The purpose of this study is to examine the most significant reasons evangelical Christian faith is compelling to its adherents. Through the interviews of nineteen Evangelical Christians, it becomes clear that evangelicals see the Bible and Christian theology in a literal and factual way. Thus, contrary to some strains of contemporary thought and scholarship, evangelicals affirm that the claims of the Bible and Christian theology should be taken at face value. Even though such claims are implausible to the modern mind, it is precisely through seeing the Bible and theology in this light that evangelicals enter into their powerful faith lives. In addition to this literal-factual orientation, evangelicals are empowered by their relationship with God in Christ. Along with analysis of interview data, brief studies of evangelical approaches to the Bible and spiritual-psychological development will further serve to explicate evangelical faith.
The Way In: Interviews with Evangelical Christians

by

B. Patrick Williams

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the

degree of

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

Presented September 10, 2002

Commencement June 2003
Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies thesis of B. Patrick Williams presented on September 10, 2002

APPROVED:

Redacted for privacy

Major Professor, representing Philosophy

Redacted for privacy

Committee Member, representing English

Redacted for privacy

Committee Member, representing Philosophy

Redacted for privacy

Chair of the Department of Philosophy

Redacted for privacy

Dean of Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Redacted for privacy

B. Patrick Williams, Author
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preface</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One Methods and Definitions</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two Belief: The Bible and Faith</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three Belief: Theology</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four Christianity the Only Way?</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five The Transforming Power of Evangelicalism</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six Intellect and Piety: A Case Study</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seven Analysis: Strong Piety and Limited Theology</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Eight Analysis: Faith Stages, Modernity, and Life-Giving Faith</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afterword</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix: Interview Subjects</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Way In: Interviews With Evangelical Christians

Preface

During the course of my undergraduate study at Oregon State University, I have had occasion to speak with many evangelical Protestant Christians. Often I would run into evangelical Christians and find myself liking the majority of them and enjoying their company. After a time, a pattern began to show itself. We would begin to discuss theology and they would begin to talk about the necessity of being saved by Jesus so as not to be damned to hell for all eternity. To them, God was clear and knowable. These evangelicals were right about religion, and all others (Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, atheists, even liberal Christians) were wrong. They saw the Bible as literally true and without any mistakes whatsoever. If it said Jesus was born of a virgin, he was. If it says God killed every living land creature via a worldwide flood, God did. If it said God ordered Joshua to commit murder, God did.

In short, I couldn't understand how these evangelical Christians thought what they thought. Marcus Borg asks, "do virgin births, multiplying loaves and fish, and changing water into wine ever happen anywhere?"¹ I'm inclined to think not. Moreover, the idea of a genocidal God raises more problems for me than it solves. Why would God order the mass murder of men, women, and children? Why would God directly commit mass murder? And why would God damn those to hell who seemed to be living their lives in as authentic ways as they knew how? If one judges others by the fruits of the Spirit, as Paul suggests, how could someone like Gandhi or the Dalai Lama deserve an eternal tortuous damnation?² How could someone deserve damnation who left the church due to negative experiences in Christianity? These evangelicals spoke about a God who personally saw to
it that more people attended a Bible study this week than the last, helped a “believer” acquire a popular VHS tape before it was checked out, and made finding a parking space in a busy lot possible. This way of seeing God was difficult for me to understand.

I was a history major. Most significant historical events are complicated. When one really analyzes the various factors surrounding a historical event, one discerns layers and layers of causes and effects. The Bible gives accounts of historical events, some of which are disputed as to their historicity. Historians analyze all relevant data. Am I to trust all these narratives taken from multiple sources over 3000 years as though they are literally true and without mistakes? I can’t think of any historical account I have read that did not contain a misplaced account, purport to know too much, or demonstrate limited insight. I had studied the Renaissance and Reformation, reading about the advances made in textual study that demonstrated errors, anachronisms, and downright forgeries in texts (such as Valla’s discovery of the forgery of the entire Donation of Constantine). I had read about pioneering biblical scholars such as Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism itself, who seriously disagreed with parts of some of the books of the Bible. In light of my study of history, I found it incredible that a document like the Bible could be perceived as infallible and without error.

I began to wonder, what is going on here? Why am I drawn to these people? Why did I like them on the one hand and find myself irritated by them on the other? Sure, some I did not like, but several of them have become friends. There is something appealing in their clarity and sincerity. They really seemed to have found something meaningful in their understanding of God through Christ; and many seemed to know something and have experienced something that changed them for the better. They were
dedicated. They read their Bibles and prayed to God daily and tried to take seriously
God's will for their lives. I couldn't help but respect that. True, some were obnoxiously
so sure they had the truth they were blind to the circularity of their appeals to the Bible as
the ultimate authority because the Bible said it was the ultimate authority. However, most
were kind, thoughtful, and sincere. But how could they believe in a murderous God and
an inerrant Bible?

In order to try to ascertain my simultaneous attraction to and dislike for
evangelical Christianity, I decided to interview evangelical Christians for my MAIS
thesis. This seemed a great way to connect with people who thought differently from
myself. Perhaps in this way I could discover why a seemingly self-contradictory faith was
so meaningful and powerful in their lives. Perhaps personal interviews would be the key
to discovering why evangelical faith is compelling.

I hope to be as explicit as possible in the presentations of my interview data as
well as in the formulation of my arguments. I don't want there to be any questions or
ambiguity surrounding how I've reached my conclusions. I advance my arguments as
incisively as possible while, at the same time, in all humility. Matters of faith are of the
most deeply held meaning and significance. I will comment on evangelical stories as well
as provide additional analysis of them through the use of outside evidence. I hope I've
given the evangelicals enough "voice" to enable the reader to assess their beliefs as well
as my conclusions about them.
Galatians 5:22-23a: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Judging by the fruits of one’s religious practice, I can’t understand how one could condemn the Dalai Lama or Gandhi or any non-Christian if the person in question manifested genuine “fruit.” [NIV]

Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, (St. Paul: West, 1991) 406: “By the fifteenth century, a consciousness of being humanists had emerged, especially evident in the career of Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457). Valla was brought up in Rome and educated in both Latin and Greek. Eventually, during the pontificate of Nicholas V (1447-1455), he achieved his chief ambition of becoming a papal secretary. It was Valla, above all others, who turned his attention to the philological and literary criticism of ancient texts. His most famous work was his demonstration that the Donation of Constantine, a document used by the popes, especially in the ninth and tenth centuries…to claim temporal sovereignty over all the west, was a forgery written in the eight century.”

2 Galatians 5:22-23a: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Judging by the fruits of one’s religious practice, I can’t understand how one could condemn the Dalai Lama or Gandhi or any non-Christian if the person in question manifested genuine “fruit.” [NIV]
3 Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, (St. Paul: West, 1991) 406: “By the fifteenth century, a consciousness of being humanists had emerged, especially evident in the career of Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457). Valla was brought up in Rome and educated in both Latin and Greek. Eventually, during the pontificate of Nicholas V (1447-1455), he achieved his chief ambition of becoming a papal secretary. It was Valla, above all others, who turned his attention to the philological and literary criticism of ancient texts. His most famous work was his demonstration that the Donation of Constantine, a document used by the popes, especially in the ninth and tenth centuries…to claim temporal sovereignty over all the west, was a forgery written in the eight century.”
Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the most significant reasons evangelical Christian faith is compelling to its adherents. Toward this end, extensive interview data was accumulated through personal interviews. The theoretical framework through which this data has been analyzed relies on the psychology of faith development. I’ve developed (in conjunction with my committee) questions for interview subjects that seek to unearth answers about how and why evangelical faith is compelling in the lived-experience of its adherents. Chapters two through six draw heavily upon the material from the interviews as the main source of evidence to support my conclusions. The last two chapters offer additional evidence pertaining to why evangelicals think and believe as they do.

My central claim is that evangelical Christians need a literal-factual orientation to theology and the Bible in order to make their spiritual life possible. Correct literal-factual beliefs about the Bible are the keys to what define an evangelical. While some evangelicals demonstrate a more rigid literalism than others, all show an effort to be in harmony with what they believe are the central tenets of their theology.

Without attempting to be comprehensive, I offer several explanations for why evangelical faith is compelling. First, evangelicalism is a way by which fact-oriented modern people can open themselves to the life-transforming power of God. Second, evangelicalism sees the activity of a caring God present everywhere. Through relationship with this God, evangelicals are able to more fully become themselves and live life. Further, by way of evangelicalism, what may seem like a mundane existence can take on new and exciting meaning. Finally, evangelicalism offers guidance and a way of understanding the world with purposeful certainty.
Chapter one defines key terms and explains the methodology utilized in this study. It explains how the interview subjects were chosen and my underlying assumptions going into the project. While I expected to find evangelical belief determined by experience, I discovered that evangelical beliefs were central and primary. Thus, evangelicals need some form of literal-factual orientation to the Bible and theology to open them up to the riches of the spiritual life.

Evangelicals fall on a continuum of two forms of literalism: natural and conscious. Natural literalism connotes a readiness to believe something as literally-factually true because there is no reason not to. This is usually applied to matters such as miracles in the Bible; for some, to believe in the literal-factuality of the parting of the Red Sea comes naturally. For others, it is difficult, but they will still adhere to a literalistic orientation. Conscious literalism is when people make an effort to believe something to be true (unlike the easy resonance with what “rings” true as found in natural literalism). The key to evangelical faith is a literal-factual orientation to the Bible and theology through which evangelicals understand God, life, and their experiences.

The following five chapters rely heavily on interview material. Chapter two showcases the importance of the evangelical literal-factual view of the Bible. Three examples illustrate the ways in which evangelicals embody both conscious and natural literalism in relation to the Bible and their theology. For many evangelicals, this belief in the inerrancy of scripture can take on rigid and narrow dimensions. However, for a few others, there are tensions within this literalism and emphases on the importance of textual meaning over whether something really happened. Even in these more thoughtful
approaches, there is still an appeal to literalism, but it becomes apparent that the
literalism may not be nearly as rigid or simplistic as it initially appears.

