yields such an answer. Nor should nondenominational churches be equated with suburban megachurches, though many are in fact nondenominational. For example, one study of nonprofit organizations in New Haven, Connecticut tracked civic engagement from 1850-1998. It found that contrary to the predictions of secularization theory, the number of churches in this progressive New England town grew “with particular intensity after 1950.” Most significantly for this study, many of these new churches in the postwar era were nondenominational. Between 1930 and 1989, 64 percent of newly established churches in New Haven were nondenominational. By 1989, more than one-third of New Haven congregations were nondenominational. Nondenominational churches in America are not a new movement.

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25 I use the term “historical genealogy” to indicate that I am concerned not only with sociological, ecclesiological, theological, or cultural origins, but how all of these factors, within a particular historical context—namely the American postwar era from 1945-2000—shaped an identifiable movement.


27 Ibid., 233.
Recent expressions like Scum of the Earth Church in Denver represent the fruit of a lengthy process that had been cultivated for many decades.

This study tells the story of the unprecedented growth of nondenominational churches in modern America. It explores this story by specifically tracing the history of four nondenominational churches in Denver, Colorado from 1945-2000. Denver is a unique metropolitan city. Initially settled through the gold rush of 1858-1859, the city went through several early boom and bust eras until achieving relative stability at the turn of the century. Denominational churches from virtually every major confessional tradition thrived in these initial decades of Denver’s history. In the early twentieth century, Denver represented the epitome of Western U.S. development as it navigated immigration, urban reforms, the war years, and the Great Depression. In the post-World War Two era, Denver’s economy soared and new residents settled down in vast suburban neighborhoods that expanded in every direction from the urban core. The swelling population exhibited all the characteristics of Sunbelt growth but sat halfway, both geographically and culturally, between the heartland Midwest and Southern California.

The four congregations I study trace the significant lineage of the American nondenominational spirit during this important postwar era. I suggest that each congregation represents an important subtype of modern nondenominational churches: Bible churches, prosperity churches, Jesus People churches, and seeker churches. I do not attempt to offer a comprehensive analysis of each subtype. Other scholars have capably treated each subtype as its own important phenomenon within modern American
Christianity. To my knowledge, however, historians have not identified the vital connections between these four types of churches as contributing to a much broader identity and a more significant transformation of twentieth-century American faith and ecclesiology. I propose that each subtype exemplifies an important stage in the process of pioneering a modern nondenominational church identity.

By examining the specific social histories of these four congregations and their experiences within the postwar cultural context of Denver, I answer two related questions: 1) what is the historical genealogy of nondenominational churches in modern America? and 2) is there a recognizable nondenominational church identity? I suggest that these four Denver churches are emblematic of a larger national trend regarding the development of a strong and discernable nondenominational identity over this period.

In Chapter One, I take up the issue of denominationalism and nondenominationalism in American history. I explore the role of denominations in the nation’s history and how they have prevailed over much of the nation’s religious spirit. I also survey ecclesiological and sociological understandings of churches, sects, and denominations and how they might relate to an exploration of nondenominational church identity. Finally, I submit a working definition of a nondenominational church and

describe some examples that challenged American denominationalism during the nineteenth century.

In Chapter Two, I offer a quantitative analysis of the history and rise of nondenominational churches in metropolitan Denver from its founding in 1858 to 2000. I explain the challenges of counting these nondenominational churches historically and describe some of the unique characteristics of early nondenominational churches in Denver. Most importantly, I demonstrate that their number grew considerably over the second half the twentieth century. This growth occurred in substantial ways from the 1950s forward, challenging the notion that nondenominational church growth has only taken place in the last two or three decades.

In Chapters Three through Six, I tell the stories of four nondenominational churches in postwar Denver: Holly Hills Bible Church (founded 1947), Calvary Temple (1943), Redeemer Temple (1967), and Flatirons Community Church (1994). I trace their trajectories from incorporation through the end of the twentieth century as they navigated congregational challenges, the changing character of Denver, and broader societal transformations. I also give focus to each church’s doctrinal convictions, pastoral leadership, wider cultural engagement, and spirit of independence in order to elucidate the traits representative of most Bible churches, prosperity churches, Jesus People churches, and seeker churches.

My research of these four congregations relies heavily on public records, newspaper articles, church archives, and secondary sources. Each congregation offered unique challenges. In some cases, church archives were abundant; in others, they were
lost or not well-maintained. One church, Calvary Temple, provided no internal records; however, it attracted numerous local press articles and the pastor wrote an autobiography of his life and the history of the church. In addition to these resources, I interviewed over twenty individuals from the congregations—former church-goers and ministers—who were gracious enough to share oral histories of their experiences. Oral histories and autobiographies have their own challenges. The stories and details that are relayed are sometimes unverifiable and present one person’s subjective account of the larger narrative. As such, I use these primary resources with caution and an awareness of their inherent limitations.

I also note my own faith background. I was raised in a denominational church tradition (Southern Baptist), licensed as a minister in another (the Evangelical Free Church of America), received a master’s degree from a nondenominational seminary, and currently serve as a pastor in a nondenominational church. Far from limiting my abilities or objectivity for this study, I suggest that my background prepared me to understand better the theology, practices, and language of American denominational and nondenominational church culture. It also opened doors that might have been closed to other researchers and provided purposeful engagement with a movement that sheds light on my own religious background and journey.

In Chapter Seven, I conclude by illuminating the nondenominational church identity that was formed by Bible churches, prosperity churches, Jesus People churches, and seeker churches from 1945-2000. I argue that three key traits emerged of nondenominational churches: conservative doctrine, evangelistic conviction, and an
independent spirit. Evolutions took place within the first two traits: theologically from charismatic fundamentalism toward evangelical minimalism and culturally from societal separatism toward methodological accommodation. If nondenominational congregations earlier in the period were more characterized by rigid doctrines and an oppositional mentality, those that emerged in later years minimized doctrinal distinctives, pursued greater cultural engagement, and adapted their methodologies for the sake of their evanglestic convictions. But the third trait—institutional independence—remains a key identity marker for nondenominational congregations across the entire period and sets it apart as an important group of American churches worthy of its own category. This spirit of self-determination and autonomy strengthened throughout the postwar years and produced what may be considered a new religious tradition in America.
CHAPTER ONE: KNOWN BY WHAT THEY ARE NOT

The denominations have splintered the work of God, have allowed liberals to rape local churches, have introduced insipid bureaucracy into the cause of Christ and have estranged the love of Christians for Jesus Christ.

–Elmer Towns, *Is The Day of Denominationalism Dead?*

Before exploring the history of nondenominational churches in America, one must first investigate the history of denominationalism. Nondenominational churches in America developed largely in opposition to denominationalism. Therefore, in this chapter, I describe the nature of denominationalism to better understand why and how nondenominational congregations developed. First, I consider the origins and development of Protestant denominationalism from the Reformation forward. I describe how the ecclesiology of denominationalism flourished in England and America, and I review how sociologists have understood the social and structural dynamics that fuel denominationalism.¹ Then, I submit a working definition of a nondenominational church and explore prominent examples that arose in nineteenth-century America. In the chapters that follow, I take up the history of nondenominational churches in the twentieth century and the robust nondenominational identity that emerged from 1945-2000.

¹ Ecclesiology is the study of the doctrine of the Christian church in both universal and local forms. In practice, ecclesiology informs how an individual or group understands the role, function, and polity of the church.
Origins and Development of Denominationalism

Historically, the seeds of Protestant denominationalism were sown in the sixteenth-century Reformation when the movements of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and others shattered the unity of Christendom in Europe. These reformers initially protested the perceived abuses and doctrinal errors of medieval Catholicism and the papacy. Their original desire was to reform the church from within. When the Catholic Church fought back and declared new Protestant doctrines and practices heretical at the Council of Trent (1545-63), the division was deemed irreconcilable. The Reformed and Lutheran movements, and to a lesser extent, the Anabaptist movement, took on lives of their own and created alternative ecclesiastical structures on the European continent.

In England, the Reformation took a unique turn. The protest there was less concerned with doctrine and practices; rather it emerged from Henry VIII’s desire for a marriage annulment that the papacy would not grant. Amid Reformed and Lutheran debates on the continent, Henry VIII utilized the opportunity to shun the authority of the pope and inaugurate a new church hierarchy controlled by the English monarch. Some theological developments took place, but the Anglican Church largely resembled the ways, traditions, and hierarchy of the Catholic Church, though under national control. But over the following century, England descended into conflict between those who tried to revert the church back to Roman Catholicism, those who embraced the Church of England and remained loyal to the king, and others who believed the doctrinal reforms had not gone far enough. Protestants who wanted greater doctrinal reform, simpler
worship practices, and less authoritarian control by the Anglican hierarchy became loosely known as Puritans (because of their desire to purify the church).

The religious and political debates finally came to a head in the English Civil War (1642-51). The Puritans seized control of Parliament and attempted to unite against those loyal to the Anglican Church and king. But the Puritans were a diverse group of reformers and recognized the need to unify their doctrine and desired ecclesiastical structure if they were to defeat the Loyalists and achieve permanent control of the nation and church. This was the purpose of the Westminster Assembly (1643-49).

In short, those gathered at Westminster were fragmented in their views on church government. To be sure, all opposed the rigid episcopacy of high church Anglicanism. They believed the Reformation in England had been incomplete; Anglicanism had simply replaced Roman Catholic institutions with a national hierarchy. But divisions remained. Some gathered at Westminster supported a moderate episcopacy led by bishops who exerted more local authority. Others argued for a Presbyterian model led by elders, presbyteries, and a general assembly like that of the Presbyterian Scots. Still others, a minority of “Dissenting Brethren,” pushed for a congregational form of church government whereby each local church governed its own affairs absent the control of any hierarchy.

Congregationalism was a novel idea in the history of the Christian church. Some of these Dissenting Brethren were influenced by the emerging Baptist belief that only adults baptized as believers could be members of the church. On the individual level, this idea conceptualized one’s choice to be a Christian and become a member of the church.
(symbolized by baptism) as a voluntary decision. Personal autonomy was essential; one could not be born or baptized into the church as an infant. This kind of voluntary association shaped ecclesiastical thought; local Baptist churches upheld not only personal autonomy, but congregational autonomy as well. Other Dissenting Brethren were influenced by the successful experiments of Congregationalists in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In the New World, most Puritan congregations had been established with congregational autonomy.

But the various groups gathered at Westminster remained at an impasse; they could not agree on one unified model of ecclesiology. As a result, the Dissenting Brethren offered a new idea: denominationalism. The universal Church could remain unified and strong, but could be subdivided by denominations that go by different names and models of church government and which all belong to the whole. Anglican, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches could all practice their own form of church government without coercing or condemning the others. The different groups no longer had to fight one another to establish and mandate one view of ecclesiology on all; they could accept the presence of various models. Church historian Winthrop Hudson described the concept well:

The basic contention of the denominational theory of the Church is that the true Church is not to be identified exclusively with any single ecclesiastical structure. No denomination claims to represent the whole Church of Christ. No denomination claims that all other churches are false churches. Each denomination is regarded as constituting a different ‘mode’ of expressing in the outward forms of worship and organization that larger life of the Church in which they all share.²

This theory of denominationalism won the day at Westminster. It experienced a brief setback during the restoration of the Stuarts and the Clarendon Code (1660-68). But denominationalism achieved a permanent victory in England and its colonies with the Act of Toleration in 1689. Protestantism would never be the same.

The Reformation was significant for American religious history because early settlers of the thirteen colonies were largely from northern Europe, especially England. They brought with them their Reformed, Lutheran, Congregationalist, and Anglican theology and practices. Initially, Congregationalists and Anglicans ruled the day in areas like New England and Virginia, carrying with them much of the conflict they left in England. Some attempted to establish authoritarian control over their colonies. Smaller groups like Baptists and Quakers were often shunned when they challenged prevailing conventions. Stories like those of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, who were famously expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for their heretical views, were not uncommon. But the practice of denominationalism quickly took root in the New World, particularly when marginalized religious groups could simply move to unsettled areas and flourish there. Baptists did so in Rhode Island, Quakers in Pennsylvania. Simply put, the abundance of land in the New World (Native American settlements notwithstanding) propelled denominationalism forward in ways it could not in England. As a result, by

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3 The act was limited to Protestant Christians who had taken an oath of allegiance to the kingdom (Roman Catholics and atheists were still marginalized). But it recognized and respected the inclusion of different ecclesiastical traditions within the larger church.

4 French and Spanish settlers were more influential outside the thirteen colonies.
1740 eight significant denominational traditions thrived in the thirteen colonies: Congregationalists (423 churches), Anglicans (246), Presbyterians (160), Baptists (96), Lutherans (95), Dutch Reformed (78), and German Reformed (51).5

As denominationalism blossomed in the colonial era, one aspect of its early character is worth noting here. Congregations at that time were denominational primarily because of their connection to broader confessional traditions and less as official members of institutional bodies. A confessional tradition is a particular way of practicing the Christian faith, rooted in historical beliefs and customs, and passed down to subsequent generations. The word “confessional” often refers to a tradition grounded in historical doctrinal statements, such as the Augsburg Confession (Lutheranism) or Westminster Confession (Reformed). But it can also refer to how groups of Christians “confess” their faith through lived religion. Liturgical norms, ecclesiastical structures, pietistic practices, ethnic customs, or ethical values have a confessional force as well.6 All eight of the denominational traditions that prevailed in the early colonies were transported and adapted from European confessional traditions.7 What is important and often not recognized today is that the kinds of denominational institutions that would


evolve in later centuries—organized bureaucratic bodies with wide-ranging institutions and membership expectations—did not exist in the colonial era.

For instance, Congregationalist churches in colonial New England were not officially registered with any kind of denominational body. There were no central Congregational headquarters or administrative officials, no authoritative denominational newspapers or magazines, and no organizational bylaws or constitutions to which member churches must adhere. This was partly due to the nature of Congregational ecclesiology that valued autonomy. But the practical matters of a small, less-established population amid a vast geographical landscape of the early colonies played a much larger role. Even the Church of England—arguably the most institutional of Protestant traditions at the time—had little colonial infrastructure. Parishes were large and had trouble communicating with one another let alone church authorities in England. A bishop was never appointed in the New World so duties such as providing direction, cohesion, and the ordination of new candidates for ministry were missing. Anglican churches and their ministers were largely on their own.

But Anglicans and Congregationalists made do during this time without large institutional bodies. Anglicans became the established church in several colonies, started colleges like William and Mary (1693), and founded mission agencies for proselytizing.\textsuperscript{8} Even the hundreds of Congregationalist churches were not entirely independent of one another despite their emphasis on local autonomy. Together they started Harvard (1636) and Yale (1701) for the training of their ministers; agreed on the Cambridge Platform

\textsuperscript{8} Noll, \textit{History of Christianity}, 63-54.
(1648), which affirmed the Westminster Confession of Faith and congregational polity as key doctrines; and formed local ministerial associations for the sake of cooperation.⁹ Thus, some nascent organizational forms were developed during this time. But the comprehensive bureaucratic institutions of later years were yet to come. What made a Congregationalist church Congregational, an Anglican church Anglican, or a Presbyterian church Presbyterian was its participation in a larger confessional tradition. Bureaucratic institutionalism was not a key marker of denominationalism in the early colonies. The nineteenth century, though, would produce significant change.

The establishment of a free and independent republic brought a new era to American Protestantism. Nathan Hatch described the transformation that took place in the early nineteenth century as the “democratization of American Christianity.”¹⁰ New charismatic leaders, new frontier opportunities, and a newfound sense of American identity paved the way for denominational organizations to thrive. Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians pioneered more formal networks as their itinerant preachers swept south and west along the frontiers in the Second Great Awakening. As educational, missional, and publishing needs required greater resources for their ever-expanding

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networks among an exploding population, each confessional tradition created vast networks of institutions to drive and sustain growth among new churches and adherents.

Conflict and division played central roles in denominationalism as well. By mid-century, the crisis of southern slavery and secession threatened the life of the nation. But this conflict paradoxically breathed new life into denominational institutionalization. The slavery question forced churches and denominations to unite with like-minded brethren to champion their causes against their respective opponents. Abolitionists in the North attempted to steer denominational leaders toward their efforts. Many southern churches broke away from their northern counterparts by creating their own denominations. Even Baptists in the South, always fearful of centralized control and resistant to institutionalization, felt the need to create the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC, 1845) to defend their pro-slavery way of life. As historian Mark Noll remarks,

For the first time a large number of these independent-minded folk had taken on a fully denominational structure like that of other Protestant bodies. Although not as authoritarian as the bishops of Methodism or the General Assemblies of Presbyterians, the SBC nevertheless provided a degree of centralized authority unknown among Baptists prior to that time.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} Noll, \textit{History of Christianity}, 179.

Division may threaten a nation’s unity, but it fuels denominationalism.

After the Civil War, the nation rebuilt and expanded. Railroads and industrialization fueled the emergence of giant corporations and centrally-controlled governmental agencies. The growth of denominations followed suit. Moreover, new forms of division facilitated denominational development. From roughly 1870 to 1930, doctrinal debates about biblical inerrancy, modernism, and supernatural gifts of the Holy
Spirit split denominations; new ones were often formed. Perhaps even more importantly, ongoing sectional tensions, racial gaps between whites and African-Americans, and masses of foreign immigrants from new parts of Europe brought additional divisions, and consequently additional denominations. New associations, reform societies, schools, mission organizations, printing houses, and denominational governing bodies proliferated the American landscape. By 1936, there were at least 263 different religious denominations in the nation. Granted, some were quite small, limited to only a handful of congregations. But virtually all had created denominational institutions to govern their unique doctrines and carve out their own corner of the American religious landscape. Few congregations in America remained entirely independent. Westminster’s denominational theory of the church ruled the day.

**Sociology of Denominationalism**

No one at the start of the Reformation or the conclusion of the Westminster Assembly could have predicted the number of different religious groups and denominations that would proliferate in modern Western culture. Unique geographical and historical forces in America, such as those surveyed, were a crucial factor. The

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13 “Census of Religious Bodies, 1936,” [Washington, D.C.:] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1936. This listing of denominations is not limited to Protestant churches; it includes Catholic, Orthodox, and other religious bodies such as the Buddhist Mission of North America. However, the overwhelming majority of bodies are Protestant in nature.
nation’s westward expansion, the crisis of slavery, a growing population of immigrants, and theological debates about modernism all played important roles in the explosion of new American denominations. But one should not neglect possible sociological factors.

For the past century, sociologists of religion have sought to understand how new religious groups formed, how they identified themselves with respect to the wider culture, and what role institutionalization played. These sociological ideas are significant as they offer a different set of answers for what drove so many American churches to divide and institutionalize into myriad denominational forms by the early twentieth century. More importantly for this study, these ideas provide hints at what might have driven a new generation of churchgoers in the twentieth century toward nondenominationalism.

German philosopher and sociologist Ernst Troeltsch provided a starting point in his seminal work, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1919). Troeltsch identified two types of Christian congregations in history: churches and sects.

The essence of the Church[-type] is its objective institutional character. The individual is born into it, and through infant baptism he comes under its miraculous influence. The priesthood and the hierarchy, which hold the keys to the tradition of the Church, to sacramental grace and ecclesiastical jurisdiction, represent the objective treasury of grace.15

Medieval Catholicism and the state churches of Protestant Europe epitomize Troeltsch’s church typology. The church-type is institutional and accommodates to the needs and

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15 Ibid., 338.
ideals of wider society. It is the corporate mediator of religious experience for the majority of citizens. But the sect-type stands in stark contrast:

the sect is a voluntary community whose members join it of their own free will. The very life of the sect, therefore, depends on actual personal service and cooperation; as an independent member each individual has his part within the fellowship; the bond of union has not been indirectly imparted through the common possession of Divine grace, but it is directly realized in the personal relationships of life. An individual is not born into a sect; he enters it on the basis of conscious conversion.\textsuperscript{16}

Sects therefore are independent and voluntary groups that typically break away from institutionalized state churches. They are minority groups that maintain a tension, and oftentimes, prophetic witness against the norms of wider culture.

Later sociologists highlighted weaknesses of Troeltsch’s typology. For starters, it was too simplistic. Milton Yinger pointed out that the church and sect types may describe endpoints on a religious continuum but fail to adequately address the many complex intermediate positions.\textsuperscript{17} Others suggested that Troeltsch’s understanding was limited by his context of early modern Europe; his categories did not apply well to the vastly dissimilar and pluralistic United States.\textsuperscript{18} David Moberg explained the need to rethink Troeltsch’s typology in light of the American experience:

The concept of the church as a religious organization into which one is born, and the sect as one joined voluntarily is not easy to apply in America. These ideal types were developed in Europe where the contrasts between state churches and free churches or sects were clearly manifested. The transplanting of a state church

\textsuperscript{16} Troeltsch, \textit{Social Teaching}, 339.


to America did not make it an established church with an all-inclusive membership, although a few such attempts were made in colonial times. Even ‘churches’ were voluntarily joined, and many ‘churches’ competed with one another as well as with ‘sects’ for membership, power, and influence. Modifications of the church-sect typology are hence necessary to analyze American religious patterns.¹⁹

Because of these shortcomings, Troeltsch failed to account for the widespread nature of modern American denominations that often blended aspects of both the institutional church-type and voluntary sect-type.

Several adaptations of Troeltsch’s typology followed.²⁰ The most helpful for our purposes is that of Howard Becker, who built on the work of German sociologist Leopold von Wiese.²¹ Becker suggested four religious types on the continuum: the ecclesia, denomination, sect, and cult (see Figure 1.1 below). The ecclesia roughly corresponds to Troeltsch’s church-type: an established church that accommodates to society and serves its needs through systems and institutions. The sect is also described similarly to Troeltsch: a minority group that is voluntarily joined and often at odds with cultural values and even those of established churches. But adding to Troeltsch’s typology, Becker observed that the early zeal and charismatic leadership of sects often die in the second and third generations. As Richard Niebuhr attested:

By its very nature the sectarian type of organization is valid for only one generation. . . . For with [the coming of children] the sect must take on the

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²⁰ For a helpful summary of these adaptations, see Moberg, Church, 78-82.

character of an educational and disciplinary institution, with the purpose of bringing the new generation into conformity with ideals and customs which have become traditional.\textsuperscript{22}

For the sect to survive beyond its first generation, compromise, adaptation, theological education, and institutionalization are required. Some sect members resist these changes. Those sects that doggedly oppose social structures and maintain hostility to societal norms Becker labels\textit{cults}. They move in an even more countercultural direction. On the other hand, those religious groups that see adaptation as a path toward maturity become\textit{denominations}. They let go of their exclusivist mentality and embrace the denominational theory of the church, not typically for theological reasons, but for their own survival.

In America, these kinds of denominations thrived in the nineteenth century. Some arose from sect-type groups that grew rapidly and embraced institutionalism in their second and third generations. Others emerged from ecclesia-type groups imported from Western Europe that, as the nation developed, rejected a state church establishment and authoritarian hierarchy. After all, personal liberty and disestablishment were bedrock American values; Protestant denominations maintained a deep suspicion and antagonism toward Roman Catholic “popery.”\textsuperscript{23} That is not to suggest sect and cult groups did not exist; many did. But in modern America, with its unique mixture of Protestant heritage, religious tolerance, and expanding population, the denominational type flourished.

Another viewpoint related to these typologies bears mention, particularly as it relates to the twentieth-century emergence of nondenominational churches. Elmer Towns

\textsuperscript{22} Niebuhr, \textit{Social Sources}, 19-20.

\textsuperscript{23} Moberg, \textit{The Church as a Social Institution}, 79.
was a self-identified church growth expert in the second half of the twentieth century. He co-founded Liberty University (then Lynchburg Baptist College) in 1971 with Jerry Falwell. He also wrote extensively about the largest Sunday Schools and churches in America during 1960s and 70s. In his writings, particularly his book *Is the Day of Denominationalism Dead?*, he criticized the institutions of denominations in favor of independent church movements. Towns never claimed to be an objective sociologist.

By the second half of the twentieth century, the largest American denominations had come to be associated with modernist or liberal theology. As a result, his fundamentalist beliefs shaped his negative perception of most American denominations that, in his view, had veered away from orthodox Christian belief.

Building on the frameworks of Troeltsch, Moberg, and others, Towns described a downward cycle whereby churches move through four key stages: sect, institution, denomination, and deterioration. In Town’s opinion and according to his theological convictions, the sect stage is the most faithful to God’s will for the church. He represents how many sect-insiders perceived themselves:

Sectarians’ beliefs are different . . . their lifestyle is different . . . their values are different . . . and their destination is different. A sectarian Christian gives allegiance to God who lives in heaven. The mystery of Christianity is inherent in his existence. Out of a ‘hard-headed commitment’ a sectarian Christian does not mind being different from the crowd; as a matter of fact, his Christianity calls for him to separate himself because he believes the godly life is distinctive. The sectarian church is opposed to the established church because of its hypocrisy and


25 I engage the influence of modernism and fundamentalism on these ideas in depth in Chapter Three.
deadness. They feel the religion of the establishment attacked the Lord and crucified Christ.  

For Towns, the purity of the Christian faith can only be found in the sectarian outlook. His next stage is the institutional church. “With the passing of time,” he noted, sects often institutionalize. A congregation in this cycle retains the “doctrinal distinctives,” “vitality,” and “original purpose” of the sect stage. But it develops an “efficient administration” and has “become established in the communities.” As such, institutional churches have taken a step away from the most faithful church expression for the sake of compromise with the wider culture. According to his outlook, fundamentalist churches of the twentieth century represented sectarianism for Towns; the neo-evangelical movement that began in the 1940s embodied the institutional expression. An institutional church often transforms into the third cycle: a denominational church. At the beginning of his book, Towns describes denominationalism is neutral terms. His definition can be helpful for this study:

A denomination is a group of churches with similar doctrinal beliefs, who have similar traditions and backgrounds, who share the same goals in ministry, who desire fellowship to encourage one another, and have organically bound themselves together to establish corporately what they feel cannot be wrought separately.

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26 Towns, Is the Day of Denominationalism Dead?, 101, ellipses are the author’s own.

27 Ibid., 98-100.

28 Ibid., 108-117.

29 Ibid., 49.
He notes that this functional definition applies to groups that do not call themselves a denomination, such as the Southern Baptist Convention or Christian and Missionary Alliance. These groups might be called “loose denominations” in contrast with “tight denominations” that exercise greater control, centralized direction, and bureaucratic tendencies.\(^{30}\) So, even within the category of denomination, a spectrum exists.

But on the whole, Towns believes that any institutionalization and denominationalism, whether “loose” or “tight,” carries self-destructive tendencies. Put simply, denominationalism is the road to religious apostasy. Towns provides a wealth of anecdotal stories about the decay of denominational churches and the success of churches he believes fit the sectarian type (which is arguable). For him, theological laxity, institutional development, and cultural accommodation are deeply interwoven. Thus, denominations inevitably descend into Towns’ final stage: deterioration.

Here, Towns relies heavily on sociologist David Moberg who traces the life cycle of social structures, including churches, through five stages: incipient organization, formal organization, maximum efficiency, institutional stage, and disintegration.\(^{31}\) This final stage of deterioration/disintegration is the culmination of a downward spiral into irrelevance. Consider Moberg’s description:

‘Diseases’ of formalism, indifferentism, obsolescence, absolutism, red tape, patronage, and corruption are common symptoms of disintegration. Lack of responsiveness by the institutional machine to the personal and social needs of constituents causes loss of their confidence. Many withdraw into new sects or drift without any formal church connections. Those who nominally continue to embrace the church ignore it in practice, or they conform to its teachings only

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 50.

\(^{31}\) Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution*, 119-122.
half-heartedly, supporting it because they feel it is not consistent or logical to change their attitudes even after losing all belief in their value. Leadership with a vested interest in the institution, and followers who are emotionally attached to it, attempt to preserve it. As a result, an internal reform movement may restore the church to a position of vitality and usefulness. However, the church’s strength may be gradually sapped by waning membership or by the growth of new sects until complete collapse occurs.\textsuperscript{32}

Of course, this is an extremely negative view of institutionalization and denominationalism, grounded in theological presuppositions that equate orthodoxy with sectarianism. But it represents how many like Towns perceived the decline of denominations in the second half of the twentieth century.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{typologies.png}
\caption{Typologies or life cycles of churches.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 122, who in this paragraph cites the work of Edward A. Ross, “The Diseases of Social Structures,” \textit{American Journal of Sociology}, 24 (Sept 1918), 139-158.
Towns was not the only one to explain the decline of denominations in the second half of the twentieth century. Others provided alternative perspectives. Scholars David Hadaway and Kirk Roozen cite declining birth rates, cultural shifts, and changing denominational priorities as key factors. Sociologists and historians will continue to debate the causes. Yet those speaking from within the Christian tradition often think that spiritual factors cannot be neglected. Ethicist Richard Niebuhr, who served in denominational churches most of his life and taught many years at Yale, highlighted the “evil of denominationalism” as not merely a tension between sect and church-types, with the former as superior to the latter. Rather,

the evil of denominationalism lies in the conditions which makes the rise of sects desirable and necessary: in the failure of churches to transcend the social conditions which fashion them into caste-organizations, to sublimate their loyalties to standards and institutions only remotely relevant if not contrary to the Christian ideal, to resist the temptation of making their own self-preservation and extension the primary object of their endeavor.

For Niebuhr, the great fault of denominationalism was its tendency to undermine the unity and single-minded mission of the church. The unintended consequence of denominationalism was an ecclesiology driven by division. Towns was less charitable and more explicit: “The denominations have splintered the work of God, have allowed liberals to rape local churches, have introduced insipid bureaucracy into the cause of

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33 C. Kirk Hadaway, and David A. Roozen, eds, *Church and Denominational Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 37-45. Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, and Michelle Wilde (“The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States” in *American Journal of Sociology* 107[2]: 468-502) also refer to higher fertility rates and earlier childbearing as explanations for higher membership rates in conservative churches compared to mainline denominations.

34 Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 21.
Christ and have estranged the love of Christians for Jesus Christ.”  

For Towns and many others, “new sects”—namely independent nondenominational churches—were the only solution to American Christianity’s perceived demise in the twentieth century.

**Defining a Nondenominational Church**

Having explored the historical and sociological origins of denominationalism, I now raise an important question: how does one define a *nondenominational* church in the context of American Christianity? I offer the following definition for this study: *a nondenominational church is an independent, Protestant church that has no affiliation or identification with a functional denomination or confessional tradition.*

First, a caveat: this definition is limited to Protestant churches. Surveys and statistics often include in their classification of denominations congregations from other Christian traditions such as Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. This is necessary for taxonomical purposes if “denomination” is broadly understood as a religious grouping or subcategory. Nonetheless, as our historical survey demonstrated, denominationalism is largely a Protestant phenomenon. It primarily refers to those subgroupings with Protestantism. Catholic and Orthodox institutions do not promote or recognize churches that have pioneered an identity outside of their purview.  

Westminster’s theory of denominationalism was never embraced outside of Protestantism.

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35 Towns, *Is the Day of Denominationalism Dead?*, 73.

I also do not include informal “house churches” in this definition. House churches are small gatherings of Christians—usually in a home—with no formal structure, paid staff, or organized programs. House churches represent an important stream of religious practice, particularly in nations where Christians are persecuted and “underground” house churches represent the only viable option. But they are a very small minority in the U.S. and including them is outside the scope of this study. For the sake of simplicity, a church is defined as a Christian community of faith with recognizable leadership positions, public worship services, and legal registration with governing authorities.

Second, nondenominational churches are not formally affiliated with a functional denomination. Obviously, this includes self-described denominations such as the United Methodist Church, Episcopal Church, Assemblies of God, or historically African-American Church of God in Christ, to name a few. For example, a United Methodist church today adheres to United Methodist doctrine, supports United Methodist institutions, participates in annual United Methodist conferences, receives clergy from United Methodist seminaries, and collaborates with other United Methodist churches on global, national, and regional initiatives. I use the adjective *functional* in my definition because there are also institutional bodies that do not call themselves denominations but operate in the same way. They may refer to themselves as associations, conventions, or alliances, but they function as theologically-governing bodies with all the trappings of a denomination. For instance, they regularly draw doctrinal boundary lines to determine which churches identify with the group or not. The Southern Baptist Convention is a prime example.
Third, nondenominational churches do not publicly identify with a historic confessional tradition. In his excellent work *Exploring Protestant Traditions: An Invitation to Theological Hospitality*, theologian David Buschart surveys eight “ecclesio-theological traditions” of the Protestant Church. Tracing the history of Protestants from the Reformation to the present day, he identifies these formative traditions as Lutheran, Anabaptist, Reformed, Anglican, Baptist, Wesleyan, Dispensational, and Pentecostal. These ecclesio-theological traditions—I prefer the term *confessional tradition*—are broader in scope than any one specific institutional body.

For example, the Lutheran confessional tradition in America today includes churches that are part of denominational bodies such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) among others. What makes an ELCA church a denominational church is not only its specific participation in the ELCA denominational body but also its identification within the broader Lutheran confessional tradition. All Lutheran churches, regardless of their specific institutional affiliation, can be identified by distinctive Lutheran marks of identity. These marks are most recognizable as creedal commitments (adherence to Lutheran creeds, doctrines, and theological distinctives), but also include worship forms, cultural markers, educational values, and missional impulses. As a result, an ELCA church, an LCMS church, and a WELS church all participate in

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different denominational bodies, each with their own distinctive practices and institutions. But all three are united with one another in their confessional tradition.

I suggest the key to identifying a denominational church, either today or in the historical past, lies not only in a church’s relationship with an institutional body but also with a confessional tradition. Our survey of colonial churches that did not have sweeping institutions bears this out. Early Congregationalist churches were denominational, not because they were members of a tightly controlled institutional body but because they identified as part of a historic confessional tradition. The same holds true in modern America. There exist congregations that are less connected, or wholly unconnected, to a denominational institutional body. But their identity is formed by an unabashed identification with a historic confessional tradition.

Consider “independent Baptist” churches. There have been and still are Baptist churches, both majority white and African-American, that are independent of institutional denominational ties. The two descriptors—“independent” and “Baptist”—stand in tension. Some have suggested such congregations are nondenominational because they lack formal ties to an institutional body. I suggest the question must be pursued more deeply. Does an independent Baptist church identify more with the Baptist confessional tradition or an independent, nondenominational church identity? Below, I argue that a

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38 For example, Jacqueline E. Wenger states, “A nondenominational church may, however, follow a distinct religious tradition such as Baptist or Pentecostal, and still be considered nondenominational as long as they have no formal affiliation with a denomination”; see her “Middle-Class African-American and White Nondenominational Protestant Congregations: Their Characteristics and Significance,” (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2009), 4.
nondenominational church identity, recognizable by positive traits, has emerged in the twentieth century. If so, is an independent Baptist church more independent (or nondenominational) or more Baptist?

On one hand, independent Baptist churches embrace a nondenominational impulse because they believe that denominational affiliation stifles growth and vitality. In his book about denominationalism, Elmer Towns referred to the examples of Akron Baptist Temple (Ohio); Thomas Road Baptist Church (Lynchburg, Virginia); First Baptist Church, Hammond, Indiana; and Florence Baptist Temple (South Carolina) among many others as examples of churches that shunned denominationalism. Each of these churches flourished in the postwar era without the help of denominational affiliation. Many of their leaders suggested that their independence from bureaucratic institutions allowed them to thrive. After growing Thomas Road Baptist Church to over 19,000 attendees in 1972, a $10 million budget, and worldwide television ministry, Pastor Jerry Falwell remarked, “If I had followed the direction of a denomination [in the early years], we would be running 300 in attendance today.”

On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of independent Baptist churches remain defined by the Baptist confessional tradition above all else. They may not affiliate with a governing body, but they are clearly and robustly Baptist in character. This identification begins with the name of the church itself. The descriptor “Baptist” is almost always in the name, as Towns’ examples demonstrate. The Baptist identification


40 Ibid., 17.
continues with important Baptist theological markers such as an emphasis on inerrancy of Scripture, believer’s baptism, congregational governance, and the autonomy of the local church. To conform to this Baptist identity, most independent Baptist churches require their clergy to be educated at historically Baptist seminaries, utilize traditional Baptist curriculum, and support Baptist missions organizations.

In other words, “Baptist” is more identity-forming than “independent” for these churches despite their lack of formal denominational ties. While they have independent qualities—they can make more choices without the governance of a national body requiring their conformity—one would say these churches remain more Baptist than independent. Despite their protestations, their strict adherence to a larger confessional tradition places them firmly within the Baptist denominational tradition. A nondenominational church, in contrast, does not publicly identify with a functional denomination or a historic confessional tradition.

To be clear, the borders will always be blurry for what constitutes a denominational or nondenominational church. Some churches will straddle the border. One might suggest that “independent Baptist” churches are at the edge of denominationalism with one foot in the nondenominational door. Therefore, when examining specific churches, judgments must be made about what constitutes their most formative identity. This gets to the heart of the question I explore in this study: what constitutes the most formative identity of those Protestant churches in modern America that shun affiliation with a functional denomination and confessional tradition? I argue that there is an identity, one that emerged primarily in the postwar era through a series of
complex theological, sociological, and cultural developments. Perhaps Buschart’s analysis of the eight most significant Protestant confessional traditions is missing one entry that developed in the postwar era: nondenominationalism. I propose that nondenominational churches are no longer known by the negative assertion of what they are not. Rather, from roughly 1945-2000, nondenominational churches took on a discernible identity that not only defined who they were in positive terms, but transformed the American religious landscape in ways that are only now being recognized.

*Exploring the American Nondenominational Spirit*

Given this background on denominationalism and a working definition of a nondenominational church, I now explore nondenominational congregations in American history. Nondenominational churches were not entirely new to the twentieth century. Independent congregations not aligned with a denominational body or confessional tradition litter America’s pre-1900 past, albeit mostly in small numbers. Typically, they exhibited the traits of the sect-type that Troeltsch and others described. These independent communities of faith criticized establishment religion, rejected secularism, and believed a return to biblical ideals required a separationist mentality from culture and traditional religious forms. Sometimes, these independent groups were driven by apocalyptic or millenarian tendencies. In a few instances, they gained a significant following.
One such example is the Restoration movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{41} Barton Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell, among others, led early groups of churches who called themselves Christians, Disciples of Christ, or Churches of Christ. They revolted against the authoritarian structures of Methodism, the rigid Calvinism of Presbyterians, and the emotionalism of Baptists. Moreover, they believed that the proliferation of denominations fractured the church and introduced human traditions that were not biblical. As such, they rejected formal doctrinal statements opting instead for slogans such as “No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible.”\textsuperscript{42} Restorationist churches also swore off institutional structures that threatened to give control to a centralized authority. Their goal, broadly speaking, was a restoration of the New Testament model of church; hence the name of the movement. By 1850, their numbers had grown to 1.8 percent of all religious adherents in America, a sizeable number for a sect that was mostly rejected by establishment churches.\textsuperscript{43} According to my definition, one would characterize early Christians and Disciples of Christ churches as nondenominational. But that spirit did not endure long.

In 1832, many of Stone’s Christian churches merged with Alexander Campbell’s Disciples of Christ congregations to form what most would call a denomination, even

\begin{footnotes}{41}{For an excellent introductory treatment of the Restoration movement, see Paul K. Conkin, \textit{American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 1-56.}
\begin{footnotes}{43}{Noll, \textit{History of Christianity}, 153.}
though they opposed such a label.\textsuperscript{44} In 1840, the group created a college at Bethany, West Virginia, and within a decade convened for a national convention. After the Civil War, the Christians/Disciples movement exploded from 200,000 members in 1860 to over a million in 1900. By the turn of the century, the group had an “embryonic denominational organization, with a convention and missionary society at the center and voluntary social agencies, several colleges, and some type of local organization in most states.”\textsuperscript{45}

Some congregations in the movement resisted the merger that took place in 1832. But they developed their own organizations as well. The Christian Connection of scattered churches eventually created their own associations, an annual convention in Ohio, and Antioch College in Ohio. Southern Christians who did not participate in the merger created the Southern Christian Association in 1844 and Elon College (NC) in 1889. The Churches of Christ, perhaps the most sectarian wing of the Restoration movement, did likewise. Though they rejected formal authoritarian structures, they nevertheless coalesced around shared doctrinal values and utilized periodicals, local associations, and colleges (such as Harding, Pepperdine, Abilene Christian, and David Lipscomb) to maintain a measure of control over the movement. As historian Paul Conkin observes,

\begin{quote}
The informal modes of applying communal authority [within the Churches of Christ] have been most apparent to individual ministers who stepped out of line, met a fraternal rebuke from fellow ministers or in the major periodicals, and never again gained a pulpit in a mainstream congregation.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{44} Conkin, \textit{American Originals}, 28.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 39.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 42-43.
Ultimately, the Restoration movement demonstrates the sociological principle of how early sectarian desires often move toward establishment denominationalism in second and third generations. More millenarian groups, or what historian Mark Noll describes as “aggressive outsiders of the period,” such as the Millerites and Mormons, followed the same pattern of later denominational consolidation.

Another example of independent or nondenominational congregational growth emerged among southern African-Americans following the Civil War. Before the war, blacks in the North organized their own churches within existing denominations or created their own, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME, 1814). A few black churches were created in the South, but most slaves were forbidden from holding their own religious meetings for fear of insurrection. As a result, blacks were only allowed to attend white churches with their masters. Many did. More than half million slaves were affiliated with southern churches. Four hundred thousand alone were formal members of Methodist and Baptist churches.

After the war, four million former slaves in the South were free to create their own congregations, independent of whites, for the first time. As church historian Mark Noll describes, some African-Americans established nondenominational churches

in which locally supported preachers created and maintained their own congregations. . . . In later decades, with the vast movement of blacks into cities


both North and South, this pattern of independent congregations led to some of the largest and most influential urban congregations.\textsuperscript{50}

But these nondenominational black churches were the exception to the rule. Many freed blacks created new denominations such as the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (1870), the Colored Cumberland Presbyterian Church (1874), and National Baptist Convention (1895). Even more African-American churches joined northern denominations that rapidly expanded in the South such as the AME and AME Zion Churches.\textsuperscript{51} While a few independent African-American congregations thrived, particularly in urban areas, they were the minority among a sea of denominational churches.

One final example of an independent church expression in American history is a significant precursor of the nondenominational spirit that would blossom in the twentieth century. In 1864, the evangelist Dwight Moody created what would later become Moody Memorial Church. Moody was an evangelist at heart; he never wanted to pastor a church. But his Chicago converts became so numerous that he felt the need to create a local congregation for them to be nurtured in their faith.\textsuperscript{52} The first church building held 1,500 people. The congregation moved locations several times, always expanding to accommodate growing numbers and programs, until they found their permanent home and built a 4,000 seat Romanesque sanctuary in downtown Chicago, which is still in use

\textsuperscript{50} Noll, \textit{History of Christianity}, 337-338.

\textsuperscript{51} Ahlstrom, \textit{Religious History}, 709.

\textsuperscript{52} For a full history of the church, see Robert G. Flood, \textit{The Story of Moody Church: A Light in the City} (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985).
today. In contrast with independent Baptist churches, Moody Church never identified with a historic confessional tradition.⁵³

In the late nineteenth century, Moody Church became a hub of urban ministry and Midwest revival gatherings. Moody and the church also started a training school for ministers and evangelists in 1886, which later became known as Moody Bible Institute. But the church, the institute, and Moody himself remained independent of denominational or confessional affiliation. Moody believed that his passion for evangelism and missions, and the church’s support of it, were best accomplished when free from denominational control or labels. In fact, Moody never served as the official pastor of the church and was never ordained by an institutional body. “Many denominations offered to ordain him,” writes biographer Robert Flood. “Moody declined. He did not want to be bound by denominationalism in general, let alone a particular one.

⁵³ Moody and his church embraced fundamentalist and dispensational theology. It is anachronistic to speak of a fundamentalist or dispensational confessional tradition at that time, though both movements play an important role in the development of twentieth-century nondenominational churches (see Chapter Three). David Buschart includes dispensationalism as an important Protestant theological tradition in his Exploring Protestant Traditions. But he notes its unique character as a theological tradition lacking presence in “‘mainstream’ academic and ecclesiastical circles” (21). I suggest that dispensationalism, like fundamentalism (the two are often intertwined), represents an important theological stream that influenced many independent and denominational churches in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But dispensationalism fails to have the marks of an identifiable confessional tradition outside of the Plymouth Brethren churches that were co-founded by the father of dispensational theology, John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). Dwight Moody met with Brethren leaders when he visited England in 1867. However he rejected the strict separatism and Calvinism of the Brethren and ultimately clashed with Darby when the two men argued about predestination. See Martyn McGeown, “The Life and Theology of D.L. Moody (with particular emphasis on his British Campaigns),” accessed January 1, 2016, http://www.cprf.co.uk/articles/moody.htm, and Lyle W. Dorsett, A Passion for Souls: The Life of D. L. Moody (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 137.
He preferred to be independent, free to do things his own way, an evangelist to the church at large.”

Doctrinal disputes also played a key role in Moody’s nondenominational character. His revivals, Bible institute, and church stood in stark contrast to the modernist fervor beginning to sweep mainstream denominations. But ultimately, it was his vision to evangelize the masses that drove his core convictions. For him, denominationalism played no part in that vision.

As the nation crossed the threshold of the twentieth century, two competing dynamics unfolded. On one hand, the movement of denominationalism seemed stronger than ever. In conjunction with the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the first World’s Parliament of Religions met. Four thousand clergy and laypeople gathered, representing scores of faith traditions from both West and East. Charles Carroll Bonney, who belonged to the small denomination of Swedenborgians called the Church of New Jerusalem, initiated the event with Presbyterian Henry Barrows serving as its chairman. American Catholic James Cardinal Gibbons led the assembly in saying the Lord’s Prayer. Those who took part in the sessions included representatives of Brahma, Buddhist, Islamic, Parsee, Jain, Taoist, Confucian, and Shintoist traditions. But Protestant Christianity dominated the Parliament. Each day opened with the Lord’s Prayer; English-speaking Christians delivered most of the papers; and the final session concluded with the

54 Flood, Story of Moody Church, 9.

Hallelujah Chorus from Handel’s Messiah. Leaders from most mainline American Protestant denominations attended in large numbers. And a spirit of cooperation, ecumenism, and unity pervaded the gathering. The denominational theory of the Protestant church had been extended to a denominational theory of religion in general. However, unity would be hard to come by given the inherent contradictions between so many different faith traditions; no tangible goals were achieved as a result of the Parliament. Nonetheless, the assembly demonstrated the role denominationalism had come to play in attempting to forge the future of American, and even global, religion.

On the other hand, Dwight Moody exemplified those who opposed a gathering of this kind. He, along with others, believed the universalistic ideals of the event threatened the particularity of orthodox Christian faith. While Moody refused to criticize the event publicly, he organized evangelistic revivals and prayer meetings across the street from the Columbian Exposition and Parliament. Indeed, Moody was at the forefront of a movement that would alter American religion in years to come: fundamentalism. Rejecting the growing liberal theology and modernistic tendencies of most American denominations, Moody and others would forge a new pathway. This fundamentalism would lay the groundwork for the modern nondenominational church movement.

Within a few years, yet another movement would transform American Protestantism: Pentecostalism. It began in 1906 with the Azusa Street revivals in Los

Angeles. Pentecostals at Azusa Street, and those who followed, embraced supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit—primarily speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing—and believed a new era in Christ’s church was dawning. Pentecostalism, too, would breed an independent, sectarian impulse that would find expression in many nondenominational churches in the decades to come.

Both fundamentalism and Pentecostalism will be explored in greater detail in the pages that follow. For now, it is important to recognize that at the height of American denominationalism, these two movements would shake the foundations of the nation’s religious groups. Both would have wide-reaching success across all parts of the nation: in both urban centers and rural areas, and from seminaries in the Northeast to the growing Sunbelt of the Southwest. But one metropolitan area serves as the case study for this work: Denver, Colorado. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Denver sits exactly halfway between Moody’s Chicago and Los Angeles’ Azusa Street. An independent spirit, nurtured by fundamentalist and Pentecostal tendencies would take root there. A nondenominational identity would be formed.
CHAPTER TWO: NARRATIVES AND NUMBERS IN DENVER

One of the things that inspired [Denver Revival Tabernacle] was the sensing of the need of a worship center undenominational in character. . . . [Kuhlman] stresses that the Tabernacle is serving as a refuge place to many who have not had supreme religious satisfaction in denominational churches.

–Irvin Unruh, “The Denver Revival Tabernacle”

I have raised the question of whether nondenominational church growth in America is truly a recent phenomenon. Chapter One demonstrated that denominations dominated American Protestantism, first in confessional traditions transplanted from Europe in the colonial era, then in their institutional expressions and further divisions in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, some church expressions independent of denominational ties arose from time to time: the early Restoration movement, black urban congregations after the Civil War, and Moody Church in Chicago. But these examples were the exception to the rule. Only in recent years have scholars and journalists noticed a substantial increase in the number of new American nondenominational churches. Most have associated this development with the 1990s and 2000s.¹

However, the GSS Surveys indicated that nondenominational church adherents numbered 2.2 percent of the population in 1972 and more than doubled by 1990 (up to

5.7 percent). One cannot accurately analyze the modern American nondenominational experience without a deeper investigation of this trend and a better grasp on exactly how and when this quantitative growth occurred. The goal of this chapter is to explore the numerical growth of nondenominational churches in Denver from the city’s beginnings in 1858 to the turn of the twenty-first century. Did nondenominational churches in Denver suddenly burst onto the scene in the 1990s? Or is their presence more notable before that time? The following quantitative analysis is essential for answering this question. But this exercise is not only a matter of numbers and statistics. I also tell the stories of several independent congregations that emerged in Denver’s early history.

**Methods and Challenges of Historical Quantitative Analysis**

Church growth is best measured by tracking two quantities: the number of adherents and the number of churches. The GSS surveys tracked adherents by asking individuals to self-identify their religious tradition. While such surveys are useful, they are limited. One might, on a survey, identify with a church or religious tradition one grew up attending yet rarely attends any longer. Tracking actual regular participation in a local church would be more meaningful. But this data is hard to come by, particularly for nondenominational churches over a large geographical area and lengthy timespan. Historical numbers are simply unavailable. Thus, my research focused not on the number of adherents but the number of congregations. Using the definition I established in Chapter One, I focused on one geographical area—Denver, Colorado—and counted the

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2 See Introduction, Figure 0.1.
number of nondenominational churches in comparison to the number of denominational 
churches from 1858 to 2000. This had its own set of challenges as well.

For starters, recall the definition of a nondenominational church: an independent, 
Protestant church that has no affiliation or identification with a functional denomination 
or confessional tradition. As previously noted, some congregations exist at the blurry 
borders of this definition, such as those that boast an independent character but loosely 
align with a confessional tradition. The task is difficult enough when examining churches 
in the present and even more so when surveying those from the past. For instance, a 
Denver church that existed in 1930 may have changed substantially in subsequent years, 
choosing to affiliate with a denomination over time. Or it may have dissolved altogether 
and left few records from which to determine its initial character.

A second obstacle for counting nondenominational churches in the past is equally 
formidable: there are no national or regional records to consult. Denominational bodies 
kept yearly records of the number of churches and members in each regional area. It is 
possible to determine how many Anglican or United Methodist churches existed in a 
region in a particular year by consulting institutional archives. But there are no such 
archives for nondenominational churches, which are doggedly resistant to institutional 
odies that might track them. Only in the last decade have sociologists genuinely 
attempted to count nondenominational churches.\(^3\) Measuring the growth of their numbers 
over the span of more than a century in metropolitan Denver requires creative solutions.

\(^3\) See the Religious Congregations and Membership Study by The Association of 
Religion Data Archives at: [http://www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).
Three resources that I utilize are Secretary of State records, city directories, and telephone book listings. The Colorado Secretary of State is helpful because non-profit organizations must register as a corporation in Colorado to legally do business. However, these online records are often incomplete the further one goes back in history, particularly before 1950. Additionally, some churches did business for several years before registering as a non-profit institution with the State of Colorado. Thus, while these electronic records are useful in verifying more recent data, particularly mailing addresses and name changes of churches (which happen quite frequently), one cannot rely on Secretary of State archives alone for a comprehensive analysis.

More helpful is the use of city directories and telephone books. In 1873, Corbett, Hoye & Co., “the largest directory publishing company west of the Mississippi,” produced the first city directory for Denver. These directories were published every year over the following century and contained listings for every known business and resident. A typical business listing included the name of the business (e.g., “City National Bank”), location (“Located northeast corner F and Holladay streets”), and prominent employees

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4 In addition, the current online search features for Secretary of State records are limited. One cannot specify a type of business (such as a church or non-profit organization) nor a location within Colorado (such as county or zip code). Moreover, each search is limited to 200 returned records; by the year 2000, over 1,400 churches existed in Denver alone.


6 The name of the publishing company often changed: Corbett, Hoye & Co. (1873-88), Corbett & Ballenger (1881-88), Ballenger & Richards (1889-1928), and Gazetteer (1929-59).
Before telephone use was commonplace, these directories were essential for information about businesses and residents of Denver. Each directory contained a listing of churches, sub-classified according to denominational tradition and including a “Miscellaneous” category for churches not affiliated with a clear tradition. Cross-checking the names of churches with other historical records (such as denominational archives and newspapers) demonstrates that these early directory listings were mostly complete and accurate. Therefore, I utilize these city directories below to provide snapshots of Denver churches in the years 1880, 1900, 1920, and 1940. Along the way, I also highlight the emergence of early nondenominational churches.

Telephone books in Denver were first published in 1876. However, early telephone books contained no listing of churches. The first section of what became known as “yellow pages,” then called a “Classified Directory,” appeared in the 1920 telephone book. Even then, the listing was not subdivided by denomination nor was it complete; many existing churches listed in the Denver Directory of 1920 were not included in the phone book listing. Most likely, many churches were not listed because they did not have a telephone or did not want to pay the fee to be listed. Not until mid-century did the yellow pages sections of phone books become complete in their listings. Also, beginning in 1951, the yellow pages began using subcategories for church listings.

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7 Denver Directory, 1873, 39.

8 The Telecommunications History Group, coincidentally located in Denver, contains an extremely comprehensive collection of these phone directories; see The Telecommunications History Group at [http://www.telcomhistory.org](http://www.telcomhistory.org).
Therefore, for the second half of the century, when the Denver City Directories fell out of use and phone books replaced them, I record the data from the yellow pages on a decennial basis, for the years 1951, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000.

The Foundation Years: Snapshots from 1880-1940

Denver City was founded in 1858 as a mining establishment in what was then the western part of Kansas Territory. Over the next eighty years, it grew from a small outpost of “miners, merchants, and missionaries”\(^9\) to a metropolitan area of over 300,000 residents. During the first four decades, denominational preachers established the religious character of Denver. During the next four, new movements took root. The story of nondenominational churches in Denver begins here.

The churches listed in the Denver Directories of 1880, 1900, 1920, and 1940 provide an overview as I further investigate the religious character of this period: \(^{10}\)


\(^{10}\) *Denver Directory, 1880 by Corbett, Hoye & Co.* (Denver: Denver Tribune Association, 1880); *Denver Directory, 1900 by Ballenger & Richards* (Denver: Ballenger & Richards, 1900); *Denver Directory, 1920 by Ballenger & Richards* (Denver: The Gazetteer Publishing and Printing Co., 1920); and *Denver Directory, 1940 by The Gazetteer Co. Inc.* (Denver: The Gazetteer Co. Inc., 1940). Each church listed in the Denver Directories was assigned a classification according to confessional tradition. I utilize the same classification from 1880-2000 for consistency. I only include Christian churches, not those associated with another religious tradition (e.g., Jewish synagogues) or religious institutions that were not churches (e.g., humanitarian missions or Christian Science practitioners). Though this study focuses on Protestantism, I include Roman Catholicism as a tradition here given its prominence in Denver. Churches in denominations or traditions that were too small or historically insignificant to this study to consider on their own (e.g., Mennonite, Evangelical Free, and Unitarians) were categorized as “Other Denominations.” Those included in the “Nondenominational” category are done so according to the definition provided in Chapter One.
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<td><strong>145</strong></td>
<td><strong>227</strong></td>
<td><strong>246</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.1:** Christian Churches in Denver 1880-1940.

Beginning in 1880, there were twenty-five churches listed in the directory for Denver, then a city of 35,629 residents. Two features of these early years are significant: the proliferation of denominational churches and the absence of nondenominational congregations.

The early Methodist character of Denver is undeniable. In the year of the city’s founding, George Fisher, a lay preacher with the Methodist Episcopal denomination, held the first religious services in the region. The initial gathering included Fisher; Denver’s founder, William Larimer, and his son; a handful of miners; and “two squaws.” The nature of a frontier church was evident: the service took place at one end of a small cabin, while “gambling was going on unabated at the other end.”

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Other itinerant preachers followed. Presbyterian minister Lewis Hamilton arrived in Denver the following year and began holding services as well. About twenty-five miles west in the foothills, in Mountain City (near Blackhawk today), Hamilton organized the first known nondenominational church in Colorado. It was a “Union Church, composed of the members of various evangelical denominations.”

But the church only lasted a few years and no record exists of exactly when and why it dissolved. A Union Sunday School was also established in Denver in 1859. Most such initiatives were begun by missionaries of the American Sunday-School Union, a nondenominational society that promoted children’s religious education. At the time, Union churches and Sunday Schools were more concerned with cooperation among denominations rather than a rejection of denominationalism itself. “Before long” though, writes historian Martin Rist, “the Methodists withdrew from the cooperative venture to found their own Sunday School.”

Methodists soon dominated the growing city and its surrounding mining settlements. By the end of 1859, Methodists had started three churches in Denver, and three more in nearby Boulder, Golden, and Central City. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South (the southern pro-slavery branch) started a congregation in Denver in 1860 and built the first church building of any denomination in the city. (The church was

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13 Ibid.

14 Templin, Breck, and Rist, Methodists, 18.
shortly abandoned, however, when the Civil War broke out and its leaders returned to the South; the building was later taken over by an Episcopal congregation).\textsuperscript{15} In the same year, Colorado was added to the Kansas-Nebraska Conference (Methodist Episcopal Church). John Chivington, the Presiding Elder of the Conference became the first denominational official of any kind to move to Denver. During his two first years in Colorado, he helped strengthen existing churches and establish many new churches in Denver and the western mining settlements.\textsuperscript{16} By 1863, the Rocky Mountain Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized. In the following year, Methodists founded the Colorado Seminary (later renamed the University of Denver). In the decades that followed, Methodism established more churches, missions, Sunday Schools, and societies.\textsuperscript{17} Other denominations followed suit: Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, and Catholics. None of the early churches in the city of Denver were nondenominational.

One misconception about this period is that Denver’s frontier character facilitated a new kind of society where social structures and institutions were unconventional, novel, and unlike anything back East. Historian Alice Cowan Cochran writes, “For decades many western historians have worked on the assumption that what is uniquely American


\textsuperscript{16} Chivington is best known for leading the 1\textsuperscript{st} Colorado Infantry Regiment in victory at Glorieta Pass in 1862 and then the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Colorado Cavalry Regiment in the tragic Sand Creek Massacre of 1864.

\textsuperscript{17} See Templin, Breck, and Rist, \textit{Methodists}, 18-34, 52-164; and Smiley, \textit{History of Denver}, 715-31.
was forged in the crucible of the frontier wilderness.” Scholarly works of religion rightly point to new movements like the Mormons to make this case. But the numbers and stories from Denver challenge this notion. Every church in the city’s first twenty-two years was established by initiatives from denominational institutional bodies. Cochran argues that as it relates to religion, “the pioneers set out to transplant the eastern and Midwestern society they admired, changing as little of it as possible . . . [they] felt that they had a mission to recreate American civilization as they had known it ‘back East’ to impose a familiar order on chaos.” This is not to suggest that Denver’s frontier character did not transform the nature of religious practice and church establishment in significant ways. But “churches served as the cohesive center of order, the social center of pioneer society, and the bearer of moral order.” As such, the familiarity of established denominations in Denver’s early years served this purpose well.

By 1900, Denver’s population had almost tripled in two decades to 133,859 residents. The number of churches grew exponentially as well: from twenty-five in 1880 to 145 in 1900. Methodists remained particularly strong (one out of every five churches), Lutherans arrived in large numbers (starting twelve new churches), while Baptist and Congregationalist churches grew at the highest rate. Several other denominations started congregations as well: United Brethren, Quakers, Swedenborgians, and Seventh-day

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18 Cochran, *Miners, Merchants, and Missionaries*, ix.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., x.
Adventists, to name a few. Only three churches might be characterized as nondenominational in 1900: the Truth Seeker’s Temple, Broadway Temple, and City Temple.

Little is known about these three churches; all were dissolved by 1905. The Truth Seeker’s Temple may have been a product of the New Thought movement. The Broadway Temple wrestled with the ideals of theological liberalism. It was founded in 1895; in 1899, after the death of its first pastor, the congregation called a new minister known as a “liberal thinker, a liberal talker.” His motto was “I believe in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man” and the subject of his first sermon was “The Contribution of Modern Science to Human Brotherhood.” 21 He lasted less than a year for reasons unknown. The third pastor vowed to focus on issues related to “human progress, involving civic responsibility, and practical patriotism.” 22 He too was embroiled in controversy and the church soon dissolved.

The City Temple was founded in 1892 “purely of an independent character.” 23 Humanitarian work and evangelism were its twin priorities. Aside from weekly worship services, City Temple managed both a school for orphans and home for unemployed women. The church owned a “gospel wagon” for preaching in the streets of the city and organized weeklong revival meetings where pastors from other churches were invited to preach. 24

21 Denver Times, November 5, 1899, 7.

22 Denver Times, February 5, 1900, 8.

23 Denver Times, February 10, 1900, 6.

24 Denver Times, June 11, 1902, 12; Denver Times, July 7, 1902, 5.
Despite these examples, established denominations prevailed in the city. Jerome Smiley, who wrote the definitive history of early Denver, commented in 1901: “At the present time almost all religious denominations known in the United States are represented in Denver by one or more permanent organizations.”\(^{25} \) After listing every church, he calculated the total value of church buildings in the city at $3.5 million and the seating capacity at 54,650.\(^ {26} \) Nearly all of those dollars and pews were supplied by denominational churches.

By 1920, the population of Denver had grown to over a quarter million. The 1920 Denver Directory lists a total of 227 churches; seven might be characterized as nondenominational. They are: Brotherly Peace Church, Church of Indwelling Christ, Evangel Community Church, Mystic Church of Christ, Spiritualist Church of Plain Truth and Liberty, St. John the Baptist Church (African), and Tabernacle of David. Discerning if any of these churches were affiliated with a denomination or confessional tradition is tricky. For most, no records exist from archives, newspapers, or other sources, aside from their names in the Denver Directory listings.

Based on their names, several of these congregations are likely from the Spiritualist, Metaphysical, or New Thought tradition. Some organized churches and denominational bodies emerged from the Spiritualist stream in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Christian Science, Divine Science, and the Unity Church. “But most,” writes historian Paul Conkin, “did not aspire to church building, did


\(^{26} \) Ibid., 731.
not license practitioners, and were so broadly eclectic in religion as to move beyond the boundaries of Christianity. They built cults that never grew into sects.”\textsuperscript{27} Whether the Brotherly Peace Church, Church of Indwelling Christ, or Spiritualist Church of Plain Truth and Liberty aligned with this broader tradition is unclear (though their names suggest so). Therefore, I cautiously classify them as nondenominational.

One church bears further mention: Mystic Church of Christ. Established around 1903 by metaphysical practitioner, Frank Hines, the church reveals a spiritualist identity.\textsuperscript{28} The congregation was mostly composed of “uncultured people . . . living on a low economic level . . . seeking help from ills of one sort or another.”\textsuperscript{29} Hines preached messages focused on health, harmony, and healing; he claimed to have healed tens of thousands of people. He also foretold the future, practiced the divination of articles, and gave astrological readings. Churches such as his often blended aspects of Christian belief with metaphysical teaching. For example, Hines claimed to believe in the Trinity but suggested its truth lie in the unity of mind, soul, and body.\textsuperscript{30} Such churches seem to meet

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{27} Paul K. Conkin, \textit{American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 269.\\
\textsuperscript{28} I rely primarily on Dean W. Dryden, “Mystic Church of Christ” in \textit{Denver Cults}, v. 1: 1929-32, ed. William Henry Bernhardt (Denver: Ira J. Taylor Library, Iliff School of Theology, 1932), 167-80. Bernhardt was a professor at Iliff School of Theology and his collection includes research papers by ministerial students at the time. Students were given an assignment to research unconventional church movements in Denver for Bernhardt’s “Contemporary Religious Cults” course. These movements, outside of mainstream denominations, were considered “cults.”\\
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 168.\\
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 171.
\end{flushright}
the definitional criteria of a nondenominational church: they were tied to no
denominational body and Spiritualism was so varied and unconventional that it is
problematic to consider it a historic confessional tradition. Yet, few of these churches
lasted more than a few years and never played a significant role in the development of a
nondenominational tradition.

From 1920 to 1940, the population of Denver continued to grow. But
denominations, like other institutions, struggled under the weight of the interwar years
and Great Depression. See Figure 2.2 comparing population with church growth.

![Graph: Population and Church Growth in Denver, 1880 – 1940](image)

**Figure 2.2**: Population and Church Growth in Denver, 1880 – 1940.

Catholic, Baptist, Restorationist, and other denominations grew only slightly in the
number of churches from 1920-40. Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and
Congregationalists declined. And in a significant reversal, Methodists went from fifty-
three to twenty-five churches in twenty years. Some Methodist congregations merged
with one another as result of a larger denominational merger between three branches of
Methodism (the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Episcopal Church [South], and
Methodist Protestant Church). Overall attendance increased. But the rate of growth had slowed significantly from the earlier years. “The World War years, the depression, and the changing complexity of the City,” writes historian J. Alton Templin, “spelled decline and demise for some of the Methodist organizations that proved not to have been strategically located.” Mainline Protestant churches were struggling to adapt to the hard times.

In the same years, however, two new religious groups arrived in significant numbers in Denver: the Holiness-Pentecostal movement and nondenominational churches. The Holiness-Pentecostal movement developed in several stages. First, Holiness churches largely came out of Methodism in the late nineteenth century (though its seeds were planted earlier). They stressed John Wesley’s doctrine of entire sanctification. Christian perfection, or entire sanctification, is conceived as a “second work” of God’s grace subsequent to conversion whereby a believer might achieve a state of holiness and moral purity. As Methodists slowly deemphasized this conviction, Holiness “come-outers” created camp meetings, societies, churches, and denominations that made the second work of sanctification a doctrinal pillar. The most important Holiness denominations to emerge were the Wesleyan Church (1843), Free Methodist Church (1860), Church of God (Anderson, IN; 1881), Christian & Missionary Alliance (1897), and Church of the Nazarene (1907).

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31 Templin, Breck, and Rist, Methodists, 284.

Those who gathered at Los Angeles’ Azusa Street in 1906 mostly came out of the Holiness movement but took God’s work in the life of a Christian one step further. They believed that a “third work” involved baptism of the Holy Spirit, as evidenced in miraculous signs, typically speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing. Some new churches emerged that retained their belief in entire sanctification but embraced the new theology of baptism of the Spirit. Other groups rejected entire sanctification and emphasized baptism of the Spirit as the only second work. Based on their interpretation of the New Testament story of Pentecost, they referred to themselves as Pentecostals. Many denominations emerged from Pentecostalism. Some had been formed earlier as Holiness denominations; others were altogether new. They include the Church of God Cleveland, TN (1886), Church of God in Christ (1897); and International Pentecostal Holiness Church (1911), the Assemblies of God (1914), Open Bible Church (1919), and International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (1923).

I classify the Holiness and Pentecostal movements as one confessional tradition because of their connection and for the sake of simplicity. But it was the Azusa Street-inspired Pentecostal movement that led to the explosion of Holiness-Pentecostal churches in Denver. By 1940, the city had at least thirty-four churches that identified with a denomination from the Holiness-Pentecostal movement. They include six Nazarene congregations, numerous Church of God and Church of God in Christ congregations, and

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33 For a good overview of the complexities of Pentecostal theology and the many denominations, see Conkin, American Originals, 288-314. Some later Pentecostals developed the “Oneness” doctrine, but I do not include a discussion of this stream here as it is outside my scope.
others such as the Four Square Gospel Temple, Pentecostal Assemblies of Jesus Christ, Pentecostal Christian Church, Pentecostal Faith Church, and Pentecostal Tabernacle. One Holiness church and denomination was birthed in Denver itself: Pillar of Fire.

Alma White was born in 1862 in Kentucky. She was reared in the Methodist church and had a conversion experience at age sixteen during a Holiness-inspired revival meeting. “Soon after her conversion,” writes biographer Susie Cunningham Stanley, “Alma decided she would become a preacher.”34 For years, she found it difficult to pursue her calling within denominational churches, particularly Methodists. She eventually moved to Denver, married a Methodist preacher in 1887, taught school, and had two sons. But her desire to preach never subsided. At the same time, White grew in her Holiness conviction regarding entire sanctification. Indeed, the two were connected for her: she described her own sanctification process as “the great event of my life, fitting me for the preaching of the gospel.”35 She soon found opportunities at various camp meetings and in the churches that her husband pastored in Colorado. As opportunities to preach increased, two curious things happened: significant opposition from Methodist authorities and division within her own marriage. Methodists did not agree with her doctrine of sanctification nor did they believe that women should preach. Moreover, her husband felt threatened as her popularity grew with the masses. Consequently, White established her own mission in Denver, initially called the Pentecostal Home Mission in


1896, then the Pentecostal Union Church in 1901. She believed a break with Methodism was necessary for converts of her mission and preaching: “To hold meetings and turn the converts over to the old denominations was like feeding lambs to the wolves.”\textsuperscript{36} She had come to the conclusion that the Methodist church would never endorse women pastors or her beloved doctrine of entire sanctification.

White’s Denver church was initially known as a Pentecostal church, though this took place before the Azusa Street revivals and emergence of Pentecostalism proper. Many early Holiness churches used the term Pentecostal though they rejected the baptism of the Spirit and speaking in tongues that later Pentecostal churches embraced. Consequently, White changed the name of the church to Pillar of Fire. By 1905, she had established Pillar of Fire churches in five other Western cities and in New Jersey. In 1918, she was formally consecrated Bishop of the church (though she functioned in the capacity from the beginning). In subsequent years, she licensed radio stations (the first religious stations of their kind) and built a huge temple in Denver, just one block from the state capitol. Over 2,000 people attended the dedication of the Alma Temple in 1937. By 1948, dozens of Pillar of Fire schools and churches existed across the country; over 5,000 members affiliated with her new Holiness denomination.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 44.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 116.
Equally important as the Holiness-Pentecostal movement, at least nineteen Denver churches in 1940 may be characterized as nondenominational. Like earlier years, some were associated with spiritualism (Mystic Church of Christ) while others may have had a Holiness-Pentecostal character (Rocky Mountain Gospel Center). Lack of records makes it difficult to assess. But many churches I classify as nondenominational at this time were likely influenced by another movement: fundamentalism. Rejecting the liberal theology and anti-revivalist tendencies of modernism, fundamentalists separated from denominational bodies they believed had sacrificed biblical teaching; oftentimes, they created new and independent churches. Several Denver churches from this period likely emerged from this movement. Two make it clear by their names: Berean Fundamental
Church and Burlington Fundamental Church. Little is known about these churches except that a local fundamentalist Bible school, Denver Bible Institute, often supplied their pulpits with ministers in training. Indeed, the founder and president of the school started Berean Fundamental Church in 1934. A graduate of the school started another local church during this time, Denver Gospel Center.

Perhaps the best example of a nondenominational church in the era from 1920-40 is the Denver Revival Tabernacle. Influenced by both Holiness-Pentecostal beliefs and evangelistic fundamentalism, it embodied the nondenominational spirit. Itinerant evangelist Kathryn Kuhlman founded the church in 1933. Kuhlman decided to settle in Denver when crowds at her evangelistic gathering, initially planned for two weeks, convinced her to establish a local congregation. Attendance grew from several hundred to over 2,000 when they dedicated a new warehouse church building in 1935. The church quickly gained prominence in Denver as Governor Ed Johnson and Mayor Benjamin Stapleton attended the dedication service.

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38 Grace and Truth: The Topical Bible Study Magazine of America, by Denver Bible Institute, vol. 18 (January-December, 1940).


Kuhlman was raised in the Methodist and Baptist traditions and educated at two Bible schools from the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions. Denver Revival Tabernacle drew on these traditions with its emphasis on evangelism, healing, and the Spirit-filled life. One might initially characterize Denver Revival Tabernacle as part of the Holiness-Pentecostal confessional tradition given its theological nature. But being a nondenominational church was more foundational to its identity. Speaking in tongues was not practiced in worship services, unlike in Pentecostal denominations. Kuhlman did not want to be divisive or exclusive toward those who questioned the practice. Bands and singers from other denominations were regularly invited to perform at services. And Kuhlman herself was careful to support the ministries of other churches in Denver by discouraging proselytizing from them.
Nevertheless, Denver Revival Tabernacle became a nondenominational haven for the masses. A Methodist ministerial student in Denver at the time described this striking feature:

One of the things that inspired [Denver Revival Tabernacle] was the sensing of the need of a worship center undenominational in character. . . . [Kuhlman] stresses that the Tabernacle is serving as a refuge place to many who have not had supreme religious satisfaction in denominational churches. Several who testified at the services stressed the fact that complete happiness and contentment had resulted by leaving a denomination and joining with the Tabernacle people.\footnote{Irvin Unruh, “The Denver Revival Tabernacle” in \textit{Denver Cults}, v. 2: 1934-1937, ed. William Henry Bernhardt (Denver: Ira J. Taylor Library, Iliff School of Theology, 1937), 65-66.}

Admittedly, Denver Revival Tabernacle may not describe each of the nineteen Denver churches I classify as nondenominational in 1940. Some may have better identified with the Holiness-Pentecostal movement or another confessional tradition. But this example demonstrates the likelihood that many, if not most, identified themselves this way.\footnote{Other churches listed in 1940, such as Denver Gospel Center and Rocky Mountain Gospel Tabernacle, were similarly described with nondenominational characteristics in Bernhardt, ed., \textit{Denver Cults}.}

\textit{The Boom Years: 1951-2000}

The years following World War Two saw a boom in church growth across the nation.\footnote{Here, I rely heavily on the data and analysis provided by Robert Wuthnow, \textit{The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 35-53.} Practically speaking, many churches had postponed new construction during the Depression and war years. Funds were limited and rationing made building materials scarce. But with the end of the war and the beginnings of financial prosperity again,
denominations spent lavishly. Southern Baptists alone built 500 new churches across the nation from 1946-49 at a cost of $97 million. Protestant denominations together committed more than $1 billion in new construction by late 1949. In Denver, ninety-eight churches were built or under construction in the decade from 1942-52; *Christian Century* magazine called it “the greatest boom in church building in [the city’s] history.”

There was great optimism following the war as well. The theological debates between fundamentalists and modernists had subsided and a new era absent old resentments between churches and denominations was envisioned. Moreover, as the Cold War developed, American Christians of all stripes had a new enemy in common: communism. The new spirit of fear during the 1950s made the vision of “one nation under God” more tangible and achievable. With Billy Graham drawing hundreds of thousands to his crusades and Dwight Eisenhower bringing religion back to the government, Protestantism seemed to be on the cusp of a great renewal.

Residential growth and suburbanization played a key role in church growth as well. New housing developments and a growing middle-class, now capable of realizing the American dream, inspired denominations to seize new opportunities. Of course, the 1960s would transform these dreams and reshape the culture of the nation and its churches. I save this discussion for Chapters Three through Six where I explore the

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postwar period and nondenominational narratives in depth. Nevertheless, a quantitative reckoning of church growth during this period is important for present purposes.

Denver followed many national trends during the second half of the century. As the population grew, so did the number of churches at similar rates (see Figure 2.5).^{46}

![Figure 2.5: Population and Church Growth in Denver, 1950/51 – 2000.](image)

By 1951, phone books became more widely used and comprehensive in their listings than the city directories I utilize for earlier decades.^{47} Moreover, in that year the

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^{46} Population numbers taken from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. I defined metropolitan Denver as those living in Adams, Arapahoe, Denver, Douglas, and Jefferson counties. While telephone directory church listings often drew from a broader geographical area, there is no simple way to define these boundaries with precise population numbers nor would it change significantly change the growth rates.

^{47} Phone directories were published by The Mountain States Telephone and Telegraph Company, Denver, Colorado in the year referenced. The company was later known as Mountain States Telephone, Mountain Bell, and finally as USWest. These directories often included areas such as Boulder and Fort Lupton, cities not considered part of metropolitan Denver by most standards today. Thus, the numbers derived from phone books in this study are slightly inflated from how the Census Bureau now defines metropolitan Denver. However, this does not take away from overall comparisons drawn between denominational and nondenominational growth in the region.
phone book yellow pages began using helpful subcategories for churches: “Baptist,” “Congregational,” “Episcopal,” etc., and later sub-subcategories such as “Baptist-Conservative,” “Baptist-Free Will,” and “Baptist-Southern.” Each church paid a small fee to be listed in the phone directory and chose which category and subcategory by which to identify themselves. Since individual congregations chose their sub-classification, I make the assumption that those that identified with a denomination or confessional tradition during this period should be counted as such. Admittedly, this is not a precise assumption; it is possible that some churches identified themselves in directory listings according to other criteria. But the sheer number of churches included—over 1,400 by the year 2000—made verifying each congregation’s status in each year virtually impossible.

Three other challenges to precision existed in the postwar era. On rare occasions, a church listed themselves twice in different subcategories, perhaps to cast a wider net for those looking to attend. For example, the Aurora-Bethsaida Baptist Church was listed in 1980 in both the “Churches-Baptist” subcategory and the “Churches-Baptist-Conservative” subcategory. While such occurrences were infrequent, some denominational numbers may be slightly inflated due to this kind of double-listing. In addition, some churches existed for several years before listing in the phone directory. For example, Ash Grove Union Church was founded in 1947 when it called its first pastor, dedicated a new building, and incorporated with the state of Colorado. But the

48 Thanks to Renee Lang of the Telecommunications History Group for her assistance and background knowledge on phone directory listings.
church was not listed in the phone directory until 1952. Thus, some lag time between founding and listing may exist with new churches.

Finally, counting nondenominational churches inherently requires interpretation when information is limited. I count nondenominational churches as those that self-identified under the yellow pages Church subcategories of “Bible,” “Charismatic,” “Community,” “Independent,” “Independent Bible,” “Independent Fundamental,” “Inter-denominational,” and “Non-denominational.” I also include some churches listed in the “Various Denominations” category if a nondenominational character is verifiable. But if a clear denominational affiliation exists in the name of the congregation in any of these categories, I classify it as such. In light of these potential inaccuracies, some margin of error—perhaps 5-10 percent—exists is my counting and classification (which is true for earlier counts as well). However, this margin of error does not affect overall comparisons between classifications in any substantive way. Figure 2.6 provides the data for the number of churches in each denominational classification for the decennial years from 1951-2000.
### Figure 2.6: Christian Churches in Denver 1951-2000.

**Conclusions**

I close with four key conclusions from this research, though several others could be drawn. First, the task of counting and classifying denominational affiliation of churches across a 120-year span in Denver proves difficult. No quantitative analysis can accurately or comprehensively capture the full picture of nondenominational church growth. Definitional, taxonomical, and archival challenges prove formidable. Nonetheless, despite these obstacles and the inherent lack of precision, the results of steady growth from meager beginnings are enlightening.

Second, before the 1920s, virtually no churches identified as nondenominational in Denver. The city’s religious culture was built and sustained by denominational institutions and leaders. Only from the 1920s to the 1940s did independent churches emerge, and most were likely connected to fundamentalism and/or the nascent
Pentecostal movement (such as Denver Revival Tabernacle). The independent nature of these pre-World War Two congregations was often a result of their desire to break away from established denominations and institutions where their conservative or Pentecostal theology was unwelcome.

The number of nondenominational churches declined from nineteen to sixteen congregations during the period from 1940-51 (when the number of denominational grew substantially). Some of these early nondenominational churches simply did not make it through the late Depression and World War Two years. Without the kind of institutional support and financing of denominational churches, they struggled to persevere through leaner years. Others created larger institutions and denominations. The Berean Fundamental Church, founded in 1934, grew into a denomination by 1951.\textsuperscript{49} Many independent Pentecostal churches coalesced into denominations as well. For example, Denver Revival Tabernacle became a member of the Assemblies of God denomination by 1944. After Kuhlman left and attendance had declined, the pastor at that time believed “the day of independent or undenominational churches is past.”\textsuperscript{50} But other nondenominational churches found greater expression in the spirit of independence. Despite the lack of numerical growth, the seeds for a nondenominational confessional tradition were sown in these mid-century decades.

\textsuperscript{49} Today the Berean Fellowship of Churches is headquartered in Nebraska and counts sixty churches in its membership.

Third, from the postwar period to the end of the century, though the number of churches in all categories grew in Denver, nondenominational churches grew at a much higher rate. From 1951-2000, nondenominational churches grew 1,225 percent in Denver. The next closest growth rate for any one tradition is Baptists, at 560 percent. Figure 2.7 graphs the rate of church growth for each confessional church tradition based on the counts provided in Figure 2.6.\textsuperscript{51}

![Graph of Christian Church Growth in Denver 1951-2000](image)

**Figure 2.7:** Christian Church Growth in Denver 1951-2000.

Fourth and perhaps most significantly, this graph demonstrates that nondenominational church growth is not a recent phenomenon limited primarily to the 1990s and 2000s. The rate of growth for nondenominational churches matched most other groups in the 1950s and 60s and outpaced every other confessional tradition during

\textsuperscript{51} I omitted numbers from the “Other Denominations” category since they did not represent any one identifiable confessional tradition.
the 1970s and 80s. The development of nondenominational churches in Denver was not a flash-in-the-pan phenomenon. Nor was Denver unique. As respected journalist Kenneth Woodward recently noted in his survey of religion across postwar America, “[i]ndependent churches—that is, those with no denominational ties or creedal identity—represented the fastest-growing segment among Protestant congregations in the second half of the century.”

In addition to these statistics, I have included the brief stories of early nondenominational Denver churches in this chapter to establish the reality of a longer narrative. From the first “Union Church” established in the foothills west of Denver to the urban Pentecostal and fundamentalist congregations of the 1930s, the “Queen City of the West” provided a seedbed for nondenominational churches to experiment with an independent identity. But our genealogy is only beginning.

52 Nondenominational rate of growth in Denver during the seventies was 121 percent and during the eighties was 85 percent. The next two closest categories during this period were Holiness/Pentecostal churches (35 percent and 24 percent respectively) and Baptist churches (25 percent and 10 percent respectively).

CHAPTER THREE: BIBLE CHURCHES

_Bible Church people are not ecumenical. They’re not accepting every Tom, Dick, and Harry-doctrine that emerges and calls itself Christian. They’re more focused and you have to establish this from the Word of God._

–Ron Merryman, pastor of Holly Hills Bible Church, 1968-82

Most nondenominational churches in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries initially identified themselves by what they were not. The central argument of this study is that from 1945-2000, American nondenominational churches formed a more positive and cohesive identity that described what they stood _for_ rather than what they were _against_. But I suggest these nondenominational churches can be furthered classified into four primary subtypes. Each merits its own investigation, and I describe them in this and the three chapters that follow, roughly in the chronological order by which they developed. Along the way, I draw natural connections between the subtypes as they build on one another in important ways. But I reserve for Chapter Seven the bulk of analyzing the four subtypes together as they shaped a larger movement.

As Chapters One and Two demonstrated, nondenominational churches were not unknown before World War Two. American history, and indeed Christian history, is littered with independent congregations and movements that sought to stake their claim to the faith apart from controlling institutions. But most, like Moody Church in Chicago or Denver Revival Tabernacle, remained isolated occurrences that proved exceptions to the
denominational rule. This state of affairs changed in the early and mid-twentieth century with the emergence of the first subtype of modern nondenominational congregations: Bible churches.

Bible churches arose out of the fundamentalist movement. Fundamentalism developed from roughly 1870-1925 as a response to the modernist movement within Protestantism. Modernists took their name from the belief that Christian doctrines should be modernized in light of scientific discoveries, enlightenment rationality, and critical approaches to the Bible. Consequently, modernists questioned literal interpretations of Scripture regarding issues such as creation and evolution, miracles, and the resurrection of Christ. In addition, modernists often believed in the inherent goodness of humanity and as such, downplayed the need for personal conversion and revivalistic evangelism. Instead, they emphasized cultural transformation through social and political reforms.

Many Protestants in this period challenged these developments. They held firm to the inerrancy of Scripture (meaning it is objectively true in every way without error), a literal interpretation of the Bible, and the primacy of personal faith in Christ. Their name came from a set of essays, The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth (1910-15), that criticized modernist theology and called Christians back to the “fundamentals” of biblical truth. When modernism seemed to be winning out, particularly among denominational leaders and seminaries, fundamentalists believed that separation from such heretical views was necessary.¹

Leaving modernist-leanings congregations and denominations behind, most fundamentalist pastors and leaders created alternative churches and schools—often called Bible churches and Bible institutes—to promote their understanding of orthodox Christianity. For example, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA) and Church of the Open Door in Los Angeles were started in 1908 and 1915 respectively by a handful of fundamentalists, including oil tycoon Lyman Stewart, who helped finance *The Fundamentals.* Other Bible churches and schools appeared across the country in subsequent years, particularly in the South, Midwest, and Sunbelt urban areas.

Three characteristics marked these Bible churches. First, they espoused fundamentalist dispensational beliefs that placed a premium on doctrinal purity. Second, Bible churches largely abandoned efforts to engage the systemic problems of society; instead, they focused on personal evangelism. Third, Bible churches embraced local presence, autonomy, and independence, choosing only loose and voluntary affiliations that did not bind them to larger organizational structures. These three characteristics laid the foundation for a modern nondenominational identity.

Some Bible churches grew quite large, especially in urban areas. The 4,000-seat Church of the Open Door, with its iconic “Jesus Saves” signs, stood as a landmark in downtown Los Angeles for seventy years. But most Bible churches remained small; they were content to minister to urban neighborhoods and new suburban developments. As the culture and denominational churches modernized around them, Bible churches held firm

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to their traditional convictions in hopes of being a witness to the fundamentals of their faith. Denver’s Holly Hills Bible Church serves as a prime example. Below, I describe the history of Holly Hills Bible Church followed by an analysis of the larger Bible church movement.

*The Beginnings of Holly Hills Bible Church: 1929-54*

In the generation after miners and white land speculators first arrived in Denver, railroads, statehood, and the silver boom brought droves of settlers. Lavish construction projects in the 1880s and 1890s—the Tabor Grand Opera House, Union Station, the Oxford and Brown Palace Hotels, and Colorado’s State Capitol—confirmed the new city’s metropolitan status and anticipated a hopeful future. Denver had become the crown jewel of the West. Then came the year 1893, “the bleakest Colorado had known.” The silver boom collapsed and a depression quickly set in. Banks defaulted, real estate values dropped, and businesses went bankrupt. The next few years were difficult, but the city of Denver eventually recovered. Gold was discovered in Cripple Creek, injecting new life into the state’s economy. New industries and agricultural prospects provided fresh opportunities for Denver’s residents. Urban reforms addressed poverty. From 1890 to

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3 Holly Hills Bible Church had four different names throughout its history: Ash Grove Union Church (1947-56), Ash Grove Church (1956-61), Holly Hills Community Church (1961-67), and Holly Hills Bible Church (1967-present). When relating the history of the church, I typically use the name representative of the era. When referring to the church over multiple eras or in a broader fashion, I use the name Holly Hills Bible Church, or HHBC.

1930, the city’s population nearly tripled; 356,061 people in 1930 called Denver and its outskirts home.⁵

A few hundred of those residents lived five miles southeast of downtown Denver in a rural area of unincorporated Arapahoe County. One of the few well-known buildings in the area was the Four Mile House, originally the final stop on the stagecoach circuit when traveling to Denver from the east. When trains made the stagecoach obsolete, the owners transformed the Four Mile House into a 600-acre farm on the banks of Cherry Creek.⁶ In the surrounding landscape, tracts of land were platted for housing subdivisions as the city looked to expand in the early decades of the twentieth century. But most of the area remained agricultural until the 1940s. Irrigation ditches crisscrossed fields of grain and cash crops, such as horseradishes and asparagus.⁷ A handful of roads and farms existed there, along with the small two-room Ash Grove School, named for a nearby stand of Ash trees.

On January 12, 1929, a missionary from the American Sunday-School Union (ASSU) visited the Ash Grove schoolhouse. The ASSU had played a leading role in the nineteenth-century Sunday School movement. Beginning in 1817 and expanding rapidly in the following decades, the ASSU’s mission was simple: “to establish and maintain

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⁵ The US Census Bureau records the city’s population as 106,713 in 1890; 287,861 in 1930. The 365,061 figure in 1930 includes Adams, Arapahoe, Denver, Douglas, and Jefferson counties.


Sunday Schools; and, to publish and circulate moral and religious publications.”8 By the end of the nineteenth century, the ASSU focused on rural settlements where Christian education was lacking. Indeed, starting ASSU Sunday schools often paved the way for new churches as their literature attested:

Believing that the American Sunday-School Union could best serve as a non-denominational, Evangelical, Christian work by planting small Union Sunday Schools in communities otherwise unprovided with Christian leadership, the Society has rightly come to be known as the forerunner of the Church.9

Rural Colorado, even farmland just a few miles from urban Denver, was fertile ground for the ASSU’s endeavor. Indeed, areas like the Ash Grove community “now offer,” wrote Edwin Wilbur Rice, president of the ASSU in 1917, “the greatest opportunity for extending Bible instruction, and one which demands prompt and enlarged efforts to meet.”10 With this vision in mind, two days after he arrived, missionary H. B. McMillan helped local residents organize the Ash Grove Union Sunday School.

R. B. Parker lived in the Ash Grove community and worked as a civil engineer with the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad. With five children of his own in the small schoolhouse, Parker became the leader of Ash Grove Union Sunday School.11 Little

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9 Ibid.


is known about the Sunday School in the early years aside from attendance and offering records. In its first year, the average attendance was twenty-four children; the average weekly offering from children, used for school supplies and donations to local missions, was $0.74.\textsuperscript{12} Local school teachers volunteered at the Sunday School. The primary goal was biblical instruction, but there was an evangelistic focus as well. One detail from the early years was recorded: on Easter Sunday, 1931, “17 [children] took Christ as Savior when the invitation was given by Mr. Parker.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Figure 3.1.} Ash Grove Union Sunday School, teachers and students, August 23, 1931. Courtesy of Wayne and Sue Anderson.

During the 1930s, two small subdivisions were built near the school: Cherry Creek Gardens and Denver Gardens. As a result, a new and larger Ash Grove School was

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{12} Note accompanying photographs of early school, Holly Hills Bible Church Records, Private Collection of Wayne and Sue Anderson, Denver, Colorado (henceforth HHBC Records).

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
constructed in 1937 to accommodate the increase in students. But the area was still largely rural—it was primarily zoned for farm residences—and development had taken place in a slow, haphazard, and unregulated manner. There was a scattering of small homes, ranches, businesses, horse stables, and even popular horse-riding paths. It was rumored that the governor of Colorado rode his horse in the area. Students at Ash Grove School in the 1940s remember:

walking, riding bikes, or riding ponies to school on graveled roads with bridle paths. Some lived as far away as 2 miles [and recall] walking past farms, greenhouses, dairies with their big barns, corrals, windmills, alfalfa fields, beet fields, [and] corn fields.\textsuperscript{14}

By the mid-1940s, the Ash Grove Sunday School had nearly tripled in attendance from twenty-four to sixty-four children; the weekly offering had also increased to $19.46.\textsuperscript{15} But more growth for the area was on the horizon. City planners believed the open landscape was primed for neighborhood development to accommodate Denver’s growing population. Zoning ordinances were passed regulating the number and type of livestock that could be housed on properties, and when World War Two ended, planners initiated a comprehensive development plan. With the increased success of the Sunday School and the anticipation of rapid suburban growth in the years to come, the Ash Grove Union Sunday School decided to fulfill the ASSU’s vision by transforming their work into a local church.

\textsuperscript{14} “Ash Grove History as Remembered by Its Alumni,” 2008, HHBC Records.

\textsuperscript{15} Note accompanying photographs of early school, HHBC Records.
In 1945, the leaders of the Sunday School called a local pastor, Reverend Archie Yetter, who was forty-one at the time, to lead the new congregation. Yetter was teaching at a local Bible institute and had been serving another church in Denver. On January 14, 1947, Yetter and the leaders officially incorporated Ash Grove Union Church for the simple reason that “there is no organized church in this community.”¹⁶ There is no indication from records that the ASSU played a role in the church. Nor was the church affiliated with any denomination. Forty-three charter members joined the new congregation and a generous farmer donated land seven blocks south of the school for a new building. The congregation acquired a government surplus barracks used during World War Two and relocated it from Buckley Air Force Base in Aurora to 2400 South Holly Street. The building was dedicated on Easter Sunday, April 17, 1949.

![Figure 3.2](image)

*Figure 3.2. Left, Moving the building into place; right, Easter Sunday service, April 17, 1949. Courtesy of Wayne and Sue Anderson.*

The next few years were marked by outreach to the growing neighborhoods around the church. In 1950, about 100 people attended Ash Grove Union Church on a

¹⁶ Articles of Incorporation of Ash Grove Union Church, January 14, 1947, HHBC Records.
weekly basis. In the same year, developers created the nearby subdivision of Virginia Village in conjunction with the postwar development plan. Hundreds of homes were built to accommodate the population boom. In 1954, Virginia Village residents voted to be annexed by the City of Denver (from unincorporated Arapahoe County), which was approved along with $8 million for improvements and services in the area. Two adjacent neighborhoods—University Hills to the south and Virginia Vale to the north—were developed as well. Dominated by new, affordable three-bedroom ranch style homes, the neighborhoods around the church became the fastest growing area of Denver in the 1950s.17

As a result, the church maximized its efforts to reach out to the new families moving to southeast Denver. A sampling of Church Board meeting minutes reveal numerous outreach initiatives in the early years of the church: “Christmas letters and tracts [to] be sent to the 500 boxholders on Route 2” (November 25, 1947); “plans for a Daily Vacation Bible School” (February 24, 1948); “a nursery, Church attendance and Evangelistic meetings in the Spring were discussed” (October 26, 1949); “plans for distributing hand bills, advertising the church to the people in the new addition south of Yale between Colorado Boulevard and Holly Street . . . and also on calling cards, to be left with new neighbors in each neighborhood” (August 30, 1950); “a plan to distribute the Gospel of John in our Community as an evangelizing effort” (January 24, 1951); “Motion . . . that we take part in the ‘Christ for Everyone’ Campaign with evangelistic

17 Interestingly, the small neighborhood named Holly Hills, an area of about half a square mile immediately surrounding the church, was never annexed by the City of Denver and remained part of unincorporated Arapahoe County.
meetings in October” (April 23, 1952); “contact & invite as many people as we can [and] print some form of Invitation to our Easter Services” (February 18, 1953); “told of the number of new homes in Virginia Village and Sunset terrace, need to ring door bell’s and get people to Church: for child evangelism to be started” (November 25, 1953). The opportunities for attracting new members seemed limitless.

**Fundamentalist Doctrine and Bible Institutes**

Ash Grove Union Church was a Bible church, though it would be several years before it would officially change its name to Holly Hills Bible Church (HHBC). Before continuing its history, it is important to examine two vital features of its identity and Bible churches like it: fundamentalist doctrine and the influence of Bible institutes. Most Protestant congregations have a statement of faith where they articulate their key beliefs and doctrines. The original statement of faith for HHBC, adopted in 1947, contained eleven articles on the following doctrines: “the Bible,” “God,” “the Lord Jesus Christ,” “the Holy Spirit,” “Man,” “Salvation,” “Sin,” “Satan,” “Heaven and Hell,” “the Church,” and “the Local Church.” Each section contained a “we believe” sentence usually followed by a few supporting biblical references.

Like most other Bible churches, HHBC’s statement of faith neither mentioned nor used language from historic Christian creeds, such as the Apostles’ Creed or Nicene

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18 Church Board and Congregational Meeting Minutes, 1947-1953, HHBC Records.

19 The Constitution and By-laws of the Ash Grove Union Church, February 11, 1947, HHBC Records.
Creed. Nor did the statement include doctrines prominent to a specific Protestant confessional tradition. For instance, it did not refer to predestination or God’s sovereignty (Reformed churches), free will or sanctification (Methodist churches), healing or supernatural gifts (Pentecostal churches), or congregational polity or believer’s baptism (Baptistic churches). What is clear from HHBC’s statement was its fundamentalist and dispensational theology.

While many Bible churches were founded by fundamentalist pastors breaking away from modernist denominations, there is no indication that HHBC was born out of this separationist mentality. Their historical record bears more simple origins: “because there is no organized church in this community.” Nevertheless, their doctrine was resolutely fundamentalist. Some of the primary “fundamentals” of the Christian faith were the infallibility of Scripture, virgin birth, vicarious atonement, bodily resurrection, sinful depravity of humanity, and a literal view of hell—all points made explicitly in HHBC’s original statement of faith.\(^{21}\)

Dispensationalism was a theological framework that originated in the nineteenth century and almost always went hand in hand with fundamentalism. It was built on an understanding that God worked in specific ways throughout unique eras or “dispensations” in human history. Dispensationalists drew a significant distinction between God’s relationship with the nation of Israel and his inauguration of the Christian

\(^{20}\) Articles of Incorporation of Ash Grove Union Church, January 14, 1947, HHBC Records.

\(^{21}\) The Constitution and By-laws of the Ash Grove Union Church, February 11, 1947, HHBC Records.
church; the former was guided by law, the latter by grace. Moreover, dispensationalists believed the church age would come to an end with the return of Christ and the rapture of the church, followed by the Great Tribulation and the inauguration of a millennial kingdom when God would fulfill earlier promises made to the nation of Israel. All of this would take place before the Final Judgment and the eternal states of heaven and hell. As such, dispensationalists were pre-tribulational, premillennialists—terms meaning they believed Christ would return before the tribulation and millennium. This focus on eschatology (the study of the end times) promoted a fixation on understanding prophecy and discerning signs that indicated the rapture and Christ’s return was imminent.22

HHBC’s original statement of faith included a belief in Christ’s “personal, premillennial and imminent return” and that the church “originated at Pentecost and will be taken away at the rapture.”23 Dispensationalism was not only articulated in the congregation’s formal statement of faith, it was evident in the style and content of biblical teaching. During the early years, the congregation hosted special teaching events, such as one advertised in the early fifties in this way:

The earth shaking events of our day give rise to many questions. Is Armageddon at hand? Will Christ come soon? The answers are found in the Bible. We invite you to study the Great Prophecies of Daniel with us each Sunday evening, 7:45 pm, Ash Grove Union Church, Speaker: A. H. Yetter.24


23 The Constitution and By-laws of the Ash Grove Union Church, February 11, 1947, HHBC Records.

In later years, this focus on understanding end-times prophecy and dispensationalism would be maintained (see Figures 3.5 and 3.6 later in the chapter).

Pastors of Bible churches like HHBC often learned their doctrine and practices from local Bible institutes. Indeed, independent Bible churches were deeply connected to the Bible institute movement. When fundamentalists lost influence within mainstream Protestant denominations and the wider culture, they did not simply disappear from public life, as the common narrative surrounding the famed Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925 suggests.\(^{25}\) To be sure, they did separate from church institutions and cultural influences they believed were cancerous to their faith; separatism was a defining mark of fundamentalism. But this tension with denominational trends and the changing culture—the trait sociologists observe in sect-type religious groups as described in Chapter One—“proved to be creative,” writes historian Joel Carpenter.\(^{26}\) They did not reject all institutions or organizational entities. Rather, they constructed alternative expressions, analogous but not equivalent to denominations, “allowing fundamentalists to establish their own identity, consolidate an institutional network, and rethink their mission to America.”\(^{27}\) These expressions included Bible and prophecy conferences, new missionary


\(^{27}\) Ibid.
societies, publishing houses, and radio stations. But, “without a doubt,” notes Carpenter, “the most important terminals in the fundamentalist network were its Bible institutes.”

The earliest and most influential Bible institutes in the nation were Moody Bible Institute in Chicago (founded 1886) and Bible Institute of Los Angeles (founded 1908). But numerous smaller schools, such as Gordon College of Theology and Missions (Boston), Northwestern Bible and Missionary Training School (Minneapolis), Nyack Missionary Training School (New York), the Philadelphia School of the Bible, and Columbia Bible College (South Carolina), dotted the landscape of fundamentalist America. These schools were “tightly knit, familial, and religiously intense places” that served the training needs of ministers, evangelists, missionaries, and Sunday School teachers. Moreover, they “acted as moderating and unifying influences within a generally cantankerous fundamentalist movement.” In other words, Bible institutes formed the glue that held the fundamentalist ideal together.

Bible institutes also met a practical need as an informal credentialing agency; independent churches looked to them for ministers and missionary training in the absence of the denominational seminaries and bodies they had previously utilized. And these local schools provided a web of relationships through which fundamentalist pastors and independent churches could maintain ties with one another. In short, Bible institutes

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28 Ibid., 16.

29 Ibid.

became “denominational surrogates.” They provided for Bible churches educational training, theological direction, social interaction, and a general sense of participation in a larger movement. But they were local and voluntary; independent Bible churches could utilize Bible institute resources according to their own needs without sacrificing congregational autonomy.

HHBC exemplified this relationship as it was deeply connected to two local Bible schools: Denver Bible Institute (DBI) and Western Bible Institute (WBI). The first three pastors of HHBC from 1945-82 were students or faculty, and twice, presidents at DBI and WBI. In the 1980s, DBI and WBI (which both went through several name changes) merged with a third Baptist school to become Colorado Christian University.

![Institutional history of Colorado Christian University, 1914-present.](image)

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Figure 3.3. Institutional history of Colorado Christian University, 1914-present.

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31 Carpenter, Revive Us Again, 17.
DBI was founded in 1914 by Clifton Fowler, who was “reared a Methodist, joined the Plymouth Brethren, later the Baptists, and later founded a church more to suit his ideas.”\textsuperscript{32} He was described as “a free lance independent,” “a fundamentalist . . . rigid in his interpretation of Scripture,” and “ambitious, determined, energetic to the highest degree, never easily discouraged, or deterred from his chosen goal or activity.”\textsuperscript{33} He frequently wrote and preached against both modernism and Pentecostalism. Approaching biblical doctrine as a dispensational fundamentalist, Fowler “was fully confident of the rightness of his interpretation of the Bible.”\textsuperscript{34} But his personality and strong convictions could be detrimental:

this extreme self confidence made him narrow, even to many fellow Fundamentalists, and in later years sometimes cost him the friendship of those who had previously been loyal to him. He was willing to break with close associates if necessary to carry out a program that he sincerely believed God had led him in formulating.\textsuperscript{35}

Driven by a literal interpretation of Scripture, rigid, narrow, and separatistic: Fowler was a classic fundamentalist.

In the first ten years under Fowler’s leadership, DBI offered a three-year Bible education, in addition to night classes for lay people. In 1924, the institute had fifty


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 36.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
students and adopted a more rigorous four-year program. The curriculum included theology courses; “Personal Christian Life Study”; English, Greek, and Spanish classes; music and “practical evangelism” courses; and instruction in “Dispensational Study.” DBI gave students of the Bible and prospective ministers a dispensational fundamentalist framework that would equip them to stand against the perceived errant ways of the world. In 1934, Fowler started the Fundamental Berean Church at DBI, which later planted additional congregations and became a loosely affiliated denomination. But Fowler soon left DBI amid criticism, health issues, and a failing marriage.

Archie Yetter, who graduated from DBI in 1928 and served as an Assistant Pastor at Berean Fundamental Church with Fowler, joined DBI’s faculty and Board of Directors in 1938. When he became pastor of HHBC in 1945, he continued to teach at DBI. But DBI had gone through several difficult years of transition after Fowler left; the school also added a liberal arts education when it rechartered as a college in 1945. As a result, Yetter joined a group of DBI graduates in 1948 to start a new Bible institute in Denver: Western Bible Institute (WBI). The founders of WBI believed it should be dedicated solely to Bible instruction with a focus on preparing candidates for ministry. Like DBI, their doctrinal foundation was staunchly committed to dispensational fundamentalism.

As HHBC’s founding pastor was deeply connected to DBI and WBI, this no doubt influenced the church’s doctrinal convictions and overall orientation to faith. The pastors that followed Yetter at HHBC also remained linked to local Bible institutes.

36 Ibid., 51.

37 Ibid., 124.
HHBC’s second pastor taught at both Rocky Mountain Bible Institute (a small school in Golden that later closed) and WBI in Denver. HHBC’s third pastor taught at WBI and was acting president of the school before leaving to lead the church. These three men, with firm ties to Bible schools, led HHBC in its first four decades. They taught members of the congregation the same doctrine and biblical interpretation methods they taught students of their Bible schools. Others at HHBC often took classes at the Bible institutes. When the church needed pulpit supply during pastoral vacancies, considered Bible conference speakers, cooperated with other independent churches, or simply needed to hire nursery workers for childcare, they utilized their Bible school networks to meet the need. The use for denominations had been replaced; their Bible institute surrogates filled the vacuum quite well.

*Growth and Name Changes at Holly Hills Bible Church: 1954-84*

By mid-1953, Ash Grove Union Church had outgrown its former barracks building, was close to paying off its mortgage, and began discussions to expand the facilities. In 1954, leaders made plans to purchase land immediately south of their building to construct a new sanctuary. But they would do so without the leadership of Pastor Yetter. Since 1945, Yetter had served as a bi-vocational pastor, splitting his time between pastoring the church and teaching at both DBI and WBI. In 1954, DBI, which had changed its name to Denver Bible College then again to Rockmont College, moved to a new campus in Longmont and courted Yetter to return as President. Yetter informed Ash Grove’s Church Board of “great interest and offers of support [at Rockmont,] the
college has good hopes for a big future.” As a result, he felt “the need to resign and thereby let the church call a full time Pastor.”

In December of 1954, Ash Grove Union Church called its second, and first full-time salaried pastor, J. L. Garland of Creighton, Nebraska. Under Garland’s leadership, the church continued to grow and began circulating a monthly newsletter, *The Ash Grove Visitor*, to local neighborhoods. On Sundays, the church hosted Sunday School at 9:45 am, a worship service at 11 am, Junior Young People’s Fellowship and Senior Young People’s Fellowship at 6:30 pm, and another worship service at 7:30 pm. Readers of the *Ash Grove Visitor* were encouraged, “If you have no other ‘church-home’, we invite you to meet with us in these services.” The church also provided a Wednesday night service along with other fellowship groups that met during the week. For instance, in 1955, the church offered a mother’s fellowship group, a men’s fellowship group, and the Ladies Missionary Society.

Aside from weekly events, the church hosted special events, Bible conferences, and a summer Vacation Bible School that drew over a hundred local children. On religious holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, the church held numerous services with traditional elements and music. On July the Fourth, congregants gathered to sing patriotic hymns and honor military servicemen and veterans. And on Thanksgiving Day, the

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38 Church Board Meeting Minutes, June 30, 1954, HHBC Records.

39 Ibid.


congregation met for a morning worship service that included “a time for praise, reading of the Word of God, and special music.” Not to worry, the church informed members, “the service will close promptly at 11:00 [am], so you can get home for the finishing touches on that turkey dinner.”

The congregation also began showing films once a month on Sunday nights and approved the use of its facilities as a voting precinct for November elections. By 1961, the numerical growth and increased fund-raising capacity allowed the church to acquire the adjacent property, raise initial capital, and construct a new sanctuary building.

During the 1950s and 60s, the congregation sometimes worked with other like-minded churches and organizations in Denver. Pastor Garland initiated a program of exchanging pulpits with pastors from other independent churches in the Denver area. In addition, he advocated support of a new organization, the Denver Association of

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42 The Ash Grove Visitor Monthly Newsletter, November 1955, HHBC Records.
Evangelicals, and planned joint meetings with McCarroll Bible Church, a nearby independent Bible church. The church lent financial support to Denver Youth for Christ, a nondenominational parachurch organization aimed at reaching young people, as well as Camp Id-Ra-Ha-Je, a summer youth camp in the mountains. Wayne and Sue Anderson, who became members of the church in the 1960s, recall meeting one another at Camp Id-Ra-Ha-Je, attending monthly “SingSpiration” hymn services at Ash Grove and with other local Bible churches, and participating in Youth for Christ meetings at Phipps Auditorium in Denver. In 1965, the church also supported the Billy Graham Crusade that came to Denver. Pastor Garland was appointed to the crusade’s visitation committee and thirteen people who made decisions to become Christians were referred to the church. But Ash Grove’s collaboration with other churches and organizations during this time was occasional and limited in nature. The congregation continued to exist primarily as a neighborhood church.

During Garland’s tenure, the church went through several important name changes that signified their desire to clarify their identity. In 1956, Pastor Garland “stated that the word ‘Union’ was confusing in its connotation to those on whom he called.” The word Union was originally taken from the church’s roots in the ASSU. It was also used by many churches in previous years to describe an interdenominational character. The term interdenominational can be confusing. Sometimes it is used as a synonym for nondenominational, but more often, interdenominational describes a church or

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44 Church Board Meeting Minutes, October 3, 1956, HHBC Records.
organization that promotes a spirit of cooperation in contrast to the sectarian nature of denominations. In other words, interdenominational typically rejects factionalism, whereas nondenominational rejects institutionalism. *Union,* as it was used in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was largely connected to this interdenominational spirit of cooperation. However, by the 1950s, the term had dropped from common use. As a result, Garland moved that the church revise its name to Ash Grove Church. When the Church Board discussed Garland’s motion, they unanimously defeated it. The reason was not recorded. It is possible that long-time members voted against the measure, not for philosophical or theological reasons, but simply because they were resistant to change. More likely, they believed the legal complexities associated with a name change were too cumbersome. In fact, a subsequent motion was made to keep “Union” in the legal name but drop it for use in advertising. The motion carried unanimously.45 For practical purposes, the church became known as Ash Grove Church.

In 1961, with the building of the new sanctuary, Garland moved for a more sweeping name change to Holly Hills Community Church. The immediate neighborhood was known as Holly Hills (only the nearby school retained the Ash Grove name) and Garland wanted to better position the congregation as a church for the local community. There was no resistance on this occasion, and on July 1, the new name was formally adopted. Interestingly, the sign installed for the new building included the word “Inter-denominational” below the name. Though not formally part of the name, the church still

45 Church Board Meeting Minutes, October 14, 1956, HHBC Records.
wanted to be known for its non-sectarian character. The early spirit of the Union, or interdenominational, mentality had not fully faded.

This desire to be known as interdenominational or cooperative is a bit surprising for a fundamentalist church. Most early fundamentalist congregations were not shy about their strict, separatist character; few wanted to be described as a church that welcomed all beliefs. However, one must see these discussions about names and descriptive labels as part of a larger process of development. Many fundamentalist churches were still seeking to balance the tension between their theological convictions and their desire to welcome families from their communities. The public ways they identified themselves, and revised this identity over time, illustrate their genuine wrestling with these matters of conviction and public perception.

In 1967, the Church Board had discussions about another name change: from Holly Hills Community Church to Holly Hills Bible Church. A special congregational meeting was called where “a discussion of pros and cons concerning the pending name change of the church was brought up and hashed out.”46 The Church Board continued to debate the issue for several months; apparently, there was no immediate consensus.

Since the early 1900s, many churches with fundamentalist doctrine had called themselves “Bible churches” to communicate their emphasis on the Bible and follow the example of Bible institutes with which they often aligned. Ash Grove Union Church/Holly Hills Community Church certainly fit this character, as the history of their doctrine and connection to DBI and WBI demonstrated. Moreover, most of the other

46 Church Board Meeting Minutes, May 21, 1967, HHBC Records.
churches in the Denver area with which the congregation partnered in the 1950s and 60s followed this naming pattern, such as Aurora Bible Church, Central Bible Church, McCarroll Bible Church, and Fairmont Bible Church. It seems that the congregation, by considering replacing the word “Community” with “Bible” in their name, was attempting to align to clarify its fundamentalist identity once and for all. As Sue Anderson noted later, “doctrinally they wanted to be known as a Bible Church.”

Another important factor in the proposed name change was likely the ecumenical movement among mainline Protestant churches in the 1960s. Ecumenism—the promotion of unity among various Christian groups—had developed in the early part of the century with the creation of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ (which later became the National Council of Churches, NCC). During the first and second World Wars, ecumenism had grown as Protestant denominations worked through the NCC to support the war effort, send chaplains, shape national policy, and coordinate missionary activities. But a new spirit of ecumenism marked the sixties. Many theologically liberal churches and denominations were putting their differences aside to work together, and at times, merge into larger unified bodies. They believed the unhealthy divisions created by denominationalism often worked against their success. Moreover, the sixties witnessed what historian Mark Noll describes as “a tidal wave of questioning of all the traditional

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Social upheaval with civil rights, Vietnam, and the counterculture challenged old structures of authority. Sociologists, such as Peter Berger, began to espouse secularization theory: the belief that traditional religion was on the wane in the modern world. As a result, historian Sydney Ahlstrom notes, “the urgency of the social crisis made interchurch and interfaith cooperation imperative.” Many denominational leaders believed their only response was to begin working together in a more cooperative fashion.

Fundamentalists rejected the liberal theology of mainline churches and saw this kind of ecumenism as a further sacrifice of doctrinal convictions. They believed collaboration and unity should never come at the expense of doctrinal purity. Indeed, many fundamentalists even criticized Billy Graham for welcoming mainline liberal churches to work with his city-wide crusade efforts. For the Holly Hills congregation, therefore, using the words *inter-denominational* and *community* to describe their church brought about new tensions. *Inter-denominational* had previously been a positive descriptor for the congregation. But the term, one member said, “started sounding more like it was just ‘one-size-fits-all,’ and that’s not what we wanted.” Apparently, church members thought the public might perceive Holly Hills as an ecumenical congregation


50 Ibid.


that welcomed and embraced liberal beliefs from many different denominational backgrounds. *Community* had also previously been a positive label, intended to convey the church’s neighborhood focus. But a subsequent pastor noted, “What a community church normally meant [by the late 1960s] was that it didn’t have a doctrinal emphasis. That was normative; it was very ecumenical so to speak. And Bible Church people are not ecumenical. They’re not accepting every Tom, Dick, and Harry-doctrine that emerges and calls itself Christian. They’re more focused and you have to establish this [focus] from the Word of God.”53

After lengthy discussions about the proposed name change, the congregation realized they were “Bible Church people” at heart. *Inter-denominational* was removed from the sign and the name became Holly Hills Bible Church.54 It did not seem to worry members that they might not reap the fruits of the ecumenical movement. (In fact, there is no indication significant numbers of people were drawn to churches because of the ecumenism of the sixties, and the spirit of cooperation that marked the ecumenical movement quickly died.) Nor did members of Holly Hills fear that their church would not be respected within the community. They were more concerned with projecting an image of doctrinal teaching based on the Bible, hence the name, Holly Hills *Bible* Church.

A year later, on August 7, 1968, Pastor Garland submitted his resignation to the Church Board. He noted that the reason was “not because of any adversities in the


54 Church Board Meeting Minutes, August 7, 1967, HHBC Records.
church, but that he and Mrs. Garland felt lead [by] the Lord to a new ministry.” He subsequently took another pastoral role in California. Before leaving Denver, Garland had a conversation with Ron Merryman, the Acting President of WBI. Garland, who was teaching at WBI, and Merryman were chatting about their classes after the spring semester had ended when Garland mentioned that he was leaving HHBC and that the church might need help from the faculty to fill his position. Merryman volunteered to serve as interim pastor while the church looked for a replacement. Merryman later noted that despite Garland’s assertion that the church was not facing difficulties, indeed it was. Weekly attendance had dropped significantly by the end of his tenure. It is unclear why the congregation had shrunk. Perhaps the church’s continued focus on fundamentalist doctrine was less appealing in the sixties than it had been in the fifties. I speculate that Garland’s leadership ability had simply faltered in recent years in light of the growth HHBC would experience under their next pastor. At any rate, Merryman recalled, “my first Sunday morning there, there were twenty-three people and twelve of them were kids under twelve years old.” Moreover, the church was struggling financially. In order to continue paying the mortgage on the new sanctuary, meet operating expenses, and provide a salary for a full-time pastor, the Church Board considered cutting financial support to all missionaries.

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55 Church Board Meeting Minutes, August 7, 1968, HHBC Records.

During Merryman’s tenure as interim pastor, both attendance and giving increased steadily. The need to reduce missionary funding was eliminated, though the pastor’s salary would remain modest at best. Also during this time, the church debated calling another man, a “Pastor Miller,” to replace Garland. There was vigorous debate about his theology and leadership style and several votes were taken. When the church finally decided to offer the position to Miller in early 1969, he had already taken a pastoral role at another church. Another individual was considered; he declined the role. In April 1969, with the congregation beginning to thrive under Merryman’s interim leadership, the members invited him to become their permanent full-time pastor. He accepted the invitation and called his time at Holly Hills “the most wonderful experience I’ve ever had in my life.”

During the 1970s, Pastor Merryman initiated numerous changes at HHBC. First, “Ron got rid of a lot of the stuff in the church that was causing problems,” Wayne Anderson recalled. “One of the first things he did: no choir.” Apparently, disagreements and discord related to the music had been a source of congregational strife that Garland had failed to address. It did not appear to be a substantial problem, but Merryman’s decisive action indicated his assertion of leadership and authority. He dealt with the problems by eliminating the choir and stated that the congregation itself would serve as the choir.

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57 Ibid.


59 Ibid.
Second, Merryman placed a central focus on doctrinal teaching. In previous years, doctrinal teaching had been important at the church; Merryman made it the supreme value. He started with the Church Board. Until that time, the Church Board (made up of elders and deacons) had primarily been a decision-making body with frequently rotating members. They spent most of their time approving budgets, paying bills, and overseeing the maintenance of the facilities. Merryman believed this model did not conform to biblical instruction. He spent several years teaching the Board the proper biblical qualifications for elders and their role as “shepherds of the flock”; he also revised their length of service from a temporary term to what he believed the Bible taught: “elders for life.”

Merryman’s emphasis on doctrinal teaching was also evident in his theological convictions and rigor. As a self-admitted dispensational fundamentalist, ensuring correct doctrine in the church was Merryman’s highest priority. Early in his tenure, he developed a doctrinal questionnaire that elders, Sunday School teachers, and missionaries were required to complete; it contained seventy-five questions. Merryman also revised the church’s Statement of Faith and Doctrine in 1972. Most doctrines from the original 1947 Constitution were expanded with greater explanation and Scripture references. For instance, the revised statement bolstered the church’s position on fundamentalist and dispensational beliefs such as “verbal-plenary inspiration” of the Scriptures “which are completely inerrant in the original writings,” the “pre-tribulational” return of Christ, “the eternal security of believers,” and “final judgment [for unbelievers] at the Great White

60 Church Board Meeting Minutes, October 9, 1969, HHBC Records.
Throne at the close of the millennium.” The revised statement even included a section specifically declaring: “We believe in a dispensational method of Bible interpretation.”

To ensure understanding and adherence to these dispensational fundamentalist beliefs, Merryman offered numerous resources to the congregation. He led the church in hosting Bible teaching conferences, such as the Creation Conference of 1971 that featured keynote speaker Dr. Henry Morris, founder of the Institute for Creation Research. Merryman also purchased and distributed books to members, such as The Green Letters by Miles Stanford, Rightly Dividing the Scriptures by C. I. Scofield, The Liberation of Planet Earth by Hal Lindsay, and Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth by Charles Ryrie (all four authors were well-known dispensational fundamentalists). Most importantly, Merryman took it upon himself to instruct the congregation using methods one might find at a Bible institute. In the 1970s, he began teaching Greek classes at the church, installed Greek-English Interlinear New Testaments in the pews for use during sermon instruction, launched a new tape ministry to distribute his sermon teachings, and began publishing his expository notes from Bible book-based sermon series. Even the graded curriculum developed for school-age children included key dispensational fundamentalist doctrines, as this plan developed in 1978 demonstrates.62

61 Proposed Constitutional Revision Holly Hills Bible Church, February 1972, HHBC Records.

By the early 1980s, the church had grown to several hundred members. In a letter to a friend, Merryman downplayed the growth: “Our primary goal is quality teaching no matter what the numbers are.” But there is little doubt Merryman’s effectiveness as a teacher and leader played an important role in the growth. Members of HHBC were enamored with the way their pastor could interpret the Bible, unlock secrets to mysterious
passages in the book of Revelation, and provide clear biblical convictions in the face of what they perceived as a liberalizing culture.

In 1982, Ron Merryman’s term as pastor came to a sudden end. Years later, he would recount the events of that time with great sadness. On September 2, after taking a sabbatical to deal with personal issues, Merryman wrote to the Church Board to notify them of his ongoing marriage difficulties. He did not specify the exact nature of his marital conflict but wrote: “Frankly, my present relationship [with his wife] is such that I no longer qualify to pastor; I do not provide the necessary model or example for the flock. As difficult as it is to express, I must resign.”

It seems that Merryman and his wife could not reconcile their conflict and were on the brink of divorce. Fundamentalists, who maintain a strict interpretation of the Bible, often believe that divorce is immoral and disqualifies one from serving as pastor or elder. With great sorrow, Merryman notified the church leaders that he was no longer qualified to serve as pastor. The Board accepted his resignation, but the situation worsened. Merryman and his wife soon divorced and over the next two years, gossip consumed the church, many members left, and several Board members resigned. Some in the church sympathized with Merryman; others supported his wife. Regardless, many believed that the divorce was unbiblical. Whether under their own conviction or pressure from others, the remaining Board members of HHBC wrote a letter of public rebuke regarding Merryman’s divorce and removed his tapes and writings from their library. Amid the discord, the congregation dwindled and struggled to find a replacement.

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64 Letter, Ron Merryman to Church Board, September 2, 1982, HHBC Records.
Bible Church Affiliations and Culture

When denominational churches face a crisis in leadership, such as when a pastor resigns under controversy, regional leaders often step in to help. Many denominations have local associations, presbyteries, synods, or other institutional bodies that are granted the authority to oversee decisions and bring resolution to local problems. In the case of Bible churches, however, there are no larger bodies or institutions of governance. Fundamentalists created a few denominations, like the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (IFCA), but they remained small. The majority of Bible churches have typically remained independent of denominational ties.

HHBC was no exception. Apart from the original relationship of the Sunday School with the ASSU (a nondenominational organization), there are no indications that HHBC was affiliated with a denomination in its early years. Indeed, when Pastor Yetter resigned in 1954, he “expressed his hope that the church continue as Independent” to the Church Board.65 Perhaps Yetter had seen a trend among some fundamentalist churches toward institutionalization and denominationalism, like the Berean Fundamentalist Church where he previously served, and he thought this detrimental. In any case, after only nine years in existence, independence and local autonomy had become trademarks of HHBC.

J. L. Garland, the congregation’s second pastor, was affiliated with the IFCA. He had been ordained through the IFCA and previously pastored an IFCA-affiliated church. The IFCA was first organized in 1930 as an alternative for “sincere believers who could

65 Church Board Meeting Minutes, June 30, 1954, HHBC Records.
no longer conscientiously continue under the denominational management of aggressive, domineering Modernists.”

While HHBC supported Garland’s association with the IFCA and even hosted an annual conference of regional IFCA pastors in 1964, the church itself never affiliated with the denomination. At least twice in 1965, the Church Board meeting minutes record Garland suggesting that the church join the IFCA; both times the Board declined. Many years later in 1993, when HHBC was struggling with low attendance and financial deficits, leaders briefly discussed merging with nearby McCarroll Bible Church. They ultimately concluded that it might be difficult for a variety of reasons including “because of its affiliation with the IFCA.”

Apparently, Board members remained committed to the church’s independent character—even when they were struggling to survive—and did not want to affiliate with a denomination despite doctrinal like-mindedness.

On numerous occasions, HHBC partnered with or supported local or national organizations, such as Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth for Christ, the Denver Association of Evangelicals, Billy Graham crusades, and other independent churches. In 1971, the church worked with the Associated Gospel Churches (AGC), a fundamentalist agency that supplied military chaplains to the Armed Services. But the reason for allowing the AGC to represent HHBC was because “we are totally independent and non-

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67 Church Board Meeting Minutes, September 8, 1993, HHBC Records.
affiliated in terms of denominations or national organizations.” Coupled with their fundamentalist outlook and wariness of institutional control, this independent spirit defined HHBC throughout its history.

HHBC also exemplifies the ethnic and socio-economic culture of most Bible churches. The people of HHBC were almost entirely ethnically white. This demographic reflected the population of southeast Denver; with the exception of several African-American and Latino neighborhoods in central and western Denver, the overwhelming majority of the city’s population in the immediate postwar years was white. HHBC was also a “neighborhood church” of primarily “working-class people” as Wayne Anderson described it in its early years. Attendees included farmers, nurses, soldiers, grocery-store clerks, factory managers, and blue-collar workers like one member described as “a guy who ran a road grader for Arapahoe County.”

In later years, as the surrounding neighborhoods grew more affluent, more suburban families and educated members attended the church: engineers, doctors, and lawyers. One of HHBC’s elders and its fifth pastor, Hal Malloy, was an electrical

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68 Church Board Meeting Minutes, July 23, 1971, HHBC Records.

69 In 1950, the Census Bureau recorded the population of metropolitan Denver as 95.6 percent white; 1960: 95.8 percent; 1970: 94.5 percent. The percentage of whites was even higher in the southeast areas of Denver and Arapahoe County. See U.S. Census Bureau statistics, https://www.census.gov. Restrictive covenants in American urban and suburban neighborhoods at the time often prevented the sale of homes to certain ethnic and racial groups. It is unclear if the neighborhoods surrounding HHBC utilized these covenants to ensure ethnic homogeneity.


71 Ibid.
engineer who worked on the U.S. aerospace program to soft-land the first spacecraft on the moon. In the 1970s, a group of lawyers attended HHBC and met weekly for a Bible study. Two doctors led another Bible study for teenagers; they taught the basics of sex education with an emphasis on biblical morality. And as previously noted, HHBC’s first and third pastors, Archie Yetter and Ron Merryman served as presidents of educational institutions. Merryman completed a Ph.D. in Intellectual History of the West under renowned medieval historian S. Harrison Thomson at the University of Colorado.

This profile of HHBC’s attendees is representative of many fundamentalist Bible churches in the postwar era. In the early years of fundamentalism, Carpenter notes that the movement “tended to attract Anglo-Americans and northern European immigrants of Protestant background who were part of the upwardly aspiring and ‘respectable’ sector of the working class, and of the lower middle class.” This description squares with the kinds of people moving to the rural outskirts and suburban developments of Denver from the 1920s to the 1960s. Bible churches like HHBC offered a “plain-folk religion” that appealed to both their humble roots and pioneering spirit. In other parts of the country, Bible churches developed in urban areas where more ethnic minorities were located, but African-Americans and Latinos remained more loyal to their denominational traditions (or Roman Catholicism), or they were attracted by the Holiness-Pentecostal movement, which Bible churches spurned. Later in the postwar era, Bible churches like HHBC

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72 Carpenter, Revise Us Again, 9.

attracted more affluent whites. Religious historian Dwain Waldrep profiled Shades Mountain Bible Church (Birmingham, Alabama) founded in 1963 by faculty from a local Bible school. By 1991, 70 percent of regular attendees had attended college or graduate school and 27 percent held managerial or professional occupations.74

_Holly Hills Bible Church: 1984-2000_

After Merryman left HHBC, and after several interim pastors, the church called Ken Marr to be its fourth pastor in 1984. In contrast to his predecessors, Marr had no seminary training. The congregation seemed desperate to find a leader to heal the wounds from Merryman’s departure and were willing to overlook their history of academically-inclined pastors. Marr excelled at interpersonal relationships and counseling but shortcomings soon caught up with him. Members began to criticize his long-winded and inconsistent teaching style, and by 1988, the church had declined from several hundred weekly attendees when Merryman left to roughly forty people. As a result, the Board discussed at length the spiritual and financial problems they faced. Marr was discouraged and considered resigning, but he persevered.75 In order to meet financial needs, the pastor’s salary and support for missionaries and were reduced the following year.

For his part, Marr sought to improve his teaching effectiveness by taking Bible and preaching classes at Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary. The Board noted that his

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75 Church Board Meeting Minutes, December 8, 1988, HHBC Records.
preaching style improved as Marr attempted to carry on the Bible church emphasis of doctrinal teaching. For adults, weekly sermons and Bible studies focused on expositional book studies, especially New Testament books that dispensationalists like Marr believed held more relevance for the church age. In each of its key gatherings—adult Sunday School, Sunday morning worship, Sunday evening worship, Wednesday night service, and Saturday morning classes—teaching played a central role. Figure 3.6 shows a chart that outlines the various topics and Bible books studied in each of these environments.

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<th>Prophecy</th>
<th>Gal.</th>
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<td>Sun-10am</td>
<td>Ephesians</td>
<td>Titus</td>
<td>I Thessalonians</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sun-6pm</td>
<td>Detailed Studies</td>
<td>Ephesians/Titus</td>
<td>Middle East</td>
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<td>Wed-7pm</td>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Life of Abraham/Isaac</td>
<td>O.T. Character or Proverbs</td>
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<td>Sat. Greek Class</td>
<td>Summer Break</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Hebrew Anyone?</td>
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**Figure 3.6.** Handwritten list of biblical books and themes studied, 1990-1991. Courtesy of Wayne and Sue Anderson.

In 1993, questions about Marr’s effectiveness as a pastor and teacher surfaced again. Board Chairman Hal Malloy noted that “we at Holly Hills Bible Church have a hurting and discouraged fellowship, and people have expressed an overall frustration with the pastoral ministry. This has been a long standing condition over the past 8-1/2

In the wake of Marr’s resignation, the church canceled the Sunday evening service, changed the Wednesday night service to a prayer focus and asked Board Chairman Hal Malloy to serve as interim pastor. Regarding the search for a new pastor, Malloy recommended a six to eight month waiting period “so that the Board can evaluate the status of the fellowship [and] ensure we have a firm base of support both monetarily and in attitude of the fellowship.” It seems that Board members were considering disbanding the church. During this time, members of nearby McCarroll Bible Church proposed a merger with Holly Hills Bible Church as both congregations were struggling to make ends meet. The Board of Holly Hills discussed the matter but declined because of complexities over “who the pastor would be, who would comprise the Board,” and “because of [McCarroll’s] affiliation with the IFCA [denomination].” Some members

76 Church Board Meeting Minutes, June 10, 1993, HHBC Records.
77 Ibid.
78 Church Board Meeting Minutes, June 28, 1993, HHBC Records.
79 Church Board Meeting Minutes, July 8, 1993, HHBC Records.
80 Church Board Meeting Minutes, September 8, 1993, HHBC Records.
who had left during Marr’s tenure returned in the following months and the church
decided to ask elder Hal Malloy to be its permanent pastor. He accepted the role and led
the congregation for about eight years. Another pastor, Vern Peterman, was called in
2001. Under his leadership, the church has slowly recovered; he continues to lead the
congregation of roughly a hundred members in 2018.

Analysis of Bible Churches

The history of HHBC from 1945-2000 is emblematic of the Bible church subtype
of modern nondenominational churches. Naturally, there exists great diversity among
Bible churches, just as there is great diversity among congregations that belong to a
denomination. It is beyond the scope of this study to survey numerous Bible churches
from different regions and demographics of the nation. Nevertheless, I use HHBC as a
model to elucidate three common characteristics that marked most Bible churches in the
postwar era—characteristics that established the foundation for a modern
nondenominational church identity.81

First, Bible churches like HHBC espouse fundamentalist dispensational beliefs
that place a premium on doctrinal purity. One on hand, I have noted how fundamentalist
theology differs from the modernist movement that produced Protestant liberalism. On
the other hand, modern American evangelicalism emerged in the 1940s and many have
confused it with fundamentalism.82 While fundamentalists share many conservative

81 This qualification about using one church as a model for the subtype applies to
the following chapters as well.

82 I explore modern American evangelicalism in depth in Chapters Five and Six.
beliefs with modern evangelicals, sociologist Nancy Ammerman has observed several key differences. Fundamentalists are more dogmatic about a literal interpretation of the Bible and “are more likely to insist on dispensational premillennialism as the only correct belief about Christ’s second coming.”

Theologian David Buschart notes that this distinctive dispensational theology regarding the end times “has not been predominant in certain corridors of power” but has been propagated nonetheless through “scores of Bible institutes, Bible churches, [and] independent churches.” This dogmatism regarding a literal interpretation of Scripture and dispensational eschatology often fuels fundamentalists’ perceived necessity to separate from institutions they deem suspect. As Ammerman describes:

At the institutional level, separation from the world results in a refusal to cooperate—even in the best of causes—with others (including many Evangelicals) whose lives and beliefs do not meet Fundamentalist standards. For this reason, the typical Fundamentalist church is independent; it belongs to no formally organized denomination but instead cooperates with a variety of independent mission boards, publishing houses, and the like.

HHBC is one of countless independent Bible churches that embraced this character in the postwar era.

Dwain Waldrep observes that “[m]ost of the first independent [Bible] churches were established in the decade or so prior to 1945, typically by people from Presbyterian,

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Congregational, Baptist, and, to a lesser extent, Methodist backgrounds.” Some were intentionally splitting from existing churches over significant doctrinal strife; others, like HHBC, were founded “as the fulfillment of people simply desiring a local church where they would have the continual access to the kind of Bible teaching associated with the Bible conference movement.” As a result, doctrinal teaching to instruct congregation members and protect them from heretical theology became a hallmark of Bible churches like HHBC:

The pastor, typically identified as ‘pastor-teacher,’ preached systematically through books of the Bible, carefully expounding the author’s central theme and tracing it paragraph by paragraph and verse by verse through the book . . . Indeed, teaching books of the Bible and stressing context and original languages remained the emphasis in these [independent] Bible and community churches in stark contrast to the traditional preaching style and anecdotal content observed in most denominational churches.

At Holly Hills, when Ken Marr’s pastoral effectiveness was questioned, the Board used the following three criteria for evaluation: “1. Is Pastor Ken functioning as a shepherd? 2. Has he manifested the overall maturity required as a pastor/teacher? 3. Is he effective in communicating the truth of the Word of God to our fellowship?” Biblical, doctrinal teaching remained the primary standard.

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86 Waldrep, “Independent Bible and Community Churches,” 1070.

87 Ibid. Bible conferences were prominent in the 1920s and 1930s as an early way of spreading the ideas of fundamentalists and Bible institutes.

88 Waldrep, “Independent Bible and Community Churches,” 1069.

89 Church Board Meeting Minutes, June 10, 1993, HHBC Records.
A second common characteristic marks Bible churches: *they largely abandon efforts to engage the systemic problems of society and instead focus on personal evangelism.* All humans, fundamentalists emphasize, are lost in sin and bound for hell without faith in Christ. Liberal Christians, they believe, water down the gospel message with beliefs and practices unrelated to one’s personal eternal destiny. From the late nineteenth century onward, many mainline Protestant churches gave prominence to engaging social issues, believing that the gospel message had wider application, perhaps even a central thrust, toward helping the poor, improving social conditions, and challenging societal injustices such as civil rights. From time to time, HHBC supported local organizations like the Denver Rescue Mission, which promoted goals such as these. But the overwhelming mission of HHBC and Bible churches like it was evangelism and doctrinal teaching of Christians. The “Description and Thrust” of HHBC, as defined in the 1972 Constitution, read as follows:

The Holly Hills Bible Church is a fellowship of persons regenerated by the Holy Spirit through the saving merits of Jesus Christ. This local church seeks to honor the priesthood of every believer, to expedite the function of spiritual gifts, and to encourage true evangelism after the New Testament pattern. . . . The thrust of this fellowship is to make sound doctrine available to believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.90

For members of HHBC, the gospel was simple: “it’s just believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and do you believe that he died and was buried and rose again? That’s the gospel,” one member declared. “If you believe that, it’s not a matter of all the other stuff you have

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90 Proposed Constitutional Revision Holly Hills Bible Church, February 1972, HHBC Records.
to do.”\textsuperscript{91} Believing this gospel accurately through sound doctrinal teaching, and then evangelizing others, remains the primary goal of Bible churches. As such, cautionary tales are often shared about liberal churches that have forsaken this mission. At one 1975 HHBC Board meeting,

The Pastor shared information he had received from Fred Moore concerning the history of a church on Long Island which had been started with fundamental Biblical concepts but has through the years let down one standard after another and is now deep in ecumenicism.\textsuperscript{92}

Pastors at HHBC frequently reminded members of what hung in the balance if they too lost sight of their evangelistic and doctrinal mission. On another occasion in 1990,

Pastor Ken concluded the Annual Meeting with a short sermon in which he likened the present civilization, whose vast numbers of this world’s population are without Christ and who seemingly could care less, to a space ship which has blasted off into outer space and unknown to its occupants is on a collision course with utter destruction and eternal separation from Christ in the Lake of Fire for all eternity.\textsuperscript{93}

This passion for evangelism drove HHBC’s teaching, evangelistic meetings, programs, and worship services.

Third, Bible churches embrace local presence, autonomy, and independence, choosing only loose and voluntary affiliations that do not bind them to larger organizational structures. The original founders of Ash Grove Union Sunday School sought to teach local children the Bible; they subsequently started their congregation

\textsuperscript{91} Sue Anderson, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, December 9, 2015.

\textsuperscript{92} Church Board Meeting Minutes, July 2, 1975, HHBC Records. As this statement reveals, “ecumenism” for fundamentalists became shorthand for a church that had sacrificed evangelism and biblical doctrine, and forsaken its true mission.

\textsuperscript{93} Church Board Meeting Minutes, March 3, 1990, HHBC Records.
because “there is no organized church in this community.” They saw themselves as a neighborhood church focused on evangelizing and teaching local residents. Rarely did member or leaders of HHBC have formal discussions about the issues of urban Denver (only five miles away), regional or national politics, social problems gripping the nation, or the Cold War conflict played out across the globe. The congregation supported foreign missionaries but never sponsored church-wide mission trips to other countries, as many other congregations did. They cooperated with other independent churches from time to time, but rarely invested funds or programs in needs beyond their local community. And every time the question of affiliation with a broader network or denomination arose, the church declined to participate.

This insularity is not solely a matter of doctrinal separatism and retreat. As historian Joel Carpenter has demonstrated, fundamentalists did not simply withdraw from the wider society. Rather, they created new and vibrant expressions of local alternatives to the dominant modernist institutionalism that had overtaken denominational churches. In so doing, they “seemed to be trying to recreate the religious culture of small-town America” and so preserve “earlier evangelical cultural ideals in the face of rapid social change.” In this sense, Bible churches, along with Bible institutes and conferences, were the locus of fundamentalist, “small-town America” ideals.

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94 Carpenter, Revive Us Again, 10.
I suggest this trait is what historian T. H. Breen and sociologist William Swatos called “persistent localism.” Breen first used the term “persistent localism” in his study of challenges to political authority in seventeenth-century England and the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He described the cultural changes that took place when the first settlers created a new society in New England and how conflicts arose between settlers, who prioritized local interests and autonomy, and Governor John Winthrop and colony magistrates, who were seen as not representing the will of the local communities.

Adapting this idea to religion and culture in twentieth-century America, Swatos observed a similar tension between cultural changes, national denominations, and locally-minded churches. “With the shift from a rural home-farm productive-consumptive society to an urban bureau-technical one,” Swatos writes, “the traditional denominations, as religious organizations in conformity with their socio-cultural environment, developed into large trans-local non-profit corporations.” As historian Michael Hamilton observed,

Records from the early 20th century are embarrassingly full of evidence that denominational bureaucrats thought of churches as local production units whose purpose was to generate income for the real work of the denomination that they—the bureaucrats—were trying to do. They hired efficiency experts to determine which kinds of churches produced the most income and then developed plans to encourage more of that kind of church. And increasingly they evaluated local pastors on their records of producing income for the headquarters.

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96 Swatos, “Beyond Denominationalism?,” 223.

Leaders of Bible churches resisted this development. They were not simply opposed to theological adaptations of denominations or the changing currents of the prevailing culture (though both were problematic for them). At a deeper level, they were profoundly wary of the demands forced upon them by centralized governing bodies—denominations—that did not represent their own interests.

“The key,” Swatos argues, “is persistent localism.” Bible churches like HHBC separated themselves from denominations, but not their local communities. In contrast, they embodied and represented the culture of their local communities. Their geographical focus was singular: the local church and its community. If denominationalism “represents an increasingly monopolistic ordering of the sociocultural system,” then Bible churches represented themselves as the local bookstore, farmer’s market, or coffee shop in the face of de-localized corporations. This persistent localism explains why HHBC and other Bible churches shunned formal affiliations with denominations like the IFCA, even when doctrinal matters were not in dispute. “More than anything else, the ‘new’ [nondenominational] churches emphasize[d] local control and autonomy from invading corporate structures.” Only they, Bible church people believed, could decide what was best for themselves and their communities.

These three characteristics—emphasis on doctrinal purity, evangelistic thrust, and persistent localism—are evident in HHBC’s history. Moreover, they characterized most

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98 Swatos, “Beyond Denominationalism?,” 225.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.
Bible churches across the nation during the postwar era, even those in distinct geographical and cultural regions, such as Shades Mountain Bible Church (in urban Birmingham) and Chapel Hill Bible Church (in a progressive college town). Naturally, there are outliers, such as Chicago’s Moody Church with its institutional forms and national influence, or Bible churches such as McCarroll in Denver that chose to affiliate with the IFCA. But these examples are the minority. Most followed a pattern similar to HHBC. And most importantly, these traits of Bible churches laid the foundation for a modern nondenominational church identity that would flourish by the end of the twentieth century.

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101 For background on Shades Mountain Bible Church, see Waldrep, “Independent Bible and Community Churches,” 1072-1073. Chapel Hill Bible Church was founded in 1969 in a politically-liberal, college town. It was the first nondenominational church in Chapel Hill and shared the ideals of Bible churches I have described here regarding doctrine, evangelism, and persistent localism; Jim Abrahamson, interview by author, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, December 25, 2012.
CHAPTER FOUR: PROSPERITY CHURCHES

There was very little space in my theology for unrealized dreams.
– Charles Blair, pastor of Calvary Temple from 1947-1998

There are four subtypes of nondenominational churches in modern America. The first, the Bible church, is exemplified in Denver’s Holly Hills Bible Church. The second subtype is the prosperity church. Like Bible churches, prosperity churches hold to a fundamentalist interpretation of Scripture with an emphasis on evangelism, biblical teaching, and eschatology. In contrast, they often promote the spiritual gifts of healing and speaking in tongues. Most well-known, however, is the prosperity church’s emphasis on the pursuit of success, affluence, and material well-being. Prosperity preachers believe that God wants Christians to thrive physically, emotionally, and financially. Thus, many have labeled the core message of prosperity churches a “health and wealth gospel.”¹ In a word, prosperity churches idealize what it means to be “blessed.”²

¹ The label “prosperity church” and the term “health and wealth gospel” are often used derisively by others who see the emphasis on prosperity and material affluence as a departure from the teachings of the Bible or historic Christianity. I use the terms in a neutral and descriptive sense while acknowledging the tensions they evoke.

² The term “blessed” is used extensively within prosperity churches to refer to the material and financial blessings God is thought to bestow upon faithful Christians. See Kate Bowler, Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
Modern prosperity churches find their theological roots in the Pentecostal tradition. The modern Pentecostal movement was born at the 1906 Asuza Street Revival in Los Angeles. “It was marked by fervent prayer, speaking in tongues, earnest new hymns . . . , and healing of the sick.” In the decade that followed, Pentecostal evangelists crisscrossed the nation, tent revivals stirred up new converts, existing churches were transformed, and new churches launched.

Some Pentecostal churches were ethnically diverse. Denver’s Bethel Church of God, organized in 1917 in the Five Points neighborhood, grew to a membership of over five hundred “Whites and Colored” by 1937. It had a distinctive mission to be:

an emergent fellowship of persons of varying national, cultural, and racial heritage in Denver, centering on the worship of God, and radiating out in those forms of Social reconstruction which are now based on the recognition that all are equal members of the human family and one world.

This kind of diversity grew out of the belief that the Holy Spirit was breaking down ethnic barriers in the new Pentecostal era. Most early Pentecostal churches, however, remained largely homogeneous and eventually gathered into denominations, such as the Assemblies of God (predominantly white) or Church of God in Christ (predominantly black). For example, Kathryn Kuhlman’s Denver Revival Tabernacle, founded in 1933 as

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5 Ibid.
an independent church with Pentecostal tendencies, joined the Assemblies of God in 1944.6

Prosperity churches developed in the decades following the Second World War in what scholars have called the neo-Pentecostal movement. As historian Kate Bowler describes, “[a]fter 1945, hundreds of ministers broke from their pentecostal denominations to form independent evangelistic associations, ministries whose lifeblood was the bold examples and promises of their charismatic founders.”7 These charismatic ministers often started new independent churches to gather their converts into long-term communities of faith.

Historian David Harrell describes the character of postwar neo-Pentecostalism by delineating two important developments or “revivals” that took place. The first, he calls “the healing revival” between 1947-58: an era when independent traveling evangelists preached nightly under big tents and “the common heartbeat of every service was the miracle—the hypnotic moment when the Spirit moved to heal the sick and raise the dead.”8 For Pentecostal churches during this time, (which did not use the term neo-Pentecostal), physical healing was the preeminent value. Harrell’s second movement was more well-known outside of the Pentecostal tradition: “the charismatic revival” from

6 See Chapter Two.

7 Bowler, Blessed, 41.

The charismatic revival gave new vigor to Pentecostal churches as it made inroads among many mainline denominational churches that became more open to the practice of spiritual gifts.  

A third movement might be added to Harrell’s analysis: the televangelist revival. From the 1970s to late 1980s, televangelists developed huge ministries that dominated the airwaves of religious broadcasting. Bowler writes,

The [televangelist] movement thrived and survived a decadent decade ruled by supersized churches and televangelists with big hair and bigger promises. Success followed these ministers who learned how to combine media mastery, church growth formulas, and openness to independent pentecostalism.

The modern prosperity church developed from these three “revivals” during the postwar era. It combined the emphasis on healing and physical well-being, the wider appeal of the charismatic renewal, and the success of media-driven televangelism. Some prosperity congregations were affiliated with Pentecostal and/or historic African-American denominations; others remained mainline Protestant churches influenced by prosperity theology. But most prosperity churches forged an independent spirit.

Nondenominational prosperity churches had three important qualities that deepened the formation of a modern American nondenominational church identity. First, like Bible churches, they formed loose networks but retained a strong measure of local autonomy. Second, they thrived under the leadership of magnetic, larger-than-life pastors,

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9 Ibid., 135-239.

10 I explore the charismatic renewal movement in detail in Chapter Five.

11 Bowler, Blessed, 78.
who served as counselors to the multitudes. And third, in contrast to Bible churches, their prosperity theology reconciled their beliefs to the economic affluence of upwardly-mobile postwar Americans. There is perhaps no better example to describe this subtype of nondenominational churches than Denver’s Calvary Temple.

Beginnings of Calvary Temple: 1943-52

No denomination embodied the early Pentecostal movement more than the Assemblies of God (AG). “From a welter of new alliances, networks of periodicals, and circuits of preachers and faith-healers,” historian Mark Noll writes, “the Assemblies of God, established in 1914, emerged as the largest Pentecostal denomination.”

Denominational records indicate that 199 AG churches existed across the country by 1940. Over the next twenty years, the AG more than doubled in number to 509 congregations. One product of this growth was Central Assembly of God in Denver, which would later become nondenominational Calvary Temple. Incorporated on January 6, 1943, Central Assembly was located in downtown Denver and had an

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12 Calvary Temple has gone by three names in its history: Central Assembly of God (1943-54), Calvary Temple (1954-2016), and Citypoint Church (2016-present). Most often, I use the name Calvary Temple except when referring to its earlier years.

13 Noll, History of Christianity, 387.

14 Ibid., 465.

15 Ibid.

16 I explore the Assemblies of God denomination and Calvary Temple’s break from it in more detail below.
auditorium that could seat up to 400 people. Little is known about the new congregation except that it struggled to grow in its early years.\textsuperscript{17}

By 1947, the church had only thirty-two members and a yearly income of $12,000. “The second pastor in a row left to go to another church after serving [at Central Assembly] just a year. ‘It looked pretty dark,’ said one member at the time.”\textsuperscript{18} The church members decided to extend an invitation to Charles E. Blair, “a young, and forceful evangelist who had conducted youth campaigns in Denver.”\textsuperscript{19} At the time, Blair’s home was in Denver, but he was preaching at revival meetings in Europe. As Blair recounted in his autobiography, he chuckled at the words of the cablegram invitation. “‘Listen to this,’ I said to Betty [his wife]. ‘All 32 members voted you pastor effective immediately advise acceptance.’”\textsuperscript{20} Blair quickly decided to decline the offer.

Charles Eldon Blair was born in Kansas in 1920 but grew up in the small town of Enid, Oklahoma. His family was poor; he remembered the shame he felt as an eleven-

\textsuperscript{17} Unfortunately, the congregation’s historical records were destroyed in a flood.

\textsuperscript{18} Ed Olsen, “Dwindling Little Church Sparked from 58 to 1,200 by Pastor Blair,” \textit{Denver Post}, October 24, 1954.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Charles E. Blair, with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, “\textit{The Man Who Could Do No Wrong}” (Lincoln, VA: Chosen Books, 1981), 104, emphasis original. Blair wrote this autobiography to defend his actions when he and the church incurred significant legal and financial troubles in the 1970s. Throughout this chapter, I use details from Blair’s book to shed light on his personal background and interpretation of the church’s history. The larger story and facts of Calvary Temple’s growth are supported by numerous other sources, though some of the personal details from Blair’s book are unable to be corroborated. I am aware of Blair’s bias in relaying his story but suggest that his subjective account of his life, calling, and work is informative for understanding how he shaped the prosperity church culture of Calvary Temple.
year-old when he picked up his family’s charity milk from the government during the Great Depression. Blair never went to church as a child: “[c]hurch was for people with new clothes and a pair of shoes for Sundays only.” But good morals were important and his father was an exacting man, often whipping him for “swearing, telling a lie, [or] bringing home a bad report card.” Financial security was constantly an issue for his family and it made a deep impression on Blair’s childhood. As a teenager, he worked as a shoe salesman. One night, he drifted into a local Pentecostal revival meeting. The preaching and worship moved, captivated, and overwhelmed Blair: “the happier I felt the harder I cried. I couldn’t understand it. I knelt there next to Sister Buffum, tears dripping onto the wood, while inside I wasn’t crying at all. I was singing and jumping and dancing for joy.” That night, Blair prayed with the evangelist to receive salvation from Jesus. His life would never be the same.

The next few years were a whirlwind for the young man. He took classes at Southwestern Bible School, a local AG school in Enid. He then moved to Minneapolis, where he enrolled in North Central Bible Institute, another AG school, and found his calling as an itinerant preacher on the AG camp meeting circuit throughout the Midwest. In 1942, he was ordained by the AG, soon fell in love and got married, and eventually relocated to Denver where he and his wife Betty made their home base for his traveling evangelist ministry. During this time, Blair’s reputation as an AG evangelist grew. He

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21 Ibid., 18.

22 Ibid., 19.

23 Ibid., 46.
rejected numerous calls from churches across the country seeking him as their pastor.

After the war ended, he accepted an invitation from a Scottish preacher to travel to attend an international congress and preach in Scotland, England, France, Germany, Italy, and Scandinavia. The opportunity was too good to pass up.

For months, Blair and his wife traveled across Europe; Betty played gospel music and Charles preached. The response was incredible; invitations for more preaching opportunities poured in, so Blair began to make plans for a long-term worldwide ministry. It was at this point that he received the cablegram from tiny Central AG in Denver. “[I]t was nice for them to think of us, but with the whole world beckoning, pastoring a church back in our own home town had little appeal.”24 But that afternoon, Blair said he sensed unrest in his spirit. He described it as “a kind of ‘stop’ signal . . . Almost like a warning. Careful! You’re about to make a mistake!”25 That evening, Blair and his wife listened to a sermon about the open doors that God provides. Believing the Holy Spirit was speaking to them, they concluded that “the door [God] had opened was at 4th Street and Grant in Denver, Colorado.”26 He cabled Central Assembly his acceptance and quickly booked a flight back to Denver.27 He would serve as the church’s pastor for the next fifty-one years.

24 Ibid., 104.

25 Ibid., 105, emphasis original.

26 Ibid., 106.

On Blair’s first Sunday in 1947, about 100 people—“members, teenagers, children, friends of members, casual visitors and babies”\textsuperscript{28}—were present. There was a sense of excitement: Blair believed they might one day fill their 400-seat auditorium.

Blair also moved into a small apartment in the building, along with his wife, their infant daughter, and his mother-in-law. In the first few months, Blair focused on preaching; this was his strong suit after all. He had traveled around the U.S. and Europe preaching to crowds of thousands winning acclaim at almost every stop along the way. But pastoring a local congregation in Denver would prove to be a challenge. He later wrote:

\begin{quote}
Every statistic I could get a hold of indicated that Denver was the ideal field for the kind of mass evangelistic outreach I had in mind. Unlike ‘Bible belt’ towns, most families in this fast-growing city were unchurched. Nor did there seem to be any vigorous effort to reach them. On paper anyhow it looked as though Denver was right for the kind of witness Betty and I could offer. But calculations on paper did not equal faces in the pews. Sunday after Sunday I preached the most soul-winning sermons I knew how—to the sound of traffic on Grant Street whizzing past.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Within a year, Blair was discouraged and wrote out a resignation letter to the church. The lack of numerical growth equaled failure for Blair; perhaps, he thought, he was not cut out to be a local pastor. But his wife challenged his lack of perseverance: “I’m disappointed in you,” she said. Those words surfaced the insecurities and inferiority complex of his childhood. “Betty now saw me,” he wrote, “as I secretly feared myself to be. A loser. A laughingstock. The boy with the milk pail.”\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[28] Blair, \textit{The Man Who Could Do No Wrong}, 112.
\item[29] Ibid., 113.
\item[30] Ibid., 114.
\end{footnotes}
Blair responded to his wife’s challenge by redoubling his efforts and seeking the advice of a famous megachurch pastor, Dr. Robert G. Lee, in Memphis, Tennessee. Blair knew how big his church was: “Five-thousand members! What if I,” Blair thought, “were to write to Dr. Lee and ask him how he had achieved this incredible figure?” Lee invited Blair to Memphis and when he arrived, the first thing he noticed was how many people Lee visited in their homes: sick, elderly, and homebound members of the church.

Then Lee challenged him:

“You keep talking about reaching Denver. . . . Son, God doesn’t know anything about reaching cities. When He was on earth, He reached individuals. . . . He went where the people were, into their homes and streets and places of business. He found them where they were hurting.”

As Blair returned to Denver, he realized that Lee’s “great secret” to success had little to do with preaching. In fact, the topic had not even come up. “Get out where the people are, was his message. Visit the sick, the friendless, the lonely.”

This insight transformed Blair’s approach to ministry. He and Betty began dedicating several days each week to visit people from the congregation; he went to hospitals and nursing homes to pray with the sick; he also recruited visitation teams from Central Assembly to fan out across the city to better understand the problems people faced in their everyday lives. Blair also started a daily radio program; how better to

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31 Ibid., 115.
32 Ibid., 116.
33 Ibid., 116-117, emphasis original.
“visit” every home in the city? Another pastor from a large church in Hollywood encouraged Blair to focus his sermons less on evangelism and more on spiritual growth:

   After [a preacher’s] hearers have taken that first step [in becoming Christians] . . . if he doesn’t give their newborn souls what they need to grow on, those people are going to keep moving. They’ve got to find nourishment and they’ll keep looking until they find it.34

Blair recognized that his strengths lie in evangelistic preaching aimed at non-Christians. He struggled, however, in giving church attendees practical advice and “nourishment” to practice their faith in the everyday routine of life. “I was still an evangelist,” Blair said. “I had not yet become a nurturer.”35 He concluded that his sermon style would need to change if the congregation was to keep and serve the people it attracted.

   With these two changes—visiting people and a focus on nurturing Christians—Central Assembly began to grow. By 1949, the auditorium was filled; the church then added a second service and began expanding their facilities.36 Blair also sponsored local revival meetings. On one occasion, he hosted Oral Roberts in Denver for a two-and-a-half-week revival in Denver’s Municipal Auditorium. During the meetings, Blair developed a “lasting and important friendship” with Roberts.37 (The two men preached at each other’s churches, spoke on the conference circuit together, and years later, Blair

34 Ibid., 119.

35 Ibid.


would be invited to Tulsa to mark the dedication of Oral Roberts University.\(^{38}\) In 1950, Blair negotiated a deal with a local station to become Denver’s first televised preacher.\(^{39}\) Central Assembly’s morning service was broadcast every Sunday morning on network television, which continued well into the 1990s.\(^{40}\) By 1951, Central Assembly filled three Sunday services and forty Sunday School classes met at the church and in homes in the surrounding neighborhoods. Blair’s dreams of a “mass evangelistic outreach” in Denver were being realized and the time had come to consider new facilities.

\[\text{Figure 4.1. Charles Blair (right) and other leaders at Central Assembly of God with sign showing Sunday School attendance goal, November 12, 1952. Photo by the Denver Post, Getty Images.}\]

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 216.


\(^{40}\) Ibid.
One intervening episode is worth noting. In 1950, Blair traveled to East Asia. At the time, there was significant uncertainty in Asia; China had become communist, the Cold War raised significant fears, and many missionaries expressed a dire need for a renewed Christian presence in Asia. Blair wrote, “the full picture of the postwar need in the Far East was beginning to reach Western countries. And so Central Assembly sent me to the Orient to see what part we could play in the answer.”[^41] Blair’s heart was moved during his time in the Philippines. He had a vision of all the work that needed to be done and believed God was calling him to resign his pastorate and become a missionary. When he returned, he met with the head of the Foreign Missions Department of the AG denomination to work out the details of becoming a missionary. But the administrator discouraged Blair from going. Blair claimed that God told the administrator: “I have put the Blairs in Denver and that is where I want them. They are not to leave.”[^42] Blair was initially dismayed. But in light of his Pentecostal background, throughout his life Blair believed that God spoke and directed him in such ways. After praying and talking with his congregation, he concluded that his initial vision to become a missionary must have been mistaken. Like the cablegram he received from Central Assembly in Europe, for Blair, this was God’s way of saying “Careful! You’re about to make a mistake!”[^43]

This episode is important for several reasons. First, it gave Blair a deep passion for global missions, a drive that would shape the church’s emphasis on missions for years.

[^41]: Blair, “The Man Who Could Do No Wrong”, 120.

[^42]: Ibid., 121.

[^43]: Ibid., 105, emphasis original.
to come. Second, it may have planted the seed in Blair’s mind that denominational authorities would sometimes be a barrier to his own goals and visions. Most importantly, this experience further illustrates Blair’s pursuit of grand dreams with world-changing potential. He often interpreted his dreams as “open doors” from God. Sometimes God made it clear to walk through the door; sometimes he closed the door; sometimes he opened another. In this case, Blair concluded that God had unmistakably closed the door that he was pursuing; he would not always be so discerning.

With Central Assembly in need of larger facilities and no room for expansion on their current property, Blair organized a committee to seek out new sites. One of the locations they found was “a block of rundown small homes built on land that bordered the former city dump.” It may not have seemed like much at the time, but Blair’s intuition, business sense, and “open door” philosophy led him to pursue the opportunity. Across the street, construction crews were preparing a site for a shopping center—a new concept in 1951—and Blair received permission to use the parking lot on Sundays if they acquired the land nearby to build the church. On the three acres the church would have after tearing down the homes, he envisioned a new 1000-seat sanctuary with an accompanying educational wing. In June 1952, after working with real estate agents to purchase the homes, Blair issued a press release to local newspapers announcing the relocation of the church to new facilities in what was then suburban Cherry Creek. Few ministers at that time would issue this kind of press release about a church building. But few ministers were the kind of showman and businessman that Blair was.

44 Ibid., 124.


Leaving the Assemblies of God for a Nondenominational Identity

Accompanying Blair’s press release were two important markers of a new identity the church was forging with its relocation. The first related to their denominational affiliation. Blair summarized the change to the press in one word: “‘Non-denominational’ I stressed to reporters; some while back we dropped our official ties with the Assemblies of God.”

This must have been a significant change for Blair. While Central Assembly of God was less than a decade old at the time, Blair himself had long been associated with the AG denomination as a Bible school student, traveling evangelist, and AG-ordained minister. And by mid-century, the AG had become the largest and most well-known Pentecostal denomination in the nation. Why would Blair and his congregation abandon his heritage and a successful denomination of like-minded churches?

It is unclear exactly how the decision to become nondenominational was made or why. There are no surviving records or available participants from that era to offer insights. Historian Mark Noll suggests one possible reason:

The Assemblies of God have charted a phenomenal story of success over the course of the twentieth century, but that very success may have brought with it some of the same problems of complacency and bureaucratic uncertainty that bedevil[ed] the older Protestant churches.

Perhaps Blair saw these institutional characteristics being manifest in the AG denomination and no longer wanted to participate.

45 Ibid., 125.

46 I attempted to contact numerous staff members or participants of the church at the time, but none were available or willing to be interviewed.

More likely Blair decided to break with the AG to attract a wider audience. Attempting to capitalize on the opportunity to reach larger masses of Denverites with new and expansive facilities, Blair believed a Pentecostal, AG, or denominational identity would be a hindrance. It certainly did not seem to be a benefit for churches seeking to attract suburbanites in areas like Cherry Creek. In William Whyte’s 1956 bestseller *The Organization Man*, he described the establishment of a new church in Park Forest, Illinois, a suburban development thirty miles south of Chicago. There was not enough land in Park Forest to build a church for each denomination, so community leaders surveyed residents to learn their religious preferences. When looking for a church to join, residents listed the first three priorities as the minister, Sunday School, and location. Denominational identity was fourth. “Of all the factors that weighed in their choice,” Whyte concluded, “denomination had become relatively unimportant.”

Blair seemed to intuitively understand this lack of denominational appeal. In subsequent years, flyers and advertisements in telephone directories touted the church as a place “Where People of All Faiths Worship God” and one whose programs are “based on the conviction that men, regardless of denominational background are able to be

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49 Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 367. This might explain the resistance of Holly Hills Bible Church in affiliating with a denomination as well, in light of its suburban location in the 1950s.
together on the fundamentals of the Faith and worship God in Spirit and in Truth.” In these ads, the congregation made clear their orientation as a church with fundamentalist doctrine; the use of the term “fundamentals of the Faith” was no coincidence. But they no longer wanted to be known as Pentecostal, AG, sectarian, or denominational; the new church would be interdenominational or nondenominational. As noted in the previous chapter, these two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Blair himself stated in 1965, “We are an independent, interdenominational church with no ties to any church organization.” He described the church as “interdenominational” again on the dust jacket of his 1968 book. For him, the church desired to shed its image as a Pentecostal denominational church that might have a more limited appeal, and in so doing, draw the interest of people from across a wider spectrum of religious backgrounds.

Interestingly, the district superintendent of the AG was present at the ground-breaking of the new facilities a year after the press release. But Ron Hood, who joined the staff as a minister of music in 1971, described the hurt feelings that existed: “there was a rift between Charles and the AG because he pulled out. There was a lot of gossip


51 I explore the doctrinal convictions of Calvary Temple and prosperity churches below.


54 “Ground Broken Here for $1 Million Church,” Denver Post, November 9, 1953.
because he was so successful and he wouldn’t use the name AG. They wanted him to stay in the AG, but he didn’t feel at ease to do that.”55 Blair believed he could be more successful in fulfilling his dreams without the label or support of the AG.

The second marker of the church’s new identity was a change in name. “From now on,” a Denver Post reporter described on the first Sunday in the new facilities, “it will be called the Calvary Temple church.”56 Blair explained the reasoning:

The name we chose for the planned church building was Calvary Temple. ‘Calvary’ to remind us that only [Christ’s] sacrifice made any achievement on our part possible. ‘Temple’ because we wanted His praise to ascend without ceasing from the new buildings.57

The use of the word Temple is instructive. It certainly characterized the nature of the new modern facilities designed by Denver architect Ralph Peterson. Dubbed the “Cathedral of Tomorrow” and built in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonian architecture, the new sanctuary utilized Norman brick and stone with large panels of soaring purple-tinted glass, “creating a magnificent effect on both the exterior and interior of the building.”58

The geometrical shape and peaked, overhanging roof evoked both modernity and upward mobility. This was no traditional white-steepled country parish or Pentecostal church storefront; Calvary Temple was a church built for the modern masses.


57 Blair, “The Man Who Could Do No Wrong”, 125.

The word Temple also evokes the biblical precedent of Solomon’s magnificent temple. The Old Testament records that Solomon, when he dedicated the first temple of ancient Israel, prayed that people from all nations and backgrounds would be drawn to the temple to seek out and worship God. Blair seems to have had this idea in mind. At the large and elaborate dedication ceremony, “The Reverend Mr. Blair told his flock that ‘we build to the glory of God and it is with great joy that we march into our temple on this beautiful God’s day.’ With a new name, nondenominational identity, and temple, the congregation would enter a new era.

59 See Holy Bible, 1 Kings 8:22-61.

Unprecedented Growth at Calvary Temple: 1952-70

For Blair, the story of how Calvary Temple acquired land for its new facilities confirmed God’s blessings. After purchasing the three acres in Cherry Creek to build a new 1000-seat sanctuary and informing the press, Blair received a phone call from Sears Roebuck and Company. Sears wanted to build a large department store next to the new mall and hoped to purchase Calvary Temple’s land before construction had even begun. Blair and the church were naturally hesitant; the dream of a new building was just beginning to be realized. Sears offered to find a comparable piece of property, along with an added cash incentive of $10,000 for a swap. Blair mentioned a piece of vacant land two blocks south of the proposed mall: “a large vacant meadow . . . next to one of the finest residential sections of the city . . . too big, too beautiful, too far above our highest sights.”

Sears went to work on the property owned by the State of Colorado. In an incredible turn of events, Sears convinced the state to sell the land, which was three times larger than Calvary Temple’s original site north of the mall, exchanged the deeds with the church, and threw in $68,000 for the inconvenience. Blair was “stunned at what God had done.” Only God knew, Blair believed, that the original land was too small for the success that was in store for Calvary Temple. “So began our great adventure.”

On July 25, 1955, 2,500 worshipers celebrated the dedication of the new facilities. Success and fame only grew from there. “It was an era of booming church growth,” Blair

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62 Ibid., 127.

63 Ibid., 128.
recalled, “a time when success was in the air.” The press thought it extraordinary too. The Denver Post, in an article titled “Modernistic Denver Church Attracts Thousands” described the church’s improbable rise: “The church has grown from a membership of 118 in 1947 to 2,000 at the present—a gain of 1,600 percent. This compares with a national increase of about 3 pct. a year in church membership.” Granted, the early 1950s saw a general renewal in religious faith and church growth across the nation. Several factors were at play: the economic prosperity of the postwar boom, the development of a family and youth culture in new suburban areas, growing Cold War fears, and Eisenhower’s conservative leadership and courtship of the religious establishment. But Calvary Temple’s overwhelming success had few parallels among either independent or denominational churches, particularly in Denver. Holly Hills Bible Church, founded in the same year that Blair became Central AG’s pastor and only three miles away from Cherry Creek, was attracting a couple hundred attendees; Calvary Temple was drawing thousands. With a sense of pride, Blair remembered: “‘The man who can do no wrong,’ reporters began calling me.” Over the next decade, it seemed that Blair could indeed do no wrong.

64 Ibid., 133.
Calvary Temple added more worship services, increased its educational ministries, and invited well-known speakers, such as E. Stanley Jones and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, to Denver. The worship services on Sundays became large-scale productions with a massive choir, TV cameras, and Blair’s soaring personality in the pulpit. When future minister Ron Hood and his wife visited the church in 1964, they were overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude and indescribable feeling it invoked: “It was electric when you came in . . . you just felt awestruck when you got in the sanctuary.”

As the church’s attendance and reputation grew, Blair was not shy about touting his accomplishments. The dust jacket of a book Blair published in 1968 proclaimed:

Calvary Temple and its minister, Charles E. Blair, are something of a phenomenon on the American scene. So popular is this interdenominational church in Denver, Colorado, that it ranks in total annual attendance, third among all civic activities of that city, exceeded only by the Denver Zoo and the Museum of Natural History! (The U.S. Mint, professional football, and theatre attendance, are all further down on the list.)

During this time, Blair also built a national and international influence through speaking engagements, radio, and an expanded television audience. He traveled the world conducting city-wide evangelistic crusades in Tokyo (1964) and Hong Kong (1966). For a period of three years, he commuted weekly to Hollywood to help oversee and broadcast the daily Haven of Rest radio program. Blair also hosted his own radio counseling show in Denver, called Counsel and Comment, five days a week, “in which he speaks by telephone to persons calling with personal problems.” And the hour-long television show

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of Calvary Temple’s worship service was broadcast every Sunday morning across six channels reaching into seven states in the Rocky Mountain region.\footnote{Ibid.}

The people that attended Calvary Temple at this time and in subsequent decades were largely middle and upper class, or at least aspired to be. One Christian man who was part of the hippie countercultural movement in Denver remarked that he never visited Calvary Temple because of its reputation. He had friends that attended but said, “I didn’t ever feel like I fit because I didn’t have a suit.”\footnote{Larry Pambianco, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, March 3, 2016.} The church produced a small booklet in the early 1980s highlighting the stories of numerous congregation members.\footnote{Charles E. Blair, There’s Something More to Life (Denver: Calvary Temple, 1984).} Each of the photographs, except for one, showed ethnically white members often dressed in suits. They included a former NFL quarterback, federal prosecuting attorney, journalist, and several businesspeople. Most members told stories of miraculous healings and life transformations through the ministries of the church.

These limited photographs, along with newspaper articles and interviews, reveal that Calvary Temple was never ethnically diverse. After 1955, the congregation was situated in a predominantly white suburb of Denver and rarely attracted minorities. But many prosperity churches in the later postwar era did have congregations that were more ethnically mixed than mainline churches, conservative denominational churches, and
other subtypes of nondenominational churches. I return to the issue of ethnic diversity of prosperity churches in comparison to other congregations in Chapter Seven.

Though age and demographic statistics are unavailable, Calvary Temple was also known as a family-friendly church with a huge Sunday School program for children. Politically, most members were conservative, as several former attendees described. While the church created ministry programs to help the poor and sick, there was no talk of leftist values: systemic social injustice, civil rights, the dangers of capitalism, or Vietnam war protest. By the 1980s, parishioner Helen Hayes described the people of Calvary Temple as “very much conservative; right-wing, Republican, no question; strong tones of patriotism; very supportive of Reagan and trickle-down supply-side economics; very pro-life.”73 The church did not endorse specific political views and Blair never mentioned politics from the pulpit. But Hayes recalled that a conservative outlook “was a more basic commonly held assumption that everyone agreed upon.”74

Amid the tremendous success of the 1960s, one night Blair said he had a dream—a nighttime dream while he was sleeping—that would change the history of Calvary Temple. Weeks earlier, in late 1964, he had driven by a site in east Denver where a local doctor had begun construction on a massive four-building campus that would serve as a “great chiropractic center in the West.”75 But the doctor had passed away with the first two buildings only half-complete. “[A]nd there they stood, starting to crumble now, an

73 Helen Hayes, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, February 8, 2017.

74 Ibid.

75 Blair, “The Man Who Could Do No Wrong”, 134.
eyesore to the community. Those buildings,” Blair later wrote, “were an offense to me. There was very little space in my theology for unrealized dreams.”76

Sometime later Blair had his nighttime dream: “I stood on a landscaped lawn outside a pair of handsome six-story buildings, watching people stream in and out of the canopied entryways. . . . It was the abandoned medical center of Dr. Spears!”77 Two weeks later, a church member shared a similar vision with Blair. When he found out that the current owners had put the property up for the sale, Blair believed the dream’s full meaning was clear: he should purchase the property and launch an ambitious project to complete the construction of a four-building Christian medical facility for elderly and handicapped patients. In February 1965, Blair shared the vision with the Calvary Temple church board and a month later announced to the press the incorporation of a non-profit organization called Life Center, Inc. and the purchase of the property for $1.25 million. Initial estimates for completing the facilities were $6 million. “Where would all this money come from?” one reporter asked. “Fund raising,” Blair answered “with supreme assurance. . . . Plus, of course, a little borrowing to get started.”78

This was not the only project Blair and Calvary Temple pursued during this time. The church purchased an additional forty-six acres south of its location known as “the Polo Grounds” for a parking lot, school, and apartment buildings they proposed to build. The church’s Sunday School was exploding and the current 2,300 seat sanctuary was

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., 135.

78 Ibid., 140.
packed for all three Sunday services, so they also planned additions to their educational wing and considered building a new 5,000 seat sanctuary. Calvary Temple’s television program was viewed by 100,000 people each week and Blair decided to start another non-profit organization, the Charles E. Blair Foundation, “to expand our TV outreach and to receive funds from the television audience for the Life Center.”

Naturally, the question kept getting raised: how would the three seemingly intertwined organizations—Calvary Temple, Life Center, and the Blair Foundation—pay the millions of dollars needed for property mortgages and construction costs? Banks had declined to provide a loan for the Life Center because they felt that Blair’s lack of expertise in hospital administration was too great a risk. Donations from the church and TV ministry were coming in, but not nearly enough to cover the costs of all the projects Blair and the church were undertaking.

Blair sought answers to these financial questions when he met with seven other megachurch pastors, “each with a thriving church and each with a popular television ministry.” Based on their own experiences with similar large-scale construction projects, the pastors strongly encouraged him to not rely on banks but simply borrow money from people who might invest in the vision. Blair was convinced and immediately launched a new development program to offer bonds to investors. In January 1967, Life Center hired a development leader to acquire the millions needed to realize the dream. Calvary Temple and the Blair Foundation sold bonds as well to fund their own projects.

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79 Ibid., 145.

80 Ibid., 142.
By 1969, after much fund-raising, planning, research, and site studies, Life Center construction began in earnest. On October 25, 1970, the first building was completed, dedicated, and ready to receive its first patients.

Figure 4.3. Charles Blair (center) meets with doctors to discuss plans for Life Center, July 23, 1966. Photo by Ed Maker at the Denver Post, Getty Images.

In some ways, the opening of Life Center marked the high point of Calvary Temple’s postwar success. Blair and the congregation were proud of their achievement and the new opportunity it brought to serve the people of Denver. “Now at last,” Blair remembered,

people at Calvary Temple could take part in Life Center in other ways than passing a hat. Residents’ rooms were never without fresh flowers or a bowl of fruit; as the Center’s population grew, church groups took charge of a transportation program and a daily worship service.\(^81\)

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 149.
Following in the footsteps of their pastor, the members of Calvary Temple would minister to Denver’s most downtrodden and lonely residents. Around the same time, an article appeared in *Decision* magazine, a national evangelical publication, extolling the vision and success of Calvary Temple.\(^{82}\) The church was even described as “the country’s fourth richest Protestant church” based on a comparison of assets with other large congregations.\(^{83}\) But the joy and sense of accomplishment would fade over the next decade. What began as a dream almost six years earlier quickly turned into a nightmare.

*Prosperity Doctrine*

Before examining the troubles Blair and Calvary Temple faced with the Life Center, it is important to illuminate the doctrinal beliefs that undergirded the church’s emphasis on growth and prosperity. Blair’s statement that “[t]here was very little space in my theology for unrealized dreams” reveals how his core beliefs about prosperity shaped the church’s character and actions, which in turn contributed to both extraordinary success and subsequent tragedy. Moreover, Calvary Temple’s approach toward doctrine illustrates its transformation from a Pentecostal AG congregation to a nondenominational church.

Calvary Temple never published an official statement of faith. Perhaps they had one, but it was never made public or utilized in any formal manner. Ron Hood, who served as a minister from 1971-73, does not remember a specific statement of faith or any

\(^{82}\) Ibid., 145-146.

requirement for staff or members to uphold certain doctrinal standards. Nor does Matt Hayes, an attendee who became a member and then elder in the late 1980s.\(^{84}\) Contrast this example with Holly Hills Bible Church from the previous chapter, which systemized its doctrinal positions in a published statement of faith, required elders and missionaries to adhere to it, and frequently made doctrinal teaching the focus of sermons, Sunday School, and educational classes. Calvary Temple’s lack of a doctrinal statement is not typical of all prosperity churches.\(^{85}\) But doctrinal statements do play a less prominent role in prosperity congregations compared to denominational churches and Bible churches.

Nevertheless, one can discern a few key beliefs at Calvary Temple. First, Calvary Temple had a fundamentalist orientation to the Bible. Blair himself described Calvary Temple as a “fundamental Bible-based church.”\(^{86}\) And the press labeled his doctrine as “definitely fundamentalist.”\(^{87}\) Second, Calvary Temple never fully rejected its Pentecostal heritage with respect to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, healing, and speaking in tongues. But Blair and other leaders downplayed these beliefs to have a broader, mainstream appeal. In conjunction with their shift away from denominational affiliation, Calvary Temple did not want to be known for their Pentecostal leanings, which were often associated in the broader culture with lower-class folk religion. Thus, Blair’s

\(^{84}\) Matt Hayes, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, February 8, 2017.

\(^{85}\) In my analysis of prosperity churches below, I describe several that do publish official statements of faith.


\(^{87}\) Ed Olsen, “Dwindling Little Church Sparked from 58 to 1,200 by Pastor Blair,” *Denver Post*, October 24, 1954.
autobiography of his life and Calvary Temple (written in 1981 to defend himself amid financial scandal) does not once mention baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, or physical healing. But these beliefs and practices were nevertheless present from time to time at the church. In the 1980s and 1990s, one attendee described the worship services as “more charismatic than your typical professionals would like”; “people speaking in tongues, not all the time, but occasionally”; “a lot of hand-raising”; “it was a church that definitely believed in more outward manifestations of the Spirit.”

The church even invited well-known faith healer Benny Hinn to speak one Sunday and heal people in dramatic fashion by throwing his hands on their foreheads “to zap them.”

If these Pentecostal beliefs were present but often practiced in a restrained manner, one core belief was front and center: prosperity doctrine. Prosperity pastors like Blair ground their beliefs about health, wealth, and success from verses in the Bible such as the apostle Paul’s admonition to the church in Corinth:

> Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. . . . Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.\(^{90}\)

\(^{88}\) Helen Hayes, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, February 8, 2017.

\(^{89}\) Ibid.

\(^{90}\) *Holy Bible* (New International Version), 2 Corinthians 9:6-11.
Blair believed this and other biblical passages support the notion that when Christians give money to the church, it directly translates into material blessings for their lives: often wealth, but sometimes physical well-being. Because of this prosperity doctrine, Blair established giving and tithing (the practice of giving a percentage, often ten percent, of one’s yearly income to the church) as pillars of church practice at Calvary Temple. And he preached on the topic of giving as a core issue of the Christian life. Granted, giving and tithing are common practices in most Christian churches; it is how churches in America are funded. But prosperity doctrine offers a unique perspective on the intended result of financial giving: lavish returns from God.

One specific sermon by Blair underscores this emphasis. In 1968, Blair asked his congregation and radio and television audiences to write to him about what subjects he should address in his sermons. The church received over 5,000 replies, which Blair organized into a ten-week sermon series on the most asked questions.\(^91\) Though none of the top questions were about money or finances, Blair added an eleventh sermon that he believed should have made the list: “Is Anyone Interested in Stewardship?”\(^92\) The content of his sermon exemplifies his perspective on wealth and prosperity. He preached, “Poverty is a part of the curse of sin. Sin destroys all moral, physical, social, and spiritual values. In contrast, through obedience to the laws of the kingdom, poverty and misery will be turned into peace and prosperity.”\(^93\) He went on to explain that “faith is the key,”

\(^91\) Blair, *The Silent Thousands Suddenly Speak!*, introduction.

\(^92\) Ibid., 137.

\(^93\) Ibid., 138.
“faith has no limits,” and that God is one who “would see us prosper and who would even
desire to teach us to prosper.” Moreover, God “recognized man’s passion to accumulate
possessions” and does not condemn this urge but requires that people give and tithe with
the promise “that the returns would be abundant.”

Blair’s preaching on prosperity translated into great wealth for Calvary Temple.
During years of growth in the 1950s and 60s, the church touted its ability to support over
a hundred missionaries and embark on huge land purchases and construction projects
because of donations. When the church later needed money to get out of debt, giving and
tithing became even more important. “Almost weekly,” one member recalled, “[Blair]
would preach tithing and giving, mini-sermons before the sermon. . . . They used to bring
people forward to share their testimony. [One man] talked about how he tithed on faith on
the income level he wanted to have, and everybody applauded, especially Pastor Blair.”

This comment explains the link between faith and finances in prosperity churches:
a belief that God materially blesses those with faith and that this faith is demonstrated in
financial giving. The more one gives, the more faith one has, and the more God will
return the blessing. One memory stands out for this churchgoer: “Pastor Blair used to
always do this as he was taking the offering: the offering basket would come around and
he would reach into his pocket and take his tithe and put it in for everyone to see.” Blair
believed he served as a living model of faith and giving for all to follow.

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94 Ibid., 138-145.
95 Helen Hayes, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, February 8, 2017.
96 Ibid.
Figure 4.4. Calvary Temple members offer donations while Charles Blair (top center) speaks about giving under large sign hanging in sanctuary that reads “Come Catch the Spirit of Giving!”, December 11, 1978. Photo by John Sunderland of the Denver Post, Getty Images.
Many other Christian leaders and churches have rejected prosperity doctrine. They balance Paul’s teaching about financial giving with contrasting biblical passages about the dangers of wealth and God’s heart for the poor. But Blair and other prosperity preachers like Oral Roberts, who often came from meager backgrounds that were associated with shame and embarrassment, choose to ignore or explain these passages differently. It is difficult for an outsider to not conclude that prosperity doctrine is driven by greed. Surely greed plays a significant role; as the church’s coffers grow, so does the pastor’s salary. Moreover, prosperity preachers like Blair are often intoxicated by the lure of success and fame. As Calvary Temple’s reputation for success grew both locally and nationally, Blair seemed to be caught up in a never-ending insatiability for bigger productions, larger crowds, and greater fame. But it would be too simplistic to ignore the theological element. However misguided one thinks they are, Blair and other prosperity preachers fundamentally believe that the Bible teaches prosperity is God’s will for their ministries and churches.

Calvary Temple, the Life Center “Boondoggle,” and Decline: 1970-2000

From a financial and legal standpoint, the scandal that overtook Blair and Calvary Temple during the 1970s and 80s is extremely complex. The “boondoggle,” as Ron Hood’s wife described it, damaged the reputation of Blair and Calvary Temple as their troubles were played out in federal and state courtrooms, not to mention the pages of the Denver Post and Rocky Mountain News. While these troubles are not the focus of this

study, they must be described here as they are integral to the history of Calvary Temple and emblematic of the problems that other prosperity churches faced during this period.  

By the end of 1970, two financial advisors informed Blair that the Life Center was operating at “enormous loss.” Moreover, the initial prospectus given to investors had not been clear about the risk involved. This was problematic because the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) required a comprehensive prospectus that clarified risk because investors, unlike church donors, would need to be paid back. With financial difficulties mounting, Blair believed the only way to make a profit and pay back investors was to complete construction on the second Life Center building and begin construction on the third and fourth buildings. But this required more borrowing. So the Life Center development team set out to gain more investors for bonds. New loans, using church property as collateral, were sought. A new prospectus for the third and fourth buildings was developed and awaited SEC approval. But by early 1972, Blair was informed that the funding strategies were not working. The first two buildings had cost $10 million, only half of which had been funded through the sale of secured bonds. Other portions had been funded through Time Payment Certificates, which were repayable at any time. The SEC, after considering the problem, ordered Blair to stop selling bonds as it became evident that Life Center would be unable to pay them back. While Life Center, Inc. stopped


selling bonds, Calvary Temple and the Blair Foundation continued selling bonds to raise money, some of which was funneled to the Life Center to meet interest payments and operating costs.

In March 1972, the SEC notified Blair that they believed Life Center was operating a Ponzi scheme in violation of federal securities law. A Ponzi scheme is the intentional selling of securities to pay off interest on previously sold securities. One could not continue selling new bonds—as the Blair Foundation and Calvary Temple had been doing—to pay interest with little hope to be able to pay back investors in full. By 1973, Calvary Temple, having needed to fund its own projects and support the costs of the Life Center, was declared insolvent. Life Center and the Blair Foundation were insolvent as well. After investigating the financial situation, Blair’s CPAs found that the Life Center was $5.6 million in debt, the Blair Foundation was $1.6 million in debt, and Calvary Temple was only $7,000 in the black. Others later asserted the three organizations carried a total of $23 million in debt at the time.100 The Life Center continued operating over the next year through Blair’s tireless fundraising efforts to get it profitable, but by March 1974, they were no longer able to make monthly interest payments. As a result, the three organizations filed Chapter 11 Bankruptcy in federal court.

Blair and his advisors hoped that Chapter 11 bankruptcy would allow them to solve their problems. Blair’s lawyer stressed, “It simply prevents individual creditors from bringing dozens of small suits, so we can work out an equitable plan for the

Many investors had invested their life-savings in Life Center and were now calling for repayment. But the legal authorities rejected Blair’s plan. In 1974, the Federal Bankruptcy court filed a civil action suit against Blair and placed the Life Center and Calvary Temple into receivership. The appointed receiver, along with Blair’s cooperation, developed a plan to pay off $4.4 million in debt over several years. But there was a hitch. At the same time, the State of Colorado brought a criminal action suit—separate from the federal civil suit—which focused on the sale of high-risk securities in the absence of an accurate prospectus for investors. Blair was indicted by a grand jury for twenty-one counts of fraudulent sale of securities in December 1974. Being the public leader of all three organizations, if Blair was found guilty, it seemed impossible for the church to move forward with their repayment plan.

As the criminal trial approached in 1976, the District Attorney offered Blair a plea bargain: if he pled guilty to one or two charges, the others would be dropped. Blair rejected the offer. He admitted that he had made mistakes in his financial oversight but did not believe he was guilty of willful fraud. The case went to trial on August 2, 1976. At the center of the case were two arguments: first, “investments had been solicited by [Blair’s organizations] without supplying an up-to-date prospectus,”102 and second, when the SEC had ordered Blair to stop selling bonds, he had continued to do so. Blair argued that Life Center had stopped when ordered and that only the church and his foundation had continued selling bonds. The SEC argued “that all three entities—Life Center,

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102 Ibid., 212.
Calvary Temple and the Charles E. Blair Foundation—were really one.”103 After a heavily publicized two-week trial, Blair was convicted of seventeen counts of fraud.

Figure 4.5. Members of Calvary Temple gather for a fund-raising dinner to alleviate debts and support their embattled pastor, November 9, 1976. Photo by Ernie Leyba at the Denver Post, Getty Images.

In his sentencing hearing, Blair convinced the judge that jail time would eliminate any possibility of repaying investors. As a result, he was sentenced to a $12,750 fine and five years’ probation. In 1977, a plan was developed to repay debts and by 1980, Calvary Temple and the Blair Foundation asserted it had repaid some of its debts (the exact amount that remained is disputed). But Life Center, which had continued operating, struggled to make any profit. As a result, Life Center was sold for $5.3 million in 1981 and eventually closed its doors. Many investors still had not been paid back and Blair redoubled his assertions that they would. In 1986, Blair and others launched a campaign to raise money and complete the repayment process. Blair utilized his television ministry

103 Ibid., 213.
and network with other prosperity church pastors to solicit funds. Notable televangelists contributed (Pat Robertson: $100,000 and Morris Cerullo: $112,145)\textsuperscript{104} and the campaign raised $1.7 million, but portions of the funds went to Calvary Temple and lawyers. When the fund-raising campaign petered out amid other well-known televangelist scandals, many investors remained unpaid. Some sued Blair for misuse of campaign funds. Before going to trial in 1991, a $700,000 settlement was reached to pay 37 cents on every dollar of debt remaining. Calvary Temple issued a subsequent press release that said, “It is still Pastor Blair’s desire to find a way to raise the remaining $1.5 million to help the final 282 investors, although he has no legal obligation to do so.”\textsuperscript{105} He never did.

During these legal and financial troubles that spanned over two decades, the church suffered a tremendous blow to its reputation. Initially, Calvary Temple withstood the storm. When the church was declared insolvent and placed in receivership, there remained “overflow crowds at every service.”\textsuperscript{106} And when a disgraced Blair faced his congregation the Sunday after he was charged with criminal fraud, he wrote in his autobiography that the church stood by him:

As I stepped through the door at the rear of the sanctuary, an unusual noise began. For all the world it sounded like clapping. The sound grew: it was clapping. Building, deafening, round after round of applause. Someone jumped to his feet. Another followed. And then dozens and scores. Now the entire congregation was standing, clapping in unison, thousands strong, expressing the undiminished support for the ministry of Calvary Temple.\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{104} Prendergast, “Give Till It Hurts.”

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{106} Blair, “The Man Who Could Do No Wrong”, 173.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 195-196, emphasis original.
No other sources recount this specific episode, but there is little reason to doubt its general veracity. Newspaper accounts and photographs depict the congregation supporting their pastor at funding drives and annual gatherings (see Figures 4.5 and 4.6).

![Figure 4.6. Amid financial and legal troubles, members of Calvary Temple celebrate Charles and Betty Blair at Red Rocks Amphitheatre for their twenty-eighth year of leadership at the church, Jun 22, 1975. Photo by John Sunderland at the Denver Post, Getty Images.](image)

Nevertheless, church attendance began to decline in the late 1970s. In addition, Blair notes that “men in other parts of the country who had accepted invitations to speak at Calvary began to back off, all but saying outright that they didn’t want their reputations tarnished by association with Charles Blair.”\(^{108}\) When other televangelists faced their own public scandals in the 1980s—Oral Roberts, Jim and Tammy Bakker, and Jimmy

\(^{108}\) Ibid., 175.
Swaggart, all of whom Blair had ties to—and questions were raised about Calvary Temple’s fund-raising efforts, the public lumped them together. Though the scandals of televangelists like the Bakkers and Swaggart were of different natures, one cannot help but see a common thread: prosperity doctrine. To be clear, many prosperity pastors and churches were never convicted of fraud or embroiled in scandal. But the intrinsic nature of massive fund-raising schemes to support idealized visions of ministry success involved an inherent danger of misuse that prosperity pastors and churches uniquely faced.

By the mid-1990s, Calvary Temple had declined to a few thousand in attendance. One member during that time described the church as “held hostage to the bankruptcy and debt. Pastor Blair really wanted to make all the investors whole and he worked diligently throughout the time to pay down what he viewed as his debt. He was obsessed by paying down that debt.”¹⁰⁹ It is clear that Blair worked hard to reestablish his reputation and in part, correct some of his mistakes. On the other hand, Blair only paid back his investors what was legally required of him. His churchgoers and supporters believed his efforts were made in genuine faith; many who never received their full investment back rightly disagreed.

When asked how Blair failed the investors and his congregation, Ron Hood, who served as minister of music from 1971-73, offered his opinion: “His mistake was he left his calling. He got overwhelmed with the bigness, the [Life Center], and the television. I think he was a simple country preacher when he was called into ministry, but he had to become a CEO of a big corporation and he couldn’t handle it. So he gathered men around

¹⁰⁹ Helen Hayes, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, February 8, 2017.
him to take care of those areas, and the one that took over the finances was a crook. Charles trusted him too much."¹¹⁰ I largely concur with Hood’s analysis. Blair’s success as a charismatic evangelist translated into initial growth for Calvary Temple but his infatuation with ever greater accomplishments caught up with him. In time, he overextended the church’s means, lacked the financial aptitude to oversee a project of the nature and magnitude of a health facility, and did not take responsibility for the reckless financial decisions made by his advisors. It does not appear that Blair tried to willfully swindle investors with malicious intent. But his belief that God would unconditionally bless his well-intentioned, but all-too-lofty, visions of grandeur created victims nonetheless. Many of those victims lost their life savings while Blair’s career and financial prosperity remained intact.

In 1998, Blair retired as pastor of Calvary Temple. Blair and the congregation were both aging, Blair had had his own bout with prostate cancer, and the need for new leadership was apparent. After a long process of identifying his successor, an associate pastor was promoted from within. But Blair did not retire from ministry; he continued working with his foundation to train Ethiopian pastors during the final years of his life until his death in 2009.¹¹¹ The church struggled after Blair’s departure. In recent years, it declined to several hundred weekly attendees, sold unused parts of its property to local developers, and rented its building to local schools to make ends meet. In 2016, the


church changed its name to Citypoint Church, perhaps attempting to break with its past and create a new identity for the future.\textsuperscript{112}

\textit{Analysis of Prosperity Churches}

Most prosperity churches from the postwar era to the present did not grow as large and influential as Calvary Temple. But many, in keeping with their values, did attain a measure of numerical and financial success. Not all modern prosperity churches are nondenominational either. Some retained or developed connections to Pentecostal or other denominations. But many are independent, particularly the largest prosperity churches in the country. Kate Bowler’s recent study of the prosperity gospel lists American prosperity churches with an attendance of 2,000 or more. Of the twenty largest prosperity churches in 2011, more than half are nondenominational, and all but three were founded between 1945-2000.\textsuperscript{113}

Nondenominational prosperity churches had three key qualities that deepened the formation of a modern nondenominational church identity. First, like Bible churches, \textit{they formed loose networks but retained a strong measure of local autonomy}. If Bible churches utilized informal networks through local Bible schools, prosperity churches cultivated similar networks through radio, television, and preaching ministries. These networks were less institutional and primarily consisted of personal relationships between prosperity church pastors. Blair frequently preached at the churches of other pastors and

\textsuperscript{112} I sought interviews with numerous current staff members of Citypoint Church. When they discovered my intent to explore the history of Calvary Temple, each staff member declined to comment.

\textsuperscript{113} Bowler, \textit{Blessed}, 239-41.
spoke at Pentecostal or charismatic conferences. As noted, Blair developed relationships with a radio ministry in Hollywood and other well-known prosperity preachers such as Tommy Barnett, Oral Roberts, Morris Cerullo, and Marilyn Hickey. When Blair was seeking answers for how to raise money amid problems with the Life Center, he turned to the advice of seven other megachurch pastors. In 1985, Blair and Jimmy Swaggart led an evangelistic crusade together in Denver (before Swaggart’s public fall from grace in 1987). And when he launched his campaign to raise $4 million to pay back investors in 1986, Blair elicited support from Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, and Jim Bakker. But these relationships and networks remained voluntary and assistive in nature. Calvary Temple never entered any affiliations with organizations that held authority or accountability in the local church.

Other prosperity pastors leveraged similar networks. Oral Roberts was known for the way he cooperated with local pastors on his early evangelistic crusades. As historian Francis Fitzgerald describes, “[h]is city-wide crusades, he insisted, had to be sponsored by a unified group of pastors or the regional Pentecostal fellowship.” Moreover, Roberts developed relationships with evangelists and pastors outside of the Pentecostal or

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114 See Figure 3.2 in ibid., 81.


prosperity church stream. “He longed for acceptance in the larger Protestant world,”118 and in the late 1960s attended cooperative meetings with Billy Graham and other evangelical leaders. Fitzgerald suggests “an abiding inferiority complex” drove Roberts to fight against “the sense many Pentecostals had of second-class citizenship in the evangelical world.”119 But Roberts found his true home with other prosperity preachers, their evangelistic revivals, and growing television audiences. Rarely did prosperity preachers like Roberts or Blair, or their churches, submit to an ecclesial authority outside themselves. Only the legal systems and court of public opinion could rein them in.

Second, prosperity churches thrive under the leadership of magnetic, larger-than-life pastors who serve as counselors to the multitudes. Blair was widely known for his preaching ability, but he was also a master salesman with people.

‘The pastor is a charming individual, one of the most charming I ever met,’ said Vince Boryla, president of the Utah Stars basketball team and one-time opponent of Pastor Blair’s church-expansion plans in southeast Denver. ‘But he’s a supersalesman,’ Boryla continued. ‘He could sell the pants off of anybody, and he knows how to use publicity.’120

The same can be said of most prosperity preachers. The role they embrace to lead their congregations toward material success requires them to have a natural talent for vision-casting, fund-raising, and persuasive preaching. Moreover, prosperity pastors are determined to succeed in a way that other Christian pastors are not. Their theological convictions propel them to interpret failure as weakness, contentedness as complacency,

118 Ibid., 221.

119 Ibid., 220-221.

120 Merry, Denver Post, March 17, 1974.
and lack of growth as lack of faith. Some describe this quality as idealistic, prideful, and even obsessive. Others, however, are magnetically drawn to a leader that exhibits such self-confidence in the face of any barrier. Blair and Calvary Temple exemplify this attraction. Even amid mounting debt and a bankruptcy filing, Blair told his congregation: “We stand on the threshold of what I believe will be the most exciting, victorious year of our entire history.”\textsuperscript{121} Unwilling to embrace failure, Blair’s personality carried the congregation of thousands for decades until his failures could no longer be ignored.

But prosperity pastors are not only successful preachers and salesmen. Despite his shortcomings, Blair was most well-known and loved as a caring, relatable counselor. Prosperity pastors care as much about making a difference in their parishioner’s lives as they do their own success. In fact, the two are interconnected. Blair declared, “I am concerned with the needs of individuals, in their fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ, in helping them find peace with God. People need an anchor and need to sink their roots deep.”\textsuperscript{122} Blair could accomplish this in personal counseling situations and over the airwaves on his daily radio broadcast entitled \textit{Counsel and Comment}. He exuded a confident and optimistic outlook that was contagious. As one reporter noted, “[i]n private conversation, Pastor Blair speaks softly, with humility, but with a certain commanding air. Expression of pessimism or disappointment rarely break through his soft smile.”\textsuperscript{123}

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\textsuperscript{122} French, \textit{Rocky Mountain News}, April 4, 1965.
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\textsuperscript{123} Merry, \textit{Denver Post}, March 17, 1974.
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Blair also embraced this role in the pulpit. He was relatable, firm, and loving all at the same time. Another reporter described Blair this way:

The pastor preaches that Christians are meant to have a good time in their church—‘I don’t believe in a long-face religion.’ He dresses well, likes good food, travel, golf and hunting, and is a capable amateur photographer. . . . On the platform, he carries over a light touch. He is friendly, persuasive, humorous. He often follows up a particularly hard-hitting lecture with a grin and ‘Now, if anybody still loves me, say amen.’\[124\]

Blair’s winsome personality persevered despite his financial and legal troubles. For some, his failings made him more human.\[125\] One member who left the church in the 1990s said, “He was a compelling person, loved the Lord and you wanted to love the Lord because of him. . . . I really loved him. He was still my pastor even though I was going to other churches. I don’t think I’ve ever loved another pastor like him.”\[126\]

This endearing quality evoked not only the love, admiration, and financial giving of Blair’s congregation; it evoked their submission to his unilateral leadership. Prosperity churches often give unrivaled authority to senior pastors to lead as they see fit. In Calvary Temple’s case, one member stated: “Pastor Blair is the one man who keeps that church going. . . . He has complete, autonomous control.”\[127\] Historian Edith Blumhofer traces this quality to postwar neo-Pentecostalism: “Not only did [neo-Pentecostalism] reveal the persistence of fiercely independent prophetic leadership within Pentecostalism; it also

\[124\] Olsen, Denver Post, October 24, 1954.


\[126\] Matt Hayes, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, February 8, 2017.

demonstrated that hundreds of thousands of Americans willingly identified with charismatic figures accountable to no one.”¹²⁸

This lack of accountability is particularly true of nondenominational prosperity churches. It allows prosperity pastors the ability to operate their churches more like for-profit businesses with themselves in the position of CEO. With supportive elder boards, often selected by the pastor, they can pursue new ventures that carry the possibility of great success and financial rewards. Naturally, there are inherent risks. Calvary Temple’s story illustrates the potential pitfalls of unaccountable leadership, particularly when large land and cash assets are involved. As one local newspaper asked amid Calvary Temple’s legal troubles, “Is it a church or a business operation?”¹²⁹ The answer is both. For most parishioners, prosperity churches are a community of faith and source of spiritual nourishment. Under the sway of independent and magnetic leaders, however, the church also becomes a business enterprise.

The third important quality of prosperity churches that deepened the formation of a modern nondenominational church identity relates to how their theology reconciled their beliefs to the economic affluence of upwardly-mobile postwar Americans. As noted earlier, prosperity churches typically hold a fundamentalist orientation to Scripture and a Pentecostal theology of spiritual gifts. Though Calvary Temple minimized its emphasis


on spiritual gifts, many prosperity churches do not. For example, the statement of faith of a recent prosperity church in Denver, The Potter’s House, includes “We believe that speaking in other tongues is an initial manifestation of the Baptism with the Holy Spirit that every new member has a right to expect, and that the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit are to operate in the local church until Jesus returns.”\textsuperscript{130} And the statement of faith of World Changers Church International (Atlanta), one of the largest prosperity churches in the nation, asserts:

We firmly believe:

- In the indwelling and baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues.
- In divine healing—the restoration of health to those who believe and act on the truths written in God’s Word. We further believe that Jesus is our Healer, and that by His stripes, we are already healed.
- Tithes and offerings should be freely given to your local church.\textsuperscript{131}

These convictions regarding speaking in tongues, healing, and the centrality of giving are unique to the prosperity church subtype of modern nondenominational churches; they are rarely found in the other three subtypes.\textsuperscript{132} But prosperity theology with its focus on success and wealth did shape an orientation toward the wider culture that would in turn shape a larger nondenominational church identity.


\textsuperscript{132} I explore how the charismatic character of Jesus People churches is distinguished from Pentecostal and prosperity doctrine in the following chapter.
Prosperity churches depart from the insular nature and narrow appeal of independent Bible churches and Pentecostal denominational churches. While some prosperity churches remain small and neighborhood-centric, many seek regional, national, or even international influence. Specifically, prosperity churches attract a wider swath of socioeconomic classes that desire upward mobility. This allure was especially strong during the economic growth of the postwar decades. During the 1950s, “Pentecostals enjoyed the postwar economic boom as contented middle-class citizens and proved as keen as any American to believe God might have something to do with it.”\textsuperscript{133}

With the proliferation of mass-consumer goods and vast suburban tracts, prosperity preachers often coupled the pursuit and realization of the American dream with God’s material blessing.

Preachers like Blair and Roberts came from humble means in the Depression years. As Fitzgerald and Bowler note, as Pentecostals they also inherited a sense of inferiority from decades of derision at the hands of the press, educational institutions, mainline denominations, and the cultural elite.\textsuperscript{134} Their Pentecostalism was rejected by mainline Protestants and even those fundamentalists and mainstream evangelicals who shared a similar view of biblical inerrancy. And the attraction of Pentecostal evangelists to rural folks and the urban poor placed their churches on the margins of middle and upper class established religion. But, “[t]he prosperity gospel served to bridge that

\textsuperscript{133} Bowler, \textit{Blessed}, 51.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 52.
Prosperity theology advanced an interpretation of the Bible that appealed to the ambitions of middle-class families seeking wealth, comfort, and success in their suburban “bourgeois utopias.” It reconciled a form of conservative faith with the upward aspirations of the middle-class and the modernizing society of postwar America. Rather than reacting against modernizing tendencies as their fundamentalist forbearers had, prosperity churches embraced and consecrated new opportunities for well-paying jobs, suburban housing, kitchen appliances, and the new middle-class status these embodied.

To be clear, this posture toward prosperity was not a calculated marketing decision made by a handful of evangelists. It was born of a deep theological conviction and became the lived reality of men like Blair and Roberts who, in the 1940s and 50s experienced their own measure of wealth, success, and fame and in turn, attributed this success to God and their faith in his blessings. In an era when many were pursuing the American dream, prosperity preachers and their congregations gave religious language and a theological foundation to its realization unlike any other religious movement.

Nevertheless, the success of prosperity preachers and churches was forged by shrewd marketing decisions. Prosperity congregations measure success by two main criteria: attendance and financial giving. To achieve success, prosperity pastors often use technology—in the postwar era: radio and television—and their salesmanship to cast a wider net to attract the masses. As one writer described, “Pastor Blair makes a broad

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135 Ibid.

appeal to those who have never joined a church, or who have fallen away from one.”¹³⁷ Blair himself believed this to be the model of Jesus: “We pattern our approach after that of the Lord. He never tried for crowds but He met the needs of individuals, and that brought Him crowds.”¹³⁸

Blair may have cared about individuals, but he never lost sight of the crowds. The location of the land he purchased for new facilities was strategic: “Pastor Blair was determined his church should be near major crossroads of the community.”¹³⁹ His radio and television ministries were designed to reach the maximum number of listeners and viewers. In the 1970s, he even envisioned a new kind of television show for nonreligious people. When he pitched the idea to potential producers, they questioned it:

Everywhere I went, they wanted me to be a preacher. I told them I can do that every Sunday. I told them that we wanted to produce a different-type TV series—a nonreligious series that might inspire the individual, by showing him examples, to put together a better world.¹⁴⁰

The result was a twelve-week miniseries called “Better World” that ran on broadcast stations during the prime-time evening hours.

Other prosperity preachers followed suit. The scandals of Bakker, Swaggart, and Roberts—who famously said on-air that God would call him to heaven unless he raised

¹³⁷ Olsen, Denver Post, October 24, 1954.

¹³⁸ Merry, Denver Post, March 17, 1974.

¹³⁹ Olsen, Denver Post, October 24, 1954.

$8 million for a medical school\textsuperscript{141}—would not have drawn attention had they not found a way to attract millions of viewers across the nation. Many Americans wanted to believe their prosperity message and regularly wrote checks to demonstrate it. If the high number of prosperity megachurches that still exist in 2018, despite the televangelist scandals of the 1980s, is any indication, many Americans still believe in the prosperity gospel.

Calvary Temple’s story from 1947-98 is clearly wrapped up in the person of Charles Blair; one cannot separate the two. Such is the common story of prosperity churches. Nor can one separate so many disparate qualities that coexisted in Blair and shaped the identity of the nondenominational prosperity church he pioneered. After his conviction of fraud in 1976, Blair retreated to Vail for a time of soul-searching. Meeting with a local journalist there, he confided both his failures and successes:

Blair said he personally is to blame for some of the problem, ‘because I became a proud, cocky preacher. I became spoiled in an era in which it was easy to become a glamor boy. I happened to find a congregation that loved me,’ he said, adding that Calvary Temple, 200 S. University Blvd., is the 10\textsuperscript{th} largest congregation in the country (6,000 members) and is the fourth largest in gross annual income. ‘I was spoiled—instead of staying humble before God. I ran all over the world to see how our missionary dollars were being spent,’ he said. ‘I took advantage of an affluent society and the gifts of the people, but I was too busy to heed the details of the corporations.’\textsuperscript{142}

In a moment of candor, Blair described the inherent tensions of a modern prosperity church and the pastors that lead them: proud and cocky; spoiled with a congregation that loved him; success in attendance, giving, and missions; an affluent society; a church operating like a corporation.

\textsuperscript{141} Woodward, \textit{Getting Religion}, 353.

CHAPTER FIVE: JESUS PEOPLE CHURCHES

[Hippies] were against traditional churches, but not against a real relationship and one by one young people were getting touched and saying this Jesus is real and come with me to Redeemer Temple. They were open to a genuine spiritual experience, but not open to their parent’s religion.

–Lou Montecalvo, founding pastor of Redeemer Temple

Of the four subtypes of modern nondenominational churches, the first two had roots in prewar movements. Bible churches grew out of the fundamentalist split from mainline denominations. Prosperity churches came from Pentecostalism, albeit a neo-Pentecostal version that developed after the war. The third subtype also drew on the neo-Pentecostal movement but owes its origins to a very defined cultural phenomenon: the turbulent counterculture of the 1960s. Originating in California and described by historian Larry Eskridge as “one of the most significant American religious phenomena of the postwar period,”¹ the Jesus People movement spawned a new evolution of nondenominational churches.

Jesus People churches swelled across the country in the late 1960s and 1970s. These unique congregations mostly embraced neo-Pentecostal beliefs but identified with the charismatic renewal movement. More significantly, Jesus People churches reached a new generation of young people shaped by New Left politics, civil rights, Vietnam war

protests, the Watergate scandal, and of course, the sex, drugs, and rock and roll culture of the times. In contrast to suit-and-tie Bible and prosperity churches, leaders of these new congregations sought out youth disillusioned by affluent upbringings, government failures, hypocritical authority figures, and self-destructive addictions. Jesus, they asserted, was the one true rebel and the only way to peace, freedom, and God. The “one way” of Jesus—-with one finger pointed upward—became their trademark slogan.

Jesus People churches strengthened the construction of a modern nondenominational church identity in several key ways. First, Jesus People churches embodied a prophetic witness against the degradation their leaders observed in both society at large and traditional church institutions. Second, these congregations engaged a new demographic of disenfranchised youth that traditional churches often overlooked or disparaged. Third, Jesus People churches continued the tradition of an independent spirit, forsaking denominational or institutional ties as a corrupting influence on the revivalistic work of the Holy Spirit. Eminent historian Sydney Ahlstrom described these qualities of the Jesus People in 1972:

“[They] showed little interest in clerical leadership or doctrinal fine points, took Jesus as an example, worked for peace and social justice, stressed love and charity in warmly personal terms, rescued derelicts of the drug culture, founded communes, adopted counter-cultural lifestyles, and flouted many legalistic forms of code morality.”

Expanding from southern California and other urban centers, the Jesus People movement arrived in Denver in the late 1960s. A small church called Redeemer Temple had just

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begun with about twenty-five Latinos and one charismatic pastor. Little did the small congregation know they would soon exemplify a national movement.

**Beginnings of Redeemer Temple: 1967-69**

In October 1967, twenty-nine-year-old pastor Lou Montecalvo launched Redeemer Temple. Montecalvo had deep Pentecostal roots. Growing up in Florida, his father was a pastor with the Christian Church of North America, a Pentecostal denomination among the Italian-American community. Despite his religious upbringing, Montecalvo points to an experience in a Baptist church, while he was in the Navy after high school, when he “got saved” and committed his life to following Jesus. His pastor at the time suggested he go to Moody Bible Institute to prepare for the ministry. Montecalvo subsequently moved to Chicago to attend Moody, a fundamentalist school associated with the Bible church movement.

At Moody, Montecalvo attempted to find his way in his newfound faith. He befriended others who had similar Pentecostal backgrounds, and they attended local revivals and listened to audio recordings of Pentecostal evangelists. But Montecalvo was discouraged. He had not yet received what he earnestly desired: an ecstatic experience, different from “getting saved,” that Pentecostals called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. One Sunday morning he visited a Polish Assembly of God church. As the music, healings, and preaching overwhelmed him, he said, “the Spirit of God began to move.”

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3 Montecalvo’s personal history and his quotations in this paragraph and the four that follow are taken from Lou Montecalvo, interview with author, Arvada, Colorado, June 26, 2013.
He remembers raising his hands during worship—as everyone else in the church seemed to be doing—and instantly felt like he “got a hold of electricity.” Something happened he could not fully explain. He went to Moody Memorial Church the following week and said, “it felt like a morgue in comparison.” The next Wednesday night, he attended a service at the AG church again. “I was broken-hearted and began to sob,” he recalled. “It was like all of the sudden the Spirit was inside of me [and] I began to pray and speak in tongues.” Montecalvo had finally received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. “Then,” he said, “Moody kicked me out.”

At the time, fundamentalist schools like Moody rejected the Pentecostal belief in the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. They held a theological conviction called cessationism: that the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit described in the New Testament (speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing) ceased in the first century. God no longer gave these spiritual gifts to modern Christians and those who claimed a baptism of the Holy Spirit and its ecstatic expressions were self-deluded. Thus, fundamentalist and Pentecostal Christians shared a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, among other doctrines. But the two streams parted ways on their views of the Holy Spirit and his work in the lives of believers. As a result, few fundamentalist schools allowed students who practiced Pentecostal beliefs; to them, it was just as heretical as modernism. Moody was no exception.

After his short time in Chicago, Montecalvo left and attended Southeastern Bible College, an AG school in Lakeland, Florida. After graduating with a college degree, he considered attending seminary and chose Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary in
Denver.\footnote{Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary later dropped its Baptist affiliation and became Denver Seminary.} At the time, he had concerns about doctrinal alignment because the Baptist seminary was known to have fundamentalist leanings. But a woman in Florida had prophesied over him and said God was sending him to Denver. Montecalvo believed her and arrived in Denver in 1965.

A year into his seminary training, Montecalvo accepted a position to preach at Redeemer Baptist Church, a small Latino congregation in west Denver. The congregation asked him to come back week after week, effectively making him their pastor. He worked with a Latino lay leader there, Lloyd Apodaca, and the church began to grow. “People were getting saved,” Montecalvo said. “We were having a mini-revival, and in a year’s time, we outgrew the building.” Over a hundred people were attending and Apodaca remembers that many were “filled with the Spirit” and experienced healing. Apparently, Montecalvo’s Pentecostal beliefs and preaching resonated with church members and many responded by embracing a new Spirit-filled emphasis in their faith and practices.

But all were not open to Pentecostal theology. When it came time to enlarge the facilities or move, Montecalvo recalled, “that’s when the leaders turned on me. It was a family-owned church and they said, ‘you’re trying to make a Pentecostal church out of us.’” Apparently, a few significant families had grown weary of Montecalvo’s doctrine, despite the numerical growth. Montecalvo also received criticism at the seminary, which was growing hostile to Pentecostal beliefs. But he said that the leaders of the seminary allowed him to graduate, after which they changed their policies to officially prohibit students from holding Pentecostal theology.
In 1967, Montecalvo and Apodaca started a new congregation with about two dozen supporters from their Baptist church. They took the name “Redeemer” from the Baptist church, and “Temple” from Calvary Temple—at the time, the most well-known church in Denver—and created nondenominational Redeemer Temple. They found a facility in an area known as the Highlands in North Denver. The existing church building at 34th and Bryant streets had formerly been a Christian Church that had moved and been bought by a local Bible institute, the Baptist Bible College. The college used the facilities for administration and classrooms while Redeemer Temple used it on Sundays.

The Highlands neighborhood has a long history in Denver. West of the South Platte River, the area was originally made up of the townships of Highland and Highland Park before being annexed by Denver in the late nineteenth century. Since then, it has variously been called North Denver (because of North Denver High School located there) or the Highlands.

In the early twentieth century, Italian immigrants moved into the Highlands and the area became known as “Little Italy.” But after the Second World War, Denver historian Mark Barnhouse notes,

as second- and third-generation Italian Americans began moving to the suburbs, their homes began to be filled with Latino families. People of Spanish or Mexican descent, whether recent immigrants or established in Colorado and New Mexico since the days of Spanish land grants, flocked to Denver for the same reason the Italians had come: job opportunities.”

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6 Ibid.
Many Latinos came to the city from the labor-intensive sugar beet industry in northern Colorado. They found affordable housing and less strenuous year-round jobs in North Denver. Within a few years, businesses, services, and several Catholic churches sprung up in the Highlands to support the growing Mexican-American community. In 1960, Latinos made up 20.4 percent of the population of the Highlands neighborhood; it grew to 47.2 percent by 1970 and 61.8 percent by 1980. It is no surprise, then, that the initial members of Redeemer Temple were Mexican-American. Most had come with Apodaca from the Baptist church (and before that, a Catholic heritage). Apodaca himself was an ex-Catholic Latino and Montecalvo joked that “they accepted me because I came from an Italian background; I was a Latino to them.”

The first two years of Redeemer Temple were characterized by slow growth, mostly from Latino families in the surrounding neighborhood. By 1970, though, white Christians from other denominational churches had begun to visit the church. They were attracted to Redeemer’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit and had often heard about the church through the Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International (FGBMFI). Founded in 1953, the neo-Pentecostal FGBMFI developed chapters across the country that gathered lay businessmen in weekly gatherings for mutual encouragement, Bible study, and prayer—all undergirded by a focus on the Holy Spirit. Montecalvo and other pastors regularly attended and spoke at FGBMFI meetings in Denver and across Colorado. Jerry

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7 R. Laurie Simmons and Thomas H. Simmons, Denver Neighborhood History Project, 1994: The Highlands Neighborhood (Denver: City and County of Denver, 1995), 41.

Schoel, who had become a pastor at Redeemer in 1969, said, “[The FGBMFI] was the going thing during that period. It was a time where God was moving by his Spirit. He was awakening the church, the whole church, to his Holy Spirit.”

People came to services at Redeemer Temple from Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Catholic backgrounds. Like Montecalvo’s experience in Chicago, they were moved by the exuberant worship at Redeemer Temple in a way that stood in stark contrast to what they experienced in their own denominational congregations. Some were reassured by the presence of ministers at Redeemer Temple who had come from similar backgrounds (Apodaca from Catholicism and Schoel from Lutheranism). Schoel remembers: “I was ministering in different home groups of Lutherans who were interested in the baptism of the Holy Spirit and many of them felt comfortable coming to a church where there was an ex-Lutheran pastor.”

![Figure 5.1. Left, Jerry Montecalvo and wife; middle, Lloyd Apodaca and family; right, Jerry Schoel and wife, c. early 1970s. Courtesy of Redeemer Temple.](image-url)

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10 Ibid.
Some even came from the Mennonite tradition. Jim Klassen, whose family had been Mennonite Brethren for hundreds of years, related this story of when he and his wife moved to Denver from Kansas in 1968: “We got involved in a Mennonite Brethren Church but we were not entirely satisfied with our walk with the Lord. We had friends who had been to Redeemer Temple and they invited us. So, we went there and of course, it was a shock. I told Harriet [his wife], ‘you know I’ve heard a few things about this place and I’m pretty straight-laced so I may just get up and walk out.’ We sat down and the place was full and this woman sitting next to me put her arms up during the worship right in front of my face and it was sort of a shock to me because the Mennonites were very conservative. But we heard some things we hadn’t heard before. They were very charismatic in the truest sense of the word. We had been searching so we were not against it.”11 The couple decided to stay, invited others from the Mennonite church, and Klassen soon became an elder at Redeemer Temple. Like Schoel, he attributed it all to “the move of the Holy Spirit.”12

Before joining Montecalvo and Apodaca at Redeemer Temple, Schoel had previously served as an assistant pastor and teacher at a local Lutheran (Missouri-Synod) congregation and school. But in 1968, when he was “filled with the Spirit,” he was no longer welcomed by the Lutherans. He remembers being told, “I could continue my ministry [at the Lutheran church and school] if I didn’t attend the Full Gospel Business


12 Ibid.
Men’s Fellowship [meetings], I wouldn’t mention speaking in tongues, and I wouldn’t talk about miracles and healing. That’s when I ran into the denominational wall and I was asked to resign.”

Charismatic Renewal

As described in Chapter Four, one stream of neo-Pentecostalism was the charismatic movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Redeemer’s early growth and Schoel’s experience at his Lutheran church were indicative of the charismatic movement and its growing tensions with mainline denominations. Several factors contributed to the charismatic movement’s origins.

First, some neo-Pentecostal preachers, like Oral Roberts and Charles Blair, broadened the appeal of their brand of Christianity beyond traditional Pentecostal denominations. Calvary Temple’s growth in the 1950s reveals how Pentecostal beliefs and practices could be made accessible to a wider audience, especially in a nondenominational church setting. Second, parachurch organizations with Pentecostal leanings exposed Christians from various backgrounds to Spirit-filled practices they had not encountered in their own churches. None was more successful than the FGBMFI, which brought scores of people to Redeemer Temple.

The third factor that led to the charismatic renewal took place when several key leaders from Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran traditions experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit and began adapting charismatic beliefs and practices for their own

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communities. In the spirit of Vatican II and ecumenism, some Catholic and mainline Protestant churches welcomed the new Spirit-filled emphases as a sign of God’s renewal. Others, like Schoel’s Lutheran church, rejected the developments.\textsuperscript{14} The most well-known national example took place in Van Nuys, California when Dennis Bennet, the rector of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, was filled with the Spirit, spoke in tongues, and began leading his congregation toward charismatic practices. “His sermons on Holy Spirit baptism, however,” recounts historian Frances Fitzgerald, “caused an uproar in his very large congregation. ‘We’re Episcopalians, not a bunch of wild-eyed hillbillies,’ one irate parishioner was heard to say.”\textsuperscript{15} On its surface, the issue was theological: mainline Protestants, like fundamentalists, did not believe the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues was for modern Christians. But class tensions play a significant role: Pentecostalism was associated with the lower-class—“wild-eyed hillbillies” in Appalachia or ethnic minorities in the inner city—but not welcomed in an upper-class suburban Episcopal congregation. Bennet was forced to resign and moved to a new Episcopal congregation in Seattle that was more open to his charismatic theology.

For the most part, charismatics who stayed within denominational churches never considered themselves true Pentecostals. As Fitzgerald notes:

\begin{quote}
They adapted Pentecostal practices to their own church traditions and rejected what they considered ‘the cultural baggage’ of the Pentecostals, from the ‘sin list’ to their plain folks’ style. . . . [But] to outsiders the difference between
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} Mark A. Noll, \textit{A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 450-51.

\textsuperscript{15} Frances Fitzgerald, \textit{The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 221.
[Pentecostals and charismatics] was not so obvious. Charismatics were also given to ecstatic worship, from quiet, trancelike states to outbursts of weeping, laughing, dancing, and being ‘slain in the spirit.’ Like early Pentecostals, they insisted on a spiritual democracy in which ordinary laymen could manifest a direct experience of God. They aimed to renew the ‘dry’ or ‘frozen’ churches with true spirituality, and they harbored a millenarian, or quasi-millenarian, hope for the soon-coming of Christ.\footnote{Ibid., 222.}

Some charismatics maintained their allegiance to denominations and were able to transform their congregations. But many, like Bennet and Schoel, faced scorn and rejection.

For Montecalvo and Schoel, the charismatic movement solidified their position outside of a denominational affiliation. Their dismissal by both fundamentalist and mainline traditions signaled to them that their Pentecostal heritage (for Montecalvo) and charismatic practices (for Schoel) would not be welcome within the existing institutional structures they had known. Pioneering an independent church expression would be the only way to fully express their convictions. Moreover, the need was clear: more and more denominational Christians were coming to Redeemer Temple to experience a charismatic expression of faith. But if the charismatic movement laid the groundwork for Redeemer Temple’s distinctiveness, the most significant factor for its identity lay just on the horizon: the Jesus People movement.

\textit{The Jesus People Movement}

Around the time Montecalvo arrived in Denver, pastor Chuck Smith arrived at Calvary Chapel, a tiny independent congregation in Costa Mesa, California. Though
Smith was about a decade older than Montecalvo, the two men shared several things in common. Both came from a Pentecostal heritage. Smith was shaped by Aimee Semple McPherson’s International Church of the Foursquare Gospel; he attended McPherson’s LIFE Bible College and was ordained by the Pentecostal denomination. The two men also grew dissatisfied with institutional expectations and restrictions: Montecalvo at Moody, the Baptist seminary, and Baptist church in Denver and Smith with the Foursquare Gospel denomination. As a young pastor out of Bible college, Smith attempted to conform to all the strategies of church growth, including dozens of denominationally sponsored contests to bring the largest number of new converts in his church. But he grew disenchanted with the ‘hype’ surrounding institutional Christianity . . . ‘I did not fit within the denomination,’ explains Smith, ‘and so I was wanting out.’

Both men also began pastoring small churches in the mid-1960s: Montecalvo leaving the Baptist church to launch Redeemer Temple with about two dozen ex-Catholics and Smith leaving an independent congregation he started in Corona, California to lead Calvary Chapel, “a struggling church of twenty-five members in nearby Costa Mesa.”

By 1968, Calvary Chapel had grown to “a middling-sized independent congregation in conservative, middle-class, heavily Republican Orange County.” At the time, the counterculture of the sixties was sweeping across California. Smith and his

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18 Ibid., 33.

suburban congregation watched as young hippies gathered in nearby Huntington Beach to protest the war in Vietnam, flout sexual norms, and indulge themselves with drugs. “I saw them as parasites upon society,” Smith remembered later. “My original thought was ‘Why don’t they cut their hair and get a job and live a decent life?’ They were radicals, smoking marijuana, dropping LSD . . . disrupting things, challenging the status quo.”

But Smith’s wife had compassion for the youth and convinced him to reach out to what he perceived as a prodigal generation.

Smith soon befriended several hippies, one of which was Lonnie Frisbee, who had lived in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco during 1967’s Summer of Love. “To Smith’s surprise, Frisbee turned out, in spite of his flower child appearance, to be an enthusiastic Christian.” Frisbee had converted to Christianity after a bad trip on LSD and subsequently joined several nascent Christian communes in the Bay area before returning home to Costa Mesa. Smith immediately asked for Frisbee’s help and arranged for him to preach at local hippie hangouts. Within a year, Smith and Frisbee were hosting massive baptism services at the beach and “a growing corps of long-haired, casually attired, barefoot or sandaled youth were beginning to troop in amid the button-downed straight congregation at Calvary Chapel.”

The church also helped establish “Jesus houses”: residences designed to help hippies make the transition from drugs to Jesus. So

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20 Quoted in ibid.

21 Ibid., 70.

22 Ibid.
many youth were living in the houses and attending services at Calvary Chapel that the church had to keep expanding its facilities, eventually purchasing a parking lot and using a large circus tent that held 1,600 people to host two services every weekend.23

The movement soon spread to other cities that followed the examples of Smith and Frisbee, and by 1971, the national media took notice. NBC, CBS, *Rolling Stone* magazine, *Newsweek*, and the *Wall Street Journal* all profiled the hippies known as the Jesus People. By June of that year, *Time*, the nation’s premier newsmagazine, described the movement sweeping America’s cities with a cover image of “The Jesus Revolution” and an eight-page feature story: “The New Rebel Cry: Jesus Is Coming!”24

![Figure 5.2](image)

**Figure 5.2.** *Left*, Baptism for Calvary Chapel at Corono Del Mar Beach, May 6, 1973. Photo by Steve Rice at the *Los Angeles Times*. *Right*, *Time* magazine cover, June 21, 1971. Courtesy of *Time* magazine.

Preeminent historian of the Jesus People, Larry Eskridge, points to four central dynamics of the movement: its Pentecostal ethos, miraculous world, apocalyptic

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23 Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 34.

orientation, and communal tendency. Jesus People welcomed the Pentecostal belief in the baptism of the Holy Spirit; they were preoccupied with an expectation of God’s miraculous work in their lives; they embraced a sense of apocalyptic urgency motivated by literal interpretations of biblical prophecy; and they established communes where street kids could find adequate shelter, food, and the discipline necessary to effect genuine transformation in their lives. These four dynamics were a stark contrast with the traditional lifestyles, beliefs, and practices of institutional Christianity and the “silent majority” of so many middle-class Americans in the sixties and seventies.

Nonetheless, the Jesus People were a product of the unique counterculture of the time. Fitzgerald notes the similarities:

[Y]oung people were taking variously to Buddhist meditation, Hare Krishna chanting, crystal reading, and ‘channeling.’ They were joining communes, human potential movements, and consciousness-raising sessions; they were getting high with mind-altering drugs and losing themselves in the great communal melding of rock concerts. Queried by their puzzled elders, some spoke of a desire for authentic experience and authentic spirituality, some about the oppressiveness of institutions, and of the need for liberation from empty hierarchical social conventions. Some railed against the rule of scientific and technological thinking that seemed to be turning people into mechanisms and called for individual autonomy and self-realization. They advocated for peace, love, and genuine community, but unlike their more political contemporaries in the antiwar movement, [charismatic Jesus People] tended to turn their attention inward and to see the future in apocalyptic terms. The difference was that the charismatics, like so many other Protestant renewal movements, envisioned going not forward to a new age but back to primitive Christianity.

Fitzgerald is correct. The Woodstock generation was driven by discontent, disillusionment, and societal dysfunction. But finding some sense of purpose, escape, or

25 Ibid., 77-89.

26 Fitzgerald, The Evangelicals, 222-23.
cultural change in protests, politics, or LSD proved elusive for many. And in the strangest, but perhaps most logical, turn of events, they found what they were looking for among charismatic Christians like Chuck Smith and Lonnie Frisbee who were willing to give them a chance.

The Jesus People movement expanded from southern California in the early 1970s. “New outposts” sprung up in northern California, the Pacific Northwest, and places like Wichita, Detroit, Milwaukee, Atlanta, and northern New Jersey. Sometimes, transplants from southern California served as missionaries of the movement, starting communes and street ministries in cities across the nation. More often, the movement took root in new places because of “an almost inevitable result of the counterculture’s rubbing cultural shoulders with the ubiquitous presence of evangelical Christianity across America.” As some evangelical Christians, particularly those with charismatic sympathies, channeled their proselytizing energy toward the counterculture, they experienced the same results as Calvary Temple in Costa Mesa.

Redeemer Temple Becomes a Jesus People Church: 1971-73

Until now, the story of the Jesus People in Denver has not been told. This oversight is surprising given how emblematic Denver’s example is to the history of the movement, and more importantly for our purposes, to the history of nondenominational churches in modern America. This story centers on Redeemer Temple. As one hippie

27 Eskridge, God’s Forever Family, 94.

28 Ibid.
later stated: “The Jesus People movement in Denver was primarily located at Redeemer Temple.”

Before 1970, Redeemer Temple had primarily grown among neighborhood Latinos and by drawing denominational people seeking a more charismatic expression of faith. But “another stream . . . the Jesus People, the kids on the street that were hippies and dropouts” began showing up. The primary catalyst was a young man named Charles McPheeters who came to Denver around 1971. McPheeters had a difficult childhood and adolescence:

My high school life was pretty bad. My dad got sick and went into a mental hospital when I was about eleven years old and so for the rest of that time I didn’t have a dad and it was kind of rough. My mom was working as a nurse to support us four kids and we were kind of poor and everything; we weren’t rich by any means. I was always stealing this and that, and on my paper route I would break into homes. I ran away from home. I was on probation half my high school years and I’d always try and act tough in jail during the day, but at night I’d stick my head under the pillow and I’d cry.

McPheeters soon dropped out of high school, hitchhiked across the country, worked various jobs at clubs, and became addicted to marijuana.

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After arriving in Hollywood in the early sixties at age nineteen, he recounts, “I got into hard drugs! I began to snort cocaine and heroin, speed balls and I can’t deny you get a buzz, man, you go on a trip, you feel good, sure you do. But like the song says, ‘What goes up must come down.’” One night McPheeters overdosed and,

[f]or the next few weeks I went crazy. My friends had to tie me up for a few days because, they said, I was trying to kill people . . . I shaved my head and went bald. I went from Beverley Hills to Skid Row in about two to three weeks. My life fell apart. I sat in a gutter and ripped up everything in my wallet, it was crazy. Here I was, no hair, no money no groovy clothes, no nothing.

In the pit of despair, McPheeters traveled home to his mother in Seattle, who happened to attend St. Luke’s Episcopal Church where Dennis Bennet had relocated and infused the church with charismatic renewal. At St. Luke’s, McPheeters “asked Jesus to come into my life and forgive my sins. It was about like dropping a new Corvette engine into a Volkswagen.” In that moment, he remembers being filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, laying on the ground for three hours, and rushing out of the church to tell everyone what Jesus had done in his life. From Seattle, McPheeters traveled back to southern California where the Jesus People movement had just begun. He played music at local coffeehouses, joined several communes, and eventually relocated to Denver in 1971 where he met Lou Montecalvo and the Redeemer Temple community.

At the time, Montecalvo, like Chuck Smith, had come to believe that there was a need to reach the hippie generation that was swelling in urban Denver. “Back in the sixties,” Schoel remembered, “our society was in upheaval, turmoil, they were going to burn the cities down, the inner cities. But also, in addition, there were a lot of young people that turned off their parents, rebelled against the Vietnam war, rebelled against
authority. So they’re out on the streets, having turned off their parents who they saw as degenerated, money-motivated people. And they were ripe were for something real. They were turned on to drugs and it was God’s answer for that generation.”

The “it” to which Schoel refers was Redeemer Temple. Montecalvo and other leaders realized that their nondenominational, charismatic expression of faith could provide the spiritual experience so many hippies were longing for. “They were against traditional churches,” Montecalvo said, “but not against a real relationship and one by one young people were getting touched and saying this Jesus is real and come with me to Redeemer Temple. They were open to a genuine spiritual experience, but not open to their parent’s religion.” As a result, in the same way that Chuck Smith identified Lonnie Frisbee as “something of an unofficial missionary to Huntington Beach hippies,” Montecalvo recognized McPheeters’ magnetic personality and the potential it offered Redeemer Temple to reach the restless youth on the streets of Denver.

McPheeters immediately started several outreach programs for Redeemer Temple. In the summer of 1971, he helped organize a “Walk With Jesus” march that caught the attention of the Denver Post. Beginning at Cheeseman Park and ending the Civic Center, about 300 young people participated. McPheeters told the Post, “We wanted to let Denver know that Jesus has the answer. You can march for peace and march for peace, 

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34 Eskridge, God’s Forever Family, 70.
but the only way anything works is to march with Jesus. If you march for Jesus, peace will take care of itself.”\textsuperscript{35} With his comments, McPheeters may have been drawing a distinction with Woodstock West, a protest that turned violent on the campus of the University of Denver the previous summer. Students at DU had protested the Kent State shooting and Nixon’s decision to invade Cambodia. When students began rumors of burning buildings and radicals joined the growing encampment on campus, the police and National Guard were called in to disperse the crowds.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Figure 5.3.} \textit{Left,} “Walk With Jesus,” \textit{right,} Charles McPheeters speaking, August 21, 1971. Photos by Denver Post.


In his interview with the Post, McPheeters also criticized traditional churches: “church buildings keep the rain off your head and the snow off your back and that’s about all. You can worship just as well in a barn.” In contrast, Jesus People believed in “the unfiltered Jesus,” not a “wishy-washy caricature of the real thing as many churches present.”37 This statement represents the classic refrain of most new religious sects going back to the Reformation itself. For McPheeters, the religious institutions of the day had ceased to exemplify the very thing—an “unfiltered Jesus”—they purported to represent.

McPheeters’ also launched a street ministry on East Colfax Avenue, a seedy part of town at the time. Named the Holy Ghost Repair Service, it contained the Paraclete Bookstore and Planet Jerusalem coffeehouse. “The effort is to reach the ‘untouchables’” said McPheeters. “And this includes the drunks, the jet setters, the Playboy Club types, the up andouters, the down andouters—even the church people.”38

Coffeehouses were a mainstay of the Jesus People movement across the country. Eskridge asserts, “Probably the biggest factor in the Jesus movement’s move into the mainstream of American youth culture during the early and mid-1970s was the widespread adoption of the coffeehouse as the focal point for meetings, Bible studies, concerts, and evangelistic activity.”39 Coffeehouses supported by Jesus People churches had biblically-inspired names like the Open Door Coffeehouse in Richmond, Koinonia (a


39 Eskridge, God’s Forever Family, 165.
Greek word meaning fellowship) in Nashville, the Joyful Noise in Chicago, the Greater Life Coffeehouse in Dallas, and the Salt Company in Detroit.40

Figure 5.4. Holy Ghost Repair Service, c. early 1970s. Courtesy of Denver Public Library.

In Denver, the Holy Ghost Repair Service was adorned with Jesus murals, bumper stickers, and posters with messages like “Truckin’ for Jesus,” “Heaven’s Gonna Be a Blast,” “Repent, Boycott Hell,” and “After Religion, Get Jesus.”41 Besides selling books, records, and coffee, the Post described the work of McPheeters and his volunteers to serve sandwiches to hungry wanderers. They ‘the Jesus Night Patrol’ go up and down Colfax and down to Larimer St. at nights to talk to lonely people telling

40 Ibid., 166-68.

them of God and Jesus Christ. Those who want to hear more are brought back to The Paraclete for further counseling.\textsuperscript{42}

In addition to marches and coffeehouses, music was a central element of Redeemer’s ministry to hippies. McPheeters played in a folk band himself and soon the church “began having concerts and famous bands were coming into town.”\textsuperscript{43} Pioneers in the movement, like Larry Norman, Barry McGuire, and Phil Keaggy, all came to Denver and led worship at Redeemer Temple.\textsuperscript{44} Their music exemplified the spirit of sixties folk, pop, and rock and roll with cutting-edge guitar riffs and protest lyrics. Norman’s most famous song, “Why Don’t You Look into Jesus?” included the lines:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Gonorrhea on Valentine’s Day (V.D.),}
\textit{And you’re still lookin’ for the perfect lay,}
\textit{You think rock n’ roll will set you free,}
\textit{But honey, you’ll be dead before you’re 33;}
\textit{Shootin’ junk ’til you’re half insane,}
\textit{A broken needle in your purple vein,}
\textit{Why don’t you look into Jesus, He got the answer.}\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

The music at coffeehouses and concerts set the tone for the movement in Denver and across the nation. It injected energy into Jesus People congregations that began incorporating guitars, drums, and contemporary “choruses” into worship. For the first time, youth came into churches like Redeemer Temple and heard lyrics and sounds that

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{43} Larry Pambianco, interview by author, Denver, Colorado, March 3, 2016.

\textsuperscript{44} Doug Toller, telephone interview by author, June 16, 2017.

appealed to their emotional angst, spiritual longings, and musical tastes. Hiley Ward, a journalist who visited hundreds of Jesus People communes, coffeehouses, and churches across the country, noted “the preoccupation of the Jesus People with new music. Rarely do you hear any of the old-time hymns. They write their own.”

Eskridge observes, “it is hard to imagine a Jesus movement without there having been Jesus music.”

The disillusioned youth that McPheeters engaged with music and evangelism were invited to Friday night services at Redeemer Temple. Montecalvo remembers them well: “The kids came in and we grabbed them and loved them and that’s what they were looking for, of course, and then they got touched by the Lord and filled with the Spirit.”

One young man described the experience when a friend invited him to a service:

That Friday summer night, my friend and I went to this old, run-down Catholic Church that could seat probably three hundred at most. The instant I walked through the front doors, I felt the power of God flood all over me. I had never felt God like that before. I knew this place had what I was searching for. . . . The church was packed; that entire evening, I was surrounded by the power of God. I had never in my life seen people worship like that. Most everyone was my age, and they sang praise and love songs to God. They raised their arms as high as they could. They even danced a little and jumped up and down. They spoke in languages I didn’t understand, but I knew it had something to do with God. That entire evening was full of the power and love of the Lord God Almighty. I’ll never forget that evening as long as I live.


47 Eskridge, God’s Forever Family, 209.


49 Caleb MacDonald, America’s Resurrection (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2014), 209. He incorrectly remembers Redeemer Temple as an “old, run-down Catholic Church,” when it was in fact, an old, run-down former Christian Church.
Another young man recalled a similar first-time experience at the church: “I went there on a Friday night and there were 400 hippies, worshiping God, crying, and singing to God. I had never seen anything like it in my life and it was so authentic and real. It just overwhelmed me.”

Figure 5.5. Redeemer Temple at 34th and Bryant streets, c. early 1970s. Courtesy of Redeemer Temple.

What captivated these Jesus People, and many in the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, included an element of theatrics and emotionalism. Compared to traditional churches—with their repetitive recitals of creeds, customary prayers, solemn hymns, and anecdotal homilies—Jesus People services were alive and vibrant. The music was new and engaging, testimonies were often spontaneously given, preachers delivered fiery sermons that called for an immediate response, and the overall expectation that the Holy Spirit would show up miraculously created a deep sense that something life-changing

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50 Doug Toller, telephone interview by author, June 16, 2017.
would take place. Moreover, for hippies of the counterculture, Jesus People services
produced the same ecstatic experiences they felt at war protests, music clubs, or during
LSD trips. This is not to suggest genuine religious encounters were not taking place. But
it speaks to how Jesus People were drawn into new emotional experiences—typically
interpreted as the baptism of filling of the Holy Spirit—that forged a sense of
participating in a historic and supernatural revival.

With experiences like this, Redeemer Temple began to grow exponentially.
Scores of people were baptized and hundreds of hippies began attending Sunday services.
Jim Klassen, the former Mennonite who had become an elder, remembered one incident:
“There were half a dozen runaways that came in one Sunday with hair down to their
backs. Pastor Lou was giving a message and he said, ‘you know, many times the
rebelliousness that we have or that kids have against their parents, against the rules and
regulations, causes them to do strange things and sometimes they grow long hair just to
frustrate their parents and harbor bad feelings.’ That night, that whole row came back and
their heads were shaved.”51

Another young convert remembered, “kids would come an hour before church
started and sat on the front rows praying for the service.”52 Others told stories of healings:
a man physically healed of his cerebral palsy when he was baptized, another who was

mute and began to speak.53 The church building was packed each Friday night and Sunday morning, and leaders removed walls, expanded the sanctuary, and designed overflow rooms to maximize capacity.

By 1973, about 600 people attended Redeemer Temple weekly. Many were hippies and charismatic transplants from denominational churches, but Mexican-Americans from the Highlands continued to play a significant role in the congregation. From its beginning as a Hispanic congregation, Latinos continued to be drawn to the church and still made up roughly 50 percent of its attendance into the eighties and nineties. Pastor Apodaca recalled: “I had sixty Hispanics just in my [home] fellowship on Friday nights. That was every Friday. We’d go to the park or Sloan’s Lake in the summertime and we’d have up to eighty people.”54

For the most part, these Latinos were drawn away from their Catholic heritage by Pentecostal beliefs. Ever since the Azusa Street revival, Pentecostal theology and practices had generated a unique interest among Latinos in the Southwest with its emphasis on healing, an unseen world of spiritual warfare, and the mystical work of the Holy Spirit.55 Some joined Pentecostal churches and denominations, like the Assemblies


of God. However, many Latinos remained in Roman Catholic parishes, unwilling to forsake their familial ties and heritage.

When the charismatic movement moved through Denver and most Catholic churches in the Highlands remained committed to traditional doctrine, many Latinos found the Pentecostal expression they were seeking at nondenominational Redeemer Temple. Here was a congregation located in their neighborhood, that met in a traditional sanctuary, and that had one minister who was Mexican-American and another who was of Italian heritage like many of their neighbors. More significantly, Redeemer appealed to their Pentecostal senses and became a place for Latino families to call home.

Doug Toller, who was a youth pastor at the church from 1978-88, said that Latinos added a vibrant depth to the community: “The Hispanics that came in were not well-educated, but they had a lot of expressiveness in worship.”  

He also noted the way their strong communal and familial ties shaped their growing numbers and involvement: “Most of them came out of a Catholic background and most were from the North High School area so they all knew each other from school. Also, one of the things about the Hispanic culture is that they’re very strong in families and when one person would come and get saved, they would bring their whole household. The kids would come, the uncles would come, the aunts would come, and there was a moving of the Lord to bring them all to Christ. Redeemer Temple grew quickly with Hispanics because these whole families were coming to Christ.”  

56 Doug Toller, telephone interview by author, June 16, 2017.

57 Ibid.
Few Jesus People churches were as ethnically diverse as Redeemer Temple. But cultural differences aside, Latinos in North Denver had much in common with the hippies attending Redeemer Temple. During the church’s early years, the Crusade for Justice, a Chicano organization committed to Mexican-American rights and identity, was forming in Denver. In 1969, Crusade for Justice leaders organized a Mexican Independence Day Rally that included a peaceful march by North High School just a few blocks from the church.\(^{58}\) It is unclear if Redeemer Temple ever endorsed or participated in the Crusade for Justice. The church’s leaders seemed more focused on the plight of street hippies and evangelism; they rarely took positions on political issues, local or national. But perhaps, as Redeemer’s Latino members were engaged in the broader struggles of their community, they found a sense of solidarity and a religious home in a nondenominational church that sought to help those disenfranchised by the prevailing institutions of the day.

When the congregation outgrew its building at 34\(^{th}\) and Bryant streets by 1973, they purchased and moved to a new facility a few blocks west at 32\(^{nd}\) and Lowell streets, the former Beth-Eden Centenary Baptist Church. Over the next decade, the church would grow exponentially. But two important developments in American religion and the culture at large would significantly transform Redeemer Temple.

*Changing Tides with Evangelicalism and the Counterculture*

The first change relates to American evangelicalism. In the 1940s, a group who called themselves neo-evangelicals (they later dropped the prefix *neo-*) attempted to forge the...
a new faith identity that was theologically conservative but less rigid and more culturally winsome than fundamentalism. By returning to their nineteenth-century revivalistic roots, evangelicals hoped to embody a *via media* between fundamentalism and liberal Protestantism. Shedding politics and doctrinal divisions, evangelicals from the 1950s to the 1970s slowly grew through the influence of organizations like *Christianity Today* magazine, the National Association of Evangelicals, Fuller Theological Seminary, and youth-oriented ministries like Youth for Christ, Young Life, and Campus Crusade for Christ. Evangelical churches included some independent congregations, but many were Southern Baptist, conservative outliers in mainline denominations, or congregations from smaller denominations that loosely identified as evangelical. But no church or group characterized the rise and influence of evangelicalism more than the person of Billy Graham. Beginning in 1949, Graham’s city-wide evangelistic crusades did more to win converts and reshape American opinion of evangelical Christianity than anything else.

Evangelical Christians were initially skeptical of the Jesus People movement, particularly its neo-Pentecostal and charismatic tendencies, which most did not share. But seeing the revival of Jesus in popular culture, especially among youth, eventually won the hearts of evangelicals. What has been called “The High Water Mark of the Jesus Movement” took place in 1972 when the Jesus People were more or less formally adopted by evangelicals. It happened at EXPLO ’72 in Dallas, a gathering organized by Campus Crusade for Christ founder Bill Bright. This five-day series of evangelistic trainings and seminars culminated in a concert attended by 180,000 youth. Johnny Cash

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performed gospel songs followed by a rousing Billy Graham sermon that challenged young people to commit their lives to Jesus. Graham concluded by asking youth to “cheer and hold up the One-Way finger when I speak the name of Jesus.”

EXPLO ’72 signaled an important milestone: evangelicalism had embraced the Jesus People and would adapt their methodologies in churches and cities across America. In the years that followed, evangelical churches set up coffeehouses, initiated street evangelism programs, engaged social injustice in new ways, and embraced the music of the Jesus People. For Jesus People churches like Redeemer Temple, this mainstream evangelical adoption legitimized the movement among American religious leaders and the wider public. Though aspects of their charismatic theology were still viewed as suspect, this legitimacy brought droves of suburban evangelicals to Redeemer Temple in the decade ahead and connected the church to the broader evangelical influence growing across the nation. If Redeemer Temple was born of charismatic convictions, then flourished as a Jesus People church, evangelicalism would add another layer—and increased numerical growth—to its story.

A closely-related and paradoxical development was the wane of the counterculture during the 1970s, particularly among youth. By the time of Carter’s presidency in 1977—Carter himself was a self-professed evangelical—much had

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60 Ibid., 169-174, quoting Graham from “EXPLO ’72, Show #3,” 1972, Arrowhead Productions, San Bernardino, CA.

61 For a fascinating look at the evangelical impulse toward social justice and progressive issues before the rise of the religious right, see David R. Swartz, Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).
changed in America since the Summer of Love a decade before. To be sure, Americans’ distrust of politics, government, and war had increased; civil rights remained an elusive reality for many; and the sexual revolution of the seventies was in full swing. Few would argue with the long-term effects the youth protest movements had on American culture for decades to come. But the unique experience of the sixties counterculture had evolved by the late seventies. This development raised significant challenges for Jesus People churches. As Eskridge notes:

[T]he emerging youth culture(s) [of the seventies] reflected what contemporary commentators labeled the ‘Me Decade,’ a rejection of the ethos that had characterized the hippie counterculture and formed so central a part of the Jesus People identity and style. With the seedbed culture from which it had emerged undermined, its main connection to the secular youth culture had been severed. . . . In many ways, the demise of the counterculture and the rise of a variety of new, startlingly different youth cultures was the ultimate coup de grace to the Jesus People.62

For churches like Redeemer Temple, these two shifts—evangelicalism’s movement toward the Jesus People and American society’s move away from the counterculture—signaled a new era. Some Jesus People churches faded; others, like Redeemer Temple, were significantly transformed.

Bringing Structure and Authority to Redeemer Temple: 1973-83

From 1973-83, Redeemer Temple grew from 600 to almost 2,000 weekly attendees. But the church’s demographics shifted dramatically. Along with an influx of new suburban attendees, the hippies and runaways who were drawn to Redeemer in the late sixties and early seventies were now settling down and starting families. Few came

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62 Eskridge, God’s Forever Family, 260-61.
with a revolutionary spirit; most had given up on utopian ideals and sought a more stable lifestyle. As the culture and demographics changed and the size of the congregation grew, Redeemer’s leaders identified two crucial needs: structure and authority.

Figure 5.6. Worship at Redeemer Temple, c. late 1970s. Courtesy of Redeemer Temple.

In the early days of the church, Montecalvo said, “there were no programs . . . it was all God.” But systems and structures are vital for larger, more established churches. Thus, the need for bigger facilities and more efficient programs began to dominate church board meetings. In 1974, Redeemer Temple purchased three homes next to their new church building to demolish and make room for parking. In 1975, Charles McPheeters moved away and the Holy Ghost Repair Service on East Colfax closed. The Jesus People

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movement had waned and though some of the hippie culture remained at Redeemer Temple, new programs—home fellowships, educational classes, Sunday School for kids, and youth clubs—were initiated to assimilate the increasing number of families and children. Also, new staff members were hired to support the numerical growth.

The disillusioned youth drawn to Redeemer Temple in the early seventies brought their vices, addictions, broken-home lives, and rebellious spirits with them. Few had positive role models. As one person related, “One thing that was lacking, which was indicative of the Jesus People movement, was there wasn’t a lot of mentorship, of how to ‘walk life out.’ All my friends that went [to early Redeemer Temple] had marriage troubles, and kids in horrible shape, and they said one thing they didn’t do is they didn’t shepherd, especially the married couples. They had a lot of Bible teaching, but the shepherding was shallow.” The term “shepherding” in this context referred to helping new or immature Christians grow in their faith and make wise life choices.

Leaders at Redeemer Temple recognized this need and turned to two sources for help. The first was Bill Gothard’s *Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts*. Gothard was a former youth ministry leader in Chicago who developed an intensive training seminar for youth, educators, and clergy. The seminar was grounded in principles he derived from the Bible regarding “youth conflicts” (such as those with parents and friends), “qualities essential for success,” “steps to spiritual maturity,” “symptoms of abnormal social

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development,” “principles on how to refocus your emotions,” “prerequisites for successful dating,” and “evidences of a spiritual dimension in life,” among other topics.66 Much of his material blended biblical and psychological instruction and relied heavily on the concept of clear authority structures. Gothard taught that undermining the “chain of command” in family, government, church, and business was the source of society’s problems and against God’s design.67 One can discern tones of Nixon’s “law and order” in the curriculum’s outlook.

Initially, Gothard’s seminars during the late 1960s drew a few thousand attendees in a handful of cities; by 1973 more than 200,000 attended each year and by 1976, he offered thirty-two six-day seminars across the country each year, including Denver. The pastors of Redeemer Temple attended Gothard’s seminars and embraced his methods. Some in the congregation resisted the new ideas. One middle school student at the time remembered that it was “all about disciplining your kids” and “very authoritarian.”68 In fact, parents were encouraged to use corporal punishment on disobedient children. A journalist for Denver Magazine described this practice in one Redeemer Temple family:

“When Tracy was young, the church provided [her parents] with a three-eighths-inch-diameter dowel stick – a ‘rod of the Lord’ – for hitting the girl if she misbehaved. [The father] broke several of them while disciplining the youngster, but after he cracked the first one the church insisted he buy his own.”69


67 Ibid., 69-70.


Another young man, the one who had been converted at Redeemer Temple’s Friday night services, remembered the influence of Gothard’s visit to Denver in 1978:

Redeemer Temple strongly pushed its members to attend Gothard’s week-long seminar. My future wife and I went, but Gothard taught simple human wisdom, nothing about flowing in the Holy Spirit. . . . My girlfriend believed all of Gothard’s teachings, as did just about everyone there. . . . She was being taught by Gothard that she must obey the pastors’ teachings and no one else’s, and that included me. The pastors at Redeemer Temple accepted all of Gothard’s teachings.70

The young man soon married his girlfriend, but the conflict over authority came to a head and she eventually divorced him in deference to her parents who wanted her to marry someone else.

Another source of guidance for Redeemer Temple’s pastors as they attempted to bring mentoring and authority to members’ lives was the Shepherding movement (sometimes referred to as “Discipling”). A handful of charismatic pastors created what became known as “Shepherding” in 1969.71 Their initial goal was to ensure doctrinal integrity within the broader charismatic movement. By the mid-seventies, Shepherding had developed into a formal, intensive discipleship program that churches could implement at the congregational level. It relied on the idea of mentors, called disciplers or “shepherds,” who led small groups, often known as “cell groups,” within the larger church. The philosophy was simple:

70 MacDonald, America’s Resurrection, 213.

71 This is not to be confused with the way many Christians used the terms shepherding and discipleship in more general contexts. Shepherding, with a capital S, was a trademarked program with accompanying literature, guidelines, and seminars that churches adopted as a formal process.
Every believer was to have a personal, definite, committed relationship with a shepherd. The need was for ‘personal pastoral care’ . . . The movement taught that submission to a shepherd provided spiritual ‘covering’ by being in right relationship to God’s delegated authority in the church. The shepherd assumed responsibility for the well-being of his sheep. This responsibility included not just their spiritual well-being, but for their full development emotionally, educationally, financially, vocationally, and socially.\(^{72}\)

In an established congregation, Shepherding functioned like a pyramid-structure: cell group members were under the guidance and authority of shepherds (lay leaders), shepherds were under pastors, and pastors under the leaders of the Shepherding movement.\(^{73}\) Shepherding groups included instruction on reading the Bible, prayer, Christian beliefs, evangelism, and even practical matters such as marriage advice and managing finances. But adherence to one’s authorities played the foundational role.

When the leaders of the Shepherding movement first pioneered this idea, Lonnie Frisbee of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa was invited to participate. Soon, other Jesus People leaders embraced the model. Initially, Shepherding was used to achieve a measure of control over the doctrine taught within Jesus People churches. Several groups, such as the secretive Children of God in Seattle, Victor Paul Wierwille’s The Way International, and Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church, had been associated with the Jesus People movement and leaders wanted to rein in doctrine they thought unorthodox.\(^{74}\) But the


\(^{73}\) The Shepherding movement also encouraged the development of house churches, small informal congregations that met in homes and lacked the institutionalism of more established churches. These house churches were directly accountable to the Shepherding movement leaders.

\(^{74}\) Moore, *Shepherding Movement*, 249.
more practical desire by pastors like Montecalvo was to address unhealthy patterns of behavior in the lives of congregation members. They believed the principles of Gothard and the Shepherding movement could help those coming out of the dysfunctional counterculture to grow up and get their act together. Thus, the very thing that created the first generation of Jesus People—a willingness to challenge authority and institutions—became a problem to be solved in the second.\textsuperscript{75} As one Redeemer Temple attendee said: “All these hippies came out of the anti-establishment [cause], and they stayed anti-establishment.”\textsuperscript{76} Church leaders intended to challenge this stubbornness.

The Shepherding philosophy made large waves among charismatic and Jesus People churches. By 1977, 25 percent of charismatic Christians identified with the Shepherding movement at a national conference in Kansas City.\textsuperscript{77} By 1982, 500 churches across the nation had officially adopted the program and purchased millions of magazines, newsletters, cassette tapes, and books to implement it.\textsuperscript{78} Redeemer Temple embraced Shepherding in the late seventies. Two of the leaders of the movement, Bob Mumford and Derek Prince, spoke at Redeemer Temple numerous times. Their

\textsuperscript{75} The sociologists surveyed in Chapter One would highlight this dynamic as a prime example of the challenges independent sect movements face in the second and third generation of their life cycles.

\textsuperscript{76} Michael Klassen, interview by author, Littleton, Colorado, July 2, 2013.

\textsuperscript{77} Moore, \textit{Shepherding Movement}, 136.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 6-7.
Shepherding books and curriculum were adopted by the congregation and groups were organized to implement the principles. It had mixed success at best.

Some members of Redeemer Temple appreciated the structure and practical guidance Shepherding brought to their lives. But many discerned that when Montecalvo and others incorporated the philosophy, “they became very controlling and cultish. It wasn’t a cult, but it was cultish in that if a couple wanted to get married they had to get blessed by their pastor. It became very authoritarian.”\textsuperscript{79} Another said, “Some of the shepherds were too much of shepherds.”\textsuperscript{80}

This tendency was not limited to Redeemer Temple; the Shepherding movement caused tensions in churches across the nation. When some charismatic leaders, such as Chuck Smith and Pat Robertson, publicly condemned the Shepherding movement, it made the \textit{New York Times} with the headline: “Charismatic Movement is Facing Internal Discord Over a Teaching Called ‘Discipling’.”\textsuperscript{81} Years later, Shepherding movement leaders publicly apologized for some of the authoritarian abuses that took place, and one couple wrote a book describing their traumatic experience with Shepherding.\textsuperscript{82} Leaders at

\textsuperscript{79} Michael Klassen, interview by author, Littleton, Colorado, July 2, 2013.

\textsuperscript{80} Jim Klassen, interview by author, Sheridan, Colorado, June 13, 2017.

\textsuperscript{81} “Charismatic Movement is Facing Internal Discord Over a Teaching Called ‘Discipling’,” \textit{New York Times}, September 16, 1975. The terms “Disciplining” and “Shepherding” were used interchangeably.

\textsuperscript{82} Moore, \textit{Shepherding Movement}, 168-175; Ron Burks and Vicki Burks, \textit{Damaged Disciples: Casualties of Authoritarian Churches and the Shepherding Movement} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).
Redeemer Temple eventually disassociated with the movement in light of these abuses.  

Eskridge concludes,

> Shepherding proved to be, for the most part, a disaster. Reports of overbearing intrusion and authoritarian control in such matters as personal finances, career and job decisions, courtship, marriage, and childbearing were rampant. . . . Many Jesus People groups and churches were damaged by their participation in the Shepherding movement.

Redeemer Temple was no exception.

> The emergence of a more authoritarian leadership style at Redeemer Temple, in conjunction with the adoption of Gothard’s teaching and Shepherding, may have contributed to its numerical growth in the short-term. But over the years, it took a significant toll on members. In recent interviews, several said that Montecalvo became “very guidance-oriented,” “legalistic,” “authoritarian,” and “overly-controlling.” Doug Toller, a former youth pastor at Redeemer, disagrees with this assessment. “I think it was a perception,” he said, “but I did not sense [legalism] at all. I think there’s a fine line between the pursuit of holiness and legalism. I did not see Lou, Jerry, or Lloyd having demands on people that were outside the Word of God.”

Toller attributes the perception to Redeemer’s Temple’s upholding of biblical standards in an era when morals had become loose. Others are not convinced. As an elder, Jim Klassen remembered a board meeting in the early eighties when amid a vigorous debate Montecalvo slammed his fist.

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83 Doug Toller, telephone interview by author, June 16, 2017.

84 Eskridge, *God’s Forever Family*, 250.

85 Doug Toller, telephone interview by author, June 16, 2017.
on the table and demanded that everyone agree with him. Klassen soon left the meeting and stated, “shortly thereafter we left [Redeemer Temple] because I was fearful of him, and that he had had too much control.”

There was also a situation in 1982 when a woman allegedly admitted to Montecalvo that her husband, who was employed as a janitor at the church, was sexually abusing their daughter. The wife and daughter claimed that Montecalvo and Schoel ignored the problem for over a year and “still let [the husband] be in a position of authority in the church.” The church was later sued, but the case was dismissed on legal grounds that the meeting with Montecalvo fell under the definition of “privileged pastoral counseling” and under Colorado law clergy were not required to report child abuse. For his part, Montecalvo claimed that the daughter never admitted abuse to him personally and he only learned of it after the authorities got involved. Regardless of which story to believe—whether Montecalvo was clearly informed or not—the authoritarian culture that emerged at Redeemer Temple certainly created the possibility of such abuses to go ignored. The daughter who was abused later said she was fearful of speaking out because:

It’s a sin to break up a marriage and you can go to hell for that. I learned that at the church. It’s a sin to have sex before marriage. They told us every Sunday that you’d live a long life if you obeyed your parents, but if you didn’t you’d die young and go straight to hell. I was raised by that church, taught by them and ruled by them. They raised my parents, taught them and ruled them, too. I still believe in God, but . . .

88 Ibid., 55-57.
89 Ibid., 57.
Her uncle was more direct: “Redeemer Temple is the ultimate male chauvinist church. Their order of importance is God, man, woman, and child.”\textsuperscript{90} The question raised by these stories and comments is complex. Were the leaders of Redeemer Temple attempting to maintain standards in keeping with their biblical convictions about authority or had they become too legalistic? The answer, as in the case of most religious groups, is likely both.

\textit{Decline at Redeemer Temple: 1983-2000}

By the time concerns with authority were beginning to surface, Redeemer Temple decided to expand. In 1983, they launched a new church, Redeemer Southeast, in Aurora (about ten miles east). Schoel became the senior pastor at the original Redeemer Temple and Montecalvo took Toller with him to lead Redeemer Southeast. Apodaca had also helped start a church in Fort Morgan (about sixty miles northeast) and was dedicating most of his time there. The church in Aurora never grew very large. After six years, it closed and Montecalvo returned to Redeemer Temple. Toller soon took a pastoral position at a small church in the mountains. By the early 1990s, attendance had decreased significantly at Redeemer Temple. The church continued for two more decades before moving to a smaller, less-expensive facility a few miles north in the Denver suburb of Arvada. In 2018, more than fifty years after its founding, Montecalvo, Schoel, and Apodaca continue to lead the congregation of a couple hundred weekly attendees.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
Several factors contributed to the decline of Redeemer Temple from its pinnacle in the early eighties. Montecalvo suggests that the decision to start Redeemer Southeast was a mistake and takes the blame: “I missed it; I was out of the will of the Lord. . . . Pride got in.” Toller believes that the responsibility and management of a large staff and church had become “overwhelming” for Montecalvo at Redeemer Temple and the prospect of going to a new and smaller congregation in Aurora is what drew him away. Being “the father of the ministry,” when he left Redeemer Temple “people just got very insecure, so there was an exodus of half the congregation during those years.”

Others submit that the authoritarian leadership style was to blame. One young man believed end times theology drove some away: “You hear about Jesus coming back, and Jesus coming back, and Jesus coming back, and then he doesn’t come back. There was a lot of disappointment with people saying ‘you told us, you prophesied that Jesus was coming back and he didn’t come.’” Another possibility for the decline at Redeemer Temple was the growth of nondenominational suburban churches. Suburban evangelicals who previously drove into the inner city to attend Redeemer in the seventies had new options—nondenominational seeker churches—closer to their homes in the eighties and nineties. Perhaps most influential for Redeemer’s decline were changes in wider culture. The Jesus People movement across the nation waned in the seventies with the loss of the countercultural spirit. The charismatic movement waned in the eighties, particularly in

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92 Doug Toller, telephone interview by author, June 16, 2017.

light of the televangelist scandals often associated with it. For an inner-city church that was established on these two crumbling pillars, decline might have been inevitable.

It is likely that Redeemer Temple’s transition back to a smaller community was attributable to all these factors. But those who stayed and those who left interpreted the rise and fall of Redeemer Temple through their charismatic convictions. They attributed the church’s decline to the same factor that they believe caused its growth in the first place: the mysterious movement of Holy Spirit. “It’s so interesting,” Jim Klassen recently said, “how God does a work in this area and then all the sudden it seems like he moves to another place. But it’s like the exciting stuff starts happening somewhere else. And I think that’s how the Spirit works.” Like most charismatics, the people of Redeemer Temple believed that the Spirit brought revival in the first place, and they are waiting for it to come again.

Analysis of Jesus People Churches

In addition to Bible and prosperity churches, Jesus People churches add another dimension to the modern nondenominational church movement in three important ways. First, Jesus People churches embodied a prophetic witness against the perceived moral bankruptcy of both society and traditional churches. Like fundamentalists, Jesus People believed American culture was headed in the wrong direction. While Jesus People churches reached out to hippies in ways fundamentalists never did, they never condoned countercultural lifestyles or embraced leftist politics. Jesus People churches condemned

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drug use, challenged the sexual revolution, and maintained standards of morality even if they adopted the forms, symbols, and trappings of the counterculture. Like fundamentalists, Jesus People also believed that denominations were part of the problem. But unlike fundamentalists, Jesus People did not think the source of decay was primarily a doctrinal matter. The real issue was spiritual: whether people in the streets and members in the pews were willing to be liberated by the power of the Holy Spirit and follow the radical way of Jesus. Jesus People thought that God was bringing revival to America in the sixties and seventies. And they believed that a person or church’s participation in that revival was dependent upon an openness to the Holy Spirit and a willingness to obey the countercultural teachings of Jesus.

In light of their convictions, Jesus People pastors and leaders saw themselves as prophets. They thought it was their responsibility to warn both the American church and the wider culture of their errant ways. Indeed, they attempted to follow the example of Jesus that they read about in their Bibles by channeling a prophetic posture. This demeanor included a loving persuasion toward those outside of the Christian faith contrasted with a harsh condemnation of religious insiders they felt undermined the faith.

In the early days of Redeemer Temple, Montecalvo exemplified the former posture of loving persuasion. He was known as a man of firm conviction with a gentle spirit. He preached stirring messages about Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the need to repent, and the eternal consequences that hung in the balance. In later years, he was accused of authoritarianism and rigid legalism. But most remembered him as meek, kind, and compassionate. One story from the church’s early years is especially illustrative:
On Sunday, May 17, 1970, the sanctuary at Redeemer Temple was crowded to the doors. Suddenly a young man sitting in the center block of pews got to his feet and stumbled down the side toward the platform . . . it was apparent to everyone that he was drunk. ‘My name’s Clarence,’ he announced, his voice thick. ‘I’m a man of color and proud not to be a white, proud to be a Black Panther.’ He was waving a black beret aloft. At first Pastor Lou Montecalvo had courteously stepped back allowing the young man the floor. As it became obvious that this was a canned speech filled with clichés and memorized hate talk, the pastor walked over to the intruder and put one arm around his shoulders. ‘Clarence, you’re delivering your speech to the wrong people. We care about you here.’ Gently, the pastor began leading Clarence back toward his seat, talking to him as they walked. ‘See all those people out there? They love you, Clarence, not for the usual human reasons, but because they know how much Jesus loves you.’

This story was shared by an author who was sympathetic to pastors like Montecalvo. Assuming its general contours are true, it reveals his heart of compassion toward outsiders that was repeated at Jesus People churches across the country. Pastors and leaders opened the doors of their churches, and often their own homes, to those outside the faith, whether angry Black Panthers or drugged-out hippies.

But the prophetic role required a deeper sense of conviction, a righteous anger. Even as Jesus People churches attracted Christians from other denominations, their leaders often condemned the institutionalism from which they came. If Montecalvo represents the compassionate prophet, McPheeters channeled the angry prophet. One person remembered him like a Hebrew prophet of old: “a really wild guy who created a lot of trouble.” Another recalled that McPheeters would say, “‘We’re not part of any

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McPheeters was not shy about his opinions in public either. When describing the Holy Ghost Repair Service to the *Denver Post*, he lamented the state of churches in Denver:

> There is a lot of Christianity in Denver, but about half of it stinks. The Christians are out there in God’s segregated acre. When there’s a need, they turn it over to the mission board to study. They wait on the Lord. Well, sometimes, the Lord is waiting on them to do something. Gold-plated churches and chromed-out people make me sick. Those churches have their token nigger and their token social action program, but they don’t have any compassion. The only time some church people reach out to help a guy in the gutter is when the press photographer is there. Jesus Christ didn’t have any press photographer.\(^98\)

McPheeters was likely referring to Calvary Temple with its growing empire in suburban Cherry Creek, which the press covered regularly. What is important is that McPheeters did not question other churches’ doctrine. After all, a church like Calvary Temple had many of the same charismatic beliefs. What he did condemn was their affluence, apathy toward justice, ethnic homogeneity, and lack of social action. Churches like Calvary Temple said they cared about people, but McPheeters believed their actions suggested they only cared about their own wealth and success.

At the heart of Jesus Peoples’ convictions was the example of Jesus himself. They understood Jesus as a revolutionary prophet who not only helped kids get off drugs but also decried injustice, wealth, and institutional corruption. For McPheeters, few churches took the Jesus of the Bible seriously; he even wondered if they were following the same person. Referring to conventional paintings of Christ that hung in so many churches,

\(^97\) Michael Klassen, interview by author, Littleton, Colorado, July 2, 2013.

McPheeters said, “He looks like he just had his hair done and he has rouge on his cheeks. He looks like a faggot. I tell you one thing, I’ve never seen a faggot carpenter. Jesus was a man.” In this quote, McPheeters reveals his fundamentalist outlook on gender, sexuality, and authority. He likely shared Redeemer’s later stress on traditional authoritarian roles by strong, masculine, heterosexual men. But the sharp edge of his comments, freely given to a local reporter, demonstrates the provocative nature of his black-and-white perspective. Jesus People prophets like McPheeters rarely minced words.

The second way Jesus People churches shaped the modern nondenominational movement was by engaging a new demographic of disenfranchised youth that traditional churches often overlooked or disparaged. Theirs was a cultural engagement directed at the margins of traditional religion, though firmly at the center of a generation’s simmering tensions. The story of Redeemer Temple could be told over and over at countless churches in San Francisco, Detroit, Atlanta, Milwaukee, New York, Dallas, and other cities across the country. At the time, most fundamentalist churches condemned the counterculture. Many mainline churches empathized with their political protests, but lacked the vision to challenge their own traditions and endanger their moral respectability in order to welcome a long-haired, rebellious, drug-addicted generation into their fold. Prosperity churches like Calvary Temple appealed to lower and middle socio-economic classes in the sixties and seventies, but their focus on success, television audiences, and realizing the American dream did little for anti-establishment youth. But Jesus People churches, with their revolutionary spirit and charismatic theology, saw a need and had the

99 Ibid.
resources to meet it. Jim Klassen at Redeemer Temple remembers: “We put kids on buses after a service to go home, because they had accepted Christ and they were sorrowful for the way they left home. We had more means than some of them had, so we put kids on buses, we kept some overnight, and we were glad we could do that.”

This gesture symbolized the heartbeat of Jesus People churches. Through their music, prayer meetings, coffeehouses, street evangelism, and genuine compassion, Jesus People churches embraced a generation of youth they perceived as prodigal sons and daughters that needed to be shown the way home.

Most Jesus People churches were predominantly Caucasian. The hippies they attracted often grew up in white, suburban families that had benefited from the postwar economic prosperity. As one pastor from the Jesus People movement observed of the hippie generation:

White, middle, and upper class youth, aged 15-30 could afford to ‘drop out,’ to be nomadic and experiment with building new, ephemeral, utopian societies. African Americans, on the other hand, were entrenched in the battle for their civil liberties and newly arriving Asian and Latino immigrants were striving to establish themselves and their communities. The establishment that white hippies despised was the same establishment that held the key to prosperity and social justice for Asians, Hispanics, and African Americans.

But if the Jesus People movement was largely “Euro American,” Redeemer Temple was an exception. As noted, the church was entirely Hispanic at its founding, and even

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102 Sánchez Walsh, Latino Pentecostal Identity, 83.
with all its growth among denominational charismatics, hippies, and suburban evangelicals, Latinos continued to attend. One can see how the character of Jesus People churches—neo-Pentecostal in doctrine, charismatic in worship, and sensitive to those who are disenfranchised by traditional churches—would appeal to minority populations. But few Jesus People churches were known to have any ethnic diversity.\textsuperscript{103} Redeemer Temple was an anomaly that maintained a large Latino population most likely because of its humble origins, pastors’ ethnicity (Montecalvo as an Italian-American and Apodaca as a Mexican-American), and location in the Latino-dominated Highlands of Denver.

Finally, like their predecessors in Bible and prosperity churches, Jesus People churches reinforced modern nondenominational church identity by remaining fiercely independent. But their independence added a new facet: it was fueled by a conviction that the revivalistic work of the Holy Spirit could not be contained—and was often opposed—in existing religious structures. Even if their charismatic doctrine and practices were founded upon Pentecostal beliefs, Jesus People churches rejected the constraints that the Pentecostal label carried. Montecalvo notes: “The thing we had going for us was the fact that we were not Pentecostal. There is a difference between Pentecostals and charismatics. People learned [at Redeemer Temple] that they could be praying quietly and be filled with the Spirit. Whereas at Pentecostal churches you had to shout the roof off, that kind of thing. There was more demonstration among the Pentecostals than there was among the charismatics and when people got into an atmosphere like that, and

\textsuperscript{103} In Eskridge’s lengthy work about the Jesus People movement, he only cites one example of an ethnically diverse congregation in Detroit; \textit{God’s Forever Family}, 121.
realized ‘I can receive this quietly like an Episcopalian or Lutheran,’ their hearts were opened and they weren’t fearful. Very often, all the [Pentecostal] demonstrations scared people away. Pentecostal was more like a denomination, but the charismatic renewal was interdenominational.”104 Montecalvo describes two important characteristics in these remarks. First, the Spirit-filled expressions that took place in charismatic churches were more inviting to newcomers than those in Pentecostal churches. The over-the-top demonstrative nature of Pentecostal churches, where “you had to shout the roof off . . . scared people away.”

Second, and perhaps more significantly, Christians from liturgical denominational backgrounds felt more welcome in charismatic churches because they sensed they were not joining another denomination, but a new movement. Even though some Jesus People leaders were critical of denominations (McPheeters’ “abominations”!), many came to Redeemer Temple for services but never left their denominational churches. One member of Redeemer Temple told the Denver Post, “Many young people are staying in their own denominations to witness for Christ.”105 Indeed, Montecalvo remembers, “We had youth pastors that would bring their whole youth group from other churches so they could get a taste of what God was doing.”106 Schoel added: “We didn’t capture them and say ‘you’ve got to go to our church now.’ We said, ‘go back and be a blessing.’”107 This posture was


not the ecumenism of the times whereby congregations from different denominations worked together in a spirit of collaboration and unity. Rather, Jesus People thought they had something—the Holy Spirit—that denominational churches often lacked. Thus, Jesus People churches hoped to be a positive influence on denominational churches, injecting them with the cure they so desperately needed to join a larger movement of God. “What the Lord was doing,” Montecalvo asserted, “was interdenominational and we wanted to go with the flow. . . . We perceived ourselves as more of a movement than a denomination.”

But to channel this “movement,” churches like Redeemer Temple believed they needed to be independent from the institutional control that would dampen or restrict God’s work.

This fear of control and constraints often originated from negative experiences Jesus People leaders had received at the hands of institutions and denominations. As noted, Montecalvo was kicked out of Moody Bible Institute, almost again from Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, and then from his Baptist church. Schoel was removed from his positions in the Lutheran (Missouri-Synod) denomination. Each was chastised for doctrinal reasons, but both came to believe that the deeper issue was institutionalism. Ecclesiastical institutions, by their very nature, drew boundaries around their identities. But these boundaries regarding which doctrines, worship forms, rituals, and lived practices were in keeping with the institution—for example, what made Episcopalians Episcopalians, or what made Baptists Baptists—were inherently restrictive.

Institutional leaders rarely allowed for the boundaries to be renegotiated, particularly by young, innovative leaders.

Chuck Smith experienced this dynamic within the Foursquare Gospel denomination, a Pentecostal body that was supposedly founded upon the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. He concluded that the problem was endemic to all denominational institutions. “I saw [denominations] as ultimately coming under the control of those who are not necessarily the most spiritual men. A man who is truly spiritual is going to be satisfied and happy where God has called him.”\(^{109}\) Denominations, Smith thought, eventually were controlled by those who were more concerned with power, authority, and boundaries than seeking God’s movement. “Once they have achieved a position of power,” Smith continued, “then they become protective and they want to protect themselves in this position of power. They do that by surrounding themselves with weaker men and by eliminating all those who are a threat to their position.”\(^{110}\)

Smith and Montecalvo attempted to take the opposite posture when the Jesus People movement started. By rejecting institutionalism and the controlling tendencies that often came with it, they freed themselves up to not be threatened by the innovative leadership of those that joined their churches and movements. Thus, Smith and Montecalvo did not see Lonnie Frisbee and Charles McPheeters as threats to be silenced, but creative energies to be directed. Toller expressed a similar opinion when Redeemer Temple hired him in 1978: “I tell you, they took a big chance on me because I had long

\(^{109}\) Quoted in Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 32.

\(^{110}\) Quoted in ibid.
hair, I had no clothes except Levi’s shirts and jeans, I drove a pop-top VW camper bus, and they put me on staff!”

Few denominational churches at the time took such chances on those who did not conform to ministerial expectations and standards. But Smith, Montecalvo, and many nondenominational Jesus People leaders did. They accepted risks with these enigmatic young leaders, gave them the freedom to pioneer new ministries, and harnessed their talents to reach the countercultural generation for their churches.

Of course, times change and movements mature. Within a few years, the leaders of Redeemer Temple would be charged with the same controlling behavior that Smith described of his denominational supervisors. Sociologists are not surprised. Recall, from Chapter One, Niebuhr’s description of how religious sects develop: “with [the coming of children] the sect must take on the character of an educational and disciplinary institution, with the purpose of bringing the new generation into conformity with ideals and customs which have become traditional.”

Or consider Towns’ assessment, that sects institutionalize when they adopt an “efficient administration” and “become established in the communities.” Nondenominational churches can be just as susceptible to this trend. As one convert of the Jesus People movement observed: “Nondenominational churches have a tendency in their infancy to not care about [rules]. They really care more for ‘what

111 Doug Toller, telephone interview by author, June 16, 2017.


vision we have, what’s God telling us to do, what are we being led to do.’ And people are more important. Unfortunately, they become what they don’t like.”

Many churches in the broader Jesus People and charismatic movements followed these trends. Though most Jesus People churches remained independent and the movement all but died out by the early eighties, several long-lasting denominations did emerge. Calvary Chapel developed a “fellowship” (with all the trappings of a denomination) of over 1,000 churches worldwide today. Another group, the Vineyard churches, split off from Calvary Chapel and created its own “association” (also a denomination) of over 1,500 churches. But the early Jesus People spirit lived on its coffeehouses, music, and engagement of youth culture. Perhaps most significantly, Jesus People churches planted the seeds of a new kind of nondenominational church that would dominate the next generation: the seeker church.

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CHAPTER SIX: SEEKER CHURCHES

People in the church world have a tendency to want to continue to use methods that may have worked at one time—say in the 1950s—but may not work now. We want to keep the message the same, but we know that the methods of delivery must change.

–Scott Nickell, former teaching pastor at Flatirons Community Church

In the previous chapters, I examined in loose chronological fashion three types of nondenominational congregations that developed from 1945-2000: Bible churches, prosperity churches, and Jesus People churches.¹ The fourth subtype of modern nondenominational churches marked another development in the formation of a nondenominational church identity. What I call seeker churches blossomed in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s.² Known for utilizing creative methods and elaborate worship service production, seeker churches attempted to attract spiritual “seekers” who might never attend a traditional church. Like each nondenominational subtype I have

¹ Though I have concentrated on Bible, prosperity, and Jesus People congregations as nondenominational subtypes, some denominational churches also resembled the theological and cultural ethos of each of these subtypes. For example, some conservative Baptist congregations resembled Bible churches in their fundamentalism and insularity; many Assemblies of God congregations embraced the prosperity spirit; and some evangelical denominational churches, like those in the Jesus People movement, started their own coffeehouses, communes, and street ministries to engage the counterculture.

² Most sociologists have used the seeker church label as well to identify these churches; see Kimon Howland Sargeant, Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).
examined, seeker churches incorporate and expand upon aspects of the previous subtypes. Seeker churches build upon the conservative theology of Bible churches, the growth mindset of prosperity churches, and the cultural engagement of Jesus People churches. Indeed, the leaders of many seeker congregations were products of the Jesus People movement in the 1970s and drew inspiration from its evangelistic impulse. But, as I demonstrate in this chapter, seeker churches pioneered a new way of thinking about evangelism and church methodology that went beyond the Jesus People movement and significantly altered the modern American religious landscape.

The unconventional methods of seeker churches and their explosive growth have captured the attention of the secular media in recent decades. This is especially true in cities like Denver where church attendance has been historically low in comparison to other regions. In 2012, Denver’s *5280 Magazine* noted the unique nature of the Rocky Mountain region:

> The American West is historically religiously unaffiliated. Whether that’s a result of a deep-seated independent spirit, a lifestyle that deems being outside on a Sunday to be more holy than being inside a sanctuary, or a holdover from a bygone era when there simply weren’t enough clergy west of the Mississippi, religious organizations have had a difficult time settling here.³

Researchers have agreed. According to several criteria that measure a city’s “lack of Christian identity, belief and practice,” the Barna Group concluded in 2017 that Denver is the fourteenth most “post-Christian” city in America among a survey of one-hundred

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metropolitan areas. As a result, 5280 Magazine asked a simple question in its article on the region’s religious character: “in A.D. 2012, what do the residents of the Front Range truly believe?” The answer surprised editors and readers alike. In a region known for its skepticism toward organized religion, 60 percent of Coloradans identified as Christian, compared to 20 percent from other religions and 20 percent atheist or agnostic. In fact, 11 percent of all Coloradans identified as nondenominational Christians, one of the highest state rates in the nation.

One nondenominational congregation was highlighted in the article: Flatirons Community Church. Launched in 1994 with the seeker church model and situated in the town of Lafayette, between the politically liberal bastions of Boulder and Denver, Flatirons drew 14,000 people each weekend to its worship services in 2012, making it the largest congregation in Colorado at the time. This led editors of 5280 to ask: “if religion is truly disappearing [in Colorado], then how do we explain the 14,000 people who visit a

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5 Faison et al., “A Religious Experience.”

6 Ibid.

7 Colorado is one of sixteen states in the U.S. where at least 10 percent of Christian adherents are nondenominational; see Percent of Religious Adherents that Are in Non-Denominational Churches By State (Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2012) at: http://www.hartfordinstitute.org/nondenom/NonDenomPerAdhSTATE.jpg.
nondenominational Lafayette-based church every Sunday?" The answer lies in an exploration of the nondenominational seeker church model.

Seeker churches extend the identity of the modern nondenominational church movement in four important ways. First, seeker churches fully embrace the proselytizing conviction of modern evangelicalism. Second, they shed traditional religious symbols, rituals, forms, and methodologies for the singular cause of attracting and evangelizing nonreligious people, particularly those of younger generations. Third, seeker churches adopt a minimalist theological posture. And fourth, seeker churches preserve an independent identity for the sake of their mission, often with a more radical maverick spirit than previous nondenominational subtypes. The history and growth of Flatirons Community Church exemplify these characteristics.

Boulder and the Beginnings of Flatirons Community Church: 1994

The city of Boulder, Colorado was first settled in 1858, about twenty-five miles northwest of Denver. Lying at the base of the foothills and the iconic Flatirons sandstone formations, the city quickly grew with miners, settlers, and businessmen. In 1876, the same year Colorado joined the Union, the state legislature selected Boulder to be the site

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8 Faison et al., “A Religious Experience.”

9 As I describe below, Flatirons Community Church went by two other names in its early history: Boulder Creek Community Church (1994) and Coal Creek Community Church (1994-97). When relating the history of the church, I typically use the name representative of the era. When referring to the church in a broader fashion, I use the name Flatirons Community Church, or Flatirons.
of the University of Colorado (CU). Over the next century, Boulder developed into the quintessential American college town.

By 1990, the population of Boulder County was 225,339. The county included the city of Boulder along with small mountain hamlets to the west, Longmont to the north, and the towns of Superior, Louisville, and Lafayette on the outskirts of metropolitan Denver. But most of those residents were not religious. Only 37.2 percent of Boulder County residents identified as religious in 1990; 8.5 percent identified with evangelical Protestant churches. This lack of traditional religious identification in

Figure 6.1. City of Boulder with Flatirons Formations in Background, c. 1910. Courtesy of Denver Public Library.

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Boulder County is partly due to its development as a bohemian enclave over the past fifty years. In 1974, a Tibetan Buddhist monk founded Naropa Institute (now University) Boulder. The school hosted teachers like Allen Ginsberg at its Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. While many who attended Naropa were deeply spiritual, adherents of institutional religion—particularly traditional Christianity—felt marginalized in Boulder among so many other religious expressions. Boulder also became known for its liberal politics. In 1975, the county clerk became the first in the nation to allow same-sex marriage when she changed the words “male” and “female” to “person” on the county’s marriage license application.

Because of this pluralistic and politically progressive culture, conservative Christians increasingly used the words *irreligious* and *unchurched* in the 1980s and 90s to refer to Boulder. For example, one resident of Boulder who worked for a CU campus ministry described the area this way: “Boulder County is a crazy place. Especially in [the 1990s], it was one of the most unchurched places in the country. Very irreligious.” For these Christians, the term *unchurched* referred to Boulder residents who were hostile or apathetic toward Christian churches. Few Protestant congregations grew in the area,

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14 Andy Wineman, telephone interview by author, June 30, 2017.
which is why Boulder became known as “the place where churches came to die.” But one small group of Christians hoped to prove the exception.

The story of Flatirons Community Church began with Richard and Linda Case, who were attending First Presbyterian Church of Boulder in the early 1990s. Case was “a businessman with a pastor’s heart.” While leading a young marrieds Sunday School class at the church, Case and his wife noticed that “the young marrieds weren’t going to church; they would go to [Sunday School] every Sunday morning, but they weren’t going to church.” When the Cases asked them why they did not attend the worship service, members of the class said that the church’s traditional hymns and choir music did not appeal to them. Instead, they wanted contemporary praise music.

In the early nineties, “praise music” had gained a popular following among younger generation Christians. With the growth of the Christian music industry, a direct result of the charismatic and Jesus People movements of the sixties and seventies, some Protestant congregations had adopted a contemporary worship style, which consisted of singing simple “praise choruses” with modern instrumentation in place of traditional hymns and organ music. When the young marrieds voiced their preference for the new style, Case approached the leadership of First Presbyterian and suggested transforming one of the three traditional worship services into a contemporary style. “It will be a hit in

\[\text{\footnotesize 15 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 16 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 17 Richard Case, interview by author, Greenwood Village, Colorado, July 5, 2017.}\]
Colorado,” he suggested. Case had seen this kind of success at a church in Chicago (more on that experience below) and believed those in his young marrieds class along with scores of others in Boulder would be attracted by a more popular style of music less associated with traditional religion. But Case claims that the leadership rebuffed the proposal. “Absolutely not. We are who we are,” Case recalled them saying, “and we’re not changing.” Case may be exaggerating the bluntness of the exchange, but the message was clear: if his young marrieds group wanted contemporary music, the leadership proposed they start their own church.

Case took the suggestion to heart. He and his wife met with several other couples in the class and they considered the possibility of starting a church over the next several months. After much prayer and discussion, the small group launched Boulder Creek Community Church (BCCC) in July 1994. The name came from the creek that ran out of Boulder Canyon and through the heart of the city. Case served as the pastor of the church, though he maintained his full-time job as a business consultant. The group met in a home for a few weeks, then hosted its first public worship service in a room at the local

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18 Ibid.

19 Email correspondence from Karen Thacker to Andy Wineman and Paul Brunner, April 19, 2011, provided by Paul Brunner. Karen Thacker was an original member of Flatirons Community Church; her email to current staff members Wineman and Brunner summarizing the church’s beginnings concurs with Case’s recollection.


21 John Aguilar, “Flatirons Community Church: Bringing the Faithful to Lafayette’s Abandoned Big Boxes,” Daily Camera, April 9, 2011.
YMCA. Over the next few months, the infant congregation grew to about fifty people and moved to a larger facility at Boulder High School.

BCCC was nondenominational. Based on their experience with the Presbyterian church, Case said, “we didn’t want to link up with a [denominational] hierarchy that said, ‘okay, here’s how you have to do this.’ We thought our church was going to be a unique and creative thing and we didn’t really want anybody overseeing us. . . . In a way, it almost became easier to do it that way than to try to link up with someone.”22 Case and others who started BCCC did not want to submit to outside oversight; moreover, they believed that a denominational label was a stumbling block for most people in Boulder. “Our vision was really to appeal to the Boulderite,” Case remembered years later, “in terms of what it meant to walk with God and be creative with arts.”23 This vision to attract the wider culture became a defining trait for BCCC. At the time, Case believed that artistic expression and contemporary music were lacking in traditional churches.

Though the impetus to start a new church arose from discussions about what musical style appealed to young Christians, BCCC quickly embraced a larger question: what kind of church might appeal to non-Christian Boulderites? Their answer: one with engaging arts and musical production.

An undeniable influence on Case and the early leaders of BCCC was the example of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago. Case and his wife had lived in Chicago during a previous summer and attended Willow Creek. “It was amazing,” Linda recalled,


“the worship was incredible, and Hybels [Willow Creek’s senior pastor] was a good preacher.”\(^{24}\) As Case heard complaints from members of his Sunday School class at the Presbyterian church, he could not help but draw comparisons to Willow Creek’s success at attracting young people. And as he and his small group envisioned starting a new church, Willow Creek served as the model to follow. Case and the leaders of BCCC used Willow Creek resources, went to Willow Creek conferences, and adopted Willow Creek’s mission statement and practices. The church also joined the Willow Creek Association, an organization started by Willow Creek to help churches around the country implement their style of ministry.\(^{25}\) Before continuing the story of BCCC, it is important to pause and explore the story of Willow Creek Community Church and the origins of the seeker church movement.

*Willow Creek and the Seeker Church Movement*

Much has been written about Willow Creek and for good reason. Willow Creek has arguably influenced more American Protestant churches than any other single congregation in the past half-century.\(^{26}\) Other congregations have wielded greater political clout, shaped more significant theological development, or grown larger in size

\(^{24}\) Ibid.

\(^{25}\) I explore this nature of the Willow Creek Association below.

\(^{26}\) In 2007, Willow Creek was rated “the most influential church in the U.S.” by a survey of 2,000 non-Catholic American congregations. Twenty-nine of the fifty most influential churches identified by the survey in that year were affiliated with the Willow Creek Association, “Willow Creek Community Church Rated Most Influential in the U.S.,” *U.S. Newswire*, July 23, 2007.
(though not many). But for reasons that will become apparent, Willow Creek has single-handedly transformed the practices and methodology of thousands of churches over the past three decades.

The idea of Willow Creek began in 1972 when twenty-one-year-old Bill Hybels accepted a volunteer role at South Park Church in Chicago. Hybels came from a Dutch Reformed background in Kalamazoo, Michigan “in which the highest values included hard work, autonomy, self-sufficiency, frugality, and an unquestioning submission to the sovereignty of God.”27 After working at various summer camps and taking a job at a Christian youth organization in Chicago, Hybels agreed to help lead the music and a Bible study for South Park’s youth group.

Though Hybels did not know it at the time—he was simply helping a friend at the church—this opportunity came at a distinct moment in American culture and religion. As described in the previous chapter, in 1972 the Jesus People movement had attracted large swaths of urban countercultural youth. At the same time, evangelicalism as a movement was growing into a nationally-recognized phenomenon from its beginnings in the 1940s. Indeed, the two movements seemed to coalesce, merge, and feed one another at EXPLO ’72 in Dallas when 180,000 young people—Jesus People hippies and evangelical youth—were inspired by Billy Graham to take the nation and world by storm. “There is more potential power to change the world gathered here on this mall than I have ever seen,”

27 Lynne Hybels and Bill Hybels, Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 117.
Graham declared. “You are young. You are fearless. The future is yours.”

In subsequent years, the distinctive nature of the Jesus People movement matured with the changing times. But evangelicals co-opted many of its traits—particularly its contemporary music and emphasis on reaching youth culture—to engage the wider population. Indeed, the Jesus People movement paved the way for seeker churches.

After Hybels led the youth group Bible study at South Park Church for several months, its size grew to about eighty students. But most of the growth came from traditional church kids. Hybels and other leaders began to wonder if they should host specific events to which their youth could invite their nonreligious friends. The students were excited about the idea, but made several important suggestions to Hybels: the events should not be held in the old church basement; the songs they sang should not be traditional church songs; they should incorporate some drama and multi-media presentations that students were accustomed to using at their schools; and most importantly, Hybels should simplify his teaching and make it more relevant to non-Christian youth.

Hybels agreed and the idea of Son City was born.

Son City was a weekly youth event at South Park Church designed specifically with unchurched youth in mind. It leveraged new music, creativity, games, and practical messages aimed at kids who were unaccustomed to or turned off by traditional church. The goal was to create a “safe place” for non-Christian youth: a non-threatening

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environment where they could be themselves, ask questions, and not feel judged or condemned if they did not conform to traditional religious expectations. This perspective on creating a “safe place” would dominate seeker church language and methodology for decades to come.

At Son City, students began inviting their friends and within six months, 300 youth were attending each week. Within another year, twice as many youth were attending the Son City events as they were adults in the entire church. One night, when 600 youth showed up, Hybels channeled the evangelistic spirit of Billy Graham. He told them the story of Christ’s crucifixion and challenged youth to come forward and commit their lives to Christ. Three hundred youth became Christians that night and Hybels was overwhelmed with emotion. He remembered thinking: “Where would those kids who received Christ tonight be if there hadn’t been a service designed just for them, a safe place where they could come week after week and hear the dangerous, life-transforming message of Christ?”\(^{30}\) The answer to this question became the vision of Willow Creek.

In 1975, Hybels and other leaders left South Park Church and launched Willow Creek Community Church. Believing they could replicate the Son City experience on Sunday mornings with adults, they rented a movie theater and held their first service on October 12, 1975. One-hundred and twenty-five people attended. Over the next few years, Hybels and other leaders honed the new model of church. On Wednesday nights, a “New Community” gathering was held for Christians. It included the more traditional

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 40, emphasis original.
elements of worship, prayer, communion, and biblical teaching. Members were also encouraged to meet in small group Bible studies on other weeknights.

But on Sundays, the service was designed exclusively for seekers: non-Christian visitors with little or no church background. The target demographic was the huge baby-boomer generation: older teenagers and young adults in their twenties and thirties. Consequently, services included loud music, secular songs (something unheard of in church), drama, intricate multimedia presentations, and practical messages, usually based on one or two verses from the Bible. What was missing from these church services was equally important. Gone was the reciting of creeds, solemn prayers, Bible readings, traditional hymns, choirs, or lengthy sermons about theology or biblical history. Even the physical space was unlike a traditional church. They met in a movie theater where there were no crosses, stained-glass windows, wooden pews, or religious symbols. The room was called an “auditorium,” not a “sanctuary.” And when Willow Creek built its new campus in 1981, the facility looked more like a high school or shopping mall, not a church. Everything was designed to create an environment where nonreligious people would feel comfortable attending a church service that did not feel like a church service.

As Willow Creek honed this model, those who became Christians and joined the church were encouraged to invite their non-Christian friends to a service each weekend. This seeker-sensitive strategy became the blueprint for evangelism at Willow Creek. The mission of Willow Creek was simple: “to turn irreligious people into fully devoted
followers of Jesus Christ.”

Hybels even developed a seven-step process that described how a Willow Creek member might fulfill this mission to evangelize irreligious people:

- Step 1: Build an authentic relationship with a nonbeliever.
- Step 2: Share a verbal witness.
- Step 3: Bring the seeker to a service designed specifically for them.
- Step 4: Regularly attend a service for believers.
- Step 5: Join a small group.
- Step 6: Discover, develop, and deploy your spiritual gift.
- Step 7: Steward your resources in a God-honoring way.

If every attendee of Willow Creek embraced this mission and strategy, Hybels and other leaders believed there was no limit to the impact the church could have.

Willow Creek grew to over 5,000 attendees by 1985 and roughly 17,000 by 1992. Of course, there were difficulties and setbacks, especially in the early years. Raising money to purchase new facilities was challenging (new Christians were unaccustomed to giving money to a church and Willow Creek’s leaders were fearful about offending seekers by asking for money). There were also internal problems among the leadership when several key leaders left because of burnout. The model of creating bigger and better productions every weekend, driven by the fast-paced culture of a growing megachurch and Hybels hard-charging personality, created casualties among staff. Moreover, Willow Creek faced criticism by many traditional churches that

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31 Ibid., 167.
32 Ibid., 169-179.
33 Ibid., 101, 123.
34 Ibid., 67.
35 Ibid., 73-90.
questioned their methods. Fundamentalists believed the church sacrificed biblical authority and doctrine; denominational leaders could not imagine a church without crosses, creeds, or choirs.36

But it was hard to argue with Willow Creek’s success. A traditional evangelical church might be skeptical of Willow Creek’s methods, but how could they criticize the result of thousands of people who were regularly becoming Christians and getting baptized there? If evangelism was important for evangelicals, Willow Creek, it seemed, had cracked the code where other churches had failed. As a result, by the late 1980s, many evangelical churches—and even some mainline churches—began to take notice. Scores of pastors made pilgrimages to Chicago to learn Willow Creek’s secret.

In 1992, the church created the Willow Creek Association (WCA) to help other churches implement their model. For a small membership fee each year, WCA churches received discounts on Willow Creek curriculum, training materials, and conferences. Through these resources, churches learned the ins and outs of implementing the Willow Creek model. Sociologist Kimon Sargeant refers to the WCA as a new kind of denomination “because of its critical role in defining a seeker church ‘liturgy,’ creating resources for seeker church worship, providing training for staff, and organizing networks for sharing information and hiring staff.”37 Sargeant is partly correct; for churches that followed the Willow Creek style, the WCA replaced some of the functions


that denominations previously fulfilled. But I contend that the WCA was never a denomination in the way denominations have always operated. There was no uniform descriptor used in church names (like Lutheran or Methodist) that publicly identified them as part of the WCA, no doctrinal statement one must sign to join, no ordination process for pastors of Willow Creek-style churches, nor a hierarchy or measure of control over member churches. The WCA was primarily a resource sharing network or business.\(^{38}\)

In fact, the business world had begun taking notes on Willow Creek too. In 1989, business guru Peter Drucker wrote an article for Harvard Business Review on “What Business Can Learn from Nonprofits.”\(^{39}\) Drucker profiled the success of Willow Creek’s mission and asserted:

> A well-defined mission serves as a constant reminder of the need to look outside the organization not only for ‘customers’ but also for measures of success. The temptation to content oneself with the ‘goodness of our cause’—and thus to substitute good intentions for results—always exists in nonprofit organizations.\(^{40}\)

Drucker stressed that many organizations had mistakenly substituted their good intentions with results, but Willow Creek had achieved success by focusing on the true customers of their product: non-Christian outsiders, or seekers. In 1991, Harvard Business School even

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\(^{38}\) Sargeant’s argument that the WCA is a new kind of denomination is particularly insightful (ibid., 134-162). While I agree with his many of his conclusions, I suggest the term “denomination” does not describe what the WCA and other nondenominational networks that have created. I return to this discussion in Chapter Seven.


\(^{40}\) Ibid.
produced a case study of Willow Creek; students who wanted to be successful in the business world studied Willow Creek’s methods for gaining market share and satisfying the needs of customers.\textsuperscript{41}

One question, however, remained: could Willow Creek’s success be duplicated? Were the factors that led to Willow Creek’s success unique? Or could pastors and churches across the country—in places like Boulder, Colorado—pioneer the seeker model with equal success? Rich Case and a few dozen Christians at BCCC believed the answer was yes.

\textit{The Merger and Struggles at Flatirons Community Church: 1994-96}

Attempting to follow in Willow Creek’s footsteps, BCCC developed some momentum in its first few months. The congregation was still small and met in rented facilities at Boulder High School. But there was a sense of energy and excitement about pioneering a new kind of Willow Creek-style church in Boulder. In addition, the congregation had no paid staff members (Case was volunteering his time as a pastor) and was therefore able to save money from donations that was typically used for salaries.

Near the end of 1994, Case was approached by leaders of Coal Creek Community Church (CCCC), a struggling Evangelical Free church in nearby Louisville (see Figure 6.4 later in this chapter). The church, which had been in existence for over a decade, was behind on paying its bills, could not afford a full-time pastor, and proposed a merger with

BCCC. CCCC was initially named Trinity Bible Evangelical Free Church. It had been launched in 1983 by two other Evangelical Free churches in Boulder County.\textsuperscript{42} The Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) was a denomination that had roots stretching back to the Scandinavian Free Church tradition. The descriptor free referred to Scandinavian churches that operated independently and “free” from European state-sponsored church governance. As a result, the EFCA developed as a denomination in America that upheld local church autonomy and a congregational style of governance. Most EFCA churches in the 1980s and 1990s were traditional in format and conservative in theology. Like Bible churches, EFCA congregations emphasized biblical preaching and doctrinal education.

A few years after Trinity Bible Evangelical Free Church had begun in the Louisville area of eastern Boulder County, a man joined the church who had moved from Chicago and been on staff at Willow Creek. Tom Lambelet, the pastor at Trinity Bible EFC, remembers that he “imparted the vision to me of the Willow Creek model and being seeker-sensitive. That was kind of a new paradigm.”\textsuperscript{43} Like Case would a few years later, Lambelet subsequently visited Willow Creek, met Bill Hybels, and decided to embrace the Willow Creek model of ministry. He recalled, “I really bought into the whole thing. We tried to duplicate some of it: we had drama skits from Willow Creek, we were trying to push the envelope, be more seeker-sensitive, and be more topical instead of expository.

\textsuperscript{42} Aguilar, “Flatirons Community Church,” \textit{Daily Camera}, April 9, 2011.

\textsuperscript{43} Tom Lambelet, telephone interview by author, July 7, 2017.
[in preaching style].” Two other families from Willow Creek had moved to Colorado as well and helped Lambelet, but as the changes began to develop, some members of Trinity Bible EFC were resistant and tensions began to mount. Lambelet was perplexed. Looking back on the resistance he encountered, he said, “I think it was new, it was different, and many of those folks had come out of Calvary Bible [Evangelical Free Church], which was very traditional, and they wanted that to continue. And I was unwise, young, and idealistic and just figured if we could reach people for Christ, why would anyone object?” Lambelet was naïve in not expecting opposition. As a result, he discovered what other pastors would: attempting to incorporate a radically different perspective in a traditional denominational church would not be easy.

After a few discouraging years trying to implement the Willow Creek model, Lambelet left in 1990. The church had about 150 regular attendees and even owned some land and a building. But the following pastor also struggled to resolve the tensions between different groups in the church. He continued to attempt the seeker model and in 1993, the church changed its name to Coal Creek Community Church, “because Trinity Bible Evangelical Free Church was a mouthful and not very current.” Apparently, church leaders realized their name had a religious institutional feel and hoped the new name would better express their mission to reach outsiders. But by late 1994, the church had fallen on hard times. Expenses were exceeding donations and the pastor had left,

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Andy Wineman, telephone interview by author, June 30, 2017.
partly because the church could no longer afford to pay him. As a last-ditch effort, the remaining leaders sought out Case to explore a merger with BCCC.

In many ways, the merger made sense. CCCC had been in existence for eleven years and despite their recent struggles, there was a sense of establishment and a core group of people remained. BCCC, on the other hand, was less than a year old. They had saved money but were still small and could benefit from instantly doubling the size of their congregation. As Andy Wineman, an elder at CCCC, said of the proposed merger, “[CCCC] had property and a building; [BCCC] had capital and energy and momentum.”\(^{47}\) And at the time, both churches were following the Willow Creek philosophy. In fact, both had taken from local rivers names that bore a striking resemblance to Willow Creek’s.

In December of 1994, the two congregations merged.\(^ {48}\) They kept the Coal Creek Community Church name, largely for financial and legal reasons. CCCC had already established tax exemption status as a church and owned the land and building in their name. It was much easier to keep the CCCC name than file the paperwork to transfer ownership and legal status to a different entity.\(^ {49}\) On the other hand, the church kept

\(^{47}\) Ibid.


\(^{49}\) Email correspondence from Peet James to Paul Brunner, n.d., provided by Paul Brunner. Peet James was an early member of Flatirons Community Church.
BCCC’s mission statement, which was taken directly from Willow Creek: “to turn irreligious people into fully-devoted followers of Christ.”

After the merger, CCCC had a little over 100 people. The church sold the building in Louisville and began meeting at the planetarium on the CU campus in Boulder. The planetarium offered an exciting opportunity for employing the Willow Creek model: it had a projection system that displayed visualization across the entire ceiling for planetary and star-gazing shows. Case remembers their first service at the planetarium on Easter Sunday in 1995 whereby a multimedia show projected the sun rising on the ceiling while telling the biblical story of Christ’s resurrection. “It was the most powerful Easter service we’ve ever been a part of,” Case recalled. Meeting at the planetarium continued to provide new outlets for creativity. “Whatever we could dream up,” Case added, “we could do: project the Notre Dame cathedral or woods with a church in the background and snow falling—all on the ceiling as the screen.”

CCCC also incorporated drama in the services, and Case attempted to provide simple and authentic sermons that would appeal to seekers. Indeed, the leaders of CCCC in its first two years seemed to take all their cues from Willow Creek’s playbook. One member at the time described Willow Creek’s influence:

> Early on the entire leadership team of the church (around 20 people) all went to Willow Creek for a conference in Chicago. Much was learned and adopted from these visits. Music, drama, video, kids, etc. teams were all created. Also, we

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50 “Coal Creek Community Church Introduction and Direction,” December 9, 1994, document provided by Andy Wineman.


52 Ibid.
learned to take what a normal church would do as a theme for one service and expand it out into several services, each with a simple concrete idea that all the music, video, drama and sermon could be wrapped around. . . . We also took steps to infuse honesty into each message, having everyone up front to share the rough, unsolved parts of themselves and honestly ask and try to answer everyday questions.\textsuperscript{53}

If young adult seekers in Boulder could be drawn to a service, CCCC hoped to provide an experience that was creative in artistic expression, exceptional in its production quality, authentic and accessible in its sermon style, and unlike anything they would experience in a traditional church.

However, implementing this model effectively proved to be a challenge. By this time, Willow Creek had almost 20,000 attendees, twenty years of experience, and an army of trained volunteer teams. Executing the Willow Creek model required talented musicians and technicians, a preacher who could connect with nonreligious people, and large teams of experienced and dedicated volunteers. New churches often lack those elements, and CCCC struggled to implement the production quality. The volunteer pool was still small, the congregation met in rented facilities each week (which required tedious setting up and tearing down for every service), and Case remained a full-time businessman. Moreover, many who stayed at CCCC from their EFCA background still had lingering questions about the model. Perhaps hoping to return to their more traditional roots, some left after the merger. Wineman remembers that during 1995, “attendance was shrinking and I didn’t feel like what we were doing we were doing very

\textsuperscript{53} Email correspondence from Peet James to Paul Brunner, n.d., provided by Paul Brunner.
well. . . . Honestly, I didn’t think we were going to make it.”

Case, too, realized, “I can’t keep running a business and doing this. We need to go get somebody.” So, in 1996, the church set out to hire a full-time pastor who had the talent, time, and passion to execute the model well. After reviewing over a hundred applicants, they hired Gil Jones. The church would never be the same.

Breaking Away from the Denomination

Before continuing the congregation’s history, it is important to explore its nondenominational status. When BCCC began in mid-1994, it was a nondenominational church. But the merger later that year with CCCC, an Evangelical Free church, raised questions about its subsequent denominational character. When two churches from different denominational background merge, there are two possible outcomes: one denominational affiliation is adopted (usually that of the larger church) or the congregation maintains membership in both denominations (similar to dual citizenship). Yet, the circumstances of BCCC and CCCC’s merger were unique. Would the new church maintain CCCC’s original ties to the EFCA? Or would BCCC’s initial identity as a nondenominational church win out?

Wineman, an elder at CCCC before the merger, noted that the relationship with the EFCA had always been “loose” at CCCC and that the leaders “didn’t feel strongly

54 Andy Wineman, telephone interview by author, June 30, 2017.

about maintaining it.” BCCC’s pastor Rich Case recalled that CCCC was desperate at the time and that the transition felt less like two churches merging and more like CCCC joining BCCC, despite its larger size and keeping the CCCC name for legal reasons. “We didn’t use their statement of faith,” Case said, “and we didn’t affiliate with the EFCA denomination. They surrendered completely; they joined us.” In his recollection of the circumstances, the post-merger CCCC was nondenominational.

Letters between an EFCA official and the church’s leaders after the merger support this understanding. Almost a year after the merger, Leroy Grimm, an administrator at the Rocky Mountain District of the EFCA, wrote to Case: “Our primary concern is over whether your present church is an Evangelical Free Church and whether you want it to be. We have been contacted by members of the Louisville church [CCCC] alerting us to the fact that they don’t believe you are an Evangelical Free Church.”

Apparently, some members of CCCC who had been part of the congregation before the merger were discouraged that the church had left the EFCA, so they reached out to district officials to voice their concern. Grimm, who seemed uninformed about the merger, went on his letter to ask about the merger process and if members of either church had voted for it. He also outlined several qualifications for maintaining

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56 Andy Wineman, telephone interview by author, June 30, 2017.


58 Correspondence from Leroy Grimm to Richard Case, November 5, 1995, provided by Andy Wineman.
membership as an EFCA church. His qualifications are illustrative of how denominations often define a church’s affiliation. They included:

– Are you subscribing to the 12 articles of faith of the EFCA without any additions or deletions?
– Is Evangelical Free Church in your name or as a by-line in your advertising and correspondence?
– Are you, as pastors, planning to become licensed or ordained with the EFCA?
– Are you practicing congregational government?59

For Grimm, membership in the EFCA denomination focused on doctrinal alignment, public identification in the church’s name and advertising, ministerial affiliation (which also ensured doctrinal alignment), and the key practice of congregational polity, which was a hallmark of EFCA philosophy.60

The leaders of CCCC wrote back with an explanation of the merger and responses to each of Grimm’s questions. Interestingly, CCCC’s leaders did not explicitly state a non-denominational identity or reject EFCA affiliation. They noted that “we subscribe to the twelve articles of faith of the EFCA,” that “we are practicing congregational government,” and that regarding their ministers becoming licensed “and how we would be involved with the EFCA, we request your assistance.”61 However, the letter also stated:

One condition of the merger was that Coal Creek would adopt Boulder Creek’s model of ministry, namely, an additional affiliation with the Willow Creek Association and a seeker-target mission. . . . Our advertising does not include any

59 Ibid.

60 Government or polity in Protestant churches refers to how leadership and authority are defined and practiced. Grimm’s definition of denominational affiliation further supports the argument made previously that the WCA was not a denomination. Membership in the WCA required none of these characteristics.

61 Correspondence from CCCC leaders to Leroy Grimm, November 28, 1995, provided by Andy Wineman.
reference to the Evangelical Free Church, since we are attempting to reach out to seekers who have no church background or a variety of church backgrounds.\(^{62}\)

It seems that while the post-merger CCCC was open to maintaining an affiliation with the EFCA, it would be on their terms and not at the expense of their larger seeker-oriented mission.

Rich Case does not recall meeting with EFCA officials after this letter; he maintains the church continued to be nondenominational. Wineman believes CCCC had functionally dropped its ties even before the merger. None of the documents from CCCC at the time of the merger mention any denominational affiliation, though the church’s letterhead did note “Member of Willow Creek Association.” Furthermore, given that local EFCA officials only found out about the merger almost a year after it happened, it is evident the church was no longer publicly, relationally, or functionally involved with the denomination.

After Jones came to CCCC in 1996, he did recall meeting with Grimm. He also remembered being invited to a meeting of EFCA megachurch pastors around the year 2000 when the church began to experience significant growth. When asked if the church was affiliated with the EFCA during his tenure, Jones indicated that a very loose connection was maintained, but the church “fully projected ‘nondenominational’.”\(^{63}\) Paul Brunner, who joined the elder board in 1999 and is now executive pastor at Flatirons,

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\(^{62}\) Ibid.

\(^{63}\) Gil Jones, interview by author, Louisville, Colorado, July 12, 2017.
said the church staff never used the EFCA doctrinal statement, attended EFCA meetings, utilized EFCA resources, or connected with the denomination in any way.

Sorting through this complexity, one fact is clear: the church maintained an independent character since BCCC’s founding in 1994. Its early leaders never felt the need to cut ties with the EFCA denomination because those that started BCCC were not connected with the EFCA from the beginning. If EFCA officials wanted to maintain ties, they could and occasionally did through their inquiries and meetings with Jones. But nothing more ever developed. For the sake of its mission to reach seekers, the congregation maintained a vigorous nondenominational identity.

“Reaching a Lost and Broken World” at Flatirons Community Church: 1996-2005

Gil Jones grew up in an agnostic family. In high school, friends introduced him to church and Christianity, and he became a committed Christian at Bradley University in Indiana. While volunteering in numerous college ministries, Jones recognized his strengths in public speaking and leadership, and though he had planned to be a businessman, he began to consider a career in full-time ministry. He spent several years working on college campuses with Campus Crusade for Christ and then attended Western Seminary in Phoenix to prepare for a pastoral role.64

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64 Jones’ account of his personal history, along with his quotations, in this paragraph and the three that follow are taken from Gil Jones, interview by author, Louisville, Colorado, July 12, 2017. Like other oral histories in the study, Jones’ account is subjective and some details are unverifiable. Nevertheless, his oral history is useful for understanding his and Flatirons’ narratives.
While at seminary, Jones worked at a large Bible church in Phoenix where he soon felt like an outsider on staff. “I was connecting well with college students,” he recalled, “but I would use words in a Bible church that weren’t appropriate; I was raw.” The problem was not Jones’ theology; he shared the conservative beliefs of the church. But his personality and speaking style did not fit the conservative ethos of the church. So he resigned and took another position at a Baptist church in Phoenix. Over the course of two years, Jones said that the college group at the Baptist church grew rapidly under his leadership, but again he faced criticism over his style. The elders pointed to students in his college ministry and said, “they’re smoking, wearing hats, and not coming to Sunday service.” While this did not bother Jones, his supervisors felt the students needed to curb their wild behavior and conform to the church’s traditional beliefs and ways.

These two experiences helped Jones realize that his approach to ministry was different than many conservative, evangelical congregations. When he met with a group of seminary professors prior to graduation, they asked him what kind of church he envisioned leading. With an air of self-confidence, he replied, “it’s going to be like a U2 concert with the best theology ever, spoken in ways the world has never heard in this context. And it’s going to be contextualized.”

Missionaries often use the term contextualization to refer to how they adapt the Christian message to a foreign culture. Jones saw himself as a missionary bringing the Christian faith and message to a new generation of young people that would never be interested in traditional churches. He claimed his seminary professors were distraught by
his answer. They did not question his theology; the hang-up was his methodology. “We teach you here how to be a teacher-shepherd,” Jones remembers them responding.

And teacher-shepherds go on hospital visits and meet with people in their homes; they marry and bury. But you’re an evangelist . . . If you want to do that, why didn’t you stay with Crusade? Be the next Billy Graham? This doesn’t sound like a church model to us.

The challenge that Jones ran into was the challenge many churches like Willow Creek were confronting. Parachurch organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ and Young Life were engaging young people in nontraditional ways, but many congregations—apart from some in the Jesus People movement—had been skeptical about adopting those methods in a formal church setting.

After seminary, Jones took a job as a teaching pastor at a Willow Creek-style church in Illinois. He appreciated the way the congregation was attempting to reach seekers. But Jones felt that the church only attracted middle-aged baby-boomers, while he wanted to reach Gen-Xers in their twenties and thirties like himself. He also believed the church was too conservative culturally; most importantly, he wanted to be the senior pastor. A friend of his at Willow Creek told him about the job opening at CCCC in Boulder and Jones applied. He thought the culture of Boulder and the opportunity to be senior pastor were the perfect mix. The church hired him in September 1996 and at 31 years old, Jones finally had the opportunity he had been dreaming of.

65 Teaching pastor is a position often established in larger churches. The teaching pastor focuses on teaching or preaching in worship services and other educational programs but remains subordinate to a senior or lead pastor, who is responsible for the overall direction of the church.
Initially, Jones was impressed by the small congregation. They were zealous about creating a church that would attract young spiritual seekers in Boulder. But Jones’ first few years would be challenging. Most of the members of CCCC were middle-aged and, like his experience at his previous church, Jones wanted to reach a younger population. Moreover, Case had stayed at the church as an elder and tensions existed between the two men. But within a year, Case moved away and Jones finally felt the freedom to fully bring his style and vision to the church.

One of the first things Jones did was change the name of the congregation to Flatirons Community Church. The Flatirons sandstone formations were visible from all over eastern Boulder County, whereas the name Coal Creek was primarily associated with Coal Creek Canyon and the town of Louisville, where the creek ran. Jones and leaders felt “it needs to be more of a regional church than a local church.” Whereas many other congregations had a parish mindset that emphasized serving neighborhoods, towns, and cities—recall the “persistent localism” of Bible churches—seeker churches often developed larger aspirations.67

Jones also hired a talented worship leader named Chris Johnson, a friend he knew from Arizona. Johnson’s musical style appealed to a younger demographic of spiritual seekers. Wineman, who remained an elder after the merger, remembered: “Chris Johnson was a great worship leader, and the music really connected. We weren’t singing hymns


67 Prosperity churches often share this characteristic toward wider influence and success.
and we weren’t singing slow. We were fast and loud and hip and current.”

Jones’ preaching and personality were particularly effective for the seeker model as well. Wineman recalled that “he brought a lot of energy, he worked hard, spent a lot of time with people, connected with people, and people liked him a lot. His preaching was good, very good.”

Another leader described Jones as “really charismatic in his persona” and even Case, before he left, acknowledged that “Gil came in and he was such a gifted preacher that it started to really grow.”

Together, Johnson’s musical talent and Jones’ winsome preaching provided the ingredients often missing in earlier years. As a result, attendees started inviting more non-Christian friends and the vision of creating a church for spiritual seekers began to blossom.

In its first few years, Flatirons focused its energy and resources largely on its Sunday service. Most Protestant churches offer numerous programs for their congregations, such as children’s Sunday School, midweek Bible studies for adults, educational classes, baptism and membership classes, marriage and divorce counseling, recovery groups, local outreach programs, social justice ministries, nursing home visitation, volunteering with non-profit organizations, mission trips, and a myriad of other ministries. At the time, Flatirons had children’s ministries and small groups, but the overriding emphasis was creating an attractive Sunday experience. Wineman noted:

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68 Andy Wineman, telephone interview by author, June 30, 2017.

69 Ibid.


“[Flatirons] was primarily about the Sunday service; in fact, we had very little else going on. We had no missions, virtually no local community outreach. . . . The big focus was ‘let’s do [Sunday] well.’”\footnote{Andy Wineman, telephone interview by author, June 30, 2017.} One reason for the limited focus was resources: as a new church, staff and finances limited the number of programs they could offer. But the primary reason was philosophical. Seeker churches are focused on attracting and converting non-Christians, and they believe the Sunday service is the most effective means for accomplishing this goal.

If Sundays take center stage for seeker churches, each element of the Sunday service is thought to be incredibly important. At Flatirons, Sunday sermons were planned meticulously. Each week’s sermon was designed to fit within a larger sermon series that typically lasted three to eight weeks (see Figure 6.2).

Each sermon series addressed a specific topic or theme, contrary to many other churches. For example, liturgical congregations (such as Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran churches) follow a lectionary of Bible passages that form the basis of each week’s sermon. Another approach, the expository method, is often adopted by evangelical pastors. They select a book of the Bible and preach through it verse by verse, often for several months. But seeker churches like Flatirons implement a short-term, thematic approach to sermon series. Practical themes or topics are chosen to grab the attention of seekers and address their felt needs. Specific series and sermon titles are often given catchy names that relate to current cultural phenomena.
1998 Messages

Diamonds In The Rough
(How God Can Use Imperfect You)

1/11 Part 1: Your Imperfect Past Is Perfect (2:1-10) 8/9
1/18 Part 2: Kickin' Back, God Style (2:21-22) 8/16
2/1 Part 4: When The Road Looks Bumpy (4:5-22) 8/30
2/8 Restoring Joy To Your Relationship 2/15
2/22 Restoring Romance To Your Relationship 9/6
Restoring God To Your Relationship 9/13

God, I Have A Question!

3/1 Part 1: Why Do You Allow Pain & Suffering? (D) 9/20
3/8 Part 2: Do All Roads Lead To Heaven? 9/27
3/22 Part 4: Can A Thinking Person Believe In Jesus? (D) 10/11

Becoming Mighty Morphin Power People!
(Sermon On The Mount, Matthew 5-7)

4/5 Part 2: Get Your Chin Up, part 2 (5:7-12/D) 10/25
4/12 Surprised By God's Power (Easter Service/D) 11/1
4/26 Part 4: The Antidote For Anger (5:21-26/D) 12/6
5/3 Part 5: Looking vs. Lusting (5:27-32) 11/15
5/10 Motherhood Madness (The Pressures Of Being A Mom/D) 11/22
5/24 Part 6: Cross Your Heart, Hope To Die? (Matt. 5:33-37) 5/31
Part 7: Graduate Level Love (5:38-48) 12/6
5/7 Part 8: Operation Secret Storm (6:1-18) 12/6

Putting “Christ” Back In Christmas

6/21 Communicating Love To Your Child (Father's Day/D) 12/20
6/28 Part 10: Skin Crème For A Worry Wart (6:25-34) 12/24
Part 11: Curing That Critical Spirit (7:1-8/D) 7:19
Part 12: How To Ask Dad For The Car Keys (7:7-11/D) 7:26

Private Conversations

Part 1: What Jesus Would Say To Jack Kevorjian (D) 1/3-12, 4/12-19/C
Part 2: What Jesus Would Say To Bill Clinton 1/13-21, 3/8-12/D
Part 3: What Jesus Would Say To Michael Jordan (D) 1/22-3, 4/17-11/D

Fire Side Chat: Flatirons’ Vision 2000 (DNS)

Finding Hope During Our Toughest Times

1/1 Part 1: Hope For The Time Of Suffering (1:3-12, 4:12-19/C)
Part 2: Hope For The Time Of Temptation (1:13-21, 3:8-12/D)
Part 3: Hope For The Time Of Physical Healing (2:1-2)
Part 4: Hope For The Time Of Feeling Useless (2:4-10, 4:7-11/D)
Part 5: Hope For The Time Of Unfaithfulness (2:11-26, 3:13-17/D)
Part 8: Hope For The Time Of Life's Battles (4:1-11)

What God Really Wants You To Know

7/26 Part 1: The Scandal Of His Grace (D) 7/26
8/2 Part 2: The Wonder Of His Spirit (Frankska/SM)

Figure 6.2. Catalog of Sermons at Flatirons Community Church from 1998. Courtesy of Paul Brunner.
For example, 1998 began with a sermon series titled “Diamonds in the Rough: How God Can Use the Imperfekt You” (the misspelled word communicated human flaws). Another series that explored Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount was titled “Becoming Mighty Morphin Power People!” after the popular children’s television series. Later that year, three sermons were preached on “What Would Jesus Say to Jack Kevorkian, Bill Clinton, and Michael Jordan.” Jones and Flatirons were not shy about tackling tough issues, but many messages focused on hope, grace, and redemption.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date: 12/27/98</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Lighting</th>
<th>Music</th>
<th>Proj. (Slides)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-service</strong></td>
<td>Music Team up on stage at 9:58 getting ready. Begin Praise &amp; Worship at 10:00</td>
<td>10/8 (stage/audience)</td>
<td>Praises/CD. Fade out when Music Team begins Praise &amp; Worship</td>
<td>Praises Announcement slides at 9:45. Fade out when band begins Praise &amp; Worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRAISE &amp; WORSHIP</strong> (10:00-10:25)</td>
<td>Praise comes up at end of song, seats people, then goes into Welcome/Theme</td>
<td>10/8 (song 1-3) 6/5 (song 4-5)</td>
<td>1) &quot;Jesus, Mighty God&quot; 2) &quot;No Name Over Me&quot; 3) &quot;Glorify Your Name&quot; 4) &quot;Sing With Joy&quot; 5) &quot;I Love You Lord&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transition #1</strong></td>
<td>Praise comes up at end of song, seats people, then goes into Welcome/Theme</td>
<td>Fade up to 10/5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WELCOME/ THEME</strong> (10:25-10:29)</td>
<td>Preach brings ushers forward and prays into the Offering</td>
<td>10/5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transition #2</strong></td>
<td>Praise comes up at end of song, seats people, then goes into Welcome/Theme</td>
<td>Fade down to 5/4 after Praise</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OFFERING</strong> (10:26-10:33)</td>
<td>Chris oversees Offering Instrumental</td>
<td>5/4</td>
<td>?????????????</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transition #3</strong></td>
<td>Chris oversees Offering Instrumental</td>
<td>Fade up to 10/7 when song is finished</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MESSAGE</strong> (10:32-11:00)</td>
<td>Music Team comes up on stage for Celebration as Gil sings</td>
<td>10/7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transition #4</strong></td>
<td>Music Team comes up on stage for Celebration as Gil sings</td>
<td>Fade down to 6/5 after Gil sings</td>
<td>1) &quot;We Surrender&quot; 2) &quot;Glorify Your Name&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CELEBRATION</strong> (11:00-11:15)</td>
<td>Chris overs Gil when Music Team is ready</td>
<td>6/5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post Service</strong></td>
<td>Praise gives a couple of announcements and says goodbye</td>
<td>Fade up to 10/8 after Praise says goodbye</td>
<td>Praises/CD right after Praise says goodbye</td>
<td>Praises Announcement slides right after Post says goodbye</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6.3.** Program Flow from 1998 Service at Flatirons Community Church. Courtesy of Paul Brunner.

The music and other elements of the worship service were also planned methodically (see Figure 6.3). Announcement slides were flashed on the screen before
the service began as attendees took their seats. A band—usually consisting of guitars, drums, keyboards, and multiple singers—then took the stage and played several contemporary songs to begin the service. No traditional hymns were included. A staff member or leader then welcomed people and introduced a financial offering that was collected. Jones, or another communicator, then preached the morning’s message, after which a couple more choruses were sung before the service concluded. Every transition between elements was planned; musical interludes and lighting changes signaled a new element.

In a sense, this type of meticulous planning was not new for church leaders. Priests, pastors, and music ministers have always labored over worship service orders. But the focus in seeker churches is different. Traditional pastors are usually concerned with theological consistency between each service element. For example, certain prayers, Bible readings, and hymns are chosen to align with the lectionary, liturgical season, or sermon topic. More significantly, traditional church services are designed with regular churchgoers in mind. It is assumed that attendees are familiar with the words of creeds; when to stand up, sit down, or kneel; how to find hymns in the hymnal; what communion means and how to participate; and what various religious symbols refer to. While denominational Protestant churches are often less formal than Catholic churches, many still utilize forms and symbols (such as different-colored robes or candles) to communicate theological beliefs.

But seeker churches utilize a different approach. They envision people who have never been regular church-goers — Willow Creek called them “unchurched Harry and
Mary”—attending a service. As a result, seeker churches eliminate many components that may confuse or alienate outsiders, such as long prayers, Bible readings, recitation of creeds, and communion. These elements may be included in a different venue—like Willow Creek’s midweek service for Christians—but weekend services are designed primarily with unchurched seekers in mind. Seeker churches like Flatirons also focus on entertainment value and production excellence. They hope attendees experience the same quality of music and production as they would at a rock concert or Broadway play. And seeker churches minimize the use of religious symbols. Most seeker churches that began in the 1980s and 90s chose to meet in schools, auditoriums, or secular venues rather than traditional church buildings. Usually missing from their facilities are crosses, religious statues, icons, pews, hymnals, kneeling benches, or choir lofts. When Flatirons finally moved into their own facilities, they had a large stage, comfortable chairs, and referred to the room as an auditorium, not a sanctuary. The building itself looked more like a shopping mall than a church. Each of these facility decisions was made intentionally with one goal in mind: creating a safe place for spiritual seekers.

At Flatirons, Jones gave direction to this goal by implementing a new mission statement for the church: “to bring the awesome life of Christ to a lost and broken world.” Lost and broken referred to the kind of people Flatirons thought they could help—those who were going through difficult circumstances of hurt, loss, family crises,

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74 Andy Wineman, telephone interview by author, June 30, 2017.
or addictions; or those who were seeking a deeper spiritual purpose in life but needed direction. Jones and other leaders knew that Sunday services at Flatirons might be safe and non-threatening for these kinds of seekers, but ultimately, they wanted to communicate that a relationship with Jesus was the answer to their problems. And Jones was particularly effective doing this. If his authenticity or “rawness” was perceived as a fault at his previous Bible and Baptist church stints during seminary, he connected well with those Flatirons was attracting. One leader recalled: “He could really attract the young snowboarder kid that smoked a lot of weed who would come through the doors. Gil connected with those people and they said, ‘I feel accepted here, I don’t feel judged and when he’s preaching about who Jesus is, it’s somehow connected to my heart’ and it really created an unusual population of unchurched people. I’d say 80 percent of our people [in the late 1990s] were not church people.”

Leaders at Flatirons recognized the value of Jones’ “raw” personality and speaking style and encouraged him to leverage it even more on Sundays. When the church began offering a recovery ministry to addicts, the leader of the ministry challenged him: “you need to unzip your soul. I’m bringing people into this church to hear real life stuff and I’m expecting you to bring it.” And when attendees took the challenge to invite their non-Christian friends seriously, Jones felt responsible to deliver a message that would be relevant, endearing, and transformative. “Someone would say,” he recalled, “‘I’m bringing fourteen people to church next week’ and then they would bring

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76 Gil Jones, interview by author, Louisville, Colorado, July 12, 2017.
them and they’d be on the second row and the person would say to me before the service, ‘I brought them, don’t eff it up.’ And every week, I thought, ‘I can’t let them down.’”

This kind of story is repeated throughout seeker churches. Every Sunday, pastors, singers, leaders, and volunteer teams feel a weight of responsibility to create a safe environment for seekers to hear a relevant message and then deliver on their promises.

This responsibility gets at the heart of two interrelated values for seeker churches. Their leaders are confident: if they create a church that is attractive to non-Christians (and the preacher “delivers” effectively), it will translate into numerical growth. Some suggest that seeker churches only care about numbers, in a different way, and yet comparable, to prosperity churches. Seeker churches are driven by a desire for growth, but only as a measure of their success in evangelizing non-Christians. Most seeker churches are not content with transfer growth: Christians leaving other churches to attend theirs. This would not fulfill their evangelistic mission. However, lack of any numerical growth would suggest their methods at reaching non-Christians are ineffective. There is an interplay between religious faith and a strong work ethic here. Seeker church leaders believe in the supernatural power of their message. They also think many churches have created unnecessary barriers for that message to be communicated and received. If they remove those barriers—through the hard work of making their music, message, and environments more accessible to outsiders—success, they believe, is assured.

Jones did not let the people of Flatirons down. After several years of employing the seeker church style, Flatirons began to attract larger crowds. In 1999, the church

77 Ibid.
moved from Fairview High School in Boulder to a more permanent location in Lafayette.\textsuperscript{78} Lafayette was about ten miles east of Boulder (see Figure 6.4).

![Map of Flatirons' locations in Boulder and metropolitan Denver area.](image)

**Figure 6.4.** Map of Flatirons’ locations in Boulder and metropolitan Denver area.

The Lafayette area was growing because of its cheaper housing and proximity to metropolitan Denver. Moreover, the cost of permanent facilities in Lafayette was more affordable than Boulder. Flatirons hosted their first service in Lafayette in an old carpet store on Easter Sunday in 1999; about 300 people attended. From that point on, the church began its meteoric rise in attendance numbers. Nothing specific happened in 1999; it just seems that the church reached a tipping point with its ability to attract and

\textsuperscript{78} Aguilar, “Flatirons Community Church,” *Daily Camera*, April 9, 2011.
keep new people. In 2000, the average attendance grew to 526; in 2001, it doubled to 1,079 weekly attendees.\(^79\) The renovated carpet store only held 250 seats and the church hosted five weekend services to accommodate the crowds. But leaders were not content. “To stay at our current location,” a church memo in 2002 indicated, “means not being able to reach any more lost people for God’s kingdom. As you well know, there are no more seats.”\(^80\) So the church dreamed bigger.

In 2002, Flatirons moved to a larger, former Country General store, also in Lafayette. The renovation cost of approximately $1.3 million for new facilities was raised by the church in six months. The new auditorium had 1,400 seats.\(^81\) The congregation also began developing new ministry programs, including a tutoring initiative at a local elementary school and support for global missions in places like Afghanistan. But the Sunday service designed for seekers remained its defining characteristic. The average weekly attendance in 2002 doubled again to 2,185; in 2003, it was 2,722; and in 2004, it reached 3,714.\(^82\) Local newspapers took notice with headlines like “‘Church for the

\(^{79}\) “Flatirons Community Church History and Milestones (2011),” document provided by Andy Wineman.


\(^{81}\) “The Church of ‘Me, Too,’,” *Outreach Magazine*, 2008, 56.

\(^{82}\) “Flatirons Community Church History and Milestones (2011),” document provided by Andy Wineman.
unchurched’ has enjoyed exceptional growth in Lafayette.” The dream of reaching the masses in Boulder County and metropolitan Denver had become a reality.

Flatirons Community Church: 2005-present

My concern is primarily with nondenominational churches from 1945-2000. Jones’ leadership and Flatirons’ growth carried the congregation into the twenty-first century as an exemplary nondenominational seeker church. Before analyzing the ethos of seeker churches more broadly, a significant transition that took place at Flatirons in 2005 is worth noting. A year earlier, Jones began having trouble in his marriage. As he later commented, the problems in his personal life and marriage had been building for some time. On one hand, the church was exploding in numbers and “everything we were touching was turning to gold; we were on top of everything.” On the other hand, Jones was experiencing burnout attempting to keep up with the growth, his marriage was failing, and he recalled feeling empty and lonely. In time, Jones had an affair with another staff member. He insisted, “I was so scared, I sabotaged [our marriage].” When the elders found out that Jones has been misleading them and had an affair, he was forced to resign in May 2005.

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84 Gil Jones, interview by author, Louisville, Colorado, July 12, 2017.

85 Ibid.
Oftentimes, when a charismatic leader like Jones leaves a successful church because of a moral issue like adultery, the church suffers incredibly. Many who were drawn to the church because of the pastor’s charisma often leave. For about nine months, Flatirons searched for a replacement. When the elders chose Jim Burgen, a pastor from the independent Christian tradition in Kentucky, there were fears among the staff.

Brunner recalls, “they saw Jim as this Kentucky guy, he’s Bible Belt, he’s going to come and change the ethos of who we were. He doesn’t drink, he doesn’t smoke cigars, he was really straight-laced, and they were really worried Jim was going to come in and change everything about Flatirons.”

86 But the church flourished under Burgen. He quickly embraced Flatirons’ ethos of authenticity and mission to reach seekers. Over the next decade, Flatirons grew from roughly 4,000 to over 20,000 in weekend attendance. The church has recently opened four additional campuses in the Denver area (see Figure 6.4 for map).

Figure 6.5. Left, Flatirons Community Church main campus in Lafayette, 2017; right, Flatirons Community Church Easter Service, 2016. Courtesy of Flatirons Community Church.

Much more could be written about the growth under Burgen’s leadership and the way Flatirons continued to model the seeker church methodology. But one comment about the transition from Jones to Burgen is particularly illustrative. Many thought there would be a mass exodus and the church would implode when Jones resigned. But as Brunner notes: “I don’t think anyone knew where else to go; [Flatirons] was so different that we didn’t lose anyone.”\textsuperscript{87} Those who had been attracted to Flatirons—with its loud music, nontraditional ways, and authentic preaching style—had no other church options like it in the area. Jones certainly played an essential role in Flatirons growth. But the church was not built on his personality; it was defined by an entirely different way of conceiving of church that transformed how many modern Americans (re)engaged religious faith.

\textit{Analysis of Seeker Churches}

By the year 2000, churches that embraced the seeker model had proliferated the country. The Willow Creek Association included 5,000 member churches in that year.\textsuperscript{88} Some of those were affiliated with a denomination. Following in Willow Creek’s footsteps, they often shed their traditional forms and adopted a focus on targeting nonreligious seekers during their Sunday services. Many of them also downplayed their denominational identities. Historian Michael Hamilton gave one example: “Granger Community Church in northern Indiana—a Willow Creek lookalike—is part of the

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{88} Sargeant, \textit{Seeker Churches}, 134.
United Methodist Church, but there’s no way to tell that from its signs, advertisements, or website.”

Many, like Granger Community Church, had embraced a functional nondenominationalism.

In 1994, when WCA membership was about 600 churches, 63.6 percent did not display any denominational affiliation in their name. Most were begun in the late 1980s or early 1990s by leaders like Richard Case who believed that a denominational identity would threaten their evangelistic mission. Andy Stanley, son of famous Southern Baptist preacher Charles Stanley, launched North Point Community Church in suburban Atlanta in 1995. The younger Stanley had spent his entire life in Southern Baptist culture and working at Southern Baptist churches. After visiting Willow Creek in the early nineties and deciding to start a church for seekers in his own hometown, he chose a nondenominational identity. In 2018, North Point Community Church has six Atlanta campuses and is one of the largest churches in the nation.

What drove Hybels, Stanley, and the early leaders of Flatirons to choose a nondenominational character? And how did these new seeker churches reshape the nature of modern American nondenominational churches? I contend that seeker churches


90 Sargeant, Seeker Churches, 138-139. Sergeant performed his own survey of seeker churches in 1994 and found that only 25 percent truly identified as nondenominational. The others maintained “loose affiliations with their denominations” and admitted that they relied much more heavily on other seeker churches rather than their denominations for support.
extended the identity of the modern nondenominational church movement in four important ways.

First, *seeker churches fully embrace the proselytizing conviction of modern evangelicalism*. Defining modern American evangelicalism from 1945-2000 has been notoriously difficult. Though some organizational expressions represented the movement—such as Graham’s crusades, Fuller Seminary, *Christianity Today* magazine, the National Association of Evangelicals, and various youth and mission organizations—evangelicalism was not controlled by a governing body or central institution. Indeed, those who identified themselves as evangelicals in the postwar era came from many backgrounds, including some Pentecostals, charismatics, fundamentalists, and Protestants from theologically conservative denominations. As a result, most scholars explain modern evangelicals in terms of their beliefs.  

Sociologist James Hunter defined American evangelicalism in 1987 as “the North American expression of theologically conservative Protestantism.”  

However, Hunter’s definition remains too broad; if evangelicals were only known by their conservative beliefs, then they might have been content with a *fundamentalist* or *conservative* label. But the new postwar generation that embraced “evangelicalism” had a more specific goal and identity in mind.

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91 Recent popular perceptions often associate modern evangelicalism with its connection to conservative national politics. However, this connection did not arise in any significant way until the 1980s and few scholars would suggest this is a *defining* feature of evangelicalism.

Sociologist Gregory Pritchard offered a more helpful description:

Evangelicals come in many shapes, sizes, and flavors. Within the doctrinal framework described by Hunter, evangelicalism is made up of conflicting and competing ideas and methods. In a sense, evangelicalism operates as a marketplace where ideas and methods are marketed and brought into.93

This marketplace conception is crucial for understanding evangelicalism and how it produced the seeker church movement. What drove evangelicals in the postwar era was not only conservative theology, but a specific conviction within their conservative theology: the conviction of evangelism.94 Evangelicals live up to their name: they are evangelical by nature. They seek to proselytize and convert non-Christians in their neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces to Christianity. Evangelicals often see themselves as Jones did: like missionaries bringing their message anew to their own cultural milieu. What brings evangelicals together from different streams or denominational traditions of Protestant Christianity is their singular passion for, in their language, “winning people to Christ.”

Thus, on one hand, modern evangelicals see society as a “marketplace” of competing ideas and ideologies for what gives human life meaning and purpose. Their

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94 British historian David Bebbington includes this emphasis on evangelism and conversion when he identified four key markers of modern British evangelicalism: conversionism, activism, Biblicism, and crucicentrism. These four terms refer to the centrality of a conversion experience, social or political action, the authority of the Bible, and the atoning work of Christ on the cross for evangelicals. Many historians believe this description holds for modern American evangelicals as well. See David W. Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 5-17.
idea—that only a personal relationship with Christ brings life, both now and after death—necessarily competes with other ideas. Evangelicals believed that most fundamentalists by the 1930s had largely given up on this competition when modernism came to dominate their religious institutions and American society scorned their dogmatic beliefs. From the 1940s to 70s, evangelicals emerged from the insularity of fundamentalism to re-engage the wider culture. They clung to their long-held conservative beliefs but developed a new zeal for re-entering society’s marketplace with their message.95

On the other hand, as Pritchard asserted, evangelicalism itself “operates as a marketplace,” whereby leaders, churches, ministries, and organizations experiment with new methods and approaches for promoting their convictions to society. When evangelicalism was reimagined in the postwar era, their core doctrines remained similar to fundamentalists, but new evangelistic methodologies were investigated. Some evangelicals were quite successful, such as Billy Graham and Campus Crusade for Christ. The Jesus People movement also played a central role by demonstrating how a rebellious youth culture could be engaged rather than shunned, particularly through music and the appropriation of cultural language and symbols. By the mid-1970s, Graham, youth organizations, and the Jesus People’s success had transformed evangelicalism from a sideshow within American religion to a vibrant movement that numbered an estimated forty to fifty million Americans.96


Few evangelicals in the seventies would have utilized this marketplace language to describe their evangelistic emphasis. Most would have cited verses from the Bible, such as the “Great Commission” of Jesus to “go and make disciples of all nations.” And many evangelicals still thought of church, evangelism, and society in conventional ways: Sunday worship services were the time for Christians to gather at church, and the task of evangelism was left to individuals on the streets, evangelists, missionaries, and parachurch organizations. What Bill Hybels, Willow Creek, and seeker churches did was change the methodology of evangelism, even if it meant radically changing the nature of how church was conceived. In doing so, they pioneered new approaches, but they fully embraced the idea that evangelism should be the defining trait of their churches.

Second, **seeker churches shed traditional religious symbols, rituals, forms, and methodologies for the singular cause of attracting and evangelizing nonreligious people, particularly those of younger generations.** Pioneering leaders of seeker churches believed evangelism was the most important trait that should mark Christianity. They also believed that American culture was growing more secular from the 1960s to the 1980s, which decreasing church attendance across the nation, especially in denominational churches, seemed to validate. Moreover, declining religious practice was most high among younger generations; the one bright spot seemed to be the Jesus People movement.

As a result, innovative leaders like Hybels guessed that the problem was not their message but their methods. One step for addressing the problem was to take a cue

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from the Jesus People: their music and coffeehouse culture revealed that young people would engage a religious message if the cultural environment was relevant to their tastes. Willow Creek took this idea a step farther by creating that environment on Sunday mornings during the church service itself. Rather than sending evangelists into the culture outside the walls of the church, with a small chance of genuine success, Hybels surmised that churches could act as collective evangelists by attracting the culture to come inside the walls of the church.

In a sense, this model of evangelism—a centripetal model of attraction rather than a centrifugal one of dispersion— is not unlike the Great Awakening revivals of the eighteenth century or Billy Graham’s crusades during the 1950s and 60s. But those kinds of evangelistic events were no longer effective in the closing decades of the twentieth century: Graham’s crowds were shrinking in America so he began to devote his attention abroad. Moreover, Whitefield and Graham’s evangelistic meetings were one-time events, not the weekly Sunday gatherings of local churches. Seeker church leaders believed that if evangelism was to be successful in a new generation and was to have a lasting impact beyond one-time events and conversion experiences—where new Christians were assimilated into local churches, could mature in their faith, and then take part in the mission of evangelism itself—it needed to happen within the context of weekly local church gatherings. But this model would necessitate a radical transformation within the church’s own programs and forms.

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98 Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals*, 221.
This realization and transformation did not come instantly. It began with a youth group in Chicago suggesting more relevant music, facilities, and messages that would appeal to their friends. It required a new generation of leaders willing to experiment with starting new churches that did not have crosses, say creeds, or take communion on Sundays. It also meant forgoing the support of denominations and institutions that were resistant to change. But as Willow Creek and other seeker churches like it grew—not by drawing Christians from other churches but by genuinely attracting the kinds of people they sought to evangelize—the new model seemed to confirm the intuitions of its leaders. Namely, if non-Christians in modern American culture were going to give evangelical churches and their message a chance, evangelical churches needed to lose the religious trappings they perceived as extraneous.

Scott Nickell, a former teaching pastor at Flatirons recently described this shift in methodology: “people in the church world have a tendency to want to continue to use methods that may have worked at one time—say in the 1950s—but may not work now. We want to keep the message the same, but we know that the methods of delivery must change.” His use of marketplace language is informative. As Nickell illustrates, seeker church leaders make a distinction between the message they want to deliver and the method in which it is delivered. They conclude that the established rules, rituals, and

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100 The “message” most evangelical and seeker churches refer to is their understanding of the “gospel”: that God loves all people and sent his son Jesus to forgive their sins and offer grace, hope, and a personal relationship with God.
traditions of religion are often a barrier to seekers hearing their message. If these religious trappings are culturally outdated or irrelevant to the heart of the message—an assertion some traditional Protestants question—then seeker church leaders are content to dismantle them. Instead, seeker church leaders focus on modern facilities, engaging music, applicable teaching, and excellent programs. “We work out of an old Wal-Mart,” Nickell continues.

We don’t use a lot of religious iconography; we play loud, secular music; and we avoid flowery religious language. But we’re not trying to be fashionable . . . We’re just being intentional about making this a comfortable place for people to come in and take part.¹⁰¹

If bringing their message to the masses is the goal, many seeker churches have found a way to achieve it by rethinking their methods of delivery. What the Jesus People initiated with coffeehouses, communes, and evangelism on the streets, seeker churches fulfilled in Sunday morning auditoriums.

The sacrifice required to let go of traditional methods was significant for early seeker church leaders. Many churches resisted such wide-sweeping changes to the Sunday church service. It required a philosophical shift in thinking: that the central gathering of the church—Sunday morning—was not designed for those inside the church, but those outside. And many churches who were intrigued by Willow Creek’s success struggled to embrace its model. When Trinity Bible EFC in Louisville tried to make this shift in the late eighties, it drove away two pastors and nearly closed its doors. The early years of Flatirons also bear out this reality. During its first five years, Flatirons

¹⁰¹ Faison et al., “A Religious Experience.”
experienced limited growth, faced questions from EFCA denominational leaders after its merger with CCCC, and struggled through tensions with members who longed to return to more traditional roots. Only through new leadership and persistence did Flatirons eventually turn the corner and become the seeker-attracting church it sought to be.

For nondenominational churches, this sacrifice was less difficult. Those that were newly started in the 1980s and 1990s had few long-held traditions or rituals to maintain. By starting from scratch and without ties to an existing tradition, nondenominational seeker churches could establish their identity without the inherited religious barriers from denominational expectations. They might be criticized by others, but their facilities, funding, minister credentials, and doctrinal commitments were not dependent upon or governed by a larger institutional body that could question their ways.

A third way seeker churches extended the identity of the modern nondenominational church movement was their adoption of a minimalist theological posture. Seeker churches do not typically have long doctrinal statements. They often shrink the foundational tenets of their faith to a short list of belief statements that are not intended to be comprehensive, but minimalist in nature. Willow Creek has eight sections that describe its “Core Beliefs” in the areas of the Bible, God, salvation, Jesus Christ, the Christian life (the Holy Spirit), human destiny, the church, and faith and practice.\textsuperscript{102} North Point Community Church in Atlanta has six “What We Believe” statements.\textsuperscript{103}


\textsuperscript{103} “Church Overview,” at http://northpoint.org/about/, accessed August 30, 2017.
These two seeker churches, like others, primarily uphold evangelical perspectives regarding the Bible, God, and salvation through Jesus. Rarely do seeker churches take public positions on issues that fundamentalists of the previous generation were concerned with: dispensationalism, prophecy, literal interpretation of the Bible, creationism, or the end times. Nor do most seeker churches embrace neo-Pentecostal or charismatic theology.¹⁰⁴

Interestingly, Flatirons does not publish a list of their doctrinal beliefs; their website only lists their vision and values.¹⁰⁵ The history of Flatirons demonstrates that articulating their doctrine has never been an important concern. In an eight-page letter written to members of BCCC and CCCC to explain the merger in 1994, not once is a doctrinal statement mentioned.¹⁰⁶ Every other aspect of the church’s mission, philosophy, values, and how the two churches will navigate their merger are addressed, but notably absent is any discussion of doctrine. Flatirons has never made doctrine a public matter or adherence to a doctrinal statement a requirement of membership, leadership, or employment. Neither Flatirons’ legal bylaws nor their employee handbook mention

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¹⁰⁴ That is not to say that some prosperity churches, which have neo-Pentecostal or charismatic convictions, have not embraced some aspects of a seeker mentality. Some have; Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston is an example. But most of these churches are more identified with the prosperity church subtype—its theology and values—than the seeker church subtype.


¹⁰⁶ “Coal Creek Community Church Introduction and Direction,” December 9, 1994, document provided by Andy Wineman.
doctrine. This lack of focus on doctrine is not unique to Flatirons. Willow Creek and other seeker church often make their vision, mission, strategy, values, or philosophy more prominent than doctrine in their literature and advertising. When Bill and Lynne Hybels wrote their history of Willow Creek, *Rediscovering Church*, in 1995, they rarely mentioned theology or doctrine. The primary “We Believe” statements the couple described referred to values and methodology in a chapter titled “Values That Describe a Movement.”

When asked about doctrine, Flatirons’ current executive pastor explained, “we’ve got our values and that’s what we run with. . . . And it comes from this idea of how do we simplify where we stand and what is core to who we are for people who come through the door and have really never been part of a church. And so we’re trying to dumb down the understanding of our faith.” This comment gets to the heart of the seeker church mentality on theological minimalism. It would be untrue to suggest seeker churches do not offer biblical instruction or attempt to persuade people to adopt new beliefs about the Bible, God, Jesus, or many other topics. As noted, they are extremely evangelical in this way. But seeker churches resist codifying any beliefs that interfere with the goal of attracting and helping seekers embrace the Christian faith. Seeker churches are not deceptive. They do not hide their beliefs about key issues like the divinity of Jesus or

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But they simplify their theological convictions to what they perceive is an irreducible minimum for accomplishing their mission. In this way, seeker churches are more driven by their mission and methodology than doctrine and theology.

Fourth, seeker churches preserve an independent identity for the sake of their mission, often with a more radical maverick spirit than previous nondenominational subtypes. This robust independence is largely fueled by the three previous characteristics. Many of the religious elements seeker churches dispensed with were wrapped up in traditions that denominational churches had embraced for decades or even centuries. As a result, questions and critiques abounded. What kind of Christian church removes crosses from its buildings? What kind of Protestant church forsakes the great hymns of the Protestant faith? And what kind of evangelical church reduces preaching to one verse from the Bible and sermons to practical advice? Only pastors and leaders with a maverick spirit had the confidence to chart this new territory and ignore the traditions of the past.

Many seeker churches even resist being labeled as “seeker churches.” Few seeker church leaders want to be described as following Willow Creek or any other established model. In this sense, I suggest that more than those nondenominational subtypes before them, they are thoroughly anti-establishment. There often exists a mixture of genuine humility marked by religious faith—the belief that only God’s supernatural work has facilitated their success and growth—and a strong sense of pride in forging a new path to engage the wider culture, a path that most other churches around them lacked the confidence, faith, or fortitude to pioneer.
Granted, Bible, prosperity, and Jesus People church leaders before them were mavericks as well. Seeker church leaders are cut from the same cloth, which is the larger assertion I make in this study. But in addition to rejecting traditions and labels, on a deeper level, the seeker church model requires radical paradigm shifts regarding both theology and methodology. If correct doctrine has often been understood as the most important trait of a Protestant congregation, seeker churches prioritize mission. If evangelism has formerly been conceived as a task to send individual churchgoers out into the world to accomplish, seeker churches reimagine and invert it as a collective endeavor that culminates on Sunday morning. And if Sunday services have always been regarded as a gathering of Christians to worship, seeker churches reshape it as an event designed for non-Christians. Few denominational churches had the ability (or desire) to challenge and transform such entrenched ways of thinking in the 1980s and 90s. Some tried. Like Trinity Bible EFC, their pastors attempted to steer their congregations to the new model. Most failed, and when the frustrated pastor left, a new one returned the church to its former ways. For the most part—there were exceptions—nondenominational churches were the ones that could pioneer the paradigm shifts, withstand questions and struggles, and persist in the mission they were founded upon.

Nondenominational seeker churches primarily leverage their independence for the sake of their mission. Attuned to the skepticism spiritual seekers have toward organized religion and institutionalism, seeker churches proudly proclaim their nondenominational character. Joining a denomination, they believe, would only add to the barriers they are trying to remove that keep seekers away from church. As such, any official connection,
alignment, or affiliation to a larger religious denomination, institution, or organization is often put to the following test by seeker church leaders: would an affiliation help us accomplish our mission at attracting non-Christians to our church services, or would an affiliation hamper it? The answer, since the 1970s, has almost always been the latter. The mission of seeker churches is so crucial that if the answer to that question ever changed—if, for example, non-Christian Americans suddenly developed a positive affinity toward denominations—then one expects seeker churches might change their posture. But the evidence has been clear for many decades: virtually every American Protestant denomination is shrinking, some quite quickly. In a cultural climate where many are tired of religion but open to spirituality, seeker churches will continue to appeal to those sensibilities while navigating their own independent paths.
CHAPTER SEVEN: A NONDENOMINATIONAL CHURCH IDENTITY

This study began with a story and two questions. The story involved a new community of faith named Scum of the Earth Church that was founded in Denver at the turn of the twenty-first century. The congregation’s name was novel. But its identity as a modern nondenominational church fits within a larger narrative of American religion in the second half of the twentieth century. The two questions I have sought to answer are:

1) what is the historical genealogy of nondenominational churches in modern America?

and 2) is there a recognizable nondenominational church identity?

I explored the first question in Chapter One by addressing important foundational issues. I surveyed the origins and development of Protestant denominationalism from the Reformation through the early twentieth century. I also provided important sociological perspectives on churches and sects, a working definition of a nondenominational church, and a few examples of nondenominational churches from nineteenth-century America.

Turning to modern America, I selected a specific geographical area for detailed study: metropolitan Denver. In Chapter Two, I used data to demonstrate the numerical growth of nondenominational churches in Denver over the course of the twentieth century. In Chapters Three through Six, I examined four congregations in Denver: Holly Hills Bible Church (founded 1947), Calvary Temple (1943), Redeemer Temple (1967), and Flatirons Community Church (1994). Their unique stories and the larger trends they
illustrate, along with the quantitative analysis, challenge the notion that
nondenominational churches in America only emerged around the turn of the twenty-first
century. At least since the fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century,
nondenominational congregations have been increasing steadily in numbers and making a
broader impact on American religion.

The second question investigates the issue of a nondenominational *identity* and
begs several other questions. The four congregations I studied were emblematic of four
types of nondenominational churches that were prominent in America from 1945-2000:
Bible churches, prosperity churches, Jesus People churches, and seeker churches. Are
these four types of churches primarily *subtypes* of modern nondenominational churches?
Or are they less related to one another than I have suggested?

Scholars have explored each type of congregation on its own or in association
with other movements: Bible churches as an expression of fundamentalism or
dispensationalism; prosperity churches emerging from the Pentecostal tradition; Jesus
People churches as characteristic of the charismatic movement; and seeker churches as
representative of evangelical megachurches. I have drawn heavily on these important
connections and attempted to elucidate them. But I also argued that though each type of
church developed *from* particular confessional traditions or movements, more
importantly, they developed *toward* a shared nondenominational tradition. Key factors,
such as common doctrinal assumptions and an emerging posture toward the wider
society, along with unique cultural factors in the postwar era, aligned these four types of
churches as much with one another as with the movements from which they arose.
To use an analogy from genealogy, these four types of modern nondenominational churches possessed a few significant traits that demonstrate their placement within the same family tree (see Figure 7.1).

**Figure 7.1.** Depiction of the modern nondenominational church family tree.

While each of these four kinds of modern congregations boasts a proud spirit of independence over and against denominational institutionalism, they do not stand independent of one another. They are deeply connected to each other by a larger trend
whereby Bible, prosperity, Jesus People, and seeker churches together shaped and formed a recognizable nondenominational identity. By recognizable nondenominational church identity, I mean an identity that is positively defined by shared traits rather than a simple negative assertion: not denominational. Thus, the question of identity becomes: practically speaking, what core traits did these congregations possess such that a visitor to a Bible church, prosperity church, Jesus People church, or seeker church would conclude, “this is likely a nondenominational church”?

Figure 7.2 summarizes key traits I identified of Bible, prosperity, Jesus People, and seeker churches in Chapters Three through Six.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtype</th>
<th>Doctrine</th>
<th>Cultural Engagement</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bible Churches</strong></td>
<td>Fundamentalist</td>
<td>“Persistent localism”</td>
<td>Informal networks with Bible institutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prosperity Churches</strong></td>
<td>Neo-Pentecostal</td>
<td>Alignment with upward mobility</td>
<td>Ministerial networks with other prosperity preachers and radio/television ministries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jesus People Churches</strong></td>
<td>Charismatic</td>
<td>Engaging the disillusioned</td>
<td>Informal networks related to music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seeker Churches</strong></td>
<td>Evangelical minimalist</td>
<td>Reaching the widest audience</td>
<td>Resource-sharing networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commonality</strong></td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Evangelistic</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 7.2.** Key traits of four subtypes of modern nondenominational churches.
These traits are, by necessity, generalizations. Not every modern nondenominational church fits nicely within these boxes or exemplifies each trait so clearly. In addition, some nondenominational churches present exceptions in one or more of these categories. Such are the limitations of all taxonomies. But overall, these traits represent the general contours of each subtype, are exemplified in the four congregations I surveyed and countless others in the postwar era, and shape the modern nondenominational church identity.

Before examining their commonalities, it should be clear from previous chapters that each subtype had distinctive attributes as well. For example, the role of the pastor in each subtype is conceived differently. Bible churches primarily see their pastor as a Bible teacher, prosperity churches as a wise counselor, Jesus People churches as an outspoken prophet, and seeker churches as a winsome evangelist. Many of the pastors I surveyed from Holly Hills Bible Church, Calvary Temple, Redeemer Temple, and Flatirons Community Church were charismatic and authoritative leaders. But this leadership was exercised in distinctive ways.

Another trait bears mentioning: ethnic diversity. Bible, Jesus People, and seeker churches are largely homogeneous. As noted in Chapter Five, Redeemer Temple (a Jesus People church) was an anomaly. Before the Jesus People movement began, its original members were Latino, and its location in a predominantly Latino neighborhood, along with two ethnic minority pastors, ensured it continued to have a large Latino presence amid its growth among white attendees. But very few Jesus People churches attracted minority populations like Redeemer Temple. Most, like Bible and seeker churches, had
little ethnic diversity. This is not surprising as it follows the pattern of most American
congregations; only 7 percent of American churches in the 1990s were multiracial.¹ But
prosperity churches often bucked this trend by the end of the twentieth century.

In the immediate postwar decades, there were numerous African-American and
Latino prosperity congregations across the country. Inherited from the early Pentecostal
movement and appealing to the economic aspirations of marginalized minorities,
prosperity theology often found a receptive audience in urban and suburban non-white
congregations. But from the 1940s to 1970s, prosperity churches were rarely diverse at
the congregational level. As Kate Bowler observes of this era, “the prosperity movement
followed the well-established American pattern of racial segregation in worship.”² Recall
from Chapter Four that Calvary Temple in Denver was primarily white.

However, “a new form of multiracial ministry arose in the 1980s and 1990s, as
prosperity megachurches placed a premium on bridging the differences among ethnic
groups and attracting potential converts from growing immigrant populations.”³ Bowler
cites numerous examples of nondenominational prosperity megachurches, such as
Denver’s Heritage Christian Center, that made racial integration a value and achieved a
level of diversity unique among American congregations.⁴ Calvary Temple remained


² Ibid., 205.

³ Ibid., 206.

⁴ Ibid., 206-207.
almost entirely white. It was located in Cherry Creek, an area of Denver that continued to be predominantly white, and the congregation never pursued the value of diversity. But some of the largest congregations in the nation today, such as Lakewood Church (Houston), World Changers Church International (Atlanta), and The Potter’s House (Dallas), are multiracial, nondenominational prosperity churches.⁵

Sociologist Scott Thumma confirms this higher prevalence of ethnic diversity in his analysis of nondenominational churches in the late 1990s, which was based on the Organizing Religious Work (ORW) project and his own research.⁶ He found “that 53 percent of nondenominational churches in our survey had memberships with some level of racial diversity. An even more astonishing fact,” he writes, was that 24 percent of these churches had truly multiracial congregations, ones in which no racial group had a predominance. In the larger ORW dataset, only the Catholic congregations had a larger percentage of multiracial churches, with the mainline and conservative denominations having barely a handful of truly integrated churches.⁷

⁵ This is not to suggest Calvary Temple is not an exemplary prosperity church. The statistics I cite in the following paragraph indicate a higher prevalence of ethnic diversity among recent prosperity congregations compared to other groups, but the majority remained fairly homogeneous.


⁷ Ibid. It should be noted that the datasets Thumma used were biased toward urban congregations and megachurches, which may account for higher numbers of racially diverse churches. He rightly qualifies his study by writing, “It is impossible to say whether, or in what ways, this sample of independent congregations represents all the nondenominational churches in the nation. These data, however, do provide a first glimpse into this reality.”
From these statistics alone, one could conclude that all types of nondenominational churches are more ethnically diverse since Thumma does not distinguish between prosperity churches and the other subtypes I have identified. But my research, along with others’, indicates that very few Bible, Jesus People, and seeker churches from 1945-2000 included a significant presence of minorities. Ethnic diversity is primarily a characteristic of recent prosperity megachurches that made it a value and were located in geographical areas of the country with multiethnic populations.

Nevertheless, a church’s nondenominational character does provide greater opportunity for diversity. As independent churches, they are less institutionally or traditionally restrained by historical ethnic boundaries. Thumma argues that the much higher prevalence of ethnic diversity among recent nondenominational churches compared to denominational congregations is directly connected to independence:

The lack of an historic ‘color line’ culture, often attached to a denominational label, allows for significant racial blending to take place in these independent churches. Stated inversely, if a congregation wanted to embrace a multiracial

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9 Bowler, Blessed, 207.
mission and have this racial openness communicated to outsiders, it could most easily accomplish this by jettisoning its denominational label.¹⁰

Most nondenominational churches did not make ethnic diversity central to their mission in the way some recent prosperity congregations have. But I suggest that this trait—freedom to embrace a mission that has greater potential to succeed without existing labels or conventions—is the foundational quality of a nondenominational church identity that all four subtypes developed and modeled.

This discussion about ethnic diversity introduces the central commonalities (in Figure 7.2) that bound together Bible, prosperity, Jesus People, and seeker churches with a shared identity. These commonalities exist like genetic traits that together give shape to a family tree. Like one’s family tree—in this case, the modern nondenominational church family tree—these genetic traits and influences were passed along from generation to generation and from subtype to subtype. To extend the metaphor further, family trees add new traits and influences every time an individual marries into the family. These new traits come from different families with distinctive traditions, and important ties remain to one’s family of origin. But these new genetic traits and traditions are grafted in, assimilated, and in subtle ways, redefine the larger family tree.

In a similar way, the modern nondenominational family tree took shape from 1945-2000. Each subtype—and the traditions from which they emerged: fundamentalism, neo-Pentecostalism, the charismatic movement, and evangelicalism—contributed subtle evolutions and transformations that took place over time and across broader cultural

¹⁰ Thumma, “What God Makes Free is Free Indeed.”
changes (see Figure 7.3). What emerged, by the turn of the twenty-first century, was a mature and fully-formed nondenominational identity. I conclude this study by summarizing three core traits that constructed this modern nondenominational church identity.

**Figure 7.3.** Depiction of the modern nondenominational church family tree with influences by other traditions.
Conservative Doctrine

The first trait of modern nondenominational churches relates to their theological convictions: modern nondenominational churches possess conservative doctrine. All four subtypes proudly boast conservative doctrine in comparison to the theological liberalization that took place among most mainline denominational churches. This liberalization included: shedding literal interpretations of Genesis in favor of scientific accounts of evolution; questioning the nature of miraculous events described in the Bible in favor of more figurative explanations; deemphasizing biblical prophecy that suggested a deteriorating moral picture of society in favor of a more optimistic outlook; and minimizing beliefs in original sin, total depravity, and the need for personal conversion in favor of engaging systemic injustice and social issues related to individual rights and societal betterment.

This observation is a generalization; it does not characterize all Protestant denominational churches. Some conservative denominations resisted these changes, as well as some individual churches within mainline denominations. But in the face of this general theological trend, modern nondenominational churches maintained a strong commitment to conservative doctrine. Bible churches, prosperity churches, Jesus People churches, and seeker churches—each in their own unique ways—held firmly to the inerrancy of the Bible and the need for personal conversion. As sociologists have described the historic relationship between sects and established churches (summarized in Chapter One), many modern nondenominational churches saw themselves as embattled doctrinal outposts in a sea of liberal churches that had abandoned biblical teaching.
To be clear, modern nondenominational churches were not doctrinally uniform. There were some key differences, especially as it relates to Pentecostal convictions. And one can discern an evolution that took place doctrinally among the four subtypes: from charismatic fundamentalism toward evangelical minimalism. Admittedly “charismatic fundamentalism” is a bit of a misnomer. These two terms combine the fundamentalist approach to the Bible and the Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, and charismatic approaches to the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. Original fundamentalists from the early twentieth century were deeply critical of the Pentecostal tradition and later charismatic movement as they believed the practices of healing and speaking in tongues were inauthentic and doctrinally unorthodox. Bible churches adopted this posture; they were fundamentalist but not charismatic.

Prosperity and Jesus People churches most reflect what I have called charismatic fundamentalism; they retained core fundamentalist doctrine regarding the Bible, eschatology, evangelism, and morality, and they assimilated their own beliefs concerning the Holy Spirit from the Pentecostal tradition. But an important evolution began with prosperity and Jesus People churches and blossomed with seeker churches. Prosperity and Jesus People churches retained a neo-Pentecostal and charismatic character, but it was less central to their doctrinal identity than Pentecostal denominational churches. Their appeal to broader segments of society—whether middle-class suburbanites or countercultural hippies—was fueled by and in turn fueled their more general commitment to conservative beliefs rather than their specific charismatic practices.
Seeker churches characterized a further progression. They embraced an evangelical minimalism that preserved a conservative interpretation of the Bible from their fundamentalist roots yet shrunk their doctrinal commitments to a minimalistic core. Seeker churches in the 1980s and 90s rarely defined their beliefs on issues important to the other three subtypes: creationism, prophecy, or charismatic practices. Nor did they take firm positions on doctrines prominent in denominational churches such as Calvinism or the nature of communion. Their pastors may have had personal convictions regarding these issues, and from time to time, revealed their positions in sermons or worship styles. But generally, seeker churches adopted a posture toward doctrine similar to the postwar evangelical spirit of Billy Graham. They minimized their beliefs and message to two primary commitments: the authority of the Bible and the necessity of faith in Christ.\

This evolution from charismatic fundamentalism to evangelical minimalism is significant. It clarifies how influences from fundamentalism, neo-Pentecostalism, the charismatic movement, and postwar evangelicalism shaped the nondenominational church family tree. Yet, despite the diversity of these influences and their intersection with other traditions, the commonality of conservative doctrine remains. Along with the two additional traits, it marks the identity of modern nondenominational churches.

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11 As one would expect, fundamentalists in the Bible church tradition do not believe evangelicals or seeker churches are conservative enough. Many would label them progressive or even liberal. But compared to mainline Protestantism, the “conservative” label holds.
Evangelistic Conviction

The second common trait of modern nondenominational churches relates to cultural engagement. Distinct from mainline Protestant churches, nondenominational congregations primarily engaged the wider culture through personal evangelism. In keeping with their doctrinal convictions and believing that fewer and fewer Americans in the postwar era embraced a genuine faith in Christ and Bible-based morality, nondenominational churches emphasized evangelism of nonbelievers as the primary mission of their communities of faith.

Like the issue of doctrine, the distinction between denominational and nondenominational churches regarding cultural engagement is helpful. By the beginning of the twentieth century, mainline Protestant denominations had achieved an established character within American culture. Their ministers and national officials had become spokespersons for religion, and local denominational congregations had often become institutions within their communities. But as historian Michael Hamilton describes, many mainline churches eventually lost their influence as their convictions and values changed:

In its day the institutional church movement was the sensation of the American church scene, and the best churches grew to phenomenal size. But by the 1920s, the movement had little life left in it. Institutional churches originally had used social service as an evangelistic tool, but as the 20th century advanced, they dropped evangelism in favor of mere humanitarian service. The result? Congregations dwindled while budgets mounted. ¹²

Other factors, such as lower birth rates and demographic changes, certainly played a role in the decline of denominational churches. But beginning with fundamentalist Bible

churches, nondenominational congregations believed a renewed dependence on personal evangelism was paramount. The way to engage and transform the wider culture, fundamentalist leaders thought, was not through humanitarian service, social justice, or even politics, but through personal evangelism and conversion.\textsuperscript{13}

This renewed emphasis on proselytization is what drove some fundamentalists in the 1940s to chart a new way forward that they would call neo-evangelicalism. Billy Graham eventually led the movement with his record-shattering crusades in the 1950s and 60s. But the evangelistic spirit worked its way forward in the postwar era through less prominent and more subtle avenues: through nondenominational parachurch organizations aimed at youth culture (such as Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade for Christ and Inter-Varsity) and nondenominational seminaries that would train a new generation of ministers (such as Fuller Seminary in California, Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts, and Denver Seminary which unaffiliated from the Conservative Baptist denomination in the 1980s).

Nondenominational churches from 1945-2000 embraced this evangelistic spirit toward the wider culture. Like the issue of doctrine, an evolution took place among the four subtypes of nondenominational churches. Bible churches were more localized; they tended to resist wider aspirations they associated with the shortcomings of

\textsuperscript{13} This is not to suggest fundamentalists or conservative Christians were not engaged in politics before the rise of the religious right in the late 1970s. Many were, especially at the local and regional levels, as historians Darren Dochuk, Kevin Kruse, and Bethany Moreton among others, have demonstrated. But on the whole, proselytization and personal transformation were prioritized over engagement in wider social and political issues.
denominationalism in favor of what David Swatos called “persistent localism.” While they aimed to be evangelistic in their local communities, they held on to fears of doctrinal sacrifice and institutional bureaucracy. For fundamentalists, the two went hand in hand. As a result, Bible churches preserved strict doctrinal standards in their churches, which often limited their broader appeal.

Prosperity churches, with their values of growth and success, were inclined toward the upwardly mobile working and middle classes of the postwar growth era. They did not fear becoming mass institutions in their communities; rather, prosperity preachers desired that status. Inherited from the Pentecostal tradition, prosperity preachers channeled a revivalistic energy that offered hope, healing, and prosperity to the masses at a time when consumer culture was thriving. But the means was evangelism. Evangelistic revivals, televisions ministries, and worship services remained the dominant methods by which prosperity churches brought their message to the wider culture. Even when they launched social programs aimed at more humanitarian needs, such as Calvary Temple’s Life Center project, these ministries were not disconnected from religious values. Charles Blair did not want to support any medical facility; he wanted to create a Christian medical facility with a Christian staff that hosted daily worship services for patients.14

Jesus People churches engaged a new demographic of the wider culture: the disillusioned youth of the sixties and seventies. From a doctrinal standpoint, Jesus People churches held many of the same tenets as fundamentalists, Pentecostals, or emerging

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evangelicals at the time. “But what set the Jesus People apart from their straight evangelical and Pentecostal cousins,” writes Larry Eskridge, “was the intensity with which these characteristics marked them and were incorporated into a distinctly nonbourgeois unchurchy atmosphere that was far removed from respectable America’s way of doing church.”15 They welcomed drug-addicted hippies, started communes and coffeehouses, engaged in street evangelism, and adopted the spirit and forms of the counterculture into their faith. But an evangelistic impulse drove it all, as Eskridge notes: “Psychedelically charged artwork; pop culture bric-a-brac such as jewelry, buttons, and T-shirts; and—most important—their freewheeling adaptation of contemporary folk and rock music helped [Jesus People] proclaim their beliefs and identity to the world.”16

Building on the success of the Jesus People, seeker churches adapted their methods to reach a new generation of Americans in the eighties and nineties. But seeker churches took the idea of an “unchurchy atmosphere” to a new level. Evangelism was no longer conceived in terms of street ministries, coffeehouses, or revival meetings. Rather, seeker churches transformed weekly Sunday services—which had long been understood as a time for committed Christians to meet for worship—into events designed primarily for spiritual seekers. Rather than gathering Christians in a sanctuary on Sundays to be sent out into the wider culture during the week, seeker churches gathered Christians in home small groups during the week and then invited the wider culture into an auditorium on Sundays. Using the latest technology and shedding traditional religious symbols and

15 Eskridge, God’s Forever Family, 55.

16 Ibid.
methods, the singular goal of seeker churches is best understood by the proselytizing focus of Willow Creek’s mission statement: “to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ.”

I describe the development of an evangelistic spirit among nondenominational church subtypes as an evolution from societal separatism to methodological accommodation. The early fundamentalist tendency to maintain separation from the perceived evils of denominationalism and modernizing culture often kept them from widespread influence on society itself. Thus, few Bible churches grew large; most remained neighborhood congregations. Prosperity churches, Jesus People churches, and seeker churches, each in their own unique ways, overcame their fears toward the corrupting nature of society. Believing evangelism was not a threat to doctrinal purity and seeing their own cities as mission fields, they adopted new methods to engage unchurched Americans with their gospel message.

*Independent Spirit*

The third trait of modern nondenominational churches is independence. It is their most unique trait. Nondenominational churches share their conservative doctrine and evangelistic passion with some denominational congregations, for example, many Southern Baptist or Nazarene churches. But Southern Baptist and Nazarene churches stand within a fixed tradition that is marked by long-held customs, maintained by institutional establishments, and governed by organizational standards. These denominational churches often encourage congregational polity and the autonomy of the local church, but in practice, a denominational character still governs their identities.
When a local Southern Baptist church challenges the denomination’s values, doctrine, or standards, they are no longer welcome in the denomination. In contrast, nondenominational churches embrace genuine independence by not submitting to any higher institutional authority.

As I have argued frequently in previous chapters, nondenominational churches of all four subtypes resist formal affiliations with any type of governing institutions. Many modern nondenominational churches moved away from denominational affiliation for doctrinal reasons. Fundamentalists associated mainline denominations with errant theology. The beliefs of neo-Pentecostals and charismatics were unwelcome among both mainline and conservative denominations. Recall how Montecalvo and Schoel of Redeemer Temple were forced out of their respective Baptist and Lutheran churches when they taught charismatic theology.

A related reason that nondenominational church leaders fled denominational affiliation was fear of bureaucracy and control by central institutions. By the mid-twentieth century, most denominations had developed the habit of supporting churches and leaders that served the denomination’s goals. As Hamilton observes, “denominational officials began to think of themselves, not the local clergy, as the frontline workers in the church. In this new configuration, the purpose of the local church was to support the

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17 To cite one example, recently a 181-year-old Southern Baptist church in Tennessee voted to install a female pastor, contrary to the denominational standard that only men can be ordained as pastors. As a result, the Tennessee Baptist Convention, the organization representing Southern Baptists in the state, voted overwhelmingly to disassociate with the church. See Bob Allen, “Tennessee Southern Baptists shun church with a woman pastor,” The Christian Century, November 17, 2017.
denomination’s centralized program, not the other way around.”

Entrepreneurial leaders who wanted to forge their own paths resisted such oversight. Chuck Smith, who started the Jesus People church Calvary Chapel in southern California, attempted to conform to his Foursquare Gospel denomination’s standards but eventually reached the conclusion: ‘I did not fit within the denomination, and so I was wanting out.”

Rich Case was led to the same conclusion when his Presbyterian pastor rebuffed his idea for a new kind of worship service to attract younger spiritual seekers. When he started Flatirons, he consequently chose a nondenominational character because, in his words, “we didn’t want to link up with a hierarchy that said, ‘okay, here’s how you have to do this.’”

This desire for autonomy by nondenominational church leaders can be described as an independence from institutional control. That is, nondenominational churches assert a spiritual authority that is not derived from any higher human institution. As Scott Thumma observes,

“This spiritual authority assertion is a powerful statement that independent congregations are explicitly not under, or beholden to, any human authority (read ‘denomination’). Rather, only God, the Bible, and God’s spokesperson in the form of the pastor, are seen as spiritual authorities in and for the congregation.”

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18 Hamilton, “Willow Creek’s Place in History,” 67.


21 Scott Thumma, “What God Makes Free is Free Indeed.”
But there is a more positive aspect to the nondenominational church’s assertion of autonomy; it promotes an independence for innovation, theologically and more significantly, methodologically. Prosperity churches like Calvary Temple negotiated their neo-Pentecostal beliefs, either emphasizing or minimizing them, in accordance with what achieved success and growth. Jesus People churches like Redeemer Temple pioneered new programs that channeled the energy of the counterculture movement when denominational churches were hesitant. And seeker churches like Flatirons Community Church redefined the Sunday service to appeal to those not interested in traditional religion. With institutional restraints removed, nondenominational leaders were free to adapt to cultural changes, transform methodologies, and chart new pathways forward.

For example, consider Flatiron’s introduction of secular music into its Sunday services. The church often begins its worship service with a popular rock, hip-hop, or country song one might hear on the radio. This could be perceived as merely a stylistic change regarding musical taste. But introducing secular music into worship is a substantive and central element for achieving the church’s mission to attract seekers. And one would search in vain to find many churches in five hundred years of the Protestant tradition appropriating non-religious music into weekly worship services for the goal of evangelism.

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Thumma, describing nondenominational churches in the 1990s, explains their ability to create new identities and innovate in fresh ways:

This intentional disconnection from identifiable denominational labels, as well as the cultural presuppositions and historical religious patterning associated with these labels, means that each congregation’s identity is essentially ‘unmade’ or at least ‘unknown’ from its sign out front. Potential members must enter in order to evaluate a congregation’s merits, rather than relying on its denominational affiliation. This freedom from traditional denominational expectations and cultural models allows for considerable experimentation in every way.  

Having a nondenominational character, therefore, removes some pre-conceived notions about a church. It also allows the congregation to better construct and regulate its image. The reputation or first impression most have of Flatirons is not related to beliefs or traditions associated with a denominational background. Rather, it has become known as the church that is like a rock concert.

This capacity to experiment with new methodologies both draws and drives entrepreneurial, charismatic leaders. And while the opportunities for innovation, wider appeal, and numerical growth increase, so do the dangers. Without institutional checks and balances, and with greater trust placed in local charismatic leaders, the potential for abuse arises. One wonders: if Calvary Temple had remained an Assembly of God with the oversight and support of denominational officials, would they have curbed the financial mismanagement that ensued? Or at Redeemer Temple, would denominational officials have rejected the full adoption of the Shepherding philosophy along with its

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23 Scott Thumma, “What God Makes Free is Free Indeed.”

authoritarian abuses? Such abuses can take place in any religious context; nondenominational churches, however, are particularly susceptible.

Another important implication of congregational independence is its creation of a strong sense of collective identity. As I explored in Chapter One, Troeltsch and other sociologists suggest that sect-type churches define themselves vis-à-vis establishment religion. Their voluntary nature, evangelistic zeal, lack of institutional norms, and willingness to challenge the establishment are believed to be antidotes to the perceived “diseases of formalism, indifferencism, obsolescence, absolutism, red tape, patronage, and corruption”\(^{25}\) inherent in state or denominational churches. Though modern nondenominational churches are not often thought of as sects, because of their numerical growth and accommodation to culture, they retain a spirit of tension and embattlement toward the institutions they abandoned. Sociologist Christian Smith observed this quality of modern evangelicals. “American evangelicalism,” he contends, “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, \textit{thrives} on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat.”\(^{26}\) For Smith, evangelicals are embattled against the wider culture, or at least they \textit{feel} that way, even in conservative regions (such as the South) where they are more at home. And this perceived tension


gives evangelicalism a “subcultural identity” that builds its inherent strength and vitality for adherents.²⁷

Modern nondenominational churches are often identified with evangelicalism theologically, but during the postwar era, their tension was directed at the denominational churches they left behind and measured themselves against. Thumma explains:

the strong anti-denominational commitment, ‘We’re not who they are,’ reinforces the group’s sense of itself as apart from others. This anti-institutional, radically-independent stance requires members to give up old affiliations with denominations if they want to embrace the nondenominational label.²⁸

Countless nondenominational church members were willing to forsake their old labels and embrace a new subcultural identity. Their reasons were numerous: some were driven by fundamentalist concerns about modernism, others by charismatic inclinations, and perhaps many by the anti-authoritarian spirit that swept the nation beginning in the Vietnam and Watergate eras. But it was a positive nondenominational identity that developed from 1945-2000—“we’re free to innovate”—which not only gave shape to the family tree, but sustained the movement and ensured its vigor, vitality, and numerical success.

Nondenominational Networks

Before summarizing my conclusions, I address the issue of nondenominational networks as it relates to independence. Each subtype of nondenominational congregation relied on networks to fill the vacuum left by the absence of denominational ties. For Bible

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Thumma, “What God Makes Free is Free Indeed.”
churches, it was Bible institutes; for prosperity churches, ministerial networks with other prosperity preachers, media, and television ministries; for Jesus People churches, informal relationships often related to music; and for seeker churches, resource-sharing networks like the Willow Creek Association (WCA). Since 2000, more nondenominational church and leadership networks have been created: The Gospel Coalition, Acts 29 Network, Association of Related Churches, and Ecclesia Network, to name a few. While all of these networks are unique and include various congregations from different backgrounds, their vision is similar to the WCA’s: to provide and share resources, promote new methodologies, host leadership conferences, and foster new church planting.

One might refer to these nondenominational networks as Joel Carpenter did of Bible institutes for fundamentalists: “denominational surrogates.” 29 Sargeant, in his study of seeker churches, referred to the WCA as “a postmodern denomination.” 30 For him, the descriptor “postmodern” explains how Willow Creek created “a new type of denomination, one based on methodological contract more than on theological covenant.” 31 If a modernistic denomination is grounded in belief, authority, and central control, a postmodern denomination, Sargeant suggests, is premised on decentralization, cooperation, and pragmatism. While Sargeant’s analysis of the WCA’s function is


30 Sargeant, Seeker Churches, 134.

31 Ibid.
helpful, I believe that redefining the word “denomination” loses its original and primary meaning. There is a meaningful distinction between historic denominationalism and nondenominational networks. Hamilton agrees. Surveying the WCA in 2000, he wrote:

The WCA does not look much like a denomination-in-the-making for the simple reason that most of its member churches remain either staunchly independent or firmly tied to their original denominations. This is a very different thing from the status of churches in two new denominations that grew out of other evangelical megachurches—the Calvary Chapel Association and the Association of Vineyard Churches. Both of these train and ordain pastors, their member churches don’t belong to other denominations, and their churches mostly have similar ministry emphases.32

Thumma concurs as well:

The [local nondenominational] congregation is first and foremost independent. Its ties to the network are characterized by a weak relational accountability between clergy, marginally supported by non-binding commitments, minimal resource exchanges and few requirements for membership.33

In reality, when nondenominational pastors or churches join these networks, it actually reaffirms their core commitment to independence. The network provides an opportunity to “belong to something bigger” but at no real cost. Pastors or churches can leave networks without any sacrifice and even affiliate with numerous networks that meet different needs at the same time.34 There is a modern American spirit of consumerism at work here. By retaining their independence, nondenominational churches can pick and choose which informal networks can best serve their own purposes.

33 Thumma, “What God Makes Free is Free Indeed.”
34 Ibid.
Conclusion

From 1945-2000, Bible, prosperity, Jesus People, and seeker congregations shaped a new modern nondenominational church identity. Following Thumma’s general assessment, I believe “this identity has also become a viable extra-congregational cultural reality. This cultural identity, although functional in the local congregational context, exists independent of any particular local church expression of it.”35 None of the four subtypes claim full responsibility for creating this identity. Rather, all four in their own unique ways added to and influenced its evolution and formation. The modern nondenominational church identity is conservative theologically; there is a deep commitment to biblical authority. The modern nondenominational church identity is also evangelistic; engaging the wider culture with the transformative gospel message is a primary value. And most importantly, the modern nondenominational church identity is independent; freedom from constraint and freedom for methodological innovation are upheld at all costs.

Nearly two decades into the twenty-first century, there is little indication that this nondenominational church identity is fading. To be sure, nondenominational churches continue to negotiate what biblical authority means in practice, how to evangelize an increasingly post-Christian culture, and what new innovations are beneficial or detrimental to the life of their communities and missions. Moreover, resource-sharing networks have asserted and will likely continue to assert a larger role in American religion as denominations—even conservative ones like the Southern Baptists—continue

35 Ibid.
to decline. What new evolutions within the nondenominational church identity are taking place now? This question will be left to future historians. For now, the numbers, stories, and larger trends of 1945-2000 are clear: the people, congregations, and culture of the postwar era created a new nondenominational church identity in America, an identity that reshaped the nation’s religious landscape.
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