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Ruptured Lives: Narrative Accounts of US American Adult Converts to Evangelical
Christianity over the Life Course

A Thesis

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the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

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Nichole Baumer

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Abstract

Within the last few decades, there have been significant discussions regarding the rupturing effect that conversions to Christianity have in indigenous contexts. Individuals who have converted to Christianity from indigenous religions frequently speak of a disruption between their pre-conversion and post-conversion selves and social worlds. Anthropologists have yet, however, to study in-depth the narratives of people living within societies like the US, where Christianity is the hegemonic religion, to see whether or not the same phenomenon can be documented in contexts where individuals are often converting from one form of Christianity to another. Through the lens of narrative analysis, I examined the narratives of six US American adult converts to evangelical Christianity to identify the ways that rupture affected their post-evangelical lives. I discovered that, while rupture is a feature of these narratives, their stories were best understood when examined in relation to participants' life courses. When analyzed through the lens of temporality, linearity, spatial shifts, and continual growth into an evangelical belief system, participants' evangelical conversion experiences had caused a disruption that led them to have distinct pre-evangelical pasts, post-evangelical presents, and post-evangelical futures. My findings demonstrate that rupture does play an important role in US American evangelical conversion narratives, but that these accounts can also contribute new understandings to the field of conversion studies.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Nature of Project

My research explores the conversion narratives of US American adult converts to evangelical Christianity. These types of conversion experiences are often thought to entail a rupturing effect leading converts to have distinctive pre-conversion and post-conversion selves. I analyzed US American converts' narratives in order to identify the various ways that the rupture of their evangelical conversion experiences impacted not only their perceptions of themselves, but also their social and material worlds. I specifically chose to focus on the narratives of individuals who had experienced a self-identified evangelical conversion a minimum of ten years prior to this research project. In this way, I hoped to gain a more insightful perspective on the long-term impact that their evangelical conversion experiences has had upon their views of themselves and the world around them.

The idea of this relationship between Christian conversions and rupture has a long and storied history that can be traced back to the Apostle Paul's archetypal conversion experience recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. Within the anthropology of Christianity, this relationship is frequently noted and discussed. One of the key theoretical tropes of the discipline is that a conversion to certain forms of Protestant Christianity, most often either to Pentecostalism, Charismatics, or evangelicalism,

inevitably encompasses some type of breach between a converts' pre-conversion self and social reality and their newfound Christian self and social world (see Bialecki, Haynes, and Robbins 2008; Chua 2012; Macdonald 2019). Many anthropologists have written about and discussed this topic, yet I think my research has several things to add to this conversation because I specifically chose to focus on the conversion narratives of US American adult converts to what I have termed *evangelical Christianity*.

I want to briefly stop and acknowledge two things. First of all, the term *evangelical* is contested and is claimed by varying denominations within the Protestant tradition; also, most anthropologists studying Christian conversions do so in environments dominated by Pentecostal and Charismatic (P/c) forms of Christianity. I have elected to use the term *evangelical* despite this ambiguity, because I believe it best suits the religious affiliation of the research participants. For one thing, I recruited the majority of my participants from a church that would balk at being placed within the same category as P/c Christians. This church does not ascribe to key P/c beliefs such as speaking in tongues or practicing the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The participants do, however all belong to churches that ascribe to key evangelical beliefs, particularly the belief that true salvation can only be found in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Meaning, a true evangelical Christian acknowledges their sinful, human nature and has complete trust in the idea that Jesus' death on the cross provides the substitutionary reparations necessary for genuine salvation. Evangelicals believe that these are the only individuals who will be able to stand righteous and redeemed before God due to their faith in the work of Jesus on the cross, and thereby will also be allowed to live eternally in heaven. People ascribing to this belief are often termed *born-again Christians*.

I will delve deeper into the differences and similarities between P/c Christianity and evangelicalism in another chapter of this thesis, but suffice to say for now that by using the term *evangelical*, I believe I am best doing justice to the participants' own views of the form of Christianity they espouse. I will continue to use the term *P/c* throughout the remainder of this thesis, but only in contexts where it is the terminology used by other researchers to describe the religious denominations they researched or I am examining the relationship between P/c Christianity and evangelicalism. I will never use *P/c* in relation to the religious beliefs of the research participants who collaborated with me for this project. To reiterate, whenever I use the term *evangelical* hereafter in this thesis, I will be referring to evangelicalism as encapsulated in the specific belief system mentioned above instead of a particular religious denomination.

I also want to acknowledge that I am studying US American adult conversion experiences to evangelical Christianity. It would be remiss of me to not briefly mention the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century and the impact this had, and continues to have, on the US American evangelical perspective of conversion. Core to the Second Great Awakening was the idea of individual responsibility. Meaning, each individual was accountable for the sin in their lives; conversion therefore necessitated repenting of sin and accepting the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ (Clapp and Jeffrey 2011). Conversion in these contexts were also highly charged, experiential, and emotional affairs. As Scott (n.d.) notes, conversion was an intense transformation that gave converts a “fundamentally altered sense of self, an identity as a new kind of Christian. As they interpreted it, they had undergone spiritual rebirth, the death of an old self and the birth of a new one that fundamentally transformed their sense of their

relationship to the world.” (para. 2). In other words, conversion in US American evangelical circles must be understood as being situated in the Second Great Awakening and a new perspective of what conversion should entail.

I decided to focus on US American adult converts to evangelical Christianity because I noticed a pattern in the literature in that many of the accounts identifying this relationship between rupture and conversion examined it in light of group conversions to P/c or evangelical forms of Christianity within contexts dominated by indigenous religions (see Chua 2012; Engelke 2010; Macdonald 2019; Marshall 2016; Meyer 1998; Robbins 2004). In contrast, there has, to date, been little anthropological research studying in-depth the conversions of individuals living within societies like the US, where Christianity is the hegemonic religion, to see whether or not the same phenomenon can be documented in contexts where individuals are often converting from one form of Christianity to another. I suggested that one reason for this focus on conversion to Christianity from indigenous religions could possibly be attributed to the fact that conversions in these situations necessitated a tangible breaking from converts’ indigenous belief systems and heritages. I argued that US society is inherently Christianized, since Christianity has been the dominant religion since the country’s founding, and that therefore conversions in US American contexts might not demonstrate such a radical and tangible breaking with the past. I wanted to examine the conversions of US American evangelical converts to discover whether or not conversions could be seen to have a similarly rupturing effect in a country where Christianity has a hegemonic influence.

Besides simply being interested in examining rupture in a context not dominated by indigenous religious beliefs, however, I have an intrinsic bias towards this concept of

a disruption that divides an individual's life into two distinctive halves. I have personally experienced a significant religious rupture in my own life that has left me with distinctive pre-rupture and post-rupture selves. I was born and raised into a conservative Mennonite community in Pennsylvania. I spent the majority of the first two decades of my life living within their restrictive, legalistic, religious worldview. I no longer belong to that world, yet, I frequently find myself navigating this space between my Mennonite upbringing and the person I am today. Due to my own fractured background, I am deeply interested in the narrative accounts of other individuals who have experienced similar breaches in their lives. More importantly for the purposes of this research project, even though I left my Mennonite faith behind, I today choose to identify myself as an evangelical Christian.

Having immersed myself within an evangelical space for nearly a decade means I am essentially an insider in that community at this point. When I was reading the anthropological literature about Christianity and rupture, I was fascinated to discover Robbins' (2017; 2019) theorizing about the concept of duplex cultural formations. He hypothesized that converts find themselves in a process of continually growing in their Christian faith without completely abandoning every element of their pre-conversion self. Rather, pre-conversion parts of themselves and their social realities are continually in conflict with their current Christian perspectives and help foment continual striving toward the Christian ideal. I found Robbins' argument here compelling, because I realized what he was describing was essentially identical to the way that the evangelical church teaches a Christian should live their life. I decided I would not only examine US American evangelical converts' narratives to find ways that conversion had brought

about rupture in their lives, I would also see if I could identify any instances of this concept of continual growth also impacting their stories.

Guided by this research focus, I began shaping my project. Since I wanted to collect participants' conversion narratives, it made sense that the overall theoretical approach to this project was narrative analysis. Because I was examining the ways that conversion disrupted converts' lives, two other theoretical concepts also quickly became vital for interpreting my research: temporality and spatial orientations. The narratives were rooted in time; one of the most prominent examples of this was when I discovered that converts were constantly narrating pre-conversion events in light of their current post-conversion belief systems. Naturally, temporality played an undeniably large role in interpreting the data. At the time of conversion, converts also entered into a specific evangelical space; inhabiting this new space led them into conflict with people who inhabited a non-evangelical space, so understanding the influence of spatial orientations was also important for the project. Lastly, the concept of continual growth into an individual's evangelical belief system also guided my theorizing.

With this theoretical framework in place, I began designing my research methodology. I was severely hampered in this with the sudden arrival of COVID-19. I suddenly found myself bereft of one of the most popular anthropological methods for data collection: participant observation. With the restrictions about not meeting in-person, I found myself having to rely solely on semi-structured interviews to collect data. I decided to do a series of three in-depth interviews with six individuals. In this way, I hoped to get a detailed and fully rounded conversion narrative from each participant. After collecting this interview data, I immediately set about transcribing the interviews. I

then analyzed the data, looking for emergent themes. From these themes I developed my analysis and findings chapter.

The most prominent and overarching theme was the role that temporality played in analyzing participants' narratives. Participants had a linear understanding of their conversion accounts. They all articulated a definite understanding of having a pre-evangelical past, a post-evangelical present, and a post-evangelical future. When discussing their pre-conversion pasts, their narrative accounts pointed towards the fact that their evangelical conversion experiences led to a transformation in their identities, which then affected their perceptions of and interactions with the world. One consequence of this is that participants frequently reinterpreted their pre-evangelical pasts according to their current evangelical belief systems. Anecdotes about their pre-evangelical lives were inevitably re-narrated through an evangelical lens. Participants' accounts of their pre-evangelical lives also demonstrated the fact that their conversion experiences had triggered what I termed an ideological spatial shift. By this I mean that, at the moment of conversion, they entered a separate space created by their newfound evangelical belief system. Inhabiting this evangelical space set participants in opposition against anybody who did not also inhabit this evangelical head-space. This triggered unavoidable conflicts within participants' social worlds.

When discussing their post-evangelical presents, participants clearly articulated the concept of continually growing into their evangelical belief system. It quickly became apparent that a vital part of their evangelical theology was growing ever deeper in their relationship with God. Even though all of the participants had been Christians for at least two decades, and in many cases much longer, they demonstrated through their narratives

that they were continuing to actively pursue opportunities for perpetual growth into their evangelical belief systems. This idea of continual growth was also present in their perspectives on their post-evangelical futures. The participants viewed themselves as moving inexorably towards their evangelical futures; parts of their narrative accounts focused on key ways that they imagined their future selves growing and changing. This meant that all of the participants actively identified areas that they believed they needed to grow in. Interestingly, participants also viewed their evangelical futures in light of the godly legacies they wanted to leave behind. This process involved them reflecting back over their lives while simultaneously endeavoring to continue living the remainder of their lives according to the type of legacy they planned to leave. All of the participants were older, so it makes sense that an important part of their futures is coming to terms with their eventual deaths. Through the focus on building a godly legacy to leave behind as a remembrance, participants are clearly preparing themselves for that future eventuality.

My research findings support the available anthropological literature on conversions to conservative Christianity, even though as I have mentioned much of this available literature examines conversions to Christianity from indigenous religious belief systems. My research demonstrates that converts to evangelical Christianity in countries where Christianity has had a hegemonic influence experience a similarly ruptured conversion to converts in indigenous contexts. The US American participants in my study did not have to break from indigenous religious frameworks, but this does not mean that their conversions will not have impacted their social realities. I discovered that their evangelical conversions led the participants to inhabit a new evangelical space that

inevitably led to conflicts in their social worlds. My research also supports Robbins' (2017; 2019) theorizing about duplex cultural formations, because all six of the participants clearly expressed the various ways that they saw themselves continuing to grow into their Christian beliefs; they are still pursuing opportunities for growth decades after their conversion experience. Participants are even looking ahead towards their futures and finding areas of their lives that they want to continue growing in.

Positionality

I believe it is necessary to address my positionality as it relates to this project. As I mentioned earlier, one of my primary reasons for pursuing this research topic is that I have personally experienced a significant religious rupture in my own life that has left me with distinctive pre-rupture and post-rupture selves. Even though I left the Mennonite religious tradition behind, I today choose to identify myself as an evangelical Christian. I conducted my research at two evangelical churches; one of these churches I currently attend and the other one I attended while I was an undergraduate in Mississippi. My religious heritage and my evangelical identification means I occupy a unique space. I am not entirely an insider in these two communities because of my Mennonite upbringing, yet I share similar values and belief systems to my informants and am an accepted member of both communities. This meant I had to be very careful both in how I positioned myself as a researcher and how I interpreted my research findings.

In one way, my status in the community undoubtedly made accessing the community very easy. When I emailed the pastor at my current church, Hope Fellowship, to see if he would be interested in letting me conduct a research project at the church, his response was an immediate yes. When we met to discuss the details of the project he told

me “I’ve gotten emails of that sort before and I’ve always ignored them, but since you’re a member of the congregation here I wanted to help out however I could.” I thought this was fascinating, as he was directly acknowledging that my status as a member of the church is what had opened the door for me. Participants also overwhelmingly expressed an eagerness to help me, something that other researchers interviewing members of their own community have also experienced (Merriam et al. 2001). In fact, I had several participants tell me throughout the interview process that they were praying for me and for anybody who would read my thesis paper. They viewed participating in my research both as a way to glorify God and an opportunity to share their testimonies about how converting to evangelical Christianity had radically changed their lives for the better with a wide and diverse audience.

Being a member of the community I was researching also meant that there were many evangelical specific phrases and terminology frequently used by participants during the interviews. Examples include words like *witnessing*, *born again*, *believer*, *Bible-believing Christian*, etc. Participants did not feel the need to explain these terms to me, implicitly trusting that I was already aware of these meanings; generally, they were correct in their assessment of this. Again, this phenomenon is not unusual for researchers studying their own communities (see Johnson-Bailey 1999). One difficult aspect of being so closely entangled with my research community was something I had not anticipated. This was when I became “a confidant for much unrelated information” (Merriam et al. 2001, 408). I was a young, single, female researcher interviewing much older participants who were all either currently married or had been married in the past. I found myself the unexpected, and somewhat amused, recipient of much advice on how to go about

correctly looking for a godly spouse; mainly the ones advising me on this were the male participants who had marriage issues due to their conversion experiences.

I am well aware that my insider status privileged me as a researcher, with other anthropologists of religion who do not share the same religious beliefs as their informants often tangling with the thorny issues that can arise. For example, Coleman (2003) writes of dreading having to explain to his informants that he was not a Christian. Ironically, at the end of one of the first services he attended, someone asked him in front of the entire church if he was saved. Elsewhere, Coleman (2006) also writes about the issue of navigating the ideological distance between a secular anthropologist and their Christian research informants. Unlike Coleman, I did not approach my field work worrying about attempts at proselytization or having to navigate the ideological distance between myself and my informants. As I mentioned above, the research sites were both churches that I have attended for several years. The one church I attended for three years while I was an undergraduate, and I have been attending the other church since I moved into the Denver area for graduate school. The people I was interviewing were all familiar faces; my research informants were people that I have had some form of relationship with for a minimum of a year. Similarly, I share many of the same theological beliefs and convictions as my informants.

Yet, I am also a trained anthropologist, and I wanted to ensure that I limited as best as I could any biases I was bringing to the research setting. I am well aware that it is impossible to completely eliminate one's biases, but I wanted to do my best at limiting, as much as possible, the effect they would have upon my findings. I drew much from Marshall (2016), who notes that it is important for anthropologists to adopt the stance of

religious relativism which “advocates a scholarly position that presents the viewpoints of believers with empathy and an eye toward understanding their own perspectives on why they do what they do” (45). I approached my research as a self-identified evangelical Christian who had much in common with the beliefs of my informants. I acknowledged, however, that their narrative accounts and their belief systems were unique to them. I endeavored, to the best of my ability, to understand and interpret their narratives according to their perspectives as expressed to me during the interviews. I continued this approach when I was analyzing the findings; I wanted to do justice to their accounts and not force my own evangelical beliefs onto their narratives while simultaneously fulfilling the role of an anthropologist by interpreting the findings using the relevant literature. This was an exercise in continually seeking to find a balance between the participants’ narratives, my own evangelical understandings, and my role as an anthropologist.

Overview of Thesis

The remainder of my thesis is laid out as follows. Chapter Two: Background, will provide an overview of some of the core concepts undergirding this thesis. I will first discuss the meaning behind a Christian conversion experience, followed by an examination of the belief systems behind three variants of Christianity that are key to my thesis: Pentecostalism, Charismatics, and evangelicalism. Chapter three: Literature Review will examine the relevant anthropological literature on the relationship between conversion and rupture. I will also explore my reasoning behind choosing to focus on US American adult converts to Christianity. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the theoretical framework used in my data analysis process. I identify why I chose to orient my theorizing through the lens of narrative analysis, as well as how the concepts of

temporality, linearity, spatial orientations, and continual growth into an evangelical belief system allowed me to fully evaluate participants' narratives.

In Chapter four: Project Design, I provide my research questions and identify the methodological choices guiding my study population and recruitment and consent. I then describe the analysis process I developed by doing individual readings of each participants' narrative to develop initial codes, followed by collating these codes into emergent themes that were then fully analyzed with the utilization of NVivo. I will end by introducing the prior religious affiliations of the six participants and explain how this factored into the terminology choices I have made to clearly identify participants' evangelical Christian beliefs. Chapter five: Findings and Analysis explicates my research findings and the ways that they are supported by the available literature. I explain that, while rupture was a definite feature of participants' stories, these evangelical conversion narratives are best understood when examined in relation to participants' life courses. Through their narrative accounts, participants discussed their adult lives before their evangelical conversions, their eventual adult conversion experiences to evangelical Christianity, and the dramatic changes brought about in their lives due to these conversion experiences. They also all looked ahead towards their futures by discussing both the ways they wanted to continue growing into their evangelical belief systems and the godly legacies they wanted to leave behind upon their deaths. I argue that these narrative accounts demonstrate the ways that their evangelical conversion experiences had caused disruptions in converts' lives that led them to have distinct pre- evangelical pasts, post-evangelical presents, and post-evangelical futures.

Finally, Chapter six: Conclusion, presents my main research findings as mentioned above. Next, I discuss the implications of my research for both the anthropology of Christianity subfield and the field of anthropology in general. I argue that my research supports other anthropological findings about the nature of conversion experiences, but that it adds to this literature in one key way, because few anthropologists to date have examined the effects a conversion can have upon participants' life courses. I also reiterate that rupture was a feature of converts' narratives but that their narratives were much better understood when analyzed in relationship to the life course than when examined through the lens of rupture. The chapter ends with a discussion of the lessons I learned and my recommendations for future research in this area. I identify the ways that my well-established relationships with members at both churches made accessing potential recruits much easier. I end by reflecting on the ways that my insider status both privileged and limited my thesis project.

CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND

In this chapter I will examine the relevant background material that provides the context for my thesis. The concept of an evangelical Christian conversion experience is central to my research, so I will begin by examining this term, looking at some of the definitions of it in the available literature, and identifying how my thesis aligns with this current research. The religious identification of my informants is also important, so I will briefly examine the denominations encompassing global Christianity and then identify the three religious movements that are most frequently mentioned in my research and the available literature: Pentecostalism, Charismatics, and evangelicalism.

Definitions of Conversion

Conversion is a central focus in the anthropology of Christianity and has generated a vast amount of literature examining it and its effects; despite all this research, it has variously been described as a “vexing problem” (Rambo 2003, 213), a “fuzzy term” (Coleman 2003, 19), an “analytically ambiguous category” (Krael-Tovi 2018, 951), and a “notoriously slippery concept that has troubled and excited anthropologists in equal measure” (Chua 2012, 511). I will examine this difficult term by looking at some of its definitions in the available literature, and identifying how my thesis aligns with this current research. Rambo and Farhadian (2014) suggest that one of the simplest and most straightforward ways to understand conversion is through the lens of change. Krael-Tovi (2014) agrees with them that change is central to an understanding of conversion, noting

that that the “field of conversion studies has been so engaged with—indeed, at times almost haunted by—the attempt to define itself by assessing the scope, nature, or quality of changes that warrant the title of ‘conversion’” (717). Even the anthropology of Christianity, she writes, is mostly defined by its focus on conversion and the change that often accompanies this phenomenon.

In his book *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Rambo (1993) writes that the term *conversion* will mean many different things as it is mentioned throughout the book. To help the reader more fully understand what he means by this, Rambo has created an impressive list of some of the probable meanings of this term; possibly in an effort to keep readers from being overwhelmed by all this unpredictability, he quickly follows this up by encouraging them to grasp the possibility that a single word can hold a multitude of potential meanings. He does acknowledge that the core meaning of conversion is change, but says that attempting to define anything beyond this is messy and problematic. Part of the reason for this messiness is that he is approaching conversion as a general concept, something that can be applied in the pluralistic world of religious movements. Within a specific religious community or tradition, there usually exists an accepted normative definition of conversion. Rambo states that these definition are too narrow, however, to be of much use beyond that particular community. Instead, he writes that it is much more worthwhile, and appropriate, to take a broader lens to conversion, and create an understanding of the concept that can be applied in many different religious traditions.

Rambo and Farhadian (2014) take the same approach. They also acknowledge that specific definitions can be applicable in particular religious communities, but decry attempts to create a singular, universal definition of conversion. From their perspective, it

is impossible to create one definition that can capture all the elements of conversion displayed in religious movements around the world. Rather, like Rambo (1993), they espouse a view of conversion that has diverse, and even at time contradictory, definitions. They believe that these multiple definitions are a more accurate reflection of the existing, pluralistic religious world. Bryant and Lamb (1999) likewise view conversion as something that is contextualizable to its environment. Conversion, they write, is “understood differently in different religious and social contexts. What Christians call conversion or *metanoia*, Muslims would probably call ‘submission’ and Buddhists would speak of ‘Going for Refuge’”(Lamb and Bryant 1999, 6).

These comments point towards a key idea: what constitutes a conversion experience varies based upon the religious tradition. Rambo and Farhadian (2014) aptly note that “each religion has its own normative definitions of the nature and purpose of converting and its own means of establishing who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ of its particular religious orientation and organization” (10). Rambo (1993) shares these sentiments; he writes that the degree of change a convert is expected to go through is mainly shaped by the expectations of the religious tradition to which they are converting. This is an important fact to keep in mind, especially when considering my research is focused on evangelical Christian conversion experiences. The Christian religious tradition as a whole has a long and complex relationship with the concept of conversion.

This relationship with conversion can be traced back to the very origins of Christianity. The core of most Christian beliefs rests on the idea that Jesus Christ provides salvation to all who believe in Him. This involves a turning away from the former, sinful self, into the new allegiance to Christ; conversion is quite literally central

to becoming a Christian (Bryant and Lamb 1999; Kling 2014; Macdonald 2019). Many of the authors of the New Testament employed key Greek words such as “*epistrephein* (to turn back, to return to the source of the way of the life) and *metanoia* (to think again, to change mentality, to repent) to characterize a radical change of perspective or transformation in one’s outlook” (Kling 2014, 1). Other key terms used in the New Testament, and also familiar to many Christians today, involve phrases referring to conversion as a *new birth*, *new creation* or *being born again*. This terminology clearly reflects a view of conversion involving a dramatic personal change or transformation in the convert’s life (Bryant and Lamb 1999; Kling 2014). This definition of conversion is exemplified in the Biblical account of the Apostle Paul. His conversion narrative has had such an impact on Christianity that some scholars point towards the theological legacy of Pauline conversion that they believe still has a hegemonic influence on the perceptions of conversion today (Rambo 2003).

What they are referring to here is the Apostle Paul’s dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Saul of Tarsus, as he was then known, was a devout Jew who persecuted Christians. While traveling to Damascus to find more Christians in order to bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment, he had a dramatic, tangible encounter with Jesus. Because of this experience, he changed his name to Paul, radically broke with his Jewish religious background and became a fervent follower of Jesus Christ. A conversion based on this Pauline model would expect a dramatic, sudden rupturing with the convert’s past and a stepping forward into new religious affiliations and beliefs, essentially, a clean break from the convert’s past (Bryant 1999; Glazier 2003; Rambo 2003; Robbins 2010). This Pauline model, however, has not gone

completely unchallenged. While scholars acknowledge the impact it has had upon perceptions of conversion, they also call for a more nuanced understanding of the forces driving a conversion experience. Instead of understanding conversion as a singular event, they advocate that it be perceived as something akin to a process (Austin Broos 2003; Coleman 2003; Galonnier, and de los Rios 2016).

One final thing regarding conversion is its specific relationship to US American evangelical Christianity. Conversion in these contexts should rightly be understood as being situated in the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century. Core to the Second Great Awakening was the idea of individual responsibility in conversion. Meaning, each individual was accountable for the sin in their lives; conversion therefore necessitated an individual personally repenting of sin and accepting the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ (Clapp and Jeffrey 2011). Conversion in these contexts were also highly charged, experiential, and emotional affairs. As Scott (n.d.) notes, conversion was an intense transformation that gave converts a “fundamentally altered sense of self, an identity as a new kind of Christian. As they interpreted it, they had undergone spiritual rebirth, the death of an old self and the birth of a new one that fundamentally transformed their sense of their relationship to the world.” (para. 2). In other words, conversion in US American evangelical circles must be understood as transformative experiences that give converts a new identity and fundamentally alters their relationships with their social worlds. This view of conversion ties in nicely with the anthropological perspective of the rupture of conversion.

Pentecostal, Charismatic, Evangelical

As I will explore further in chapter three, much of the literature that I am building my thesis upon addresses Pentecostal and Charismatic conversion experiences. I have noted several times already, however, that my research focus is specifically directed towards self-identified evangelical Christians. I will be delving a little deeper into these denominations and the belief systems most commonly associated with them, but before I do that I want to examine the global Christian tradition. The reality is that the three variants of Christianity most closely associated with my research represent just a portion of Christian denominations worldwide. I believe it is important to grasp the scope of global Christianity in order to fully understand the place that Pentecostals, Charismatics, and evangelicals inhabit within this larger Christian tradition.

There are three generally agreed upon branches of global Christianity: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy. The Catholic tradition represents nearly half of the global Christian population. The majority of global Catholics belong to the Western, or Latin tradition, while the remaining non-Latin Catholics mainly belong to the Eastern tradition of Catholicism. The Orthodox tradition makes up twelve percent of the global Christian population. Eastern Orthodoxy is the main branch, but there are a few other variants of Orthodoxy also encompassed within this tradition. I found it interesting that there appears to be more agreement about what it means to be a Catholic and an Orthodox versus a Protestant. What I mean by this is that the two sources that provided the data for this section both agreed upon the religious groups that belonged to the Catholic and Orthodox traditions (Pew Research Center 2011; Center for the Study of Global Christianity 2018).

I discovered that Protestantism is a much harder category to define. It can get confusing and contradictory quite quickly. The two research groups that I got my data from took different approaches to explicating the Protestant tradition. The Pew Research Center (2011) divided the Protestant tradition into three groups: historic Protestants such as Methodists, Anglicans, and independent Christians. They also created a category titled *Other Christian traditions*. Within this they include religious groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. They note that these Christians who do not belong to one of the three big traditions within Christianity make up about one percent of the global Christian population. In contrast, in their infographic about global Christianity, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (2018) initially separated Protestants from Independents, i.e. their version of Pew Research Center's (2011) category for other Christian traditions. Unlike the Pew Research Center, they state that followers of this Independent tradition make up nearly seventeen percent of the total Christian population. Later in the infographic, however, they confusingly place the Protestant and Independent categories together when they identify the names of the religious groups that make up these categories and the percentage of followers that each group has worldwide. This means that Pentecostals and Charismatics are included within the same tradition as Latter-Day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The statistics I have been citing above examine the global Christian population. Since my research is looking at the conversion experiences of US American adult converts to evangelical Christianity, I want to also briefly investigate Protestantism in the US. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), American Protestantism is highly

diverse and encompasses more than a dozen different denominational families, including Methodists, Anglicans, and Pentecostals. Each of these traditions has their own unique belief systems, practices, and histories. The Pew Research Center (2015) states that “because of this great diversity, American Protestantism is best understood not as a single religious tradition but rather as three distinct traditions – the evangelical Protestant tradition, the mainline Protestant tradition and the historically black Protestant tradition.” Again, they are acknowledging the diversity within US Protestantism, but are here trying to do a better job explicating the divergences within the tradition.

I found this entire examination of Protestantism highly confusing, and I imagine any reader will also. I believe there are several reasons for this complicated diversity, one of the most prominent being the fact that, unlike Protestantism, the Orthodox and Catholic traditions have unifying institutional bodies, but this is not a point I will examine in-depth. Instead, I think this data indicates two important observations for my research. First of all, the global Christian tradition encompasses many different religious groups. Global Christianity is not, and never will be, a unified whole. To put it another way, no one group has a monopoly on what it means to be a Christian. Secondly, and highly pertinent for this research, the category of Protestantism is confusing; different research groups can take very different approaches to identifying who does and does not belong in this category. This is particularly true of Protestantism in the US. Protestantism appears to essentially be a contested term with no easy definition. That is important because all three of the religious movements I will be discussing in my thesis rightly belong underneath the umbrella of the Protestant tradition; yet, there is undeniably diversity of beliefs and opinions among these three religious groups.

Unsurprisingly, Sweeney (2005) notes that a multitude of scholars have attempted to flesh out the relationship between these religious movements over the years, yet today it remains a divisive and often debated topic. For the purposes of this thesis, I will start by examining Pentecostalism and Charismatics. These two religious movements generally appear in close association with each other in the anthropological literature (see Coleman 2006; Marshall 2015; Robbins 2010). Coleman (2006) explains that he has decided to use the term *Pentecostal* to refer to both ‘classical’ Pentecostals and Charismatics or neo-Pentecostals. His “justification is that despite their differences they occupy significantly overlapping universes of anthropological discourse” (Coleman 2006, 4). I agree with Coleman that Pentecostals and Charismatics are usually placed within the same category in much of the anthropological research. I believe the likely reason for this can be found in one of the most common views in the literature. This is the belief that Charismatics are an offshoot of so-called classical Pentecostalism. This perspective states that followers of this new movement were not only developing new terminology to set them apart from historical Pentecostal churches, they also adapted traditional Pentecostal beliefs to fit better among the mainstream churches where Charismatics flourished.

One good example of this is that they were much more flexible about a key Pentecostal belief: speaking in tongues. The older, and now sometimes known as classical, Pentecostal churches generally required all adherents to speak in tongues. Charismatic followers, however, did not see this as an absolute necessity. While they still valued this spiritual practice, it was no longer a fundamental and required aspect of their belief system (Wacker 2001). Charismatics are viewed as helping rid Pentecostal beliefs of some of the strict religious guidelines that had hitherto defined it. Synan (1997) writes

that Charismatics developed a “new view of the ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit’ that allowed Pentecostalism to flourish in the historic churches [i.e. non-Pentecostal churches such as Baptists] without the ‘cultural baggage’ and rigid exclusivism espoused by many of the Pentecostal churches” (253). Of course, many classical Pentecostals were horrified to hear of Charismatics who drank alcohol, smoked tobacco, and also spoke in tongues. Some of them went so far as to deem Charismatics a Satanic plot sent to hinder true Pentecostal beliefs. Regardless of this opposition from classical Pentecostals, the Charismatic movement has flourished outside the confines of strict Pentecostalism. Despite these objections from classical Pentecostals about being associated with the Charismatic movement, I believe there are undeniable connections between these two variants of Christianity. At this point, it should not be surprising that many anthropologists place these two religious movements into the same category, as Charismatics are generally, and I believe rightly, understood to be an offshoot of Pentecostalism.

Several scholars have also placed evangelicalism into the category occupied by Pentecostalism and Charismatics (Freeman 2017; Macdonald 2019). Their primary argument for doing so is that all three variants of Christianity focus heavily on tangible evidences of conversion, which causes rupture to be an expected and defining aspect of the conversion process. What this means for my research is that when an individual converts to evangelical Christianity they adopt a new worldview. Probably the most central feature of this is the belief that individuals need to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Through believing in Jesus as the Son of God and repenting of one’s sins, it is possible to be born again “that is, breaking out of one’s old life at the same time

as developing an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ as personal savior” (Macdonald 2019, 124).

Many scholars also focus on the meaning of evangelical: spreading the good news of the gospel. An important part of evangelicalism is spreading the gospel message to other people in the hopes of converting them; this emphasis on proselytization is often colloquially referred to as witnessing (Macdonald 2019; Sweeney 2005; Yong 2002). As Yong (2002) writes, “to be evangelical is to be biblically defined by the good news proclaimed by the apostles of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead” (239-240). Evangelicals are also focused on the primacy of the Bible; the origins of this can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther’s insistence on sola scriptura, i.e., Scripture alone. Evangelicals today are generally defined by their belief in the infallibility of the Bible as the inspired word of God (Yong 2002).

As can be seen, the evangelical worldview requires adherents to adopt beliefs that are very different from non-evangelical and/or secular viewpoints. While not sharing such a direct, traceable connection to either Pentecostalism or Charismatics as these two belief systems do with each other, I believe Macdonald (2019) and Freeman (2017) are correct in their assessments that evangelicalism demands the same rupturing with an individual’s pre-conversion life that is expected of converts to Pentecostal and Charismatic belief systems. Because of this focus on rupture, evangelicalism is an excellent candidate for my research on the effects that a conversion to this religious tradition has upon a convert’s social and material world.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the relevant literature for my thesis. I begin by examining the relationship between conversion and rupture. I explain how anthropologists have been fascinated with this idea of rupture caused by conversions from the very beginning of the anthropology of Christianity. I also discuss the anthropological argument that rupture is not a one-time occurrence but rather should be understood as a process. Next, I identify a predominant focus in the literature on researching conversion experiences to Christianity that are occurring within the context of indigenous religious practices. I describe how noticing this research focus led me to choose a specifically US American study population. I end by describing the theoretical framework that supports my thesis analysis. First, I identify the overarching role that narrative analysis played in my theoretical approach. Then I discuss how the concepts of temporality, linearity, spatial orientations, and continually growing into an evangelical belief system also aided my theoretical analysis.

Relationship between Conversion and Rupture

As I discussed briefly in chapter two while examining definitions of conversion, much of the literature investigating Christian conversion experiences recognizes a rupturing aspect in these accounts. This relationship to rupture is heavily identified with Christianity's Pentecostal and Charismatic (P/c) variants, though evangelicalism is

sometimes included in this list as well. In his review article on the anthropology of Christianity, Robbins (2014) observed that from the earliest emergences of this subfield, anthropologists have been exploring the “extent to which some kinds of Christianity, particularly its Evangelical and Pentecostal branches, promote radical discontinuity in the lives of converts—demanding that they reject their former cultural commitments and ways of living” (167). Coleman and Hackett (2015) likewise remarked that within the anthropology of Christianity subfield “one of the key theoretical tropes so far . . . has revolved around the question of ‘rupture’” (13-14). Many other anthropologists have also noted the vital role that rupture and discontinuity play in this subfield (see Chua 2012; Macdonald 2019).

Robbins (2012) argues that rupture is intrinsic to Christianity itself. He notes that most variants of Christianity narrate their history as emerging from a radical schism with Judaism. The idea of rupture is therefore not new to Christians, in fact, he believes that “is fair to say that almost all forms of Christianity emphasize radical change in one or other dimension of time” (Robbins 2012, 12). For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will only be focusing on the relationship between rupture and conversion experiences, because this relationship is a key part in trying to understand conversions to P/c and evangelical forms of Christianity. The reason for this is that these forms of Christianity expect a definite breach between a convert’s pre-conversion and post-conversion lives (Freeman 2017; Macdonald 2019; Meyer 1998; Robbins 2010; Robbins 2012). One good example of how this rupture affects converts’ lives can be found in Meyer’s (1998) Pentecostal research informants’ frequent references to the phrase “make a complete break with the past” (3). In other words, these converts sought to distance themselves

from aspects of their prior lives, such as ancestor worship, that stood in opposition to their newfound Pentecostal beliefs. They were seeking to create a breach between their pre-Pentecostal and their post-Pentecostal lives. Converts to all three of these forms of Christianity are expected to experience a similar phenomenon. A significant amount of literature has been written examining the various forms that this breach takes in converts' lives.

The anthropology of Christianity subfield has undoubtedly benefited from this focus on rupture and discontinuity, but some anthropologists have rightly cautioned against focusing too heavily on rupture alone when studying conversions. Chua (2012) writes that the “model of Christian conversion-as-rupture . . . has become a prevailing orthodoxy in the anthropology of Christianity and religion” (513). She argues that focusing primarily on rupture risks missing any instances of continuity that may exist within research contexts. She does acknowledge that many contributors to the literature on rupture recognize that conversions can contain both elements of rupture and continuity, but she is clearly worried that this is not enough. She wants to ensure that anthropologists do not reify “continuity and discontinuity as clear-cut, diametrically opposed categories . . . [but instead understand] the shades and degrees that they take in reality” (Chua 2012, 522). Chua follows this up by commenting that several anthropologists have convincingly shown that rupture can be a difficult thing to fully achieve in one's life.

Her comments that rupture is not a singular, finite occurrence is borne out by the available literature. Rather than being a one-time, clean break in a convert's life, many anthropological researchers have identified this rupture as taking the form of a continual

negotiation between the two selves. In her introduction to *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, Austin-Broos (2003) notes that a common theme can be discerned in the authors' focus on conversion as "continuing and practiced" (9). Engelke (2010) similarly views rupture as a difficult and ongoing process that is relative to each individual. Luhrmann (2004) states that becoming an evangelical Christian is "both a singular event that people celebrate like a birthday and an ongoing process" (520). Robbins (2019) writes that Christians do not wholly discard their former cultures "or even transform all of their parts in ways that lead them to be unrecognizable in relation to their previous forms . . . [instead] Christians are enjoined constantly to take an evaluative position with regard to their previous traditions" (224). What Robbins means is that converts do not totally sever themselves from their former pre-conversion lives, or, in the words of Meyer's (1993) informants, they do not make a complete break with the past. Rather, these converts continually re-examine their pre-conversion selves and cultural beliefs in light of their P/c and evangelical belief systems.

Finally, Daswani (2013) discusses how converts to P/c Christianity are expected to identify a radical discontinuity with their pasts, but that this process is ongoing and dialectical. In other words, it is to be expected that P/c and evangelical converts will experience a radical rupture that will cleave their lives into a pre-conversion past and a post-conversion present. Yet, this experience of rupture is not limited to the conversion moment itself but rather becomes an ongoing process in their lives with converts trying to move towards a post-conversion ideal while continually struggling against their pre-conversion selves. These anthropologists' understanding of rupture as something that is

still ongoing in converts' lives long after the conversion moment itself is vital for my analysis of the participants' conversion narratives.

Focus on Conversions in the Context of Indigenous Religions

I have already mentioned several times that much of the anthropological literature examining Pentecostal and Charismatic (P/c) conversions has hitherto focused primarily on this occurrence in contexts dominated by indigenous religious beliefs (Chua 2012; Engelke 2010; Marshall 2015; Marshal 2016; Macdonald 2019; Meyers 1998; Robbins 2017). Rambo (2003), a well-known anthropologist in the field of religious conversion experiences, commented on this phenomenon:

Anthropologists are often in a position to see conversion as it occurs among those who have had little previous exposure to Christianity . . . for example, they can examine the intricate and subtle processes that transpire in a convert's first contact with a new religious option . . . It is hoped that anthropologists will continue this focus (212).

Of course, this does not mean that anthropologists of Christianity do not study converts in societal contexts where Christianity has a hegemonic influence. Some anthropologists even directly discuss the phenomenon of conversion in these situations, with Harding's (1987) article, *Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion*, being the most prominent example of this that I could find. In the piece, she studies the rhetoric that one US American evangelical pastor used to proselytize to her, a non-Christian; she then builds upon this experience to theorize how listeners can become susceptible to converting. Her emphasis on the rhetoric of conversion fits well with her research focus elsewhere on examining the speech patterns of US American evangelical Christians using discourse analysis (see Harding 2001). While Harding's research on discourse has much to offer the field of conversion studies, it is very different from the

majority of the research being done on conversion in the context of indigenous religious beliefs. In these situations, anthropologists often examine the conversion experiences and narratives of entire communities, particularly in relation to the ways that conversion has altered their social and material worlds. They are not necessarily focused on identifying the ways these Christians try to convert others.

Besides Harding's (1987) article, there are many other anthropologists who also study Christians in countries where Christianity has historically had a hegemonic influence (see Bialecki 2008; Coleman 2003; Coleman 2006; Elisha 2011; Harding 2001; Luhrmann 2012). In fact, several of these sources have been very helpful in shaping my thesis research (Coleman 2003; Coleman 2006; Elisha 2011). Interestingly, most of these anthropologists study different aspects of the Christian experience, rarely if ever focusing directly on conversion experiences. Rambo's comments above provide one reason for why this might be, with his understanding that many anthropologists conduct research in locales dominated by indigenous religious beliefs where Christianity has hitherto had little influence. While I think Rambo makes a good point, I do not believe it can fully explain this phenomenon; especially because, as I have just mentioned, there are many anthropologists who study Christianity in countries like the US, but are just not focusing directly on conversion. For the purposes of my thesis project, I believe that another reason why so little research has been done on conversion experiences in these contexts can be discerned through a close reading of the literature.

Upon examining some of the statements and theorizing coming from scholars studying conversions to P/c Christianity happening within societies with indigenous religious frameworks, a theme rapidly appears. For example, Robbins (2017) observes

that Christianity always follows another culture. What he means by this is that Christianity is never culturally where people begin. He believes this is especially important to keep in mind when studying conversions in places where Christianity is not prevalent. He states that when anthropologists study “conversion in places where people have had little contact with Christianity before, one thing that stands out is that part of Christianity’s appeal is this quality of secondarity and the way it leads Christianity to acknowledge that converts start from somewhere else” (Robbins 2017, 39). Robbins’ focus on the ways that P/c Christianity manifests in cultures that have historically not been influenced by any forms of Christianity is more clearly expressed, yet still quite similar, to other statements in the literature.

Macdonald (2019) notes that anthropologists are fascinated with studying indigenous P/c conversion experiences because these forms of Christianity often demand that believers sever ties with many of their indigenous cultural and religious beliefs. Engelke (2010) writes about the African Christians he studied trying to break away from their indigenous heritage of traditional healers and witchcraft. Ikeuchi (2017) describes the experiences of a Japanese convert to P/c Christianity, who identifies his newfound religious beliefs as setting him free from the “formulaic ‘monotonous’ sutras, passive participation ‘out of the sense of obligation,’ and . . . [the] ritual code oriented toward external forms” characterized in his Buddhist and Shinto religious upbringing (10). Even Marshall (2015; 2016), who studies the effects conversion has had upon a small group of Pentecostal, Navajo believers in the US, focuses mainly on the experiential ways that their new beliefs interact with indigenous Navajo spirituality. The common theme

running through all of this is the focus on how these converts to P/c Christianity seek a radical break from their indigenous beliefs and cultural practices.

As I have mentioned several times already, however, Christianity has historically been the dominant religion in the US. Christianity has heavily influenced US American views on numerous issues, including morality, gender roles, and sexual mores (Barker 2017). Meaning, there might not be as radical of a break between the pre-evangelical conversion self and post-evangelical conversion self in the lives of the participants I studied as has been documented by anthropologists studying conversions to Christianity in indigenous contexts. Guided by this observation, I chose to study the conversion narratives of evangelical Christians at my own church in Denver, Colorado. I wanted to use this research project to discover the role that rupture played in conversions that happened within contexts where Christianity has a hegemonic influence. It has been well-documented by many other anthropologists that rupture is a significant force in the lives of individuals converting from indigenous religions; I was curious to see if the same phenomenon could be documented in contexts where individuals were essentially converting from one form of Christianity to another.

Theoretical Approach

Narrative Analysis

The overarching theoretical framework for this thesis is narrative analysis. I chose to collect conversion narratives because narratives enable researchers to “see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change” (Squire, Andrews, and Tamboukou 2013, 2). In other words, by choosing to study narratives,

researchers are able to describe and explain important parts of participants' social worlds, including the ways that change has affected these accounts. As Garro and Mattingly (2000) note, narratives are essentially stories that take the listener on a foray into the narrator's social reality and explore the "meaning of events by linking motive, act[ion], and consequence" (10). They believe that narrative analysis provides a space for researchers to examine the cultural lives of participants through the lens of both a personal and social drama. Choosing narrative analysis as my driving theoretical component will enable me to collect participants' stories of the many ways that conversion impacted their personal and social realities.

Narrative analysis is also a good theoretical framing for my thesis because I am specifically examining the ways that conversion brought about changes in participants' lives. Bamberg (2012) states that narratives are not always a good way to examine how participants' construct identity. He believes, however, that one good way to use narratives to study identity construction is as it relates to change. He writes that narrators can present themselves as "having undergone some gradual (continuous) changes or radical (discontinuous) breaks resulting in a different, new persona — changes we can frame in terms of having been transformed, having grown, developed" (Bamberg 2012, 205). Bamberg goes on to note that these types of claims, i.e. having radically changed from the person one used to be, often inspire a response from the listener asking how and why this change occurred. This in turn seems "to require some kind of explication or accounting [on the part of the narrator]. It is here, interactively, where storytelling activities typically kick in" (Bamberg 2012, 206). Bamberg is arguing that identity changes, such as the rupturing effect of conversions that I am examining in my thesis, are

understood well through the lens of narrative. These types of radical change interest listeners, who want an accounting of why someone can claim that their life has been altered so dramatically. It is here, in this space, where narrative storytelling flourishes. Narrative analysis is an excellent choice for my examination of participants' conversion narratives.

I agree with Riessman (2013), however, that the term *narrative* is often used so indiscriminately that it has no real meaning. She urges scholars to avoid using the term loosely, but rather ensure that they define the particular application of narrative in their individual research projects. I have chosen to use Chase's (2005) excellent comparison of narratives to other forms of communication when defining what this term means for my project:

Unlike a chronology, which also reports events over time, a narrative communicates the narrator's point of view, including why the narrative is worth telling in the first place. . . . Unlike editorials, policy statements, and doctrinal statements of belief, all of which also express a point of view, a narrative makes the self (the narrator) the protagonist, either as actor or as interested observer of others' actions. Finally, unlike scientific discourse, which also explains or presents an understanding of actions and events, narrative discourse highlights the uniqueness of each human action and event rather than their common properties (656-657).

I believe that Chase's description is not only a good comparison of narrative to other types of communication, it is also an excellent definition of what a narrative is and is not. When I refer to the participants' conversion narratives, I am indicating that these are stories told by a narrator, who is describing their point of view as an actor in the story of their life pre- and post- their evangelical conversion experiences. Not only is this concept of narrative extremely helpful in the overall framing of my theoretical analysis, as I will explore in the next two sections, narrative analysis also plays a key role in two other parts

of my theorizing, because “narratives are about people (characters), who act (events) in space and time; typically across a sequence of events (temporality)” (Bamberg 2012, 203). In other words, narratives also provide a way of understanding the roles that temporality and spatial orientations play in a narrative retelling of an individual’s life. I will begin by examining the concept of temporality.

Temporality and Linearity

Temporality and linearity are two theoretical concepts that I will be using in combination with each other to help me analyze my research findings. I have chosen to focus on temporality because it often comes up in discussions of narrative analysis (see Bamberg 2012; Baynham 2003; Chase 2018; Garro and Mattingly 2000). Chase (2018) says that part of what makes a narrative a narrative is “connecting and seeing the consequences of actions, events, feelings, or thoughts over time (in the past, present, and/or future)” (549). Garro and Mattingly (2000) likewise note that narrative research has been “taken up by those who wish to explore how life (both social and individual) unfolds through time” (20). These three researchers all understand temporality as playing a key role in fully analyzing a narrative. I have chosen to combine this view on the importance of temporality in narrative analysis with the concept of linearity.

I am building here upon Bornat’s and Bytheway’s (2012) understanding of the way temporality interacted with their study of life history accounts. They explain that their “life history approach meant that temporality was both implicitly and explicitly covered, given that participants were asked about life events in a biographical and chronologically ordered way” (293). While Bornat and Bytheway do not explicitly mention linearity, I believe it is also implicit within their approach. Like them, I am

approaching the participants' conversion narrative through a linear, and therefore temporal, lens. I am asking the participants about chronological, biographical events. The first question in my first interview asks participants to discuss their initial encounters with Christianity; the remainder of the interview series continues with their first encounters with evangelical Christianity and then follows the unfolding progression of events after their conversion experiences. I am also studying the rupturing effect that participants' evangelical conversions had upon their lives; this research focus likewise means that temporality and linearity are key aspects of the narratives. According to Becker (1997) the very nature of a rupture involves linearity. First there is the "disruption itself, a period of limbo, and a period of life reorganization" (Becker 1997, 2). What this suggests to me is that any rupture needs to be understood through both a linear and a temporal lens. A disruption provides an individual with a linear understanding of a before and after period. This, in turn, means the narrative is also rooted in temporality. In the context of this research, I will employ an understanding of this relationship between temporality and linearity to interpret the participants' narratives.

Spatial Orientations

As I mentioned above, another important part of my theoretical analysis is examining how conversion affected converts' orientations in space. Baynham (2003) has critiqued narrative theory for not fully examining the many ways that temporal orientations can affect participants' narrative accounts. He has also argued that spatial orientations are likewise ignored; he states that many narratives have "typically privileged temporal orientation over spatial orientation and that, while every definition of narrative will contain some reference to a temporally ordered sequence of events,

typically orientation in space is assumed and taken for granted” (Baynham 2003, 347). He wants researchers to consider the many ways that changes in spatial orientation can affect a narrative. Baynham (2003) believes that different versions of spatial orientation are frequently present in the same narrative, and that a narrative is not “fully comprehensible without this knowledge” (365).

Baynham (2003) is examining the ways that understanding shifts in geographical spatial orientations can affect a narrative. I want to note here that none of the participants in my research went through a geographical spatial relocation as a result of their conversion experiences. However, Carrithers (1992) states that narrative analysis needs to account for the “changes in an inner landscape of thought in the participants as well as the outer landscape of events” (84). One possible interpretation of Carrithers’ comments is that spatial orientations do not have to be limited to geographical changes. Participants can also experience what I might term an ideological spatial shift. Because of their evangelical conversion experiences, the participants in my research not only faced changes in the world of events, their “inner landscape of thought” also radically shifted to align with an evangelical belief system. I believe that the participants in my research likely did experience a shifting spatial orientation as a result of their conversions, just not one that is as immediately obvious as a changing geographical spatial orientation. For the purposes of this study, I will be combining Baynham’s (2003) views on the importance of accounting for spatial orientations to fully comprehend the narrative with Carrithers’ (1992) understanding that spatial orientations are not solely limited to geographical relocations. In this way, I hope to examine that ways that shifting spatial orientations influence participants’ narrative accounts.

Continual Growth

The idea that converts are never able to fully effect a total break with their pre-evangelical pasts but rather spend the rest of their post-evangelical lives striving after an ideal version of rupture, is a vitally important part of my theoretical analysis. I am particularly drawing from Robbins (2017; 2019) theorizing regarding what he has termed *duplex cultural formations* for my understanding of this concept. Examining the work of several other scholars, Robbins' posits that converts to Christianity find themselves continually negotiating between their adopted Christian belief system and their prior worldview and culture. He writes that the:

traditional cultures of converts are not jettisoned entirely or even transformed beyond all recognition . . . [rather] Christians are challenged to take an evaluative position with regard to those cultures, often negotiating between their new Christian values and those that are central to their indigenous ways of living (Robbins 2017, 40).

I believe what he means is that converts' prior cultural beliefs and practices can never be fully eradicated from their new lives as Christians. Converts will continually be engaged with the non-Christian, secular world they inhabited prior to conversion and continue to live in post-conversion. Converts learn how to continually situate their Christian beliefs in relation to their surrounding non-Christian cultural reality.

Robbins' believes that this produces an enduring tension in converts' lives, as an expected part of being a Christian is perpetually working towards an idealized version of what the Christian rupture should be. Since converts do not live within an ideal Christian world, however, they are unable to fully effect this rupture in their lives. Robbins' states that this continual focus on rupture can be found in Christian slogans like "reformed and always reforming" or "God has no Grandchildren" (i.e. each person and each generation

has to experience the Christian rupture for themselves – it is an experience that cannot be inherited)” (Robbins 2019, 225). I believe that one way this focus on rupture manifests in converts’ lives can be found within the slogans Robbins has cited. This is the idea that part of being a true Christian is seeking to continually grow into the Christian faith. The one slogan in particular captures this concept well; Christians are reformed at the moment of conversion, yet they are also continually being reformed into their Christian beliefs. In the context of my research, I am employing Robbins’ theorizing in this sense of converts’ seeking continual growth into their Christian belief systems.

CHAPTER FOUR: PROJECT DESIGN

In this chapter, I will present the project design for my research. I begin with an explanation of the impact COVID-19 had upon my original research protocols and how I was forced to adapt my research design to its current form. I then outline the overarching research questions that have guided this thesis project from the beginning. Next, I examine my study population, articulating my reasons for choosing to focus on adult converts to evangelical Christianity. I also identify the methodological choices guiding my decision to limit the study to six participants. I then describe the two churches I recruited participants from and explain the recruitment and consent process. I articulate my methodological choices and disclose the analysis process I used for this project. Finally, I end by introducing my participants and identifying their prior religious affiliations; I explain how this factored into my decisions regarding the terminology I have chosen to identify the religious beliefs and practices of the participants in this thesis.

Doing Research during COVID-19

I think it is necessary to begin this chapter with a brief discussion of the effects that COVID-19 had upon my research protocols. I will refer to the issues caused by COVID-19 several times throughout this chapter, but I wanted to specifically address it at the beginning. I entered graduate school in the fall of 2019, and spent the winter and spring of 2019-2020 writing my thesis proposal. Just as I was beginning to seek approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in preparation for going into the field during the summer of 2020, Covid-19 entered the scene. The impact of the pandemic radically

changed my field research. The IRB at my university would not approve any projects that brought student investigators into direct contact with research informants. Because of this, I was unable to conduct informal interviews as planned and my participant observation at the church was solely limited to watching services over livestream. This obviously affected my data collection; I was simply not able to obtain as rich of data as I was originally planning. The majority of my collected data came from semi-structured interviews, conducted either over the telephone or via a video-conferencing app such as Zoom. I know that my project would have undoubtedly benefited from the observations gleaned during in-person time on the field, but unfortunately that option was not available to me during the time I was conducting this research.

Research Questions

There were two primary research questions anchoring my project. I added several sub-questions to help me further explore the concepts articulated in the primary questions. These questions were designed to help me understand the ways that participants' evangelical conversion experiences had or had not altered their belief systems, perceptions of themselves, and their interactions with their social worlds.

1. How do US American adult converts to evangelical Christianity see the relationship between their pre-conversion and post-conversion selves evolve and change over the years?
 - a. What differences do converts see as being the most significant between their pre-conversion and post-conversion selves?
 - b. How do converts create distance between their pre-conversion and post-conversion selves?

2. What is the process through which converts transition to their post-conversion selves?
 - a. How does this transitioning process shape their post-conversion selves over the years?

Study Population

For this project, I wanted to research the conversion narratives of US American adult converts to evangelical Christianity. There were several reasons for choosing this study population. First of all, I wanted participants who had been eighteen years or older at the time of their evangelical conversion experience. I decided to study adult converts because of the likelihood of there being more evidence of rupture in their narratives. I realized that adult converts would likely experience a more disruptive conversion experience than somebody who was in their early teens or younger at the self-identified age of conversion. Adult converts would have more fully solidified social worlds, perspectives, and identities that would be affected by their evangelical conversion experiences. Secondly, I wanted participants who had been born and raised in the US. As I mentioned earlier in this thesis, a significant amount of research has been done on conversions to Christianity from indigenous religions. I wanted to study the narrative accounts of US American converts to evangelical Christianity, because I was curious to see if conversion experiences in contexts where Christianity has a hegemonic influence had similarly disruptive effects on converts' lives as it did in the lives of their indigenous counterparts.

I also decided to focus on converts to evangelical Christianity, despite the fact that much of the available literature is specifically on Pentecostal and Charismatic (P/c)

conversions. As I discussed earlier, evangelicals share many of the same core beliefs that P/c Christians do, which was one of the reasons I decided to focus on this denomination. Also, given that I was already an insider in an evangelical church in the Denver area, I decided to make use of those connections instead of trying to build relationships at a different church. The initial study population was restricted to my current church in Denver, Hope Fellowship. When COVID-19 struck, however, it quickly became apparent that I would not be able to conduct any in-person research. In consultation with my advisor, I decided to take this unexpected opportunity and expand my study population to include another evangelical church, Pleasant Grove. Pleasant Grove was the church I attended while I was earning my undergraduate degree at a university in Mississippi. I obviously no longer attend Pleasant Grove since I moved to Colorado for graduate school, but I still have close ties there. I had not included Pleasant Grove in my initial plans since I wanted to conduct in-person interviews and participant observation. When these research methods were taken away from me, one of the few benefits I was able to gain from this was a slightly expanded study population.

Besides just limiting the study population to US American adult converts to evangelical Christianity, I also chose to specifically focus on the narratives of individuals who had experienced a self-identified evangelical conversion a minimum of ten years prior to this research project. In this way, I hoped to gain a more insightful perspective on the long-term impact that their evangelical conversion experiences had upon their views of themselves and the world around them. Lastly, I decided to limit the number of participants in this study to six. While my research was not specifically phenomenological in nature, I took some guidance from Smith's, Flowers', and Larkin's

(2009) handbook on conducting interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) when choosing the number of participants. IPA is a research approach that relies on a series of semi-structured interviews to gather an in-depth analysis of an individual's experiences. One thing that sets IPA apart from other research methodologies is its focus on getting a highly detailed account of one or two individual narratives instead of focusing on a broader, less in-depth analysis of a larger population. From their experiences working with student researchers, the authors recommend that a master's thesis candidate choosing this approach would do well to limit the study population to three participants. They state that limiting the participants like this means that student researchers will not be overwhelmed by an excess of data. Since the IPA model fit well with the research approach necessitated upon me by the COVID-19 restrictions, I decided to similarly limit the number of participants in my study. I think it was wise of me to do so, because at the end of my research I found myself with nearly twelve and a half hours of rich interview data. As Smith, Flowers, and Larkin note, I believe I would have found myself slightly overwhelmed by the amount of data collected if I had not limited the study to six participants.

Recruitment and Consent

I restricted the participants of this study to members of either Pleasant Grove or Hope Fellowship who were born and raised in the United States and were eighteen years or older at the moment of their self-identified, evangelical conversion experience. Hope Fellowship is a small church that averaged around a hundred or so congregants in attendance during Sunday morning services pre-COVID-19. Pleasant Grove is a significantly larger church that averaged between one-thousand to one-thousand five

hundred congregants on Sunday mornings. Because of the size difference in these two churches, I used slightly different recruitment methods for each church. Mostly due to the smaller size of Hope Fellowship, I am a familiar face at the church and have a personal relationship with the pastoral staff. I reached out to the pastor at Hope Fellowship and asked him if he would consider allowing me to recruit participants from among the congregation. He and his wife met with me to learn more about the project and were eager to help me. They aided me by sending out recruitment emails to the congregational listserv and allowing me to make a short, recruitment video that was then played during the announcements portion of each Sunday morning service. In this way, I was able to quickly recruit the majority of the six participants I needed.

For recruitment at Pleasant Grove, I decided to reach out to the Lifegroup I had been a member of, instead of the pastoral staff. Lifegroups is the term Pleasant Grove uses to denote what many other churches call Sunday school. Ironically, my Lifegroup at Pleasant Grove was, at one point, nearly the same size as the entire congregation at Hope Fellowship. I reached out to a senior member of the Lifegroup to get their approval to recruit among the members. When this was received, I had our communications member send out the recruitment email to the Lifegroup listserv. Since adding Pleasant Grove to my study population was not on my initial IRB documents, it took me several weeks to get approval to add this church. This meant that I did the majority of my initial recruitment at Hope Fellowship, and therefore most of my participants are from that church. I was unfortunately able to only recruit one participant, Sarah, from Pleasant Grove, instead of finding half my participants at Pleasant Grove and half of them at Hope Fellowship per my initial revised research plan.

Methods

As I have mentioned several times, the COVID-19 pandemic interfered with my research methodology. Due to the restrictions placed upon my research by the IRB, I was not able to conduct any in-person research in order to minimize the risk of infection. My main source of data collection came from a series of three semi-structured interviews I conducted with the participants. These three interviews were designed to get an in-depth and fully-rounded picture of participants' conversion narratives. To protect participants' privacy and give them autonomy over the interview process, I let them set the terms of the interview. I made myself as available as possible, which meant I ended up conducting interviews both over the phone and via videoconferencing apps like Zoom. I also allowed participants to set the date and times of the interviews. I did try to ensure that there was at least a week between each interview for two primary reasons. First of all, I wanted to avoid overwhelming the participants in any way. Secondly, I wanted to allow participants some space in the hopes that they might reflect upon the previous interview and add some insights from those reflections into the next interview. This happened numerous times, with some participants opening the interview by telling me some additional thoughts they wanted to share with me. In one instance, Renee even talked with several of her family members and friends to hear their opinions on some of the material we had discussed in the previous interview. She then shared their responses with me in the hopes that it would give me a fuller picture of her conversion narrative.

The other form of data collection I was able use was observing online church services. I only used this form of data collection at Hope Fellowship, mainly because the majority of my participants came from this congregation. I was unfortunately not able to

glean much relevant data from this. I was mainly able to collect some interesting observations about the messages being propagated by those in authority at the church, i.e. the pastor and the worship leader, that corresponded with beliefs expressed by the participants during the interviews.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Before I began my data analysis process, I first had to transcribe the nearly twelve and half hours of interview data collected from the participants. Once I had successfully transcribed all the interviews, I moved on to the initial phase of data analysis. I should note here that I conducted all of my data analysis digitally. I began by individually reading each of the participants' interview series in its Word document format. During this phase I treated each of the participants as an individual case and only examined the interview series for any insights it could shed on that particular participant's conversion narrative. As I was doing this initial reading of the data, I also began making notes in the margins, paying attention to ideas and concepts that seemed to be particularly important to the participants or that were repeated throughout the series of three interviews. I then collated these notes to identify any emerging themes. At this stage in the analysis process I was continuing to focus on each interview series as an individual case. It was not until I had finished analyzing each participants' conversion narrative in this manner and had identified the emergent themes that I moved to looking for connections across these six cases.

During this phase of analysis, I moved the Word documents containing the interviews and my notes into NVivo. While each of the participants' interview series provided fascinating insights into their individual perspectives on their conversion

narratives, I knew I needed to look for connections across their various cases to make a fully anthropological thesis. I used NVivo's method of creating nodes and sub-nodes to organize the participants' data. I began with emergent themes I had uncovered during the first stage of analysis and started coding each participant's interview series into NVivo. As I worked my way through coding each of the participant's emergent themes, I began uncovering patterns across their various cases. By the time I had finished coding each participant's data into NVivo, I had identified numerous recurrent themes across these six conversion narratives. Finally, since I was able to do so little participant-observation, I did not code the data collected in this way like I did for the interview data. Instead, I typed these observations up in a separate Word document and only referred back to this document after I had coded participants' emergent themes in NVivo. Then I was able to make connections between the messages I observed being propagated across the pulpit and some of the recurrent themes that appeared in participants' narratives.

Introduction to Participants

Before moving on to a discussion of my findings and analysis, I want to briefly introduce the six research participants, examine their prior religious affiliations, and explain how this affected the terminology I have chosen to identify their religious beliefs and practices. To begin, as I have mentioned elsewhere, all of the participants interviewed for this research rightly belong in the category of evangelical Christianity. First of all, they are all active, practicing members of churches that belong to the evangelical movement. Sarah is a member at Pleasant Grove, a church belonging to the Southern Baptist denomination. The other five participants are all members at Hope Fellowship, a church associated with Converge Worldwide; Converge presents itself as a

movement of churches helping to plant and multiply more churches around the globe. Both of these denominations hold to the core beliefs mentioned elsewhere that are most frequently associated with evangelicalism. Secondly, through their conversion accounts, all the participants articulated these core evangelical beliefs in their narratives. Having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ was the central feature of their conversion experiences. They also all frequently narrated their attempts to spread the gospel to other people through witnessing. The primacy of the Bible as the inspired word of God was also apparent in their narratives.

There is another facet to participants' narratives, however, besides them articulating these adult conversion experiences to evangelical Christianity. All of the participants could rightly be said to have converted from Christianity to Christianity. I have included a table below to demonstrate what I mean.

Table 1: Participants' Childhood and Current Church Affiliations

Name	Dominic	Sarah	Renee	Penny	Ben	Martin
Childhood Church	not specified	Southern Baptist	Lutheran	Catholic	Episcopal	Catholic
Current Church	Evang.	Southern Baptist	Evang.	Evang.	Evang.	Evang.

As can be seen, all the participants encountered some form of Christianity during their childhoods. Even Dominic, who did not specify a particular denomination, was often sent to church on Sunday morning by his parents. In several cases, notably Sarah, Penny, Ben, and Martin, participants were raised in the church. By this I mean that they attended church regularly on Sunday mornings and were also active in the local church community. Yet, it is interesting to note that today only one of the participants, Sarah, is currently a member of the same church denomination that she was raised in.

I believe this is mainly due to all of the participants clearly differentiating between their childhood religious encounters and their adult conversion experience. They are all able to articulate a definite division between or a falling away from their initial exposure to Christianity and their current belief systems. For example, in the cases of Penny and Martin, the two individuals raised in the Catholic church, they have strongly rejected the majority of the things they were taught as Catholics. In fact, when I asked Martin to describe his first encounters with Christianity, he started telling me about the times during his mid-teens that he was accosted on the street by people trying to witness to him. It was not until later that he mentioned he had been born into a Catholic family and raised in the Catholic church. He did not seem to equate Catholicism with his current Christian beliefs and stated that the priests “talked about God and Jesus, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but it was more, it wasn’t just up to Jesus for salvation, you had to do other works to earn your salvation to get into heaven. And of course then we were taught that the priest could absolve your sins and you’d be okay.” Martin makes it clear through this and other statements in the interview that he no longer believes the Catholic teachings that salvation can be earned and that priests have the authority to absolve sin.

When I asked Penny to describe her first encounters with Christianity, she responded “Well, I was raised a Catholic, so I guess it depends on what you mean by Christianity This is Christianity to a degree, and yet you know, the Catholic church adds tons of things that aren’t Scriptural. I believed in Jesus, I loved Jesus, I loved God, but I also loved Mary and the saints.” She is clearly differentiating between her childhood religious beliefs and the beliefs she has today. She expressed this sentiment even more emphatically elsewhere in the interview, when she mentioned that “I know there’s a lot of

Christians that are Catholic. Why they stay Catholic I have no idea.” In this statement, Penny explicitly articulates her belief regarding the incomprehensibility of being both a Christian and a Catholic. Both Penny and Martin do not seem to see Catholicism as true Christianity; in other words, their current evangelical belief system is truth but Catholicism, the form of Christianity they were raised with, is not.

In the case of Sarah, the only participant still a member of her childhood denomination, she clearly laid out the division between her childhood religious encounters and her adult conversion experience. Sarah’s entire childhood was dominated by the Southern Baptist church, leading to many negative associations. She recounted participating in numerous contests about Biblical knowledge, such as drills where children competed with each other to call out Scripture references first. Her parents were disciplinarians who had high expectations for their daughter to do well in these competitions. According to Sarah, “I won things like that right and left, because if I didn’t, I got in trouble. So I better know everything.” The church came to have even more negative associations when her parents used it as a form of punishment. These punishments meant that “I could go nowhere but there, I had to be there every time mother was there. So it kind of gave me a negative feel about it, as much as it being a part of my childhood, it gave me a negative connotation once it started being forced on me that I had to be there every minute that mother was there and I couldn’t be there with my friends unless my mother was there.” Sarah’s inevitable falling away from church started as she left home after her first marriage. Her husband did not regularly attend church and this attitude rubbed off on Sarah and their young children.

After their divorce, Sarah said, “I would go back to church occasionally And, as a single mother, I knew what we needed, so I started taking us to church, but, one of the pastors came to visit in the neighborhood I was living in. I hadn’t decided on which church to attend yet. But he came to visit, and in the conversation, he looked at me and said, “Where is your husband?” And I said “Well, I don’t have a husband, I’m divorced.” He literally sat back, just responded like, “Oh.” And reached over and patted me on the knee, and said “That’s okay, you come on anyway.” That ended me coming to his church, because my family already was ashamed of me being divorced. I felt like I’d been branded with a crimson D on my forehead. So I didn’t go to that church. I went in to the city, I didn’t go in my neighborhood, I went into the city to a big, big church where I could get lost in it. But I could also have my boys in Bible study classes. And we did that, but I found more acceptance and true friendship from people in the world that frequented bars and five o’clock happy hours, than I did church people.” Sarah did occasionally attend church after this period, but never seriously went back until after her conversion. While she is today an active member of a Southern Baptist church, during her conversion narrative she articulated that the beliefs espoused by her current church, Pleasant Grove, are far different than the Southern Baptist ideology she was exposed to in her childhood church setting. People at Pleasant Grove are actively seeking to pursue core evangelical values, just like Sarah herself is.

The other participants were also able to clearly identify a divide between their childhood religious encounters and what they understood as their genuine adult conversion experience to evangelical Christianity. However, their narratives of having come from what was essentially a Christian background to converting to another form of

Christianity inevitably led to some confusion when I sat down to write this thesis. I needed to find a way to do justice to participants' understandings of what they believed to be their genuine evangelical conversions while also acknowledging that they frequently discussed their childhood Christian encounters in the same breath as talking about their current evangelical beliefs. Not only am I an active member of the Hope Fellowship community who has spent the last year and a half building relationships among church members, I was also raised in the conservative Mennonite church which shares many of the same essential beliefs as evangelicalism. For these reasons, it was fairly easy for me to discern such nuances in the participants' narratives; I would like to acknowledge here that one reason the participants may not have explicated these nuances more clearly during their narrations is because they knew I was an insider and was therefore well-versed in the spiritual beliefs that guided their linguistic choices. Harding (2001) aptly notes that in her role as a secular researcher studying an evangelical community she occupied "a psychic intersection between born-again and un-born-again languages and worlds" (xi-xii). Unlike Harding, I did not have to navigate this psychic intersection, a fact that both the participants and myself were well aware of during the data collection process.

I recognize, however, that many people are not members of this community and are therefore not likely to understand the oftentimes implicit differences in the participants' narratives between their childhood religious encounters and their current evangelical belief system. To make this distinction more clear and discernable for others, I have chosen to use some specific terminology in this thesis, particularly in chapter five. Two common terms in the anthropology of Christianity are pre-conversion and post-

conversion. I have chosen to rarely use these, however, instead preferring to discuss participants' pre-evangelical and post-evangelical beliefs. When referring to participants' current Christian denomination, I have always inserted the word evangelical either before or somewhere nearby in the sentence to make it clear that the variant of Christianity being discussed is evangelicalism. In cases where participants discuss their pre-evangelical Christian encounters and their post-evangelical beliefs in the same anecdote, I have also been careful to explicate these differences for the reader immediately after the quote. I have done all of this to ensure that I have adhered as closely as possible to the participants' understandings of what constitutes true, evangelical Christianity while also acknowledging for the reader that Christianity is a term widely used to describe multiple different denominations that can have somewhat diverse belief systems. Ultimately there are many variants of Christianity and evangelicalism is but one of them. Yet, for my participants, evangelicalism is the true and only way to achieve genuine salvation in Jesus; I would be doing their narrative accounts a great disservice if I did not acknowledge their view of reality in my thesis.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

One of the most inescapable features of this thesis is the role that temporality, particularly in the form of linear thinking, played both in my approach to the research and in the participants' perspectives on their conversion narratives. Bornat and Bytheway (2012) note the inherent temporality of the life histories approach used in their research, with participants being asked biographical questions that were chronologically ordered. While my particular focus was on conversion narratives, the interview questions I chose nonetheless followed the pattern described above, being focused on participants' biographies and structured according to their initial encounters with Christianity, their eventual adult evangelical conversion experiences, and the progression of events that followed thereafter. Given that I, the interviewer, and the participant interviewees were all born and raised in the United States, it is not surprising that the concept of linear thinking played a key role in this research. Becker (1997) states that Western approaches to the life course emphasize this concept of linearity; Westerners expect life to unfold along a linear, orderly progression. She believes that this emphasis on linearity is beginning to shift but still sees its pervasive influence on Western thought. Becker was writing twenty-three years before I began my thesis, yet her views on linear thinking are still applicable for my research.

Becker's (1997) findings support the idea that the overarching focus on linearity found in my thesis was initially formed in the shared Western mindset of the participants and myself. Young (1997) demonstrated the importance of looking at the structures underlying a narrative through his research of psychiatric staff working with patients with PTSD. He discovered that narrated accounts produced in this context would have differing content but were always undergirded by the same structure. As Garro and Mattingly (2000) rightly point out, Young's research suggests "that attending to underlying narrative structure may allow a researcher to see more clearly the imprint of institutional practices and ideology" (15). Meaning, by attempting to understand the hidden structures shaping the participants' narratives, I should be able to more clearly discern the ideological forces driving both my approach to the research and participants' responses.

One of the biggest implications of this for my research is the fact that our shared Western heritage gave the participants and I a foundational linear viewpoint that grounded both my interview questions and their responses. In my case, this came from my decision to chronologically order the interview questions. In the participants' cases, as I examined the data collected from the series of interviews, I realized that, throughout the entire interview process, participants were shaping their conversion experiences through a temporal lens; there were distinct, easily discernable periods in their understandings of their narratives. I decided to call these: pre-evangelical conversion experiences, post-evangelical conversion experiences, and then finally, the most unexpected finding of all, a post-evangelical future focused outlook. It was clear that,

from their current stance as born-again evangelical Christians, there was a definite linear process in the way they understood their conversion stories and their lives as a whole.

Again, as I have mentioned above, this can likely partially be attributed to the fact that I chronologically ordered the interview questions to ensure that their conversion accounts were temporally structured. Another factor undoubtedly at play here is that evangelical and Pentecostal Christian conversion experiences often demands a rupturing with the past (see Engelke 2010; Meyers 1998; Robbins 2010; Robbins 2014). Therefore, it is not at all unexpected for converts to structure their lives temporally according to a pre-evangelical conversion past and a post-evangelical conversion present. In fact, the very nature of a disruption, whether it is caused by a conversion experience or something else, has implicit temporal qualities (see Becker 1997). I believe that all of this contributed to the participants displaying an undeniably linear understanding of their life stories embedded within the data collected in the interviews. Through the lens of their current perspective as born again evangelical Christians, all of the participants understood their conversion narratives in the light of their pre-evangelical pasts, their post-evangelical presents, and their post-evangelical futures. I will begin by examining their understandings of their pre-evangelical pasts.

Pre-Evangelical Past

As I examined the accounts of their pre-evangelical pasts, much of what appeared to be going on was participants reinterpreting their pre-evangelical lives according to their post-evangelical beliefs and value systems. In her research on members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Cain (1991) argued that the process of going through AA led members to a transformation in their identities by coming to view themselves as

alcoholics in need of help. That transformation in their personal perspective of themselves then drastically altered the ways they interacted with and perceived the world. It would seem that the same thing is going on in the participants' lives. Participants' narrative accounts point towards the fact that their evangelical conversion experiences likewise led to a transformation in their identities, which then affected their perceptions of and interactions with the world. As Cain (1991) noted, this kind of identity transformation "requires not only a particular understanding of the world, but a new understanding of their selves and their lives, and a reinterpretation of their own past" (210). Cain's research suggests that it is only natural to find the participants reinterpreting their pre-evangelical past through the lens of their post-evangelical self-understandings.

Another reason participants kept reinterpreting their past through the lens of their present can also be found in the fact that I approached the research through the lens of temporal linearity. When "time is used as an organizing tool for narration and life, time is uniform, allowing for juxtaposition and comparison" (Koro-Ljungberg and Hendricks 2020, 1198). The participants were guided by my chronological questions and their own linear viewpoint to compare and contrast their pre-evangelical selves and their post-evangelical selves. Besides this juxtaposition of the past and present, however, another facet of the role played by temporality is that, "by inviting participants to speak and narrate their past, these individuals also produce present time (in relation to past time). Thus, time is often described as lived time accessed through memories . . . that are assumed to shape present storytelling" (Koro-Ljungberg and Hendricks 2020, 1198). In other words, by asking my participants to narrate their pre-evangelical selves to me, they inevitably reproduced this narration of their past through the lens of their present reality.

Their narratives were indubitably a product of both their past memories and their present time.

I will show examples of participants' reinterpretations of the past below, but first I want to make a brief shift here from my focus on narrative memory time to discuss calendrical age time. I think it is valuable to know the ages at which all six of the participants identified their true conversion experience as occurring, as well as the length of time they have been a Christian. Understanding this information allows for a more accurate interpretation of the data. I have included a table below that provides this.

Table 2: Participants' Conversion Ages and Number of Years an Evangelical

Name	Dominic	Sarah	Renee	Penny	Ben	Martin
Conversion Age	Early thirties	Early fifties	Early thirties	Late teens	Late twenties	Late teens
Number of Years an Evang.	Approx. twenty	Approx. twenty	Approx. forty	Approx. forty	Approx. forty	Approx. forty

As can be seen from the data, all of the participants, apart from Sarah, converted during a crucial time in their life courses. Becker (1994) notes that young and middle adulthood is a significant time in people's lives, because foundational life events, such as marriage and the birth of children, usually occur during this phase. These events lay the groundwork for how the remainder of a person's life will be lived. Since the participants' conversions occurred during this critical life phase, the rest of their lives were shaped by this singular event. Given that the converts' current ages range from early fifties to mid-seventies, they were all able to reflect back over this crucial conversion event and detail how it impacted the majority of their life course lived so far. Also, all of the participants have been evangelical Christians for a minimum of two decades, and in most cases, much

longer than this. In fact, over half of the participants have been believers for forty years or longer. This is an important, because it means they have all devoted large portions of their adult lives to their evangelical faith. As Austin-Broos (2003) states, to be “converted is to reidentify, to learn, reorder, and reorient” (18). These converts have all had decades to reidentify and reorient their lifestyle and beliefs around evangelical Christianity.

In addition, drawing upon her research on members of AA, Cain (1991) states that those individuals who had been with the organization the longest had done the best job at reinterpreting their life story along the structure provided by AA. Others who had not been with AA as long had life stories that differed in places from the AA structure. She believed that this indicated a process of reinterpretation, whether ongoing or complete. Her findings suggest that the longer an individual orients themselves around a specific belief system, the bigger the impact will be upon them. Since all of the participants have been evangelical Christians for at least two decades, they are likely much better equipped to reinterpret their pre-evangelical past than a more recent convert would be. Their evangelical faith is securely grounded in years of experience, which enabled them to flavor their pre-evangelical narratives with rich contextualization derived from their current perspectives.

Returning to my focus on narrative memory time, during the series of interviews I conducted the participants articulated many new interpretations of their pre-evangelical life from their current perspective as born again evangelical Christians. These insights were generally of two kinds: aspects of any childhood religious encounters, Christian or not, that they now understand differently after converting to evangelical Christianity, and a new viewpoint on the things they did, the person they were, or the way they lived their

life during their pre-evangelical adulthood. One common example of this, expressed by several of the participants, is the idea that genuine Christianity is a free gift from Jesus instead of something participants had to earn. As my choice of wording would suggest, this is the idea that people have to either go through some sort of action or work to acquire their salvation, in contrast to the participants' current evangelical belief that salvation is a free gift from Jesus that cannot be earned.

In my first interview with Martin, I asked him to describe for me his first encounters with Christianity. He responded by mentioning times in his teen years that people tried to witness, i.e. share the gospel, with him. He divided these witnessing attempts into two types: encounters on the street with complete strangers and situations when his friends would take him to services at their various churches. At one point he briefly mentioned that his "background is Roman Catholicism" but interestingly he did not seem to equate this variant of Christianity with the Church of Christ and Baptist church services he described occasionally attending with friends. In order to better understand his reasoning here, my immediate follow-up question was "Were there any Christian religious beliefs in your own family, or did you mainly experience Christianity through encounters with people outside your immediate family circle?" Martin responded, "No, we were Catholics in my family. . . . [the Catholic church] talked about God and Jesus, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but it was more, it wasn't just up to Jesus for salvation, you had to do other works to earn your salvation to get into heaven. And of course, then we were taught that the priest could absolve your sins and you'd be okay." In his statement here, Martin appears to believe that there were some seeds of genuine Biblical truths in the things he was taught as a child, such as acknowledging that

they taught him about the Trinity. But he quickly follows this up by stating that they had a misguided view of what salvation actually entails. The Catholic church taught Martin that salvation was not up to Jesus alone and that more was required of him; today, he believes that true salvation can only be found in Jesus. I believe this could be why, in his earlier comment, Martin did not appear to equate Catholicism on the same level as the Church of Christ and Baptist churches he also briefly experienced in his pre-evangelical past.

Penny was also raised in the Catholic church and says that “I was really heavily involved in everything Catholic. I went to Catholic school, all the sacraments, confession, communion, all that stuff.” She was taught that these aspects were all necessary for her salvation. Her conversion experience happened when she was listening to a Campus Crusade pastor who “was using tons of Scriptures and he was showing how you didn’t need to do anything, you didn’t need to go to church, do the sacraments, go to confession, go to mass, go to communion, all that stuff. You didn’t need to do any of that. You just needed to ask Jesus to save you because you can’t save yourself.” Penny described getting “tunnel vision” as she listened to this teaching and realizing that was the pastor was saying was the truth. She reported that she became an evangelical follower in Jesus that very day. Articulating her current perspective on the Catholic church, she remarked that “this is Christianity to a degree, and yet you know, the Catholic church adds tons of things that aren’t Scriptural.” It would seem from this comment and others she made that part of what she sees as the non-Scriptural aspects of Catholicism today are things such as going to confession and partaking in the sacraments. According to her current evangelical perspective, these things are not necessary to guarantee a person’s salvation.

When I asked Sarah to tell me about her initial encounters with Christianity, she immediately began recalling her childhood in the Southern Baptist church. The church was arguably the focal point of her childhood and she spent many hours involved in the church and its activities. Yet, she was quick to make sure that I understood being raised in an evangelical church did not necessarily mean that she herself experienced a genuine, evangelical conversion at this point in her life. Sarah recounted her childhood “false conversion” experience, saying, “One Sunday I came home from church, and at the dinner table my mother looked across the table at me and said, ‘When are you joining the church? You are the oldest one of your group that has not yet done it.’ I was twelve years old. ‘And it’s kind of a shame that as close as we live to the church, our daughter is the oldest one in your age group that still has not joined.’ There was no mention of Jesus, Holy Spirit, anything. I knew I was about to be in more trouble if I didn’t join the church. I don’t remember if it was the Sunday night after that, or maybe it was the next Sunday, I just don’t remember. But I knew when it came to the altar call, that if I didn’t go down that aisle I wasn’t going to be able to go home and eat. So I walked the aisle. I went to the pastor and he looked at me and said, ‘Why are you coming?’ and I said, ‘I want to join the church. He said ‘Okay, sit right over here. And when everything is done we will invite you.’ They always put the people who joined or anything up in front of everybody, told them what they had come for, and then everybody came around and shook hands. And said hello, and welcome, whatever. So that’s what he did, he called me up front and he said, ‘Sarah has come to be a member of the church.’ There was no conversation with me if Jesus had moved in my heart. If I was making him my Lord, if I had repented, there was nothing like that. So everybody came and welcomed me and that was that.”

While discussing this experience, Sarah inserts occasional asides into her narrative account to make it more accurately reflect her current perspective. For example, she pauses after telling me how her mother said it was shameful to the entire family that Sarah had not yet joined the church and comments, “There was no mention of Jesus, Holy Spirit, anything.” By saying this, Sarah makes it clear that these elements were missing from her mother’s view of conversion. Similarly, when describing how the pastor presented her to the church as a new member, Sarah reprovably mentions, “There was no conversation with me if Jesus had moved in my heart. If I was making him my Lord, if I had repented, there was nothing like that.” Again, Sarah wants to make it clear she now believes that these are vital aspects of a conversion experience that were completely ignored in her childhood church. Today, Sarah believes that a genuine evangelical conversion experience will be rooted in repenting of one’s sins and seeking salvation in Jesus Christ. These insightful additions to her narration of this experience demonstrate that Sarah’s current perspective of this entire moment is that it was an action rooted in public perception and keeping up appearances. It was only a surface level change that had nothing to do with what she considers the elements of true evangelical Christianity today, i.e., saving faith in Jesus Christ. Despite being baptized into an evangelical church as a child, Sarah makes it clear that her true evangelical conversion experience would come later in life.

Ben likewise reevaluated his childhood encounters with Christianity from his current evangelical viewpoint. When discussing his local childhood community, he said that, “We lived in a good church-going community. I say church-going as opposed to Christian per say.” Ben’s quick clarification here is indicative of his present mindset;

today he believes that these people in his local community were not necessarily evangelical Christians but rather just people who regularly attended church on Sunday mornings. Shortly after making this comment he stated, “Since becoming a born again Christian in my adult years, it was interesting as I look back, some of the ideology was right, some of the Scriptural perspective was correct, but I think some of it was a little off the mark. I remember our pastor, he was a great guy and we loved him and his family. But I think he was a more topical preacher and I think they were more a social-oriented church, social mores and things like that. I think the gospel was part of the message but not as significant as was the social, how to live your life better, kind of thing.” Ben’s post-evangelical belief system has obviously influenced his past memories; his comments are illustrative of someone reinterpreting their pre-evangelical life and religious experiences through the lens of their current, evangelical values.

Finally, Sarah expressed a particularly interesting perspective when discussing her former self. She stated that, “I don’t think I would like me very much anymore. As a matter of fact, one of my prayers I pray most often is, Lord please don’t let me revert to who I was before. Please don’t let anything entice me to go back to the lifestyle I lived. [Because] I was a party girl, I was a business woman that could hold her own with the men.” What Sarah means here about holding her own with the men is that she used to be a manager in a male dominated industry. In another interview she described to me how she had to make herself tough and swear a lot to be taken seriously by the men under her authority. She obviously looks back on that person she used to be with distaste. Indeed, Sarah’s present understandings influence her recollections of her past self to the extent that one of her most often repeated prayers is a plea that she never returns to the person

she was in her pre-evangelical past. She looks with disgust on the party girl lifestyle she used to live and the tough exterior she put on at work and makes it clear she never wants to return to this version of herself. Participants' narrative accounts given above demonstrate ways that their identities, and therefore self-understandings of themselves and the world around them, changed after their evangelical conversion experiences. These new understandings allowed them to reinterpret their pre-evangelical pasts. Participants' accounts also demonstrate that their present time is influencing their recollections of their pre-conversion selves.

In this section, I will continue analyzing interview data that supports this idea of identity change and present time being narrated into recollections of the past. However, I believe there are also some other things going on as well, and I will now delve into them. While I have acknowledged that temporality plays a key role in their narratives, I think that converts' spatial orientation also needs to be considered to do their narratives justice. Carrithers (1992) notes that to "comprehend a plot is therefore to have some notion of the changes in an inner landscape of thought in the participants as well as the outer landscape of events" (84). It is this relationship between the inner landscape of thought and the outer landscape of events that I find particularly informative for my purposes here. What I believe Carrithers is referring to is that any examination of a narrative has to account for the ways changes in participants' inner landscapes, such as shifts in their self-understandings, will then inevitably influence their interactions with the world around them, i.e. affecting their spatial orientations.

Baynham (2003) also believes that understanding spatial orientation is key to fully grasping a narrative setting. He thinks that many narrative accounts too often take

space and time for granted. He states that this oversight needs to be remedied, noting crucially for my purposes that a “narrator can [often] deploy . . . space/time orientation, including transposed reference to past space/time in terms of current social space/time” (Baynham 2003, 347). His comments about the importance of understanding how spatial orientation affects narratives aligns well with Koro-Ljungberg’s and Hendricks’ (2020) belief that narrators often incorporate their present time into narrative accounts of their past. To demonstrate his point, Baynham (2003) examines how spatial positioning can be involved in the construction of a narrative from the perspective of a Muslim family. When the son moved from their home country of Morocco to London, his father reacted angrily. As Baynham interprets the situation, he believes that the father is threatened by his son moving from a distinctly Muslim space into a non-Muslim space. This:

narrative invokes a space starkly organized in religious terms the narratives examined here demonstrate the complex ways in which space is involved in the construction of narrative: in [the Muslim son’s] narrative, the point of the narrative turns on his father’s organization of space into the space of Islam and the space of the unbelievers. The narrative is not fully comprehensible without this knowledge (Baynham 2003, 355).

I do want to acknowledge that using Baynham’s example of the Muslim family here may initially seem counter-intuitive to my discussion regarding the ways that the participants’ spatial orientations shifted during their evangelical conversion experiences. The Muslim family experienced a geographic spatial shift, with the son moving from a Muslim country to a secular country. The participants in my research, however, not only continued living in the United States, they also remained in the same communities that they inhabited before their evangelical conversion.

Yet, their conversion experiences triggered what I believe could be called an ideological spatial shift. At the moment of conversion, they entered a separate space created by their newfound evangelical belief system. The existence of this evangelical space is well-documented in the Bible. This connection is not surprising, because as I discussed in an earlier chapter, it is hard to overstate the importance of Scripture to the evangelical belief system. Evangelicals orient everything around the Bible and try to live their lives in accordance to the dictates contained within these Scriptures, in particular the New Testament. There are numerous Bible verses that speak to this idea of not inhabiting the same spatial reality as non-Christians (see James 4:1-10; John 17; Phil. 3:17-21; 1 John 2:15-17; 1 John 4:1-6). Jesus himself, the founder and architect of the Christian faith, frequently reminded his followers of this reality. One good example is found in the gospel of John, when Jesus warns his disciples, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15: 18-19, English Standard Version [ESV]). Jesus sets his followers up here for understanding that, once they have confessed faith in him, they will inhabit a different space than the rest of the non-believing world. His followers are not to be surprised that their belief system is offensive in the eyes of non-believers, since Jesus himself was rejected by many people. Jesus comments that when people are a part of the world, they are loved, but as soon as somebody professes faith in him, they automatically set themselves up in opposition to the rest of the world simply by believing in him.

With potent language and powerful word pictures such as this by the founder of their faith, it is not at all surprising that evangelical Christians enter into a separate space

at the moment of conversion. Their conversion experience catapults them into the space of evangelical Christianity. An evangelical conversion experience immediately carves out a separate space for new adherents and sets them up in opposition against a newly discovered secular world. Evangelical converts find themselves in a new space, quite distinct from the space inhabited by their non-evangelical selves and anybody else who does not ascribe to their evangelical value system. Oftentimes, as some of the quotes above such as those from Penny and Martin when discussing their experiences in the Catholic church illustrate, in this category can be found followers of non-evangelical Christian denominations. These research findings are supported by the literature, with Carrithers (1992) noting that the relationship between participants' inner landscapes of thought and the outer landscape of events is "inseparable, because the metamorphosis of thoughts entails the metamorphosis of social relations and vice versa" (84). The metamorphosis into participants' newly discovered evangelical worldviews inevitably led to a metamorphosis in the way they interacted with and viewed the world. As Carrithers points out, this unquestionably also affected all of their social relationships. Baynham (2003) is quite right in saying that it is not possible to fully comprehend a participant's narrative until this shift in spatial orientation is taken into account.

One key way that participants articulated this shift in spatial orientations is in their description of the ways that their personalities have changed or shifted in their post-evangelical worlds. They all identified ways that their shift to an evangelical spatial orientation caused definite personality changes that then affected their social lives and their interactions with the newly discovered secular world. Their accounts here represent ways, often tangible, that the shift in space caused by their evangelical conversion

experiences impacted their social lives. In Dominic's case, he believes he "went from a self-centered life to a God-centered life. It wasn't all about me anymore, which you know it always was. I mean, in a way . . . I still have kind of a self-first attitude, but only because I know that logically I can't take care of anybody else if I'm not taking care of me But again, it's more of a God-centered thing." Later in the interview he further clarified his meaning by stating that "Going to work, before I was a Christian, I went to work so that I could get money so that I could go out and party, have nice things, meet hot girls and have dates. It was all about me. Now, I go to work to help support six different families and my family so that I can give to the church, so that I can help other people grow a business. It's different." Dominic's perceptions of the world shifted dramatically after his evangelical conversion; now he seeks to financially support his family and his employees' families, instead of just having fun and going on dates. His post-evangelical worldview led to tangible shifts in his social reality.

Martin experienced a similar shift in the way he centered his social life. His post-evangelical self, he thinks "wasn't too selfish anymore, I wasn't living for myself, you know, wanting to have that good time and everything. Now it's more like, I'm still selfish, and I'm trying to get past that, but now it's more like I'm thinking about what I can do for God and his kingdom, than what I can do to please myself." Both of these men describe the ways that their perspectives on the issue of selfishness were altered. They both believe that their evangelical worldview not only helped them identify selfishness in their lives, it also helped rid them of it or move beyond it to become more selfless and better functioning social beings.

Penny's and Renee's evangelical spatial orientations impacted their social reality to the extent that they went from very shy people to women boldly unafraid to share their faith. When I asked her to describe ways that she believed her life had changed after her evangelical conversion, Penny detailed a memorable experience that highlighted one change she saw. She explained that, "When then this came along [her conversion], I didn't see anything more important than sharing the gospel with people. Pretty much anybody I talked to, I did share with. That was really different for me. I had this English professor I don't even remember how I told him once, but I told him, 'You know you need to get right with the Lord, you need to ask Jesus into your heart as your Savior.' He just couldn't believe it that somebody told him that, one of his students. He goes, 'You know, I want to talk to you more about this. Let's meet up some place for coffee or something.' He didn't want to learn anything, I know that. He just wanted to shred me to ribbons. I said, 'Ok!' Here I am, I've been a Christian for three months or something. So we met some place on campus and he pretty much shredded me. But that's okay, because I prayed before I went and as many Scriptures as I knew I told him. And I told him how so many things in my life had just changed, I didn't want to drink or swear anymore, I wanted to tell people that they could know they were going to heaven, that they didn't need to be a Catholic or any other religion, there's so much freedom in this and everything in the Bible made sense, God can really change your life, etc. I know he shredded me, I don't remember exactly how but he shredded the heck out of me, but that's okay. I was this real little shy little person. I would never have done anything like that before my conversion."

Penny's social reality was so changed by her evangelical conversion that she no longer cared about anything other than sharing the gospel. She was so zealous about her newfound evangelical beliefs that she put herself into situations that other people might not think very appropriate, such as a student witnessing to a professor. Even in a situation like this, where she clearly knew she would be met with strong opposition, possibly bordering on ridicule due to her usage of the term *shred*, she did not care and boldly shared her evangelical faith regardless. Renee also described going from a quiet person to someone very ready to speak up about her faith. When I asked her the same question I had asked Penny, she replied, "I was really an introvert, and that's true and I still see myself that way, but I'm much more comfortable with people and much more willing to share what I think even when I don't necessarily think that people are going to agree with me. I have a lot more confidence, I don't know whether I want to call it self-confidence, but I'm not so worried what people think of me. And that used to be big."

In another interview, Renee commented that she believed her conversion, "made me more willing to talk to people about my faith. I have always, even though a lot of people don't believe that, I'm very much an introvert. I'm not comfortable with people I don't know very well. Probably a lot of people at church wouldn't agree with that, but it's only because I have very firm doctrinal beliefs and I'm not at all afraid to stand up for what I believe, including what the pastor says. He can probably fill you in [chuckling]." Like Penny, Renee's evangelical conversion changed her social self. From the first comment she made, it appears that her evangelical faith gave her self-worth and freedom from continually worrying what other people thought about her.

Renee has very firm evangelical doctrinal beliefs, and she boldly shares them, both at church, in what can be assumed to be a safer space than others, and also at her work, surrounded by people who do not share her beliefs. I can personally attest to the fact that she is unafraid to widely share her doctrinal convictions at our church. I was actually chuckling at a recent Sunday morning service when our pastor paused to recommend some outside resources that tied in nicely with the sermon he had just preached and then briefly thanked Renee for sending them to him. From personal interactions, not to mention my interviews with her, I knew this was very typical for her personality.

From her own accounts, Renee is also like this in other environments, particularly her regular volunteer work at a local day shelter in the intake office. She told me, “The man who is my boss is a Unitarian, who doesn’t really believe that there is a God but he goes to church anyway. I also work with a man who is gay, and he and his partner have been together for thirty years and he was Catholic and now is a Unitarian. Then the woman that I work with was raised as Catholic and she now goes to a Pentecostal church. We have a lot of discussions, I guess I’m pretty bold about what I believe, even though I know that nobody in there agrees with me. Even though, I certainly have not had any part in the conversion of any of them, I believe that I have had some effect on them. The man I work for says I’m the most conservative person that he knows, so he definitely knows all the little things that I don’t always share with people about my Calvinism and all that kind of thinking, even though I know that he doesn’t agree with that.” According to Renee’s own observations, prior to her evangelical conversion experience she would not have done anything like this. Her encounter with evangelical Christianity seems to have

created both a desire to proselytize to other people and convert them to her worldview, while simultaneously giving her a new identity that allows her to freely share these beliefs without fear of what others might think.

Adopting an evangelical spatial orientation also caused several participants to experience changes in their temperaments that then impacted their social worlds. In Ben's case, he thinks his post-evangelical self has done "a better job of relating to the world in general in a more positive way to try to receive people for what they are and that they don't intend to affront me or cause me anger." He used the example of driving to explain what he meant by this. He said, "I [still] talk to other drivers a lot, it seems like I'll say, 'Did you see that dumbie?' I'll just say something pretty easily like that, but I hope I'm not so much in anger." Ben admitted that his wife wishes he would curb this even further; from his narrations of these events, however, it seems that his pre-evangelical self would have reacted with much more anger and hostility to perceived bad driving than he does today.

Sarah also had anger issues before becoming an evangelical Christian. She herself did not realize this, until a friend told her that she had never seen anybody as angry as Sarah was. Sarah explained, "That [anger] was one of the first things that seemed to have just dissipated. Suddenly, I could let go of things that didn't work, I could let go of people who had hurt me, I could let go of all that because I had someone who cared, and accepted me and had a purpose for me." Both Sarah and Ben believe that their evangelical worldview enabled them to let go of their pre-evangelical anger issues. Being an evangelical Christian has allowed them to interact in a much healthier manner with their social worlds. Returning to Ben, not only has anger had less of a hold on him, he

also sees himself as more empathetic towards people. Ben is a retired banker, so he has a good grasp on financial issues. He described a recent experience with an elderly friend who unwisely gave money to a person they had met on the internet. While Ben admitted to being disappointed that this person would make such an unwise decision, he said, “I’m also empathetic. I’m wanting to say, ‘How can I help? What can I do to make that better? Maybe we can get that back?’ But I feel so bad about it, because I know that this person was hurt by that situation.” His pre-evangelical self, he recalled, did not think a response like this was important. Being an evangelical Christian has allowed Ben to develop an empathetic and understanding perspective towards those around him.

Ben and Sarah also described ways their evangelical conversion led them to specific views on morality that set them on a collision course with the non-evangelical members of their social groups. Ben articulated this when he reviewed his career path. He explained, “I had just gotten into banking during that time of conversion, I think it helped me relate to where my work should be and how to do the right thing. I think my career was a little slower because I wouldn’t do things that others might have done to get ahead. I’m not boasting in that comment, I just think that as I look back at my career, there were people who, even to the end of my career, they would do things that I think were oriented to getting them ahead or getting them in favor.” Ben gave an example of what he meant by this, describing how people on loan committees who wanted to be noticed would speak up and disparage the other loan. They gained favor in the eyes of their bosses by being highly critical of other people. It was clear an approach like this still rankles Ben today. In regards to the frustration he was feeling when recalling situations like this, he said, “Maybe that’s one of those things that I need to shake off, even though I’ve been

retired all this time, I don't know. You brought it up! I don't think about it." He chuckled immediately after saying this, but recalling what he believed were non-ethical career practices obviously still struck a nerve in him.

Sarah also described a shift in her moral beliefs after her evangelical conversion, saying "It was quite different, because some of the same things that I saw before that were okay suddenly now were not okay." She mentioned an example of this that occurred when a boss asked her to prepare a falsified letter. Sarah told her she did not want to do this, but the boss warned her she would lose her job if she did not obey. Sarah went back to her office, and "sat down at my desk and I prayed, and I said, 'Okay, what do I do Lord?' I walked in and I told her, 'Okay this one time because this transaction is on the line, this one time I will do this, but I can promise you, blood is on your hands, not mine. I am doing it because you ordered it done, so you will be the one that will answer for this, not me' [reflecting on the incident she said] I had to step up and either say okay, I'm going to do what the Lord expects me to do or I'm going to give over to the ways of the world. And I couldn't do it. It was very different." Sarah's boss eventually backed down and did not make her prepare the falsified letter. Still, Sarah was willing to take a stand and risk losing her job, because she could not morally do something that would not have bothered her pre-evangelical self.

I find it unsurprising that several of the participants, particularly Sarah and Ben, detail the ways their adopted evangelical spatial orientations affected their moral relationships with their social worlds. Anthropologists have been examining this relationship between religious beliefs and practices and the moral self for some time (see Asad 1993). I believe, however, that there is a uniquely evangelical twist to these moral

nuggets embedded in participants' narrative accounts. Smith (2007) notes that Christians "embrace the Ten Commandments, the moral teachings of Jesus, and the ethical and practical teachings of the apostles. . . . this provides Christians with moral foundations, instructions, and sensibilities by which to navigate their actions and choices in life" (175). Given the heavy focus on obeying Scriptural dictates in evangelical circles, it is to be expected that participants would embrace Biblical moral teachings and endeavor to orient their social lives around them. Elisha (2011) adds an additional dimension to this, when he discusses how the US American evangelicals in his research sought not only to attain these religious moral standards in their own lives, but also worked to inspire these same beliefs in others. In other words, "their aspirations pertain not only to what they desire for themselves but also what they have come to expect of others, including those who share their religious outlook as well as the larger secular and nonevangelical public" (Elisha 2011, 2). In this context, Ben's frustration with his co-workers who did not live up to his evangelical moral standards are not surprising. Similarly, Sarah's disagreement with her boss is also inevitable, because she is holding her boss to the same moral standards that she lives by. The participants' accounts of the ways that their moral, evangelical spatial worlds clashed with their non-evangelical social reality is wholly expected based upon the available literature.

As all of the accounts above have demonstrated, participants experienced a definite shift in what I believe could be called their ideological spatial orientation after their conversion to evangelical Christianity. Inhabiting this evangelical Christian space allowed them to have a completely new perspective on life and led to personality changes that often had a tangible impact on their social lives. While their spatial reorientation did

not occur within the physical realm, this ideological evangelical shift nonetheless had a significant impact on their relationship to the world and on their social lives. Temporality and spatial orientation clearly influenced these conversion narratives; however, I think there is one final thing going on here when converts continually stress the changes between their pre-evangelical and post-evangelical selves that is a little different than what I have been exploring so far.

According to Becker (1994; 1997), when someone experiences a disruption, they seek to restore order to their disrupted life by looking for ways to create continuity between their pre-disruption and post-disruption selves. When discussing the narrative of one woman who experienced a massive disruption in her life, Becker (1997) states that the narrator continually “underscores differences [between her life before the disruption and her life after] She tries to reconcile these differences, to create continuity” (3). While the participants’ conversion narratives I have been discussing so far undeniably led to disruption in their lives, the accounts they have given above show that they are not seeking to create the continuity that Becker records in the lives of her research informants. Rather, by repeatedly describing the multitude of differences between their pre-evangelical and post-evangelical selves throughout the interview process, participants could almost be said to be actively seeking to create discontinuity in their conversion narratives. Through the narrative snippets recorded above, participants are demonstrating how radically they believe their lives have been changed by their evangelical conversions, and how welcoming they are of those changes.

That my findings are dichotomous with expected narrative analyses of disruptions is not surprising when taking into account the research surrounding other Christian

conversion experiences, particularly among conservative Christian traditions such as Pentecostalism and evangelicalism. As discussed in an earlier chapter of this thesis, conversion experiences into these traditions generally expects a dramatic disjuncting of the past from the present. Converts actively seek to dislocate their past from their present, creating a distinct divide between these two halves of their lives. A major focus in the field of the anthropology of Christianity is examining the various ways this rupture can play out in a convert's life (Chua 2012; Meyer 1998; Robbins 2007; Robbins 2010). The ways that the participants in my research repeatedly compared their pre-evangelical lives to their post-evangelical presents, with the attitude that their past was not something they approved of and were judging through the lens of their present realities, is wholly expected based upon the unique nature of these conversion disruptions. My research findings support the available literature stating that the rupturing of an evangelical Christian conversion experience can have a quite different affect upon an individual than other types of disruptions. I will now turn to examining converts' perspectives on their current post-evangelical experiences.

Post-Evangelical Present

One of the biggest theoretical motivations driving this research was Robbins' (2017; 2019) theorizing regarding duplex cultural formations. I have delved in-depth into this concept and my reasons for being fascinated with it in earlier chapters, but I will briefly sum it up again. Robbins argues that Christianity expects converts to continually take an evaluative stance in regards to their pre-Christian self and culture. These former aspects of themselves are not wholly discarded, but rather remain in tension with their new Christian belief system. He states that this makes "rupture a continuing ideal rather

than a settled accomplishment. It is this kind of enduring impetus to continually work toward rupture that some Christians capture in such slogans as ‘reformed and always reforming’” (Robbins 2019, 225). This idea of rupture as something that is never completely settled has been well-documented in the literature for some time. For example, in her introduction to *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, Austin-Broos (2003) notes that a common theme can be discerned in the authors’ focus on conversion as “continuing and practiced” (9). I was particularly fascinated by Robbins’ comments, however, because I realized his theorizations were very similar to the way that the evangelical church says a Christian should live their life. My thesis developed out of this interest in seeing if US American adult converts to evangelical Christianity identified any aspect of this type of growth in their conversion narratives.

While I was conducting my interviews with participants this past summer, I noticed numerous examples of this belief in growth being mentioned during church services. This message of continual growth was espoused multiple times by both the pastor and staff members. For example, Sunday morning services always begin and end with a period of worship. Mandy, our worship leader, often uses this time of worship to exhort and encourage us. One time, she paused before going into the chorus of a song and called out “And as that relationship [with Jesus] grows and grows and grows, we sing this, [starting singing the chorus] ‘You keep on getting better, keep on getting better.’” Mandy’s language here quite explicitly points towards her belief that an evangelical Christian’s relationship with Jesus will continue to grow; the song lyrics that she tied into this demonstrate her belief that this growth will bring an even deeper and sweeter relationship with Jesus. Another service, Mandy took a moment during worship to remind

us that, “God keeps getting better and better each and every day. And it’s not because he’s changing, it’s because we’re changing how we see him, how we love him.” Again, her comments here point directly towards this belief that a believer’s relationship with God will daily change and grow.

Our Pastor also referenced this notion of growth in various sermons. He often dedicates the final portion of his sermons to a section titled *Relevance*. In this section, he shows how the sermon he just preached has relevance for our daily lives. One sermon, he had a bullet point in his relevance section that directly referenced this idea. It was called: Those who are truly saved will grow into the likeness of Jesus. He noted that, from the outside, it may seem like this growth is very slow; despite this, he firmly stated that when a person is truly a born again Christian, this growth is an inevitable part of their walk with Jesus. He said, “You know, there are some people with sinful lifestyles who want to hold on to that lifestyle. They want to associate with Jesus and claim, ‘Well, Jesus loves me just the way I am.’ They’re right. Jesus does love them exactly the way they are. But that’s not the whole story. The whole story is this, Jesus loves them so much he doesn’t want to leave them where they are. That’s the whole story. Yes, somebody can say, ‘Well, Jesus loves me just the way I am’, but usually it’s an excuse not to change. It’s a true statement but the whole story is, yes Jesus loves you. He loves you so much he wants to conform you into his image of righteousness and morality. That’s how much he loves you. If you are truly saved, God is constantly working on your life to draw you to him, to draw you to his actions, to make you look more and more like Jesus. If you are truly saved, he’s constantly working on your life to do that, regardless of whatever sinful pattern is in your life.” The pastor is making very clear his understanding of what

Scripture says about true growth in Jesus. From his perspective, it is impossible for someone who has truly accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior to stay in their sinful pre-evangelical conversion patterns and lifestyle. Jesus will continually seek to pull these people closer to him and form them into his likeness and image.

Unsurprisingly, given this heavy emphasis on seeking continual growth from the pastoral staff at the church where I found the majority of the participants, I discovered during my research that, to some degree, all of the converts approached the narration of their post-evangelical present through this lens of seeking continued growth in their lives. The idea of continually growing into their evangelical Christian faith was expressed repeatedly by all of the participants across the series of interviews that I conducted with them. Some of them directly communicated this idea while others gestured to it through comments and experiences that they recounted. Interestingly, the three male participants were the ones who most clearly articulated this growth, while the women did not refer to this phenomenon as explicitly. I will start with the male participants' understanding of this growth.

When discussing his evangelical beliefs, Martin remarked, "I've discovered that it's a walk, it's a lifetime. [Especially] the more I hear other Christians talk about it, and the struggles that they have, and some of them are older than I am. They encourage you to just keep going forward and loving God. You're not under condemnation, don't take advantage of the grace, and if you do, confess." When he mentions not taking advantage of God's grace, he is referring to times in his past that he has sinned by disobeying Biblical mandates. Referencing this idea of sin in another interview, Martin commented "I mean, it's been there, the growth has been there, it's more steady now, I would say

than it was in the early years. Doesn't mean I've arrived yet because there's struggles that I go through, but I know that Christ is there with me and he'll help me through it." The two quotes above point to Martin's belief that, despite this sin in his life, God is merciful to his children and always draws them back to him. From Martin's perspective, whenever a genuine Christian sins, they have to acknowledge their failure and God will be merciful to forgive them. Then they have to continue moving forward in their walk with God, not allowing this sin to drag them away. Finally, Martin expressed the same idea of perpetual growth when I asked him how he saw himself as a believer in the future. He responded, "I see myself as continuing my growth in Christ. It'll never stop until I die. I want to be an example for my wife and other people of godly living. That doesn't mean I'm perfect or anything, but my goal is to be like Jesus in every way that I can." Martin is asserting that a vital part of being an evangelical Christian for him means seeking to grow into the likeness of Jesus.

Ben likewise saw room for more growth as he looked to his future. He noted that, "What could I do better, as I evolve, I'm an old man, but I still have a lot of years hopefully, therefore I have to continue the process [of growing deeper into his evangelical faith]." Steady evolution in his evangelical belief system is obviously integral to his understanding of what it means to be a genuine Christian. Ben was also able to describe tangible ways that he saw this growth affecting his life, particularly as it related to alcohol. He stated that his pre-conversion self was never a big drinker, but that he developed an entirely new perspective on alcohol once he became an evangelical Christian. He says that, "I took on a different perspective of drinking. I have a few drinks a year, I'm not against it, but for my own self, I think I want to make sure I stay in

control. I don't damage this temple that God's given me in my body, so I limit that fairly significantly." When talking about the temple of his body, Ben is referring to a belief stated in the Bible that Christians' bodies are a temple where God's Spirit dwells. Ben does not want to indulge freely in alcohol because he believes that would damage this temple. He told me, "That's not a holier than thou kind of statement, it was a choice. It was a conscious decision, and I think that's kind of interesting that that evolved."

Reflecting on his twenty years of being an evangelical Christian, Dominic stated, "I have learned, I still do learn a lot, I learn a lot from Pastor. I know that I'll never stop learning. I'll never stop growing in my faith, until I die." Like Ben, Dominic also described some tangible ways that he had witnessed this growth in the past. He says, "I found myself, in the beginning, I found myself intolerant of nonbelievers, my mom especially. I didn't go to football games at my mom's house, because there was drinking, there was cussing, and they didn't, it wasn't a strong Christian [environment]." He elaborated on this in another interview, "Like I said I wouldn't go over to my mom's house. We kind of grew apart a little bit. It's not that way now, I almost didn't, I think I was maybe afraid in my infancy as a Christian that I would get tainted. Maybe I thought I would be tempted. I didn't really understand, there was no going back. That once you're saved, you're always saved. Nobody can steal you out of the arms of Jesus once you're there. I didn't really understand that. So I was a little reluctant to be a part in anything that wasn't absolutely Christian. That's what I think I remember the most. It was probably a good three or four years that I was pretty on fire and wouldn't have anything to do with anything non-Christian. But, I'm still growing in my faith, I think. I'm not

afraid to really go anywhere in my life knowing that I can share the gospel with whoever and however I want.”

Dominic described this shift using the term *pendulum*. When he first became an evangelical, the pendulum swung far to one side, so far that he would have very little to do with non-Christians in general. Today, “I look back now and I think, that was wrong of me to do, but again, that was part of that pendulum that swung really far the other way. I thought that I needed to dissociate myself from everything non-Christian, that only devoted Christian people were worth my time.” Dominic admitted that he now believes this was a mistake on his part. In fact, he said that God told him he needed to stop being so afraid of associating with non-Christian people. Dominic still surrounds himself with evangelical Christian friends and fellowship, but he is also has relationships with non-believers. In another interview, he actually mentioned that some of the non-Christian people he was friends with prior to his conversion are now starting to ask him questions about his evangelical beliefs. He believes that they “see that I’m not a kook. They see that I’m not judgmental. And they’re wondering, maybe there is something to this Christian thing.” He went on to describe an experience with a non-Christian friend he saw “last night, and I’ve told him before, ‘God’s already got you. You just don’t know. It’s just a matter of time.’ . . . I just keep telling him, ‘One of these days you’re going to see the truth.’” Through his comments, Dominic was able to clearly demonstrate the ways that he has grown in his evangelical beliefs since his initial conversion experience. It is clear that he believes this will continue to evolve and grow for the rest of his life on earth.

As I mentioned above, the three women participants did not refer to this idea of continual growth as explicitly as the men did. Yet, this concept is clearly embedded

within many statements they made and experiences they recounted to me. For example, Penny discussed this idea when she talked about the impact that other evangelical Christians have on her life. She stated, “I look up to them as wiser than me in the Lord because a lot of them are. They inspire me to try to learn more and to get closer and pray more I look up to them as older than me and more mature than I am. They inspire me to help to serve, help to pray more, read the Bible more.” Penny is here demonstrating that she wants to grow closer to God and learn more about him. She mentioned that she honors these people for helping hold her to a higher standard and helping her grow her relationship with God. Obviously the concept of continual growth in her evangelical belief system is important to her.

Another time, Penny discussed some sinful temptations that occasionally crop up in her life. She ended by saying, “I think all of this is ways of saying that the Holy Spirit is alive and well in you and that you’re listening to him. Because when old things do crop up, right away we make excuses. Oh that isn’t that bad, and blah blah blah. But you know the more you do it, the more the Holy Spirit pricks at you and goes, ‘Yes it is and it’s not going to be good for you.’ I think God loves us so much he does this because he knows things aren’t good for us. They’re not going to bring us any fulfillment or joy or bring us closer to him. He knows that they just do negative things to us. So, I think out of love, the Holy Spirit kind of pricks our heart and says, ‘This is bad for you.’ Like a parent with a child that’s doing something destructive to themselves or going to hurt themselves.” Penny’s comments show that she believes that the Holy Spirit enables her to recognize sinful patterns in her life so she can break free of them. The Holy Spirit acts as her conscience to enable her to grow in her relationship with God; she literally compares this

to the type of relationship between a parent and a child. This metaphor illustrates how she perceives herself growing and maturing in her relationship with God.

When discussing her conversion experience, Sarah also gestured towards this notion of ceaseless growth. Her childhood was dominated by the church, and she believes that God had to get past this to religiosity to get her attention. That religious attitude has no place in her life today; as soon as she became a true evangelical believer, her purpose in life shifted to being first and foremost about “Jesus Christ and what he wants of me. And to the best of my ability, making mistakes here or there, but repenting and coming right back, and learning rapidly like a sponge absorbing water, he led me from that place [pre-conversion life] into the life that brought to me the place where you know me.”

Sarah’s metaphor of a sponge absorbing water vividly describes the process of growth that she believes has shaped her into the person that I am friends with today. Her use of the present tense suggests to me that she sees this process of growth continuing into the present day.

Sarah again gestured towards this concept of growth in another interview. She discussed how happy she is that God rescued her from her pre-evangelical self, saying, “I am forever grateful, and I tell the Lord often, thank you for pulling me out of the world. Thank you for giving me a new life, putting my feet in the path you made for me.” She followed this statement by admitting that “There’s still aspects about my personality that are the same and always will be, but it’s channeled according to the Holy Spirit’s guidance. Yeah, I see a huge difference, and I’m grateful for the change, so grateful.” I think that Sarah’s comments here about being put onto a new path by God are very informative for the journey she sees herself as starting on the instant she became an

evangelical Christian. At the moment of her evangelical conversion experience, God put her onto a new path that was specifically created for her. The imagery of a path leads me to believe that Sarah sees herself as journeying on this God-created path for the rest of her life. The more years she walks on this path with God, the deeper she grows in her understanding of and commitment to her evangelical values.

In Renee's case she stated that, "I just see the Christian life as being a period of transformation, where God is working little by little, day by day. It's not like it's some big thing that you see that there's a change." Renee's comments about not believing the evangelical Christian life is not composed of radical changes is born out in comparing her conversion narrative to that of the other participants; her conversion experience is arguably not nearly as dramatic and definitive as most of the other participants. Yet, Renee clearly shares with all the other participants this idea that the evangelical life is one of continual, daily growth, or as she puts it, transformation.

One final thing that has particularly made this focus on continual growth so interesting, from my perspective, is that several of the participants discussed it at the very end of our interviews. I always ended each interview by asking participants if there was anything else that we had not discussed that they would like to share with me. Several times they responded by reminiscing over their pasts, often making statements about the growth that they have experienced in their lives and how they hope to continue this in the future. Ben noted that, "I've enjoyed the experience [of discussing his conversion]. It's neat to kind of relate back to how this walk has taken place. Maybe God's saying, hey you're still in the desert, you're still learning, you're still evolving." He related his statements here to the recent memorial service for his father-in-law. Ben was tasked with

giving a eulogy, and this helped him reflect on how his father-in-law became a Christian later in life. Ben was able to see an evolution in his father-in-law's walk with Jesus, and he reflected that he wanted to experience something similar. He remarked that, "I hope I'm seeking Jesus stronger now than I would have ten years ago. I hope I live long and have more experiences on this earth. I hope they're experiences that people can relate back to and say, 'That was good, that was an evolution, he was getting closer to Christ.'" Ben clearly believes that his life as an evangelical Christian involves continual evolution. Life for him now is focused on growing in his earthly relationship with Jesus, with the ultimate goal of spending eternity in heaven with him.

Martin articulated this growth from a slightly different perspective at the end of one of our interviews. His conversion experience, somewhat like Renee's, was arguably less drastic and less ruptured than most of the other people I interviewed; consequently, he described many struggles with behaviors that evangelical Christians often view as sinful in his post-evangelical life. This is in comparison to the rest of my participants, including Renee, who all identified ways pre-evangelical sinful behaviors were almost invariably stopped, sometimes quite abruptly, in their post-evangelical lives. I would like to briefly note here that at this point in his life, Martin states that he has put these sins in his past. While reflecting on the ways these sins impacted his post-evangelical life, he interpreted them as factoring into his growth as a believer. He stated, "One of Satan's tactics is to get Christians to fall away from God, not losing your salvation but also not serving him. And so he sets up these little temptations and you fall into them. Like I did in several parts of my life. You're away from God and you're living for the flesh, and all of a sudden things start going a little haywire in your life and you're wondering why this

is happening? And then it would hit me, okay, what have you been doing with your life, are you glorifying God with your life? No. So what's God trying to do. I mean, I got to a point so low in my life again that I didn't want to live. And Christ pulled me out of the gutter. He showed me through the Bible that I wasn't living a life that was glorifying to him and that I needed to come back [as a Christian] You will fall, you will stumble. And fall away from God until he has to do drastic measures to get you back I'm not going to lie to you, I'm not going to sugarcoat that the Christian walk is such an easy walk and you'll never experience another problem in your life. That's not true. But you have a God who loves you and all you have to do is just turn to him, no matter how horrible you think of a sin you may have committed, he's there. As a matter of fact, he already knew you were going to do it, he's just now waiting for you to realize that you stepped too far. And he's there to pick you up, carry you, and help you learn from the mistakes that you made.”

While Martin does not express the idea of growing in one's evangelical beliefs here as clearly as Ben does, it is still obvious that he sees these sins as being part of his own growth in Christ. As he puts it, these sins are a learning opportunity for him. Martin is aware that some of the sins he admits to committing while being a follower of Jesus might make other evangelicals wary of him. He even told me at one point, “You're learning a few things about me, you're going, okay . . .!”, implying that I might be leery of him after learning what he shared with me. I found it fascinating, however, that the opposite appeared to be true. Martin's history has arguably molded him into a very strong evangelical Christian who is regarded with favor by other Christians, at least in his workplace. I discovered this when he described times that he had proselytized to people

at work. When I asked him how he sought out these people, he stated that “actually, other believers will guide me to somebody who’s an unbeliever and who’s struggling. That’s happened at work a couple of times. Because they know I’m a believer and they think I’m stronger, more mature than they are, I guess is the word. So they’ll ask me to talk to somebody so I will.” I am not sure of all the reasons why his co-workers view Martin as being more mature than themselves, but I have to wonder if part of it is not related to his sinful past that he is not afraid to share with others. By putting these sinful behaviors behind him and continuing to grow his relationship with God, Martin, in the eyes of his co-workers at least, appears to be an evangelical Christian giant, who will boldly do things other Christians may be afraid to do.

I think, however, the most powerful, not to mention poignant, example of how continual growth in the relationship between God and the evangelical Christian is manifested were found in some comments Dominic made at the end of our final interview. Like always, I ended by asking him if there was anything else he would like to share with me; he responded by thanking me for the opportunity to reflect on his conversion experience and reminisced about some recent occurrences in his life. Why I found his comments so powerful is due to the fact that Dominic’s only biological child [he also has two adopted children] had tragically died a few weeks prior, right at the time when he and I were in contact trying to arrange this final interview. The interview was obviously canceled and I let Dominic know that he was free reach out if he ever decided he wanted to reschedule it but that I was not putting any expectations of that on him. Much to my surprise, a mere two weeks after his son’s passing, Dominic reached out to me and announced he was ready for the final interview. Despite my reservations,

Dominic insisted he was ready for the interview and his wife backed him up, telling me she actually thought it might be good for somebody to just sit down and listen to him. So the interview went ahead as Dominic requested.

Significant chunks of the interview consisted of me just listening as Dominic shared what he had experienced in the last few weeks. He told me how all of this had strengthened his faith in God and it had taught him how to completely surrender himself to God's will; in fact, Dominic explained that, "I think I can honestly say [to God], maybe for the first time in my Christian life, whatever you have for me, I'll take it. I don't know if I could have said that two weeks ago. I would have said it but in the back of my head, as long it doesn't mean this or this. But with the death of my only son, I have my daughter, she was adopted. I have my other son but he was adopted. Jake was my only flesh and blood in this world and he's gone. But, I don't know what God has in store for me, I remember a long time ago I learned a prayer. I think it was in one of the books I read. It says, 'Lord for all that has been, thank you. For all that will be, yes.' That's kind of my thought now. For everything, including Jake, thank you. For everything that will be from this day forward, yeah. Take it, whatever it is. Because no matter what happens, my last day here is my first day with him. Whether that's tomorrow or whether that's thirty years from now, I wanna be here for him and whatever his plan is for my life. That's really reassuring because I think I'm pretty smart, but nothing compares to whatever it is that he's got, whether it's sad or bad or painful or not, it's gonna be fantastic. It's gonna be fantastic. So yeah, I'll do it." Dominic's comments here are an insightful example of a life that is continually focused on seeking God and growing an ever deeper relationship with him. Even through the absolute tragedy of losing his son, something that could

easily be seen to tear somebody away from God, Dominic instead found his faith and hope in God strengthened. By his own admission, it was only after the tragedy of losing his son that he is now completely open to whatever God will bring his way.

He refocused on this idea of perpetual growth with his final comments to me. He described to me some of the miracles that he believed God had allowed to happen around the time of Jake's passing, which he believed were signs that God was giving them grace by letting them know that everything will be okay. He ended by saying, "Crazy couple of weeks. But I'm not a fool, I know that there are hard times coming and it's going to be times of joy and times of sorrow and that's all part of it. But I am glad. So thank you, I guess what I'm getting at, thank you for allowing me this opportunity. I really appreciate it." In these final comments, Dominic is clearly looking ahead towards the rest of his life, and recognizing that more hard things will happen to him, but alongside this there will also be good times. As his comments above show, he believes that God is completely in control and he has surrendered himself to whatever this might be. Dominic is, in his own words, looking forward to walking this path of growth with God throughout the rest of his life, sustained in part by the knowledge that this life is temporal and that he will spend eternity in heaven with Jesus. As I have said above, I think Dominic's response to his son's tragic and untimely death is a truly powerful example of this growth, or evolution, into his evangelical belief system.

As the data above shows, all six of the participants identified their own various ways of understanding the role that continual growth plays in their relationship with Christ. I want to return here to a quote from Robbins mentioned at the beginning of this section, when he noted that Christians have "slogans [such] as 'reformed and always

reforming”” (Robbins 2019, 225). I think his comments here are something that the participants would likely all agree with, because this slogan is illustrative of the process that they all described in their conversion narratives. It gets back to the idea that converts have been reformed at the moment of conversion, but that this reformation process continues beyond the initial conversion experience and is actually ongoing until they die. The narratives recorded in my research did give me a detailed account of their conversion experience but the overall focus was clearly on the consequences of this experience, how their lives have henceforth been shaped by it, and how they see themselves continuing to grow into these beliefs in the future. Again, I do want to stop and acknowledge here that part of this focus was undeniably shaped by the way I chronologically structured the interview questions and what points I particularly chose to focus on.

The fact that several participants, however, when given freedom at the end of the interviews to share any thoughts they wanted, chose to focus on the ways they saw themselves continuing to grow in Christ, is, I believe, indicative of a forward looking focus not entirely shaped by the interview structure. One other thing that is also illustrative of this future focus is that I actually had to add a question into the final interview, because I discovered that the participants, without any prompts from me, would often discuss the legacy they wanted to leave behind after their death. Several of them articulated ways they were looking ahead towards to the remainder of their lives and seeing ways they could continue living according to their evangelical values in order to create a solid legacy. I will delve into this phenomenon fully in the last section, but I wanted to mention it here to show how the participants’ current evangelical perspectives were generally focused on their futures, both how they could continue to grow closer to

Jesus and ways they believed they could spend the remainder of their lives continuing to shape a godly legacy to leave behind for future generations. Returning to the slogan quoted by Robbins, I believe it is very apt and well-supported by the accounts of all six of the participants that I interviewed. All of the participants not only see, but are continuing to actively pursue, opportunities for perpetual growth; this is despite the fact that they have all been Christians for a minimum of two decades, and in the case of over half the participants, four or more decades. Ceaseless growth and a continual seeking after Jesus is a key feature of their theology. I believe my research nicely fits into Robbins' theorizations about the ways that converts approach their post-evangelical conversion lives.

Finally, as I also mentioned at the beginning of this section, and discussed in an earlier chapter, the idea of conversion never being a fully settled thing is well-documented in the literature (see Austin-Broos 2003; Chua 2012; Coleman 2003; Daswani 2013; Engelke 2010; Flinn 1999; Meyer 1998; Lurhmann 2004). I think the participants in my research would agree with many of these findings, particularly those such as Lurhmann (2004), who noted in her research at a US American evangelical church that, "learning to be a true Christian is understood as a lifelong goal. . . . Being 'saved' is both a singular event that people celebrate like a birthday and an ongoing process" (520). Lurhmann does a good job here at adopting the appropriate vocabulary for explaining the phenomenon of conversion in the lives of US American evangelicals. In comparison, in her introduction to the edited volume, *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, Austin-Broos (2003) notes that a common theme can be discerned in the authors' understanding of conversion as "ongoing and partial" (18). I believe most of the

participants in my research would balk at the idea that their conversion event is still in progress and is only partial. From their perspectives, as articulated above, they are not as focused on the exact conversion moment itself. Instead, their present reality is concentrated on the ways they can grow in their relationship with Jesus. Their conversion experiences were, as Lurhmann (2003) so well articulates, a singular event that set into motion a process still ongoing in their lives decades after the event itself. Most of this likely comes down to the fact that Lurhmann, like myself, is specifically talking about US American evangelical conversion experiences, while Austin-Broos (2003) is speaking about anthropological research from multiple different religious traditions. I believe it is important to be aware of these kinds of distinctions when examining research results, in order to do justice to participants' narrative accounts. I will now turn to examining converts' perspectives on their post-conversion futures.

Post-Evangelical Future

As I articulated in the section above, through their narrative accounts all of the participants demonstrated a forward focused viewpoint. Such a finding is not entirely surprising, because as Uprichard explains, the “future matters. It matters in everyday life and it matters to the lives of everybody; it is an intrinsic part of the time and temporality in which all things are necessarily situated” (2). Since this research analysis is firmly situated in linear temporality, the appearance of participants' futures in their narratives is to be expected. Corbin and Strauss (1987) likewise note that, a “biography evolves over time, the core around which it revolves. Over the course of a biography, one is living in the present, coming from the past, and moving forward toward the future” (254). As the participants' narrated their conversion stories to me, they understood themselves as being

situated in the present, yet having a distinctive past that impacted their narratives. They also viewed themselves as moving inexorably towards their evangelical futures; inevitably, they focused parts of their narrative accounts on key ways that they imagined their future selves growing and changing. This meant that all of the participants were able to actively identify areas that they believed they needed to grow in.

I do want to acknowledge here that this is quite similar to the discussion in the section above about the ways that participants viewed continual growth impacting their faith walk. Yet there is a difference, because what I will be discussing next are areas of growth that have not yet happened in participants' lives. There is a definite futuristic aspect to this in that none of these things have fully been realized in any of their lives at the time of the interviews. Interestingly, the majority of the participants addressed wanting to grow in areas relating to social outreach and action. Only one participant deviated from this when expressing his vision of growth which related to intangible spirituality. I will start by examining those examples focused on growth in social impact.

Penny clearly identified areas that she wants to pursue social growth in her life. All of her children are grown, so she now has more availability time-wise. Because of this, she wants to get involved with an anti-abortion group. Due to COVID-19, however, the group she wanted to volunteer with has mostly shut down and is no longer accepting new volunteers. Regardless, Penny still wants to get involved in this group once restrictions are lifted, saying said "I know God's telling me to do that. I want to do that. I think also our kids, you don't know much about our kids, but we have four adult kids and they've all had a lot of trouble with things because of bad choices. I know encouragement is part of that with them. I wanna keep doing that." All of the areas that Penny identified

growing in her faith mainly relate to being a change agent in society and in her own family.

Sarah is similarly focused on ways she can effect social change. Like Penny, this was also disrupted, but by severe health issues, not the pandemic. Sarah explained that she a group of ladies at her church “were beginning to meet together just as the Holy Spirit led and it would be as many as ten, it could be few as four or five. It was always a Holy Spirit focused meeting. We start worshipping quietly, and inviting Holy Spirit to come and then he starts ministering. And what I saw him doing in me, and others did too, because they were upset when I couldn’t come the last couple of times, God was beginning to bring the gift of prophecy and words of knowledge through me in ministering to some of the women. I’m praying that that will be what I have the opportunity to do; use the gifts that he manifests in me for kingdom expansion. Whether that’s through establishing more groups, whether that’s through helping women to be set free from baggage and bondage, or a choice they made or whatever. I’m praying that he will manifest those gifts more often. I have experienced gifts of healing, I’ve experienced word of knowledge, prophecy, tongues, pretty much all of it through the years on the field. . . . But I was beginning to realize, that’s what he was doing. He was bringing that gift often. Spontaneous, of course, it’s always spontaneous when it’s from the Spirit. So I’m hoping that’s the next level, because word of knowledge, word of wisdom, word of prophecy, prophetic utterance, those things change lives rapidly. Because people realize there’s no way she could know that, God has to be speaking it. I don’t know beyond that. . . . My prayer is that God will use me in a way that will literally cause the enemy to wish he had never touched me or my family. That I can put a huge dent in the kingdom of

darkness for the days that I have left. How God's going to do that, it's up to him and I'm willing for him to do with me whatever he wants to do. I just want to be effective every day that I'm breathing breath." Sarah makes it clear that she wants to spend the rest of her life impacting the church body. She is eager to be healed from her health issues so she can return to meetings and allow the Holy Spirit to minister to other people through her.

Renee also sees the area she wants to grow into being related to this connection with other believers. She said that she wants to continue on the "same path that I've been on, to stay connected to the body. To be as available to people as I can be." Renee stated in another interview that one of her God-given gifts is leading Bible studies at church. She has been leading these studies for some years now; during the interview process she spent a lot of time telling me about a new Bible study that she was going to hold at church during the autumn of 2020. It seems likely that she sees continuing on her same path of growth involving things like supporting the church body by facilitating these studies.

Martin wants to grow into being a mentor to young men who had similar life experiences to himself. He also wants to mentor young children and give them foundational knowledge about God to support them as they reach adulthood. Interestingly, he wants to do this not only to have a positive impact on the lives of those he is mentoring, but also because he believes it would be helpful for his own faith walk. By discipling others, Martin believes he will find purpose for his own life, "because it would help me be in prayer more, it would help me be in the Word [i.e. the Bible] more. The more you're in the Word, the more you learn about Jesus, the more confidence you have in Him, the more boldness you get. The more you're able to love and to show that

love.” Martin’s comments here obviously tie back to the discussion in the previous section about participants seeking continual growth in Christ. By spending more time in the Bible, he will grow his relationship with Jesus and be better equipped to mentor others. This newfound growth would then enable him to take that mentee “alongside of you and you try to convey all of these things about Jesus. And their growth, you know, and you’re honest with them, telling them about the struggles they’re going to encounter and how they can grow from those and stuff like that. That helps me, it gives me worth, it gives me a sense of self-worth. Just knowing that I’m helping somebody.” Martin clearly believes that his own spiritual growth would be inextricably tied into the growth of the individuals he is mentoring.

Quite naturally, given the traumatic life experiences he had just been through, Dominic related his vision of growth to his son’s tragic passing a few weeks prior. He began by acknowledging that, “What happened to Jake was tragic, it was sad. But it is not the last sad thing that’s gonna happen to me. I wanna be open to him, whatever he wants, whatever he asks of me. I wanna be in his will. If that means that I sell everything off and I go to Iceland, then I wanna do it. If he wants me to become a missionary and teach, then I’ll do it. If he wants me to go to Mexico and dig ditches, then that’s what I wanna do. But I wanna be in the word, because I know his will never goes against his word. Sometimes it’s hard to know what the will of God is because he doesn’t speak audibly anymore to us. He doesn’t just show us very clearly the way that he wants us to go. But if we’re in prayer and we’re in his word and we are looking for those opportunities that would further his kingdom and better serve him, then I wanna be open to that no matter what that brings.” Dominic articulates a much more open-ended view of how he wants to

grow in his belief system. He is not able to lay out specific social actions that he wants to accomplish in the future, unlike several of the participants such as Sarah and Penny. Yet, he clearly recognizes that God will bring new things into his life and he is open to accept whatever that may be.

Finally, Ben was the only participant to identify a personal vision of growth relating to something more intangible than social change. He thinks he is, “not a good Bible student in terms of memory, and some people think that you clearly should do memorization and others not. But I do think I want to know Bible parts better. I need to know the story of David better. This series that Pastor did on the life of Moses, I certainly knew a lot of that story already, but he shared some of the intricacies and challenges that probably got into his head. “Why in the world Lord did you pick me? You put me in the desert for forty years and I lived with nomads and now you kicked me back into Egypt.” It’s a crazy story. To know some of the intricacies and where the message was I think is even better to understand that. I have a better understanding of that part of the Bible. I need to do more of that. There’s times when I’ve been very committed to Sunday School; or an outside Bible study. We haven’t done an outside Bible study for a good long while, and I don’t even know why. I’m kind of convicted to think maybe we should commit ourselves to one. It’s also one of those areas where you grow in fellowship with other Christians and we probably need to seek that more in our lives.” Ben is talking here about a recent, mostly chronological, sermon series that our pastor preached on the life of Moses. The sermon series gave him a new and better understanding of Scripture by teaching him some of the lesser known details of Moses’ life. Ruminating over his desire to be a better Bible scholar led Ben to share the conviction he is feeling to get involved in

a Bible study outside of church. From his comments it appears that he thinks this type of Bible study would not only help him be a better scholar, but also enable him to grow in his faith walk by fellowshiping with other believers.

Besides articulating the ways they actively sought to continue growing into their Christian faith, a frequent concept that cropped up in participants' narratives was a focus on building a godly legacy to leave behind as a witness to their family and those who knew them. All of the participants, aside from Martin, clearly articulated their concept of leaving behind a godly legacy that would impact their families and the wider community. I believe that this emphasis on legacy fits well into the participants' overall linear viewpoint of their narratives. I do want to acknowledge though, that not everybody may agree with my interpretation, since there is inevitably an aspect of reflecting back over one's past life experiences in this as well. Yet, as Corbin and Strauss (1987) explain, "Experiences influence the interpretation of who I am at present, while together the past and an unfolding present form the basis of who I shall be in the future" (254). They are here noting that the past and the present will combine to influence an individual's perspective of their future; their concept fits nicely with the idea that the process of building a godly legacy involves participants' reflecting back over their post-evangelical lives as they endeavor to continue living the remainder of their life according to the type of legacy they want to leave. That the concept of a legacy kept repeatedly appearing in the participants' narratives is not surprising, because their current post-evangelical life experiences are impacting who they are in the present moment while also preparing them for their unfolding futures.

Especially given that all of the participants are older, an important part of their futures is coming to terms with their inevitable death. Through the focus on building a godly legacy to leave behind as a remembrance, participants are clearly preparing themselves for that future eventuality. I have included a table below to show what I am discussing.

Table 3: Participants' Ages

Name	Dominic	Sarah	Renee	Penny	Ben	Martin
Current Age	Early fifties	Mid-seventies	Mid-seventies	Late sixties	Late sixties	Early sixties

As can be seen, over half of the participants are either nearing or well past the age of retirement. Naturally their thoughts would be focused on the legacies they will leave behind. As Renee herself stated, “And now, and particularly as I get older, it’s like what kind of a legacy do I want to leave?” Also, as I will discuss later, in the cases of Dominic and Ben, recent deaths in both of their families seemed to be another causal factor in their focus on leaving a legacy behind.

In addition to this, I believe the very nature of being a Christian necessitates a forward looking focus. A crucial part of being a Bible-believing Christian is acknowledging that a person’s life on earth is fleeting and looking forward to an eternal home with God in heaven. From this viewpoint, death is not something to be feared because it means believers go to their true home. There are multiple passages in the New Testament alone that attest to this idea (see Heb. 11; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Tim. 6:11-19; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). One good example is found in 2 Cor. 5:1-4, where the Apostle Paul metaphorically compares life on this earth to living naked in a tent. Believers living in this tent longingly groan for their eternal home in heaven, built specifically for them by

God; it is here, with the shedding of their mortality through death, that they will be truly clothed. The language he uses here paints a powerful picture of travelers inhabiting unstable and exposing living conditions. It is only in heaven, their true home, that they will live in an actual building that has already been prepared for them.

These Bible passages are also taught in the church; one sermon our pastor preached while I was conducting this research clearly communicated this message. He told us, “If you have put your trust in Jesus Christ, hell can do nothing about that; hell cannot defeat you. On a related note, we need not fear death. Famous Psalm twenty-three, ‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me’ (Psalm 23:4a, ESV). The good shepherd is Jesus and he walks with us through those places. . . . Jesus has put to death the fear that we have of death. Jesus brought life and immortality and light to the Gospel. In his book *Facing Death*, Billy Graham told the story of a friend of his named Donald Grey Barnhouse. Barnhouse was one of the best known Bible expositors in North America in the middle part of the twentieth century. Cancer took his wife, leaving him with three children all under the age of twelve. They were driving to the funeral when he said that a large truck passed them, and cast a dark, noticeable shadow over their car. And when it had passed, Barnhouse turned to his oldest daughter who was just kind of staring blankly out the window and he said, ‘Tell me sweetheart, would you rather be run over by that truck or its shadow?’ He said she looked curiously at him, kind of wondering what this was about. She said, ‘Well the shadow of course, it can’t hurt you.’ He looked at all of his children and he said, ‘Your mother has not been run over by death, but by the shadow of death. And there’s nothing to fear.’ It’s a great picture of what this is all about. We need have no fear of

death, because Emmanuel has come, he has won the victory.” The pastor uses quotes from the Bible as well as a moving anecdote from another Christian to disseminate this message of hope found in a believer’s physical death to the congregation. With numerous Bible passages and teachings from the pulpit that remind believers they need have no fear of death, it is not at all surprising that the participants’ narratives would reflect this belief. The concept of leaving a godly legacy behind was clearly important to their narratives as they acknowledged the reality of their eventual deaths.

As I briefly mentioned in the previous section, I did not actually have any interview questions specifically asking participants about their legacies. Yet, after conducting a few interviews, I realized that this concept of legacy kept cropping up in the participants’ narratives. I was so intrigued by this that I added a prompt to one of my questions specifically querying participants about their thoughts regarding their legacies; interestingly, I still continued to find the term *legacy* appearing at other times in the interview series without any prompting from me. The participants appeared to be heavily focused on what sort of spiritual inheritance they wanted to leave behind them. They were concerned not just about leaving behind a godly legacy for their families, but also having an impact on the church body.

Sarah related her idea of a legacy to another woman who had had a tremendous impact on her faith. Sarah told me that this woman had now entered eternity and was with Jesus; when Sarah herself goes home to be with Jesus she hopes that any time “my name comes up or I’m thought about or mentioned, the one comment would be, ‘I saw Jesus in her every time I saw her. She walked with the Lord. She impacted my life because I saw the level of faith she had.’” Sarah also wants her life to have impacted her family, but

there are some unfortunate divisions that do not allow her much contact with them. She continued by saying, “I would like to think that would be the legacy I’m leaving behind for my grandchildren. But I don’t have the opportunity to be with them, so I’m praying that it is the case with many other ones that are close to me. I will have made a difference in the attitude or life choices that will impact for generations to come.” Since Sarah is unable to associate with her grandchildren, she is instead focusing on the many friends in her life. She is praying that the Lord will continue to allow her to embed her spiritual legacy into their lives and make a generational impact.

Penny also has family struggles, and she immediately connected her legacy to her children. She had explained in an earlier interview that her four adult children had made some bad choices in life that are still negatively affecting them. She hopes that her kids do not destroy themselves and mature into “good people and believers. . . . It’s really all I want. They are believers, it’s just that they don’t always act like it. If my children would be Bible-believing Christians and a blessing to their families, that would be what I want my legacy to be. And then everything that stems from that, how they would touch other people’s lives.” Here, Penny looks beyond her children growing into their Christian faith and hopes that they would then have an impact on other people’s lives. Her perspective is somewhat similar to Sarah’s, in that she wants a legacy that reaches beyond an immediate familial circle and positively influences a wide range of people. From several conversations I have had with Penny outside of the interviews I conducted with her, I know she is still in the process of making a godly impact on the lives of her children. Several of her adult children have moved back home with Penny and her husband, and

unfortunately this has not always been an easy transition. Yet Penny is still faithfully seeking ways to effect godly, evangelical changes in her children's lives.

Renee likewise approached her legacy from these two angles, focusing on how it would affect her family and then the wider world. She said that before she was an evangelical Christian, she did not have any purpose in life, or even know what purpose was. Afterwards, however, and especially as she has grown older, the concept of a legacy became important to her. Like Penny and Sarah, she wants to make a good impact on both her children and grandchildren. Renee's daughter and her grandchildren attend the same church she does, and they always sit together. Renee mentioned once during an interview that she thinks one main reason her grandchildren come to her church is because it assures them one opportunity a week to see their grandmother. Through comments like this, Renee points towards the fact that she has already partially succeeded in her attempts to have made a good impact on her family members, and that she is likely to continue building this legacy as long as she is able. She also wants other people to see that "my life, my actions, my words, were in line with what I claimed to believe. In other words that I was living the Christian life, I wasn't a hypocrite that was saying one thing and doing another." It would seem that Renee is also successfully fulfilling this aspect of her legacy as well, because she told me during one interview that the "man I work for says I'm the most conservative person that he knows, so he definitely knows all the little things that I don't always share with people about my Calvinism and all that kind of thinking, even though I know that he doesn't agree with that." Renee is living her life in such a way that the people around her are clearly recognizing the evangelical values undergirding her life choices. Renee will likely continue living her life in the same

manner to leave behind a fully-realized legacy impacting both family and others around her.

Lastly, I will turn to Ben and Dominic, whose views on their legacies were obviously influenced by recent deaths in their families. In Ben's case, he immediately related his understanding of a legacy to his father-in-law's recent funeral. Ben was asked to give the eulogy and he connected this experience to his views on his own legacy. He said, "We just did my father-in-law's memorial service. I won't go into all the detail behind all these things, but I think it'd be valuable for you to consider collectively. I would like my legacy to be that I came to understand and know who Christ was and was able to give witness to that. In the sense of loving people, that I truly was loving more to my family than they realized. That I have a deeper love for my children than I think they realize. A deeper love for my brothers and sisters and maybe even beyond, like I said cousins, than they realized. Hopefully they'll say, oh yeah that's true. Hopefully it's through word and action that they'll be able to see that and they'll reflect back on that. I look for opportunity to maybe even share that deeper. Then, I'd like to hope that people outside of family would look back and reflect that I was a good, solid leader to my family and it was reflected in love and that that expanded community wise. That my community involvement was a good thing, that people not only recognized it, but that I was a good community leader. I was hopefully a good person. Not that I seek to be a good person in that sense, but that somehow my Christian walk was reflected in my leadership in the community. The community of my family, my church, and then beyond." It is interesting here that Ben's explanation of what he wants his legacy to be is much more detailed than the other participants. He wants to become Christ-like in his love and compassion for

people, to such an extent that they do not fully grasp the depths of this until after he is gone. Ben depicts a long-reaching legacy that impacts both his family and the surrounding community.

Dominic discussed his legacy several times before the tragic passing of his son. This was obviously an important concept to him even before his son's unexpected death gave him a new perspective on it. His pre-conversion self, he said, was focused on working so he could make money and go on fun dates with attractive women. Now, he says, "I go to work to help support six different families and my family. It's different. It's not about just getting material things, it's about leaving a legacy, it's about leaving a business for my grandkids or my kids to take over." Here, Dominic clearly conceives of a more tangible legacy than the spiritual impact all of the participants above discussed. Another time he mentioned, "I would like my headstone, if I could have a headstone, I'd like it to say faithful. I want to be faithful, faithful not just to my wife and family, but to God and my friends. I wanna be the guy with integrity. I know that, as a child of God, I'm a representative of his kingdom." This time, he refers to a spiritual legacy more in line with what the other participants expressed.

When I queried him about his legacy during the interview conducted after his son Jake's death, Dominic immediately responded, "Faithful. Faithful. I want my grandson too look at me and be able to say, he was faithful to God, he was faithful to his family, he was faithful to his teachings. So yeah, I would want it to be faithful, that I stayed the course, that I finished the race. I would want that to be my legacy, faithful." Here he uses the same terminology to describe his legacy that he used above before his son Jake's death. Yet, his son's passing clearly influenced Dominic's viewpoint on his legacy at this

moment in time, because the grandson he is referring to here is Jake's only child. Dominic has several other grandchildren and two other children besides Jake, but when discussing his legacy he only mentioned wanting it to affect Jake's child. From earlier comments, Dominic cares deeply about all of his family and wants to leave a godly legacy behind for all of them. Yet, and not surprisingly, Jake's recent passing indubitably shaped his perspective on his legacy at the time of our interview. Dominic wants to keep living his life according to his current evangelical standards so his young grandson can grow up acknowledging that his grandfather was a faithful, evangelical follower of Jesus.

Through their narrative accounts as presented above, it is clear that participants are looking ahead towards the end of their lives without feeling fearful or threatened. Instead, they are focusing on living the remainder of their lives in such a way that it will positively impact those left behind at their passing. Participants also see ways that continual growth in their relationship with God will impact not just their present reality but also play a role in their evangelical futures. Most importantly, however, when discussing their relationships with their future selves, participants seem to understand their life course both through a linear and a temporal lens. McLeod (2013) notes that "narratives necessarily involve a temporality in which past, present and futures are utilized to produce a coherent and linear representation" (166). Even though their futures have obviously not yet happened, participants' linear structuring of their narratives means that a future focused outlook is wholly expected. They understand their lives as having a definitely linear pattern, with a pre-evangelical past, a post-evangelical present, and a post-evangelical future. By understanding their life through a linear lens, they inevitably also understand their lives as being temporally oriented; one key way this temporality

impacts their narrative is when they acknowledge the reality that their lives on this earth will eventually end by discussing the concept of a legacy.

As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, temporality and linearity are profoundly important concepts for analyzing the participants' narrative accounts. They are the overarching concepts embedded throughout the narratives. Participants' articulated them when discussing their pre-evangelical pasts, inevitably narrating their present time into these accounts of their pasts. Through discussions of the ways they perceived continual growth impacting their lives, both in the present moment and their unfolding futures, participants demonstrated a commitment to a linear perspective of their lives, as well as an understanding that everything was temporally situated. Lastly, by acknowledging the reality of their eventual death and the godly legacy they were committed to leaving behind, participants expressed the impact that temporality has upon their lives while simultaneously identifying the final piece in their linear life course: a physical death in this world that will eternally unite them with Jesus, the originator and architect of their evangelical faith system.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Main Findings

The purpose of this research was to examine the conversion narratives of US American, adult converts to evangelical Christianity, in order to see how the rupture of their conversion experiences had or had not affected their lives by reshaping them according to evangelical standards. I used qualitative research methods, particularly relying on semi-structured interviews due to the research restrictions placed upon me by the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon analyzing the interview data, I discovered that participants were temporally orienting their accounts. Temporality was particularly apparent in participants' linear understanding of their narratives. Their evangelical conversion experiences had caused a disruption in converts' lives that led them to have distinct pre-evangelical pasts, post-evangelical presents, and post-evangelical futures.

When discussing their pre-evangelical pasts, participants inevitably reinterpreted their prior selves and experiences according to their current evangelical belief systems. Participants also appeared to experience a shifting spatial orientation that affected the ways they interacted with the world. Their newfound evangelical beliefs led to a shift in their self-understandings that then changed, in some cases quite radically, the ways they interacted with their social worlds. When narrating their post-evangelical presents, participants continually articulated the concept of perpetual growth. It appears that an important part of their evangelical identity is growing ever-closer and deeper in their

relationship with God. This growth not only impacted their present reality, they also described ways they wanted to continue seeking growth in their future selves. Lastly, participants' linear view of their life courses culminated in their perspectives of the legacies they wanted to leave behind after their physical deaths in this world.

Implications

My findings in this study confirm what other researchers have previously found when examining the nature of Christian conversion experiences. For example, the fact that an evangelical conversion experience causes a distinctive rupturing with an individual's past that is not necessarily confined to the moment of conversion but that continues to impact a convert's life long after the initial conversion experience itself is well-documented in the literature (see Austin-Broos 2003; Chua 2012; Coleman 2003; Daswani 2013; Engelke 2010; Flinn 1999; Meyer 1998; Lurhmann 2004; Robbins 2017; Robbins 2019). My research theorizes conversion "as a simultaneously temporal, relational, and shifting set of configurations that encompass both Christians and non-Christians in a shared world" (Chua 2012, 522). My findings show how evangelical Christians negotiated the complex relationships with the non-evangelical members of their social worlds, as well as demonstrating how this close proximity to non-evangelicals had a significant impact on converts' lives and social realities. I was also able to show how converts' perspectives shifted over the years, particularly in the case of Dominic who went from being stridently opposed to having non-Christian friends to today acknowledging that he was wrong to take that position.

The main contributions of my research came from examining conversion in relation to the life course, highlighting the complex effect conversions have upon

participants' lives over the years. By comparison, many other researchers are simply examined the ways that conversion manifests not as a singular event but as an ongoing process that affects converts' lives beyond the initial conversion experience itself. In slight contrast to this, Flinn's (1999) perspective on conversion is, I think, very similar to my own research findings; this is particularly true when he states that the phenomenon of conversion encompasses both:

A sudden turning away from one's past life and behavior . . . [but also] conversion in the long stretch of a full life-cycle seems a stage of growth toward maturity, a transition from one status to another, a turning toward a fuller and more complete commitment to the wholeness of life and its ultimate meaning (54-55).

Flinn exactly describes to the way that the participants articulated their conversion narratives. There was the conversion experience itself which did entail a rupturing with their pasts. But then, examining their narratives in light of a full life course demonstrated that the participants have been and are continuing to mature into the ultimate meaning of being an evangelical Christian.

It would be remiss of me at this point to not acknowledge that the narratives I based my research findings upon were co-created in a situated context. These narratives should not be viewed as objective accounts of conversion experiences. Rather, I believe they should be partially understood in light of the participants' own terminological choice: a testimony. As Salmon and Riessman (2013) note, the intended audience, "whether physically present or not, exerts a crucial influence on what can and cannot be said, how things should be expressed, what can be taken for granted, what needs explaining, and so on" (198). By calling these narrative accounts their testimonies, participants are acknowledging that I alone was not their intended audience. Testimonies

in the evangelical community are understood as stories that tell about the wonderful things God has done in the narrator's life. They are a testimony both of God's goodness and as evidence for the existence of God in the narrator's life. Testimonies are meant to not only be shared with other Christians, but also with non-evangelicals as a tool for proselytization. Meaning, the participants were not just sharing their testimonies with me, they were looking beyond me to the non-evangelical, secular audience who would interact with my research findings. They accordingly contextualized their narratives towards this perceived audience. Participants were also situating their conversion narratives with the culturally accepted pattern of the Second Great Awakening. This meant that their conversion narratives inevitably reflected a perception of conversion:

as a profound psychological transformation that left them with a fundamentally altered sense of self, an identity as a new kind of Christian. As they interpreted it, they had undergone spiritual rebirth, the death of an old self and the birth of a new one that fundamentally transformed their sense of their relationship to the world (Scott n.d., para. 2).

In other words, it is not at all unexpected to discover that participants' accounts expressed the radically altered sense of self discussed above. Researchers undertaking similar projects would benefit from examining the methodological implications of these insights.

As the individual who collected these narratives, I also assisted in the creation of these accounts. For one thing, my questions and interactions with the participants means that these narratives were co-constructed. As Salmon and Riessman (2013) also note, "storytelling happens relationally, collaboratively between speaker and listener in a cultural context where at least some meanings and conventions are shared" (200). Using our shared knowledge as insiders within the evangelical community, the participants and I co-created these narratives within a situated, cultural context. The narrative stories I

present in the thesis were also chosen partially by building upon our shared knowledge. As I have mentioned elsewhere, I found the majority of the research participants at my current church. The congregation is very small, and participants freely told other congregants that they were letting me interview them for this project. Even though I gave all of the participants pseudonyms and endeavored to the best of my ability to remove any easily identifiable information, I am well aware that any congregant at the church who reads this thesis will likely be able to deduce who the participants are. Because of this, I was careful about what narrative stories I chose to include in the thesis. There were several times when participants shared with me personal beliefs that are highly controversial within the worldview espoused by the church. I chose to leave these problematic instances out of the thesis, to protect the participants' reputations in the community. I did not want my research to be the cause of participants' potentially losing status within the community. I chose to privilege the privacy and reputation of the participants over adding any extra research details to my thesis. While this may seem problematic from a research perspective, I believed it was more valuable to leave these narrative accounts out than potentially causing issues within this tight-knit church community. My choices are in line with anthropological discussions regarding ethnographic responsibility (see Garcia 2000). The narrative findings I have presented in this thesis should rightfully be understood as being rooted in this situated, contextualized, co-created context. Researchers attempting to conduct ethnographic research in tightly knit communities where they themselves are insiders would do well to consider these methodological implications.

I likewise want to acknowledge again the limitations forced upon me by the COVID-19 pandemic; my main source of data collection came through semi-structured interviews with six individuals. Any other ethnographic research methods I wanted to use, particularly participant observation, were restricted to watching online church services. Because my research project relied so heavily on interviews solely examining participants' conversion narratives, questions may arise about the validity of my findings. Given the fact, however, that these findings are confirmed by other researchers working within the field, I feel confident in asserting the validity of the findings presented here.

As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, I chose to focus this thesis on US American adult conversion narratives to Christianity due to the fact that, despite there being a vast body of literature within the anthropology of Christianity on P/c conversion experiences, much of this research looked at conversion in the context of indigenous religions. This literature generally agreed that Christians conversions in these various situations were defined by the rupturing of converts' pasts from their presents. I suggested that one reason researchers have generally overlooked the conversion narratives of converts in countries like the US is because these cultures are saturated with Christian influences; evangelical converts in these societies might not have the dramatic, tangible rupturing from their prior culture that is so often present and so well-documented in their indigenous counterparts' narratives. My research was partially driven by a desire to explore whether or not the phenomenon of rupture played a significant a role in the context of US American adult converts to evangelical Christianity. I also wanted to see if Robbins' (2017; 2019) theorizing about duplex cultural formations, i.e., the way that P/c converts continually sought after rupture instead of it being something accomplished

once and for all at the moment of conversion, could likewise be documented in the narratives of US American converts to evangelical Christianity.

My findings contribute to this available literature by demonstrating that, in their narratives, US American converts to evangelical Christianity do identify conversion as a rupture in their life courses. Their evangelical conversion experiences had a significantly disruptive effect upon their lifestyles, social worlds, and belief systems that was not dissimilar to the documented experiences of indigenous converts Christianity. This suggests to me that studying the conversion experiences of individuals in countries where Christianity has a hegemonic influence could add additional insights to our current understandings of the ways that conversions to P/c and evangelical Christianity impact converts' lives. I also discovered evidence that, in the lives of these six participants at least, continually growing into their evangelical beliefs was a vital part of their theology. Interestingly, however, neither this nor the rupture of the conversion experience became the main focal point of my analysis.

As I was analyzing the data, I realized that there were some other significant things also going on in these narrative accounts besides what I have documented above. I decided to incorporate these unexpected discoveries into my analysis because I believed these findings could contribute more to expanding the anthropological understanding of evangelical conversion experiences. I had more to offer the field of anthropology by examining the ways that temporality, linearity, and spatial orientations affected participants' narrative than by identifying the ways that rupture altered their lives. Ultimately yes, I could easily have focused my analysis solely on participants' accounts of the actual conversion experience itself and the immediate rupturing effects it had upon

their lives since I had ample data to prove this point. I decided against this, however, and I believe my thesis is stronger because of this. My thesis shows that studying the narratives of US American converts to evangelical Christianity can be a fruitful area of research; as in my case, it will likely open doors to new areas of study that researchers may not have considered before conducting their projects.

Finally, as I reflect upon my research findings, I believe that I can add to Robbins' (2017; 2019) theorizing regarding duplex cultural formations. I have discussed this theory numerous times in the thesis, but I will briefly re-examine it here. Robbins essentially argues that converts do experience a radical break from their pre-conversion world and culture, but that parts of this pre-conversion culture still exist within converts' lives. This means that there exists an enduring tension between converts' new Christian belief system and this pre-conversion culture, which makes rupture something that is continually sought after rather than being a one time, settled occurrence. I do not disagree with Robbins' theory so far, but I think my research can add to this theory as it relates specifically to adult conversions to evangelical Christianity. When someone converts to evangelical Christianity, they instantly find themselves entering the evangelical space I described above in my analysis. Inhabiting this ideological evangelical space means that converts suddenly find themselves in opposition to a newly discovered secular world. Going back to the Bible verses I quoted when discussing the spatial shift experienced by evangelical Christians, Jesus quite literally tells his followers they are separated from the rest of the world when they profess belief in him. Building upon Robbins' theory, converts in these situations are, of course, never able to effect a full break with this secular world, because it is the reality of existing within the secular society that

continually surrounds them. Evangelicals find themselves inhabiting an evangelical space diametrically opposed to the non-evangelical, secular society that exists all around them. As the Apostle Paul gestured towards when discussing the unstable and exposing living situation that converts are forced to dwell in while living on this earth, it is only upon their physical death in this world that true evangelical Christians will be fully freed of this secular world.

I believe Robbins is correct when he says that a vital part of being a Christian is the need to continually negotiate a tenuous relationship with the pre-conversion elements of their culture that still exist within converts' lives. In the case of evangelical conversion experiences, converts need to continually navigate the territory between the evangelical space they currently inhabit and the encompassing secular space that they no longer live within. As Jesus warns his followers, it is expected that the remainder of their lives lived on this earth will involve clashes between the ideological evangelical space they inhabit and the surrounding secular world that is mediated through their evangelical worldview. While Robbins closely examines what occurs in Christian conversion experiences, my findings suggest that it is also important to look at the relationship between people's life courses, their social worlds, and shifting ideological spatial orientations.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Looking back over this research project, I believe there are several lessons I learned and recommendations I can make that will inform future researchers. I have already discussed several times how this project's scope was limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The IRB at my university would not allow student investigators to come into direct contact with any research participants. My data collection was reduced almost

entirely to semi-structured interviews conducted over a video-conferencing app such as Zoom or over the phone. I believe a similar project like this could provide more in-depth data collection if it were conducted under less restrictive circumstances. The main church I conducted my research at normally holds many events outside of Sunday morning services that would be fruitful areas for participant observation. My experience with fellow congregants has also been that they are friendly and welcoming, often inviting people over to their houses for Bible studies or mealtimes. Again, situations like this would give researchers many more opportunities for data collection than I was afforded.

I am thankful that I already had well-established relationships at both of the churches where I recruited participants, particularly my current church and the one where I found the majority of my participants. That undeniably opened the door and made conducting research under these circumstances much easier for me. As the pastor himself told me when I initially approached him via email about the possibility of conducting research at church, “I’ve gotten emails of that sort before and I’ve always ignored them, but since you’re a member of the congregation here I wanted to help out however I could.” I greatly appreciated his willingness to work with me, but I also found his comments interesting because it made me wonder what exactly he meant. I wonder if he felt like I was a trustworthy person and he did not have to worry about the things that I would uncover during my research, unlike he maybe would with a researcher he had no connections with? I also realize that he is a very busy man and his comments may simply have meant that he did not feel capable of helping someone who he did not know. I am a regular attendee of Sunday morning services, however, so it would have been much more awkward for him to ignore my emailed request.

The pastor was true to his word and certainly opened the door for me by recommending the project to the entire congregation. His support undeniably eased my access to potential participants. I believe that any future researchers trying to conduct projects in a similar setting would do well to heed the pastor's comments to me. Of course, I recognize that my insider status privileged the research setting for me from the start, and that it is not possible for every other researcher to attain this standing. However, if a specific church setting has been chosen as a research site, I think it would likely be a good idea to at least attend a few events in this setting and make oneself somewhat familiar to those in authority at the site before approaching them about conducting research.

Returning to the topic of my insider status, I recognize that this undoubtedly had an effect on participants' interactions with me. I was not an unfamiliar person asking them to confide their deeply personal narratives, but rather a trusted member of the same congregation that freely admitted to sharing the same belief system. In fact, nearly all of the participants, at some point or other during the interviews, articulated their wish that their "testimonies" i.e. the conversion narratives they had just shared with me, would be an effective witnessing tool to anybody who read my thesis. The subtext in these conversations was that I, through the very nature of doing this project, was myself being a witnessing tool by bringing our shared evangelical values into a decidedly non-evangelical, academic setting. Participants also never felt the need to explain any linguistic choices to me, such as what they meant by the terms *witness*, *faith walk*, or *believer*. They made the assumption, that since I was a member of the community, I would know the context in which they were using these terms. Generally, they were

correct in these assumptions. None of them also ever attempted to witness to me in an attempt to convert me, something which other non-evangelical and/or non-Christian researchers have documented happening to them. I have to wonder if participants would be more careful in the language they used and the stories they shared if they were telling their conversion narratives to a non-evangelical. I believe it would be worthwhile for a non-evangelical researcher to conduct a similar study of US American adult converts to evangelical Christianity.

I have been talking about the ways that being of a member of this community benefited me as a researcher, but I also recognize that my insider status brought with it limitations. For one thing, I acknowledge the inherent bias that I had to constantly be conscious of, from the first conceptualizations of this project through to the actual writing of the thesis. During interviews with participants, I endeavored to adopt the position of religious relativism as it is expressed by Marshall (2016), which was especially pertinent when participants would share surprising aspects of their belief systems with me. As I coded their narratives and began examining the emerging themes, I strived to always have clear justification from the interview data to support these themes. In this way, I hoped to avoid my insider knowledge leading me to conclusions that were not necessarily directly in the data. My insider status also meant that I did not always clearly explicate my research findings. For example, I had several professors who were proofreading documents express confusion over certain terminological choices that I thought were easily understandable. I realized then that things that were obvious to me might not be as clear to an outsider. This meant that I had to explicate things in more detail than I originally thought necessary. I am sure that my insider status limited me in other ways as

well; these are simply some of the most obvious examples from my own perspective. I believe that, ultimately, my insider status both privileged and limited this project. I was aware of this reality going into the project, but it has taken on a new meaning as I reflect back over the actual execution of this thesis.

Finally, as I have mentioned several times, I chose to focus this thesis specifically on the adult conversion narratives of US Americans due to the overwhelming preference within the anthropology of Christianity to research conversions happening in contexts dominated by indigenous religious beliefs. I hypothesized that one reason this had been a hitherto fairly overlooked area of study was due to the overwhelmingly Christian influences embedded within societies like the US, where Christianity has had a hegemonic influence. As I was in the midst of getting IRB approval to start conducting research, I read a book for one of my classes written by indigenous US American scholars who were heavily critiquing Christianity for the harm they believe it has done to their cultures (see Barker 2017; Kauaniū 2017; Nelson 2017). Reading their critiques helped me realize how saturated US American society was with Christian influences, but it was not until I set out to actually find research participants that I fully grasped the reality of this. In my initial conceptualization of this project, I decided to study the conversion narratives of individuals from a strictly secular background. After only a short time trying to recruit research participants, I quickly realized it was nearly impossible to find participants who fit these requirements. Indeed, every one of the participants I interviewed for this project had some form of childhood encounter with Christianity. In the cases of five out of the six, they were all raised in various Christian denominations and regularly attended church on Sunday mornings during their growing up years.

Dominic, the only participant whose parents were not particularly religious, still recounted having his parents put him into Sunday morning services at various points throughout his childhood.

Any researcher studying adult evangelical conversion narratives in US American contexts should be prepared for the reality that their participants will likely have had Christianizing influences in their lives prior to their evangelical conversion experiences. They will find, as I myself did, the need to distinguish these pre-evangelical religious encounters from what the participants deemed to be their genuine evangelical conversion experiences. In fact, as two of my advisors told me at different points during this thesis writing process, they were mildly confused because the participants had essentially “converted from Christianity to Christianity.” They were entirely right in their assessment of this and in my difficulties differentiating between these two parts of the participants’ narratives in my thesis. As I explained in an earlier chapter, I eventually decided to use the term *evangelical* to specifically denote participants’ current Christian beliefs and more clearly separate these evangelical beliefs from their prior Christian influences. I also made sure to clearly explicate the times when participants recounted pre-evangelical Christian encounters while simultaneously narrating their current evangelical belief system into these accounts. Nevertheless, I admit readers may still find themselves slightly confused on the topic, as it is a highly complicated issue. I believe an in-depth study on these so-called “conversions from Christianity to Christianity” could provide interesting insights into the US American relationship to various Christian denominations.

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