Unlike chapter two, which treats the Bible, chapter three demonstrates the
importance of a literal-factual theology for evangelicals. God is experienced as a lover
who cares about the beloved. Even though this is quite experiential, the explanation for
intimacy is couched in theological terminology. The relationship with God through Christ
produces joy, purpose, reduced fear, and a sense of community. While the results of such
a faith are indeed liberating, evangelicals also hold to such rigid beliefs that, at times, the
depth of life can be obscured. Evangelical correct belief exists in conjunction with, as
well as in tension with, the empowering life-experiences that follow from it.

Chapter four examines the exclusivity of evangelical Christian faith. Interview
materials show how powerfully and rigidly confident many evangelicals are in their
conclusions about salvation. Most assert that eternal life comes through Jesus alone and
even one like the Dalai Lama will be eternally damned for being a non-Christian. In
contrast to this view, the positions of four minority dissenting interview subjects will be
examined. While all evangelicals assert a literal-factual set of beliefs about the Bible and
theology, these four illustrate that there are evangelicals whose beliefs are in tension with
the more rigid and exclusive views of the majority.

Chapter five shows the nourishing benefit of evangelical faith that follows after
giving assent to the literal-factual theology. Interview subjects tell of being liberated from
eating disorders, painful self-preoccupations, and fears. Evangelical faith works in day-
to-day experience. Prayers are answered, the world is structured and ordered, and
"objective" results unfold in accord with the explanations of their belief system.
Evangelical lives are changed: they are healed, given meaning and purpose, decentered from their egos to find their real selves in a divine other, and oriented toward God’s will for them through prayer and devotion. Consciously trusting in God results in God speaking God’s truths in the context of their experiences. Directly and consistently focusing upon God provides a hope and a coherence otherwise unrealized. An interpretive commentary on the Christian life will close the chapter by giving voice to the meaning of evangelical Christian faith.

Chapter six illustrates the insights from the previous chapter by focusing on a single case study. I spend extra time allowing this person to tell his stories; then, at the end, I will offer some analytical comment as to its significance. It will be shown that evangelical theology provides a healthy and positive personal orientation to life. However, there are limits to that theology. Evangelicals are so successful at personal devotion that they extrapolate from it to the broader geo-political world scene. It is in this broader application to the world at large that evangelical theology potentially breaks down.

Chapter seven identifies problems in evangelical thinking that lead to anti-intellectualism and the powerful projection of preconceived ideas upon reality. Many evangelicals adhere to a limited theology and are unaware of their own presuppositions or other perspectives that might lead to a more complex view of the world. Lack of historical awareness leads some evangelicals to disregard the complexity of Protestant biblical interpretation; other evangelicals are so entrenched within their theologies that they can’t see how their beliefs determine the meanings of their experiences. Views will
be presented to illustrate limitations to evangelical understandings surrounding the Bible and theology.

In chapter eight, I use psychological faith development theory to describe evangelical faith. These theories help identify evangelical thinking patterns that offer explanations for why they see life and God as they do. Evangelicals enter the transformational power of God through experiencing mythos as logos. Rational logos opens into imaginative mythos where evangelicals meet God within the framework of their beliefs.

Evangelical Christianity is compelling to its adherents for a number of reasons. A literal-factual approach to the Bible and theology resonates with evangelicals as moderns. Through this approach, evangelicals are able to access experiences that transform their lives in positive ways. However, evangelicalism also has its limitations, such as its rigid adherence to belief in the inerrancy of scripture and belief in exclusive salvation only through Jesus. Faith stage theory and the confusion of mythos and logos offer explanations for why and how evangelicals think and believe as they do.
Chapter One Method and Definitions

Interview Methodology

A significant portion of this thesis is based on materials gained through interviews with evangelical Christians. In conjunction with my thesis committee (primarily professors Marcus Borg and Chris Anderson), I produced the following questions to ask evangelicals.¹ My intent was to ascertain what really mattered the most to them. Knowing that there often is a disparity between what people believe and what they actually experience, I sought to discern the role of experience in evangelical faith. My assumption was that positive experience must lead to stronger faith. In past conversations with evangelicals, I’d observed an emphasis on belief and doctrine. I wanted to understand what fueled the passionate dedication to their beliefs. Underlying all the following questions was the central question of the thesis: why is evangelical faith compelling?

1. What led you to this way of being a Christian?
   a. How was your life before? How is it different now?
2. What sustains you in this faith?
   a. What do you receive?
3. What resistances (if any) to your faith or God have you experienced?
   a. Doubts? Dark night of the soul where God seemed absent?
   b. Other people?
4. What tensions (if any) do you experience with other ways of knowing?
   b. Have you met likeable, intelligent people – either from other religions or liberal Christians? If so, how do you understand them?
5. What do you fear? Powers – (God, Satan, Govt.)?
6. What do you rely on and trust? Powers – (God, govt., pastor, friends)?
7. With whom or what group do you share your most sacred and private hopes for your life and the lives of those you love?
9. How do you see the Bible?
10. What does it mean to be saved?
11. Have you ever encountered the devil or the demonic? What was it like?

After completing the first couple of interviews, I added the following two questions:

a. Can you crystallize into one sentence what is most important to you about your faith?

b. According to your faith, what happens to the Dalai Lama when he dies? Is he damned to hell for all eternity?

I did not always adhere rigidly to this format, as my intent was always to push for what seemed most central and important to a particular evangelical’s faith. As such, I often allowed the conversations to flow without trying to direct them too strictly. This proved effective; I believe many of the interview subjects identified important beliefs and stories that they otherwise might not have.

Each question was designed to solicit a specific type of answer. The first question explores the role of dramatic “born-again” conversion experiences and their frequency among evangelicals. Question two investigates why an evangelical continues to practice that form of faith. What do they get out of it? Question three asks whether depression or difficult experience plays a role in becoming an evangelical or produces doubts within evangelical faith. Question four looks for cognitive dissonance regarding other ways of ways of knowing (scientific or religious). Question five is open-ended, an effort to determine if the devil, hell, or divine judgment plays a motivating factor in being evangelical. Questions six and seven seek to understand the impact of the community upon evangelical faith. Question eight explores the effects of particular spiritual practices (prayer, meditation) as well as how evangelicals related with the God they claimed to be in a personal relationship with. Question nine asks if evangelicals affirm the inerrancy of scripture and if so, how they define it. Question ten measures the exclusivity of
evangelicalism. The additional question (b) seeks to solicit a more specific answer surrounding salvation, while eleven means to discover if evangelicals really take experience of the devil in daily life seriously. The other additional question (a) sought to locate as straightforwardly as possible what each felt most important about being an evangelical Christian.

I chose people according to those I knew to be evangelical Christians or those who were recommended by friends who were evangelical Christians. I interviewed nineteen men and women for durations of one and a half to three hours for a total of forty six hours and forty five minutes of taped interview material (which I later transcribed).

Unless noted otherwise, all interview data here is transcribed as close to literally accurate as possible. Sections in brackets indicated paraphrased material. All names have been changed and all interviews took place in Western Oregon. Church names and other details indicative of location have been altered for confidentiality. Ten subjects were of college age (no older than twenties) and nine subjects were over forty. Three others were interviewed, but they were disqualified for not being sufficiently evangelical and Protestant.²

By interviewing 19 people in Western Oregon, I can’t hope to generalize too broadly about evangelical Christians in the rest of that state much less the nation. Still, I think taking the time to conduct personal interviews in this way has netted me direct experiential data that leads to conclusions about why evangelicalism is compelling.

Terms and Definitions

For this study, “evangelical” connotes a Protestant Christian who ascribes to the necessity of belief in: Jesus as the son of God, Jesus’ atoning sacrifice for the sins of all
people as the key to individual salvation (going to heaven upon death as opposed to
going to the tortuous hell reserved for unbelievers), the miracles in the Bible as having
factually happened, the Bible as containing accounts that are all literally and factually
true (hence without error),\(^3\) the Bible as the Word of God and as expressive of God’s will
(hence authoritative for one’s life), the importance of sharing the gospel message of
salvation through Christ, and the second coming of Jesus as God’s judgment visited upon
the world. Hence, the key to a definition of evangelicalism is identifying correct beliefs,
the most important of which comprise believing that Jesus is God and that Jesus can
provide salvation through his vicarious atonement for the sins of humanity.

This study’s working definition of evangelical Christian is roughly synonymous
with similar definitions by scholars such as George Marsden, Karen Armstrong, and
Mark Noll. According to Marsden:

Roughly speaking, evangelicalism today includes any Christians traditional
enough to affirm the basic beliefs of the old nineteenth-century evangelical
consensus. The essential evangelical beliefs include (1) the Reformation doctrine
of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God’s saving
work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive
work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, and (5) the
importance of a spiritually transformed life.\(^4\)

Marsden adds that evangelicalism contains a wide variety of “striking diversities,” with
the result that “No one leader or set of spokespersons can begin to speak for the whole
movement.”\(^5\) Further, Marsden sees Christian fundamentalism as closely related to
evangelicalism. “A fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something.”
Moreover, “an American fundamentalist is an evangelical who is militant in opposition to
liberal theology in the churches or to changes in cultural values or mores, such as those
associated with ‘secular humanism.’”\(^6\) It is important to be aware that evangelicals and
fundamentalists share the same or similar beliefs by which they define themselves. However, fundamentalists are more aggressive in pushing those beliefs on others or fighting to defend them. For this project, given the overlap in shared belief, I did not try to discern whether a person is fundamentalist or evangelical. My hunch is that most of my interview subjects are evangelicals and a couple of them are fundamentalists.

In terms of organizational structure, Marsden indicates that both evangelicalism and fundamentalism are "religious movements." Thus:

Each of these movements, though only informally organized, is an identifiable set of groups and individuals with some common history and traits. So we may talk about each movement as a whole, as when we say fundamentalists are militant. At the same time, it is just as true that each of these movements is a coalition of submovements, which are sometimes strikingly diverse and do not always get along.\(^7\)

Marsden lists several of these movements, including many Baptists, Pentecostals, and some Presbyterians and Episcopalians.\(^8\) I interviewed both denominational as well as non-denominational Protestants.

Mark Noll defines an evangelical Christian slightly differently than Marsden, though their perspectives are fundamentally similar. Noll writes:

In one of the most useful general definitions of the phenomenon, the British historian David Bebbington has identified the key ingredients of evangelicalism as conversionism (an emphasis on the "new birth" as a life-changing religious experience), biblicism (a reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority), activism (a concern for sharing the faith), and crucicentrism (to focus on Christ's redeeming work on the cross).\(^9\)

I interviewed both kinds of evangelicals: those who did not have conversion experiences as well as those who did. I also interviewed those who took evangelism very seriously and those who downplayed it. All took the authoritative Bible seriously as well as the importance of believing in God's saving work through Jesus on the cross.
Karen Armstrong cites five crucial beliefs from the early twentieth century which define (then and now) many evangelical Christians:

In 1910, the Presbyterians of Princeton, who had formulated the doctrine of infallibility of Scripture, issued a list of five dogmas which they deemed essential: (1) the inerrancy of Scripture, (2) the Virgin Birth of Christ, (3) Christ's atonement for our sins on the cross, (4) his bodily resurrection, and (5) the objective reality of his miracles. (This last doctrine would later be replaced by the teachings of premillennialism.)

All three scholarly definitions agree on the authority of the Bible and the necessity of the vicarious atonement of Jesus, coupled with the importance of believing in it as a factual historical event. Marsden and Noll both emphasize the importance of a new life in Christ as well as the importance of spreading the gospel. Marsden and Armstrong agree on the factual reality of the miracles as recorded in Scripture.

There is a diversity of beliefs within the uniformity of evangelicalism. While not all the evangelicals I spoke with are premillennialists (who believe God's judgment will come soon, opening with the spiriting out of harm's way of true believers), most believe that Christ will come to judge the earth at some unknown time. Of people interviewed, Bart, Janet, Clark, and Jacob are the only four who are particularly intent (and in some cases almost enthused) about believing in a real second coming of Jesus in the near future. Six interview subjects are emphatic about the need to believe in a historical-factual bodily resurrection of Jesus in order to be a Christian: Wayne, Steve, Clark, Bart, Bruce, and Stuart. Steve and Clark even go so far as to assert that the bodily resurrection of Jesus validates every claim in the Bible.

I expected to find four things through doing the interviews but one of these expectations proved correct. First, I expected fellowship with other members of the
Christian community would reinforce evangelical faith convictions. While this is likely true in practice, not many interview subjects identified the support of their fellow Christians as having much if any significance. Second, I thought perhaps faith practices like singing at church, prayer, or Bible study would be highlighted by evangelicals as influencing their faith convictions. However, none of the evangelicals identified faith practices as making their faith compelling.

Third, I anticipated that evangelical confidence largely derived from the belief that the end-times are near. Given the popularity of the best-selling Left Behind series, I imagined many evangelicals were drawing comfort from a belief that God would soon spirit them to heaven out of a perilous world. Perhaps the human psyche could draw solace from living in an apocalyptic fantasy world; hence, through the promise of “real” fantasy, evangelical Christians were motivated to be faithful via these stories. However, only four mentioned the end-times and none did so in dramatic or powerful ways. The Rapture and God’s judgment does not seem to have a very controlling influence over the minds of evangelicals.

Fourth, my underlying assumption was that even though evangelicals emphasize belief, the source of their faith must be lived experience of God. Evangelical faith would be made compelling by their perceptions of God as real and active in their experience. I figured this had to be the case because certain beliefs (such as regarding miraculous events in the Bible) simply don’t make sense in this day and age. Dramatic supernatural events like the parting of the Red Sea or walking on water or God blasting Sodom and Gomorrah into oblivion just don’t happen. Hence, evangelicals must be unconscious of the power of their experiences, so they spoke about them via belief. Or so I thought.
The key factor for all interviewed was a literal-factual orientation in beliefs about the Bible and theology. Contrary to my expectation, it was precisely the seeing of Christian theology in a literal-factual way that opened Christianity up for the evangelicals. Thus, “the way in” for evangelical Christians to experience the life-changing power of God was through assent to a literal-factual belief in the Bible and, even more importantly, an assent to a literal-factual belief in evangelical Christian theology.¹⁴ Truth must be factual in order to be credible.¹⁵ Because of all/nothing thinking, some of the biblical record cannot be thrown out – it’s all or nothing.¹⁶ Evangelicals know on some level their “way in” to relationship with and experience of God is through their all/nothing literal-factual theology and view of Scripture; hence, they resist rejecting a literal-factual belief in the events of the past. As such, evangelical Christians fall along a continuum of stronger to weaker literalistic-factual belief, demonstrating a combination of natural and conscious literalism.

Because of their literal-factual theology, evangelicals must acknowledge that God intervenes dramatically in human history. Hence, to view the God of the Bible as able to intervene dramatically in history is to view God as capable of doing so now. If God parted the Red sea then, God can part the Red sea now. On some level, evangelicals know that this belief contradicts today’s knowledge of what is possible, but evangelicals choose to see events in the past as unique while also affirming that if God wanted to, God could part the Red sea again. For the evangelical, the fact that nothing like the Red Sea parting has ever happened is secondary to the trust the evangelical places in God. For them, God is God: all-powerful and able to do anything.
Having observed a pattern to evangelical conversion in the interviews, I offer a broad summary of the process:

1. Making a decision to believe in the Bible understood literally and factually through a literal-factual evangelical Christian theology. This can be done at almost any age.
2. Taking a “step of faith.” This is the conscious effort to give oneself and one’s life to Jesus as God while committing oneself to correct theological belief. Often, this results in freedom or a life-transformation. Also, this can be characterized by realizing in a new, deep, powerful way the “meaning” of evangelical theology and what Jesus did.
3. Seeing one’s experience through the lens of literal-factual belief (scripture and theology) confirming its meaning in an evangelical framework.\(^{17}\)
4. Seeing belief about God, theology, and the Bible confirmed and reinforced by one’s experience. It’s possible for there to be an ebb and flow in faith conviction after the initial conversion – in that case, up to the whole process may, to a degree, repeat itself.

For some, this conversion process involved immediately assenting to “correct belief” (such as the necessity of salvation exclusively through Jesus Christ). For others, it took an exposure to correct belief that was subsequently made “real” by experience. In both cases, experience is important for conversion, but only insofar as it confirms and validates the belief system through which the evangelical sees the world and God.

Not everyone fits into all four categories. Numbers one and two treat the initial process of conversion and three and four describe what happens afterwards. When one has been a believer all his/her life there is no need for a defining moment in which one surrenders to God through Christ while committing to correct belief. For that person, categories one, three, and four will apply.

Three main patterns described the faith-lives of those I interviewed. The first involves those who became Christians from age four through their teen-age years and have been solidly Christian ever since (Richard, Mark). The second group contains those
who become a Christian through a "born-again" experience, whether dramatic or mundane (Wayne, Rebekah). The third type are a subset of the first two: after having become a Christian, they experience an ebb and flow process of being close to God and then falling away (Pam, Martin).

Evangelicalism is a form of Christianity adhered to by those who hold strong beliefs about God and the role of Christ as the redeemer of humanity. Evangelicals emphasize the importance of correct belief in order to obtain salvation. Their belief system is powerful and deeply held, comprehensively determining their perceptions of what is real. The "way in" to a life with God for evangelicals is through a literal-factual belief system comprising a theology that utilizes the Bible for support. Understanding the Bible as literal and factual leads evangelicals to believe God intervened dramatically in the past and as such, can and will likely do so in the future. Once evangelicals have given intellectual assent to correct beliefs, they open themselves up to a life-giving relationship with God.

\[\text{Questions 5., 6., and 7., were derived from James Fowler's Stages of Faith, page 3, at the suggestion of Chris Anderson.}\]

\[\text{I interviewed and rejected three very nice and interesting people who just didn't fit what I was looking for. One was a very interesting young woman who had a born-again experience. She claimed to have experienced Jesus Christ as her personal savior in a way that changed her life for the better. Instead of endlessly questioning her faith as before, she felt she had found her home and way in Christianity. Having been referred to me by Rebekah and Gail, I anticipated this young woman would be perfect. However, we spoke for an hour and a half, after which I realized that this woman didn't quite fit the bill of an evangelical Protestant Christian. For one thing, even as she spoke of her conversion from a vague, seeking spirituality to Christianity with language reminiscent of an evangelical Protestant Christianity, it became quite clear she had a much more nuanced orientation than my other interview subjects. For instance, she was not sure about heaven or hell or the necessity of salvation through believing in Christ. While this woman had found a clarity that previously alluded her, she still felt God was ultimately beyond our concepts and hence, God}\]
was a mystery. Thus, she didn’t demonstrate the clarity or certainty I was looking for in my interview subjects. Further, the spiritual book that she found most helpful to her own experience was Christian Zen by William Johnston, a Roman Catholic Priest and Zen Buddhist meditation practitioner (hardly a book I’d expect to find on many evangelical Protestant Christian bookshelves). Lastly, this woman attended Roman Catholic mass as her church of choice, having rejected the non-denominational Protestant church her friends attended. So, while I very much enjoyed the interview, I concluded this woman would not be a very representative sample. The second person I interviewed was a very thoughtful and very earnestly spiritual woman who had attended a Baptist college and tended to see the Bible as a literal-factual account of what actually happened as well as containing rich metaphorical resonances of meaning. However, after our three hour conversation, it became clear that the God this woman was devoted to was much more mysterious than concrete. Further, she was making a shift from her evangelical Protestant Christian roots to begin the process of conversion to Roman Catholicism. As such, I think I caught her when her faith was very much in a state of flux and that flux was moving her away from evangelical Protestant Christianity to the Christianity of Roman Catholicism. In the third case, the man I interviewed was very thoughtful with a rich and varied background, having worked as an ambulance driver and EMT in Oakland, California. We had an enjoyable three hour conversation. However, this man was a Roman Catholic, and I discovered his beliefs, while rigid and certain, were rigid and certain about Catholic dogmas, not Protestant ones. For instance, he felt the activity of the Roman Catholic mass was necessary for salvation. Hence, every gesture and every word had supernatural significance. Behind the activities of the priest on the altar, angels and demons were battling in a spiritual otherworld. To not kneel at the right time or to have lay people administer the Eucharist could tip the balance in favor of the Satanic enemy. So, while the man’s thinking patterns struck me as similar in some ways to the rigidity with which some evangelical Protestant Christians held to their beliefs, the man’s beliefs were so Roman Catholic in character they were not representative.

Borg ix, 16. Borg identifies the literal-factual approach to the Scripture as being one prominent way of seeing the Bible and treats variations of it throughout the book. To interpret the Bible literally means roughly that the Bible means exactly what the words indicated. To interpret it factually is to say that the events depicted therein really happened as the Bible say it does. Thus, those events must have happened in an empirical way to be seen as true. As Borg indicates, we moderns tend to identify “truth with factuality;” hence, “if a statement isn’t scientifically or historically factual, it isn’t true.” For “fundamentalists and liberals alike,” “facts are what matter.”

George M. Marsden, Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 4-5.
Marsden 5-6.
Marsden 1.
Marsden 1-2.
Marsden 5.
Mark A. Noll, The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 8. Noll continues: “But these evangelical impulses have never by themselves yielded cohesive, institutionally compact, easily definable, well-coordinated, or clearly demarcated groups of Christians. Rather, the history of these evangelical impulses has always been marked by shifts in which groups, leaders, institutions, goals, concerns, opponents, and aspirations become more or less visible and more or less influential over time. Institutions that may emphasize evangelical distinctives at one point in time may not do so at another. Yet there have always been denominations, local congregations, and voluntary bodies that served as institutional manifestations of these impulses.”

James Davison Hunter, Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987) 19: “Theology has long occupied a central place within Protestant culture, perhaps the central place. The Protestant Reformation was, at the heart, a theological protest, which reverberated throughout northern European culture in the sixteenth century and thereafter. The Reformation established a precedent, for since that time the articulation and rearticulation of the substance of Protestant belief (as opposed to defining religious and moral authority [Catholicism], achieving particular spiritual experiences [Hinduism and Buddhism], or maintaining the cohesion of the religious community [Judaism]) has been the paramount task of the Protestant community. Protestantism’s emphasis on belief is unusual in this regard. It seeks to
distinguish itself – indeed, it achieves its very identity – principally through the substance of its theological tenets.

Evangelicalism shares with the larger Protestant phenomenon a fixation with theology. Yet its concern is far more intense. Not only do Evangelicals distinguish themselves from other religions this way, but they distinguish themselves from liberal Protestantism this way as well. Orthodoxy, strictly speaking, is a theological matter, not a moral or ritual matter as it is for some other faiths. Indeed, the history of conservative Protestantism in twentieth-century America has, in large measure, been the history of the effort to maintain the purity and integrity of its theology. Notably, the pursuit of doctrinal integrity has consumed not only theologians and ministers but the vast numbers of those ordinary people calling themselves Evangelicals or Fundamentalists.

The issue here (and one common to all orthodoxies) is the issue of boundaries, the theological criteria determining the range and the limits of acceptability. Such criteria provide a test for group membership: those who adhere belong; those who do not adhere entirely or on particular points do not belong." So, to be an evangelical Christian in most cases hinges upon correct belief. If one believes the wrong things or doesn’t believe the right ones, he or she will not be able to “belong” within a particular evangelical church. This is another salient aspect of the importance of evangelical belief – it determines identity as well as who is allowed in and who is kept out.

Karen Armstrong, The Battle for God, (New York: Knopf, 2000) 171. Re: Premillennialism, Armstrong asserts (pp.137-139) that premillennialism “envisaged Christ returning to earth before he established his thousand-year reign.” Armstrong indicates a strong popularizer of premillennialism who preached it in America in the 19th century was John Darby. Similar beliefs abound today. According to Armstrong: “Darby did not search for mystical meaning in the Bible, which he saw as a document that told the literal truth. The prophets and the author of the Book of Revelation were not speaking symbolically but making precise predictions which would shortly come to pass exactly as they had foretold. The old myths were now seen as factual logos, the only form of truth that many modern Western people could recognize. Darby divided the whole of salvation history into seven epochs or “dispensations,” a scheme derived from a careful reading of scripture. Each dispensation, he explained, had been brought to an end when human beings became so wicked that God was forced to punish them. The previous dispensations had ended with such catastrophes as the Fall, the Flood, and the crucifixion of Christ. Human beings were currently living in the sixth, or penultimate, dispensation, which God would shortly bring to an end in an unprecedentedly terrible disaster. Antichrist, the false redeemer whose coming before the End had been predicted by St. Paul, would deceive the world with his false allure, take everybody in, and then inflict a period of Tribulation upon humanity. For seven years, Antichrist would wage war, massacre untold numbers of people, and persecute all opposition, but eventually Christ would descend to earth, defeat Antichrist, engage in a final battle with Satan and the forces of evil on the plain of Armageddon outside Jerusalem, and inaugurate the Seventh Dispensation. He would rule for a thousand years, before the Last Judgment brought history to a close. This was a religious version of the future-war fantasy of Europe. It saw true progress as inseparable from conflict and near-total destruction. Despite its dream of divine redemption and millennial bliss, it was a nihilistic vision expressive of the modern death wish. Christians imagined the final extinction of modern society in obsessive detail, yearning morbidly toward it.” The “elect would be spared, yanked by God out of the path of judgment in the “Rapture.”

Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days, (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1995) 16. Left Behind opens with the Rapture. The saved are miraculously spirited away from wherever they, transported to safety while those who remain await a terrible fate. An upset stewardess on an in-flight airliner tells a crewmember, “Ray! Their shoes, their socks, their clothes, everything was left behind.

Armstrong 139: “Darby provided the elect a way out. On the basis of a chance remark of St. Paul’s, who believed that Christians alive at the time of Christ’s Second Coming would be ‘taken up in the clouds... to meet the Lord in the air,’ Darby maintained that just before the beginning of the Tribulation, there would be a ‘Rapture,’ a snatching up of born-again Christians, who would be taken up to heaven and so would escape the terrible sufferings of the Last Days. Rapture has been imagined in concrete, literal detail by premillennialists. They are convinced that suddenly airplanes, cars, and trains will crash, as born-again pilots and drivers are caught up into the air while their vehicles careen out of control. The stock market will
plummet, and governments will fall. Those left behind will realize that they are doomed and that the true believers have been right all along. Not only will these unhappy people have to endure the Tribulation, they will know that they are destined for eternal damnation. Premillennialism was a fantasy of revenge: the elect imagined themselves gazing down upon the sufferings of those who had jeered at their beliefs, ignored, ridiculed, and marginalized their faith, and now, too late, realized their error. A popular picture found in the homes of many Protestant fundamentalists today shows a man cutting the grass outside his house, gazing in astonishment as his born-again wife is raptured out of an upstairs window. Like many concrete depictions of mythical events, the scene looks a little absurd, but the reality it purports to present is cruel, divisive, and tragic.” One area of disagreement here with Armstrong: she asserts that the picture of the woman being “raptured” is “absurd” and “tragic.” She’s correct in part, but in part it seems she fails to appreciate the power of the literal-factual myth upon the psyche. How is such a picture different from a movie like Star Wars or The Fellowship of the Ring? Both of those movies embody truths: mystical forces of destiny, both good and evil, calling participants to undertake a task of great significance beyond what seems possible while embodying such virtues as courage, loyalty, and honor. To see the Rapture literally is absurd. Yet, just as Star Wars and The Fellowship of the Ring can speak truths about human nature if experienced as literal in a movie theater, so too can evangelical notions of the Rapture: God is going to take care of the believer, whatever happens. And, the story is all worked out. God is in control. Those meanings resonate with the evangelical Christian from the literalized myth just as the meanings of classic fantasy and science fiction resonate with the rest of us. When I was watching the Fellowship of the Ring last night (8/6/02) with some friends and fantasy/Tolkien buffs, they weren’t experiencing that movie as anything but literally and factually. The was an enthusiastic attention to the concrete details of middle earth and the various characters. One fellow kept explaining middle-earth lore to a Tolkien novice in a such a literal-factual way, I thought I might look outside the apartment and see black riders or elves in the parking lot. Perhaps, this has to do with 21st century Americans being modern people conditioned by literal-factual ways of seeing truth.

14 Borg 31. Borg defines the Bible as “a sacrament of the sacred….Central to the definition of ‘sacrament’ in this particular sense is that something that is sacramental is ‘a means of grace.’ The word ‘sacrament’ also has a broader meaning. In the study of religion, a sacrament is commonly defined as a mediator of the sacred, a vehicle by which God becomes present, a means through which the Spirit is experienced.”

15 Borg 16.

16 Borg 61: Borg explains that when he was a teenager, he struggled with the problem of calling one part of the Bible or theology into question. If he did so, what would happen to the rest? Evangelicals reflect Borg’s concerns, seeing the Bible in an all-nothing way. If you call into question some of it, you might as well call into question all of it because if one part is false it all may be false. It’s not just an intellectual decision – it’s deeply felt. Much is “at stake.” Borg writes: “So I began to take seriously the likelihood that Adam and Eve had not been real people. But if that likelihood turned out to be true, what were we to make of the story of the first sin, commonly called ‘the fall,’ in the Garden of Eden? If ‘the fall’ was not historical, how (I wondered would this affect the Christian story of universal sin, our need for redemption, and Jesus’ death as the necessary sacrifice? Something more seemed to be at stake in the historical factuality of Adam and Eve and ‘the fall’ than was involved in lengthening the six days of creation to geological epochs. Resolving these questions was a major theological problem for me. As I wrestled with it, the foundations of my religious understanding began to shake. If the story of Adam and Eve was not ‘true’ (as a modern teenager, I thought of truth as that which was factual), what happened to the truth of the Bible and Christianity as a whole?”

17 Borg 3. Borg writes: “Reading and seeing go together. On the one hand, what we read can affect how we see. On the other hand, and more important for my immediate purpose, how we see affects how we read. What we bring to our reading of a text or document affects how we read it. All of us, whether we use reading glasses or not, read through lenses.”
Chapter Two Belief: The Bible and Faith

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how evangelical Christians see the Bible in a literal-factual way as the foundation of their faith. This is their “way in” to being open to the power of God in their lives. Evangelicals need a literal-factual understanding of the Bible or the God of Christianity is closed to them. While this applies to the majority of evangelicals, some, even though they espouse belief in an inerrant scripture, will qualify their understanding in ways that call into question a literal-factual understanding of all scripture. However, all the evangelicals interviewed believe a substantial portion of the Bible to be literally and factually true. This chapter will begin with striking examples of this necessity for a literal-factual belief orientation in evangelicals. Later, two notable exceptions will be identified.

When Stuart, a 58 year-old English professor, was asked what led him to be an evangelical Christian, he explained that he had grown up in Christian home. Even so, during his freshman year in college, Stuart reached a point where he had to decide if he really believed in Christianity.

So, I’m reading this educated physician [Luke] who says to Theophilus, I’ve talked to eyewitnesses and this is what I’ve found out. These are the stories that I’ve heard. And he puts them all down. And I thought well, this guy doesn’t sound like a superstitious nut... He’s not some kind of zealot. Doesn’t sound like he’s making up big stories here. And they’re stories that are pretty hard to...get pretty outrageous. But he says, I talked to people who saw them. So, I’ve got some choices. Either I can say, well I don’t think he did. Or, he was really careless in his interviews. It sounds like he’s saying I checked and cross-checked these stories and this is what I’ve found out. I didn’t know how to get around that. So my conclusion eventually was, these are pretty unusual stories, but sounds to me like they must have happened. And, if they did, that leaves me with certain conclusions and obligations. For me, it was, let’s go back to the beginning and let’s look at this narrative here and I have to decide what I think about this. Now it didn’t seem reasonable to me that the guy was lying or making up tall tales. Didn’t sound like that kind of guy.
For Stuart, something is not true unless it factually happened just as Luke records it did. It’s not clear that Stuart realizes that he is deciding what he will subjectively believe and not establishing an empirical fact. He already has a picture of what all this means; now he’s simply looking to see if the “data” will fit his “evidence.” Stuart’s confidence in what he’s found shows the powerful influence of his presuppositions. By not weighing additional evidence, Stuart strives to reach a literal-factual conclusions about the events in the Bible so his faith will be compelling.

Stuart’s approach to the Bible embodies both conscious and natural literalism. He demonstrates natural literalism in reading the Bible and deciding it rings true in a literal-factual way. As a modern person, he is used to perceiving information as truth when it’s factual. Stuart hears Luke’s account as a straightforward journalistic narrative of something that happened just as is recorded. However, there is a subtle conscious literalism at work here as well. Stuart is not concerned with research across disciplines of biblical scholarship to ascertain the correctness of his conclusions. He says nothing about other scholars or the possibility that there could be competing explanations for what happened that lie beyond the surface of the text itself. Nor does Stuart mention the possibility of metaphorical interpretation of what the text might mean in terms of the God’s relationship with humankind. It requires effort to read admittedly “outrageous” stories and decide with no other independent verification or qualification that they must be literally and factually true.

Like Stuart, Wayne, a 61 year-old retired forester, had to decide whether the Christian faith was literally and factually true. Until Wayne did so, he was unable to experience the life-giving quality of his faith. He asserts:
The pastor of the church taught a class on baptism and Wayne said to him, "I'm not sure I can honestly believe that this is all true." The pastor said, "I'll tell you what - I've got a book for you, why don't you take it and read it." The pastor gave Wayne the book *Know Why You Believe* by Paul Little - which answers questions about the Bible and Christianity according to an evangelical perspective. It was like something was blocking me from saying Christ is my Lord and savior. I couldn't really say that this is true. I started to read this book, and I don't know what answers and what questions there were, but all of a sudden, I was just overwhelmed by the knowledge that it was true, and I started to weep. It just hit me. The tears were shooting out of my eyes. I sat and I read through the whole book and I knew it was true. And I made the determination that I was going to tell [the pastor] that I wanted to make a public profession of faith and accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and be baptized. I told him that on Sunday and then on Monday we went out to [the park and were baptized in the river one by one]. The river was high and the water was cold, but it was a significant event. And I just felt a great peace about the whole thing.

Wayne faces an intellectual barrier to fully becoming a Christian but once that is surmounted, he has a powerful and moving emotional experience culminating in a "great peace." Thus, Wayne assents to the literal-factual truth of a particular form of Christian theology and its concomitant use of the Bible to support its claims. It's "true," he concludes, as confident as if he'd empirically proven it to be true or observed its factual occurrence. He's found "the truth." From that point on, he can accept Jesus as his savior and begin his life as an evangelical Christian.

All of the same elements at work with Stuart are in place with Wayne. For something to be true, it must be factual. There seems to be both a natural and conscious literalism at work. Wayne has not read scholars of religion who might have a different perspective from his own. Rather, he's studying friendly evangelical apologetics to ascertain the intellectual acceptability of his faith. It's as though he is deliberately trying to find some way to persuade himself to accept it rather than question and understand it in a thoroughgoing manner which indicates a subtle conscious literalism. And yet, there is a natural literalism at work for Wayne too. He resonates with these "facts" as though he'd
observed them himself; they resonate with him as true. Like Stuart, Wayne has read an account and decided to believe it as literal-factual truth, a subjective decision and not factually the establishment of anything other than a belief. Even though most evangelicals emphasize “facts,” what they often mean are subjective beliefs, however earnestly held. The difference between Stuart and Wayne is that Wayne has read a work of apologetics overtly informed by evangelical theology and its perspective of the Bible; Stuart has actually read an account in the Bible but has viewed it through the unconscious application of a theological lens that has determined his reading of its meaning.

Like Wayne and Stuart, Bruce sets out to establish whether the Bible and Christianity are literally and factually true. Bruce, a 22 year-old biochemistry/biophysics and chemistry major, is clear that Christianity is not based on experience but on correct belief. He asserts:

I would say the intellectual comes first. That is, in my experience I wasn’t saved because I had an experience with God. I don’t believe in Christianity because I had a relationship with God – it’s because of all the intellectual things behind it that cause me to believe in it.

This is key. First comes assent to the literal-factual claims of evangelicalism; then comes the life-giving faith and relationship with God through Christ. The difference between Bruce and the others is that Bruce takes his analysis one step further, concluding that if Christian theology and the Bible are not literally-factually true, they must be cast aside.

Here is some of my exchange with Bruce:

If I was to believe Christianity, its claims about history had to be just as valid as its claims about theology. Because if it was a purely experiential thing, there was no real differentiation between any other religion. That it had to be something that is true apart from individual experience or thought because that’s what it claimed to be. Otherwise it was really just a nice mythology, a pleasant way to look at the world, but it wasn’t any more valid than anything else in the world.
Q: So it couldn’t be just a subjective perception about the way the world works? It had to be grounded in historical-factual events?

Exactly.

And the reason I say that is because all of Christianity and especially the Bible, which is what I really base my beliefs on, I hope, claims that it’s historical – claim it is based on history. Paul even says, if Jesus didn’t raise from the dead, then our faith is hopeless. And so Christianity itself recognizes that if it’s not grounded in history, then it’s a foolish religion and we should be the first ones to throw it out the window if it’s proven to be untrue. I actually said to myself – if the evidence points to the Bible being inaccurate or purely a human document, the result of social and cultural influences rather than the divine Word of God, then I will reject it. I will throw it out the window.

Hence, Bruce is quite clear about the necessity for a literal-factual understanding of theology and the Bible or his faith will fall apart. He has a driving need for certainty even if it’s a certainty he must create for himself. Bruce’s evangelical theology is deeply ingrained and he appears unaware of how it determines his view of the Bible. He speaks as though he is referring to the Bible alone when in fact it’s the Bible seen through his theology. Thus, Bruce believes his theology when it says the Bible must be purely a divine product independent of other conditioning. What purports to be inductive reasoning is actually assenting to the prescriptions of a literal-factual theology. Bruce so closely identifies the Bible with his theology that he is unaware of the relationship between the two.

Stuart, Wayne, and Bruce are quite clear about the decision to adopt literal-factual beliefs about Christian theology and the Bible in order for them to be Christians. A 66 year-old professor, Richard echoes their insistence in our exchange:

Q: What do you mean by the Bible was true?

That the stories told in the bible are literally true. They actually happened. The other thing is that whatever is commanded in the Scripture, it is God that is commanding it. It’s not somebody’s imagination coming up with some kind of religious concepts
that people should follow if they are going to be a good Jew or good Christian. God superintended the writers of Scripture so that what they said was what God intended to be said.

Q: You feel pretty much the same way about it [today as when you were younger]?

Did I change in my understanding of some things? I'd say yes. Did I ever change in my beliefs regarding the Bible? I haven't changed since I was 16.

Remarkably, Richard has held the same beliefs about the Bible (and the theology that unconsciously determines its meaning for him) since age 16. Interestingly, Richard said he studied the "higher criticism" of the Bible but that only "confirmed" his assumptions as true instead of causing him to question them. This is likely because he felt drawn to Christianity and realized on some level, like Bruce, that to embrace a liberal approach to his faith (such as seeing the Bible as a human construction not directly from God) would call the credibility of his faith into question. That is one possible explanation for Richard's maintenance of a solid literal-factual belief system that is founded at age sixteen and continued in very similar form for fifty years.

When I asked twenty-one year-old ministry student Pam what she thought of the Bible, she responded, "I believe that the original Word of God is perfect. Part of it is the case that God knows people's hearts who are translating this and seeking to make it as good as possible for people." Pam trusts the Bible because she trusts the God who speaks through it. The Bible is perfect because God is perfect. God seeks to bring things to God’s people and will work through their hearts.

Jacob indicates a similarly trusting perspective:

Q: Regarding the Bible, how would you describe it?

Inerrant. There's no mistakes in what is said there....

Q: So there’s no contradictions, no mistakes?
I think there are seeming contradictions. But, I don't think there are real contradictions. … Trying to understand doesn't mean I don't believe it.

Q: You trust that it's true even if you don't get it?
Yeah. Exactly.

Q: And it's true – factually true?
Like Noah being eaten by the whale, the big fish. I don't know how it happened, but it happened.

Q: You mean Jonah.


Q: That's right, one of those “ah”-s.

Even if Jacob doesn't understand something, he still moves to trust in the God who stands behind the Bible. To trust in the Bible for Jacob is like trusting in the will of God.

My conversation with Clark was similar to the one with Jacob. A 24 year-old ministry school student, Clark is confident in the literal-factuality of the Bible.

Q: How do you see the Bible?

I think the Bible is inerrant. That means, without error.

Q: So there's no mistakes?
No.

Q: Everything it says is true?
Right.

Q: Scientifically and otherwise?
Sure.

This is where it comes into the language. In Joshua, it says the sun stands still. You have to understand what that means?
Q: What does it mean?

It's us saying the sun sets. The sun never moves. The earth moves. We use these terms – analogies or metaphors....

Jesus Christ fulfilled 300 Old Testament prophecies. From where he would be born to how he would die, to the fact that none of his bones would be broken [in Isaiah].

99.9% of scholars conclude Isaiah was written 400 years before Jesus was even born [through looking at papyri and carbon dating].

Q: So Isaiah accurately predicted Jesus?

Right. How'd he do that?

I believe the Bible is God's word. I believe it's without error, and I can back that up to show you, obviously not tonight. The contradictions... I believe it's inspired by the Holy Spirit. I believe that what it talks about in Revelation is going to happen.

Belief is powerful. Clark states what he believes as though that is accomplishing something. And it is. It's keeping him connected to his evangelical faith and through that, to God.

Rebekah, a 20 year-old Spanish major, is quite direct: "God wrote the Bible. He's not lying. So, believe what God says [in the Bible] or reject it all." 19 year-old ministry school student Jamie is equally emphatic:

Q: And you said literal... and that means if it says something like a person is over 900 years old or the Red Sea parts or something – you take that stuff –?

It says God created the world in six days. He meant six days.

61 year-old Janet concludes that, "I have no qualms about what I believe at all. I don’t have any questions about anything else. The Bible is the inerrant Word of God."

43 year-old sociology professor Jane shows some confusion about the Bible, allowing that some Bible stories can be reports from a violent, primitive tribal community and not the directions of God. Thus, while the “Bible is the story of salvation history, the
unfolding of God’s interaction with the world, I’m not as closely tied to lifting particular stories out. To me the whole thing is what’s important.” Jane then indicates that a “rape story” in Genesis for her “doesn’t have anything to do with God.” While the Bible is inerrant and infallible, “the Word of God,” inerrancy, she explains, refers to “the original autographs, the original documents” in which “there was no error.” Thus, Jane doesn’t see the Bible of today as without any mistakes; rather, it is without mistakes in the original documents and in its overall telling of stories.

According to Jane, an “infallible” Bible means:

[There is] no error in the truth of the story that is being told and it will not lead you into fallacy. The evangelical camp plays fast and loose with those words and I think they are used to the abuse of the stories in many ways. If you read the story and you understand it’s an ancient culture in which some new news is being unfolded, [you’ll see that] a lot of the story is simply the story – the history of these people. Same as the letters of Paul – written to particular churches in problematic kinds of situations.

Jane demonstrates one of the more nuanced perspectives surrounding the Bible of all the evangelicals I interviewed. Jane explains she can take from the Bible its meaning without having to accept its stories as literal-factual reports. Unlike Bruce and Stuart, Jane is content to seek the “point” of Genesis:

So, when I pick up the Bible I say this is the Word of God, and I think at some level it’s all the Word of God, it’s inerrant somehow, but that doesn’t mean that I interpret it literally as a 7 day creation. I don’t really care – whatever, doesn’t matter, not a relevant question to me. The point of the Genesis accounts is that there is a creator and the world is an orderly place. We can know it, and we’re supposed to be in this place. I think it’s inerrant, though some of my Baptist friends would quibble with me over that.

Jane seems to indicate that the Bible contains stories that are factually accurate as well as stories that are not literally true but convey an overall message.
And yet, regarding the divinely instigated mass murder in Joshua, Jane seems compelled to take it literally and factually. I asked her about God’s divine command in Joshua to kill everyone – men, women, and children. Jane responded:

[The account in Joshua is inerrant because it’s factual, someone wrote it down. It gets at something that happened.]

[Regarding God], that story [rape story in Genesis] doesn’t point to God at all. With Joshua, it’s a whole different kettle of fish – it’s God reaching into history and saying, time is up and part of my plan for you is removal of them. Our sense – genocide is not right, but a sense of holiness of God… I often default into not understanding it. If I could understand what holiness was about – then I could understand how God could say, the corruption of the people in this land… and there are some things that are worse than death. Injustice, personal corruption, is worth that death, so death is the ending of something that is horrific. In those cultures there is suggestion of child sacrifice practice going on… I have to say, because I don’t know how else to get around it – God is holy. I’m pretty sure I don’t understand what that means and a sense people’s behavior comes to a point where the elimination of their lives is not the worst thing that can happen – the persistence of that injustice, unrighteousness – there is a sense that it’s full, enough. Same issue as with the flood. A sense there is some wickedness and corruption, and it’s worse that it go on. Don’t you ever look at the world and say, how long can this injustice go on, how long can this horrific thing continue without someone saying it’s enough?

Jane can bracket God out of any connection to the rape story she dislikes in Genesis while also justifying why God would order the murder of men, women, and children. One heinous act (rape) calls into question the inerrancy of Scripture while another (mass murder) deserves to be justified and explained away.

[The question of genocide] comes back to how adequately can I understand the depth of the moral implications of this behavior. Does my sense of this is awful – this annihilation of this people group – is that so awful because I don’t have a deep enough sense of right/morality that I would be able to feel … life and death… what else can happen to you than to have you die. In my ability to understand the world, I’m putting too much emphasis on death as the worse thing that can happen and I’m not adequately appreciating the implications of moral behavior. What evil is.

It’s hard to tell when to take another life – Iraq, Kuwait – are complicated, though Hitler’s Germany is an example [of] when the world says it is enough – these people should be killed in war or surrender rather than have this continue. The things that
give me hope – is outrage when I see this happening that shouldn’t, so if my inadequate sense of morals/truth/and goodness – if I can generate that kind of “stop it, stop it, stop it” – certainly I can understand that God understands it more thoroughly and says – enough, the end. Death is not the worse thing that can happen in the world.

The account from Jane is laden with tension. Articulating deeply held beliefs is not always easy. Jane takes God seriously, tries to justify the literal-factual accounts in Joshua and Genesis where God either orders mass murder or actively commits it, and wrestles with the ethics of war today. Regarding Joshua, Jane exercises conscious literalism in her effortful explanation about how God can be righteous while committing genocide. She is wrestling with the notion that genocide is wrong, but that God is always right; thus, there must be something so wrong that warrants genocide as a judicious response. Jane’s adherence to belief in a just yet genocidal God suggests something at stake compels her to hold onto her literal-factual view of the Bible. Jane must see the Bible in a literal-factual way in order for God and her faith to be meaningful to her.

Brian, a 48 year-old engineering professor, struggles with conscious literalism. In his more complicated orientation to the Bible, Brian (like Jane) is unlike most of those I interviewed. He does not automatically fall into conscious literalism, forcing a literal-factual orientation as true. Instead, Brian seems open to asking the question of a biblical text – what does this mean? While Brian can reject a literal-factual Old Testament, he does adhere to a literal-factual understanding of the activities of Jesus.

Q: What about something like the Book of Jonah? How would you understand something like that? Would you take that literally, or would you take that metaphorically?

That’s sort of like the flood. Perhaps, could have happened. I think what’s more important is that it’s a story of a man who ran away from God and got into big trouble, but was given a second chance.
Q: So, it’s more the meaning — “what does this mean?” — not whether he was really in the belly of the fish? The plant grew up and then died. Animals put on the sackcloth to repent as well as the people. It isn’t so much whether all that stuff factually happened or not —

No.

Q: But it’s what does this mean?

What does it mean.

Q: But with Jesus, you’d probably take the miracles pretty literally?

Yes.

Q: The walking on the water. And the water turned into wine.

Right.

Q: Raising the dead.

[Yes]

Brian can let go of the literal-factuality of Jonah, but he can’t do so regarding the activity of Jesus. Jesus is too central to the heart of the Christian faith. One must believe on him to obtain eternal salvation. Still, Brian goes farther than most I spoke with who seemed much more constrained by a literal-factual reading of the Bible and theology.

A literal-factual belief system appears to be the “way in” to a life-giving faith for most evangelical Christians. All of the people I interviewed affirmed a belief in the inerrancy of scripture. Most understood this to be an affirmation of the literal-factuality of all scripture, though Jane and Brian proved two exceptions. Each was able to listen for the meaning of a text without having to identify that text as literally and factually true.

Indeed, Jane indicates she doesn’t care if the creation stories are true, implying that is beside the point. Brian identifies the same regarding Jonah. For Jane and Brian, meaning takes precedence over literal-factuality for some Bible texts. And yet, Jane takes the
Joshua story literally and factually, seeing God as the direct author of mass murder.

While Brian can dismiss the literal-factual truth of Jonah in favor of determining the story’s meaning, he still adheres to a literal-factual reading of Jesus’ miracles. This illustrates that even though some maintain diversity within evangelicalism, they still must hold to a normative stance on certain beliefs.

1 Joshua 6:21 [Battle of Jericho]: “They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it – men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.” Joshua 8:1-2: “Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land. You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king, except that you may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves. Set an ambush behind the city.” Joshua 8:21-25: “For when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that smoke was going up from the city, they turned around and attacked the men of Ai. The men of the ambush also came out of the city against them, so that they were caught in the middle, with Israelites on both sides. Israel cut them down, leaving them neither survivors nor fugitives. But they took the king of Ai alive and brought him to Joshua. When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the desert where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword, all the Israelites returned to Ai and killed those who were in it. Twelve thousand men and women fell that day – all the people of Ai.” [NIV]

2 Genesis 6:7: “So the Lord said, ‘I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth – men and animals and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air – for I am grieved that I have made them myself.”’ Cf. also Genesis 7:17-24[NIV]
Chapter Three Belief: Theology

This chapter will examine the theological structure of evangelical Christianity through interview material. Evangelical Christians believe a personal, intimate relationship with God through Jesus is available. To achieve this, people must first assent to belief in literal-factual evangelical theological abstractions such as the saving sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the world. While this theological language is abstract, evangelicals use it to articulate their deepest experiences. Assenting to the correctness of literal-factual evangelical theology opens evangelicals to a life-giving relationship with God through Christ that brings freedom from guilt, fear, and a negative self-concept.

48 year-old Brian, an engineering professor, explains salvation as understood by evangelical theology. Brian apparently feels he must assert his views on salvation in a decisive and clear way.

The only thing that is necessary for us is faith. Faith that Jesus Christ was God Incarnate. Came to earth to offer himself as a sacrifice in our place, to pay the penalty for our sins, which we cannot pay, because we are not good enough. We are not morally capable of overcoming evil, only God himself incarnate as Jesus. The good news is that we don’t have to do it. We don’t have to be perfect. He was perfect for us, and we put our faith in him. And that is man’s salvation. Not by our own works, because we are incapable – but by his work on the cross, his death, his resurrection. Through his resurrection, we can have eternal life. That’s the good news.

So, the sermons would typically be about that. You’re not good enough. You’re sinful. You’re not good enough to pay the penalty for your sin. You have to accept Jesus Christ as your savior. Acknowledge his work on the cross.

“You’re not good enough” seems to be a common theme. However, perhaps those who feel they aren’t good enough need the language of evangelical Christianity and salvation through Jesus Christ in order to find liberation.
For 21 year-old ministry student Pam, God is like a lover or a parent.

There is an incredible sense of worth in realizing that God died for you, he created you, he knows every hair on your head, he has you written on his palm, his thoughts of you are more than the sands of the seashore. It’s incredible. And to think, the creator of the universe speaks to me! Not just that God loves me, but that God is in love with me. He cares so much about me. That he would prepare a husband for me, that he would plan this day for me, that he would do all these things for me.

God acts on Pam’s behalf and takes care of her. She glows as she speaks of God’s love for her. God is in control and she can trust this God that knows her like a lover. She explains that intimate knowing with the language of theology.

Jesus’ saving activity opens evangelicals up to the freedom from fear brought via a relationship with God.

He who is within you (God, Holy Spirit) is greater than he who is in the world (Satan – prince of this world). Satan is roaming about doing horrible things that we can see. God gives us a spirit of love, power, and sound mind. We don’t have to fear – the battle has been won. When Jesus died on the cross, he conquered death. We are no longer a slave to sin but slaves to righteousness...all this is Scripture, none of this is my own. We do not therefore have to have a spirit of fear. There is no fear in that. He will never give us more than we can handle. When we are tempted, he always provides us a way out. I know hard, hard, hard times may come. Fear and worry will never get you anywhere. It’s sin – it’s sin to worry. Jesus said - Do not worry about tomorrow, tomorrow [will take care of itself]. Therefore, we are disobeying him whenever we worry. When you think of it as sin, it’s awesome because you can confess it and get rid of it, and God will give you not a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power and sound mind. If you deal with it like any other sin, it’s not a weird thing. Just prayer – Lord I confess, I’m fearing about this and worried, take it away please, I’m putting my faith in you, I want to believe you for good things.

God strengthens us and takes away our fear. Even the author of all the evil we see around us can’t touch us if we put our trust in God. Freedom comes through obeying God and confessing sin. Pam believes that people should tell God their specific fears and concerns; God will free remove those difficulties and the result will be a decisive and clear-thinking confidence.
43 year-old sociology professor Jane explains that the relationship with God through Jesus Christ involves both “joy” and obligation.

That god has provided in a person of Jesus of Nazareth a way to restore and create a human community. To be fully human is contained in that person of Christ...with that restoration is a part of what I’m called to be and be a part of ...which involves peace and joy, and duty/obligation (boring ways to talk about it). God has acted in the world to make possible all the hopes/possibilities and I’m called to participate in that restoration. Not just peace of mind, personal peace – but health, well-being, right relation, in the world, personal relations, sense of stewardship – it’s all packed in there.

For Jane, full life is within the community and story that God makes possible through Christ. People are to grow spiritually in Christ together; this involves conferring upon themselves and the broader “world” hope and possibility. Part of evangelical Christians’ task is to help others have a better, more fulfilled life. Evangelicals receive joy in their lives and work to make it possible for others.

Steve, a 22 year-old who aspires to “pastor” his own church, explains the power of giving everything to God while also believing correctly in what Jesus did through his vicarious atonement.

What I really think a true Christian is, is someone who follows Jesus Christ. And you follow Jesus Christ and you look at the way Jesus lived. You give everything to God, but you also accept that he died on the cross for your sins, and resurrected, and that he took the debt that you owe. You realize that – you fully realize what that means. It’s not confusing to you and because you know that, because it’s very real to you by knowing that you are held accountable for that knowledge and so we have to evaluate how you are living your life, are you following Jesus? Are you giving everything you have to spreading his kingdom?

The clarity of belief and its relation to life experience results in a sense of purpose.

Evangelicals are to give everything to God: fears, worries, and concerns. Like Pam, Steve is articulating a powerful way to live in the world while centered in God. For Steve, this
life is motivated by gratefulness to the risen Christ for his saving self-sacrificial atonement that makes salvation possible.

Richard, the 66 year old professor, briefly explains why one might feel a debt to Jesus as God.

Christ...is God. That he was God Incarnate who when he died on the cross he took my sins, everybody's sins, and was our substitute – rather than our suffering he suffered in my place.

In bearing the burden that Richard could not bear, Jesus made forgiveness possible for Richard and for all. Richard is explaining what Steve means above – to realize that God suffered for you places you in his debt and it fills you with gratitude.

24 year-old ministry student Clark painstakingly explains why we need Jesus to rescue us via a legal analogy. This contractual formula of salvation provides him evidence for his faith.

We go 45 in a 25...[and the] police officer brings you in. Standing before the judge – on trial for breaking the law – I'm a good person, I'm a good student, I've helped my mom cook, I do the dishes after dinner – I've done all these things, and the judge is like – you are not on trial for that, you are on trial for breaking the law. So he puts you into prison, and the bail is like a trillion dollars. Something we could never pay. So Jesus Christ comes in and he says hey listen, I know you're guilty, I know you've broken the law, I know you're not going to get out of prison. If you don't accept my offer, you are going to die here. For the Jews what Jesus was saying was like, listen, you cannot save yourselves. I'm going to take your place on the cross and pay the payment of sin that you can't pay and what you get in return is the free gift of salvation from God. Because it says in Romans 10: 9 and 10, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that he raised from the dead you shall be saved. It says in 2nd Corinthians 5:21 If God made him who knew no sin, cause Jesus was sinless, that he made him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that we can have the righteousness of God, because there was no way for us to be with God, which is his desire, unless that payment of sin was paid for because of who God is. His holy nature – he's without sin, it would be denying who he is to have us in his presence without that payment and so that's where he says, I'm the way, the truth, and the life, cause only through accepting the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and accepting the payment for sin can we be with God in heaven.
Without Jesus’ saving sacrifice, people are lost. By themselves, people don’t deserve to be rescued. However, God has offers salvation in Christ. Hence, there is cause for hope and an incentive to believe.

I’m a decent person, but according to God’s standards, I’m not good enough, and I never will be. So you realize that you need a savior. You have to accept Jesus Christ as your savior, accept the fact that he died on the cross for your sins, that he took the wrath of God, the payment of sin, that you couldn’t ever – that you don’t want to bear, and if you go without accepting Jesus you will. And come to the realization that with Jesus Christ as your savior now in God’s eyes it’s like he came to us in prison and said listen man, I want to take your place. You can walk free, I’m going to pay the payment. So now, we switch places in God’s eyes, God judged Jesus at the cross, now in God’s eyes we’ve got Jesus Christ [who rescued us...]

Like I said, in Romans 10: 9 and 10, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that Jesus raised from the dead, you shall be saved. So, that’s what it means to be saved – you acknowledge that you are a sinner, and you want God’s free gift of salvation that comes through accepting Jesus by faith, also the grace of God and the mercy of God, like we’ve talked about in Ephesians chapter 2, and as he talks about in John chapter 3 with Nicodemus (he’s one of the Pharisees) being born again spiritually. That’s not just a colloquia phrase that we throw around as Christians because when you believe in God, God’s holy spirit causes you to be regenerated. He says in Ezekial I will take [your heart?] I will give you a new heart. He causes us a change in your inner man

On his own, Clark does not think he can save himself. However, if saved by God through Christ, he can have new life. Being on one’s own, centered in oneself, is like being in prison. Giving one’s life to God through Jesus Christ is freedom.

Q: What sustains you in this faith?

As I grew in my knowledge of the Bible and what had happened, I think for me as a Christian is that first and foremost. I’ve done the research on the resurrection and I know the different intellectual positions...Princeton theological seminary, and I know what the stuff is out there, what the viewpoints are. You know I’ve read a lot of accounts of both sides – atheists. People who have gone and tried to figure this out. First and foremost from that perspective, you know for me, I’m a very analytical person, you know, like logic. I like logic, I like reason. I’ve spent a lot of time [asking] is this reasonable? Can this really happen? Cause you know obviously – we want this to happen. For me, coming first of all to that point where I know without a shadow of a doubt that what happened happened. For me, if that’s the case, if Jesus Christ really raised from the dead, the things that are taught in the Bible
[are] obviously true. For the Christian, the fact that the tomb was empty [that means] something happened. For me, I've done the research [on the different theories] – for me, that means I have a living hope in Jesus Christ. [I discovered I can't forgive myself and that I must put my faith in Christ]. I know when God asks me why He should let me into heaven, I know what to say – that I've accepted Jesus Christ as my savior and my Lord and I've confessed my sins and repented. So for me, there's not that fear of death, there's not that fear of failure and all these things that people struggle with.

Christ's resurrection confirms everything in the Bible, which in turn gives the evangelical hope in Jesus who takes away fear.

I've come to the place where I realize, I may tell myself I'm good... but I'm still a sinner. It's the grace of God that sustains me. It's the fact that I have a living hope in Jesus Christ that sustains me. No matter the highs and lows I go through in life, I have that living hope. That's what keeps me going – and knowing that one day, I'll be in heaven with God. Sin – look at the Greek word – it means anything less than perfection... you've fallen short of God's glory, his holiness, he is without sin, his nature... when you lie, steal, when you lust after a woman, thought an angry thought on your heart... anything less than God's standard of perfection is sin. I'm confident... I'm going to be in Heaven with God when I die. I've done the research myself, and I've seen enough evidence in the Bible... it [Christian faith] has allowed me to know that there is a purpose for why humans are here. It gives direction - When I spend time in His word, there is that peace and joy... When you come to the fact that in and of myself, I can't save myself. What do I get out of it? I'm not doing it for the riches. I'm not doing it for the... popularity, I'm not doing it for the money, I'm not doing it for the esteem – I'm doing it because it changed my life, and I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is a God and that Jesus Christ raised from the dead. With that comes the hope in heaven and in God.

Mixed with the freedom from fear and life in Christ is excessive and disproportionate guilt. Clark feels he has to be perfect or he's completely bad. He can't make any mistakes at all. He can't even be sexually attracted to a woman or be angry. It's no wonder a religion of personal salvation like evangelical Christianity would be such a blessing for Clark. Believing in the literal-factual theology of the vicarious atonement of Jesus gives the guilt-ridden Clark a way into relationship with God, providing freedom from guilt, fear, and perfectionism.
20 year-old Rebekah, a Spanish major, explains how an intellectual knowledge of salvation was not enough; she had to take a decisive step and open herself to the truths of evangelical Christianity before she could apprehend the real meaning of Christianity and a relationship with God. Rebekah is clear that people need the Holy Spirit in order to “believe.”

When you get saved, you get sealed in the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit helps you understand the Scripture and it comforts you and things like that. One day I didn’t trust God and I wasn’t trusting God. I didn’t believe in Jesus. I may have been seeking, but I didn’t believe in him. And I didn’t take a step of faith in his direction. One day I did. And after that day, I understood these things that are truth. I understood truth.

Rebekah makes a conscious move toward God. She takes the risk of believing the doctrines are true as well as the risk of trusting in the will of a previously unknown God.

Q: So what did you understand?

I understood that there is a God, and I understood that he is loving. And that he’s not – just the basics, that he is loving, and that the reason that he sent his son is to save us because we needed to be saved. And I understood that we are all imperfect. And the only way we could ever come to God is by being perfect, And the only way we could ever become perfect is by God’s Grace. By God providing something that would make us perfect, which is a sacrifice that is Jesus Christ. And he wrote the Bible. And just like all these things - I went from unbelief to belief, that’s what happened. So maybe that’s what I mean by understand – I believed. It wasn’t that I understood the concepts, because I understood the concepts before, but I thought it was trash.

Still present is the emphasis on perfection and belief in evangelical Christian thinking, but Rebekah seems more calm and more thoughtful than the exuberant and agitated Clark. Also, Rebekah is clear that knowing the tenets of evangelical Christianity is not enough; one must embrace them with his/her whole being with the help of God.

No Holy Spirit, no belief. Holy Spirit, believe. To a point where I don’t even want to believe it. I don’t want to believe this. I don’t want to believe in hell, and I don’t want to believe that my parents are going to go there. But I believe this cause it’s true. That’s why I believe it. I believe it cause it’s true, and cause I can’t deny it.
anymore. Cause there’s this truth that I am faced with, and I can’t walk away from it anymore cause it is in my face.

Here is a combination of natural and conscious literalism. While Rebekah believes freedom comes through Christ, she is uneasy about the existence of a painful hell for non-Christians. However unpleasant or incredible the thought of hell is, Rebekah still feels she must believe in it.

21 year-old Gail, a psychology major, sees Jesus like a sympathetic lover she knows intimately.

Q: Do their [the Jews in the Holocaust] prayers not count in the ways that a Christian’s would?

I guess not, but I don’t think of it like we’re better than them. I think of it like – like when I picture them crying out, I usually picture God just like down on his knees reaching down crying to them, you know, please, just, my son, please, I sent him to you, please just believe in him. You know, I can’t look at you guys as perfect righteousness. No, I can’t blind myself to all the pain and iniquities that you guys have inflicted on me and upon the land, you know I can’t, because I have to judge you, please just believe in my son, then I can look at you in perfect light and righteousness, and I can help you.

Because she must believe in a literal-factual theology, Gail privileges the theological abstraction of Christ’s atonement over the living hell endured by Jews during the Holocaust. Her voice was fills with emotion at this point, as though she really feels for those Jews in the Holocaust who are eternally lost because they have not accepted Jesus. Gail’s compassion is bounded by her theology. Overlooking the human suffering of the Holocaust, Gail worries about those Jews who will be damned because they haven’t been “saved.”

I shared some of my ideas with Mark via email and asked him for comment. One of Mark’s responses illustrates why a literal-factual theological orientation is critical for evangelicals. He writes:
It is the not merely the matter of facticity that is at stake. I think the deeper reason is this. Christianity teaches that Jesus Christ is the son of God and savior of the world. That is its central proclamation. We know about him through the accounts in the New Testament. If they aren't basically accurate, it is hard to imagine that he can save us.

The question is not that certain beliefs are required to be a Christian and if you don’t accept them you aren’t a Christian. Rather, there is a central group of core beliefs beyond which it is difficult to see how one can believe that God really exists and cares for me.

The real question is whether Jesus Christ is God, whether he died for my sins, whether he rose from the dead and sits at the right hand of the Father interceding on my behalf because as a sinner I can’t approach a righteous God except through his mercy and forgiveness. That is the message of Christianity—it is not merely a collection of beliefs.1

This email passage is illuminating. First, the Bible is understood to validate God’s ability to save someone. Thus, if the Bible is inaccurate, the evangelical’s salvation is called into question. There needs to be that additional biblical support for the evangelical to be confident in his/her place in heaven for eternity. Second, correct core beliefs about God are necessary for peace and joy in this life: without having assented to the literal-factuality of those correct beliefs about the Bible and theology, the evangelical can’t be sure that God is there to be in a life-giving relationship to the evangelical.

Two critical facets of evangelicalism are at work: correct belief in theology and the life-giving aspect that is the content of that belief. In first believing in evangelical theology (to include its view of the Bible) as literally and factually true, evangelicals can gain a life-giving relationship with God through Jesus Christ, resulting in the healing of all manner of afflictions (guilt, fear, disconnection from emotions/thoughts). However, if one does not believe correctly, there is no “way in” to the fulfillment and forgiveness found in right relationship with God.2
Email correspondence June 4, 2002.

In John 10:10b, Jesus says: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” [NIV]
Chapter Four Christianity the Only Way?

The crux of evangelical Christian theology is exclusive salvation from God through Jesus Christ. Most interviewed agreed that if people didn’t accept Jesus as their personal savior, they would be eternally damned to a tortuous hell apart from God. Most show an all/nothing orientation that unabashedly privileges their belief system over all others. Even those evangelicals who struggle with their beliefs appear compelled to accept their theology literally and factually because a failure to do so would damage their faith. And yet, some are not so heavily governed by evangelical theology that they can see exceptions to a strict damning of the Dalai Lama. Evangelical views of damnation illustrate the importance of right relief as a precursor to full life with God.

To discover if each person’s concept of salvation was exclusive, I asked for a definition of salvation, and then if salvation was available for non-Christians. Stuart, Pam, Janet, and Erica were asked specifically if anyone who had not accepted Christ would be damned? Pam and Erica clearly stated damnation would result; Stuart was uncertain. Janet was the only one who did not directly answer the question. After the first four interviews, I added a follow-up question, asking specifically about the salvation of the Dalai Lama: when the Dalai Lama, a Tibetan Buddhist dies, what happens to him? Brian, Mark, and Jane all had somewhat more nuanced answers than the rest, qualifying their remarks in some way. Out of eighteen, only four conceded there might not be a tortuous eternity in hell for a non-Christian. The other fourteen were quite clear that a non-Christian would be damned. The following examples convey the intensity of the beliefs at work.
Pam, a 21 year-old ministry student, has no doubt that anyone who does not put faith in Jesus will be painfully damned.

Q: One final question – What’s the crux of what someone has to do to be saved?

Put their faith in Christ. That sounds vague and not concrete but – lose your life, give it to him. Surrender your life to Christ.

Q: Now if you don’t do that, when you die…?

I believe that you will be separated from God, you’ll be in hell.

Q: Hell would be?

A place of eternal torment.

Q: Eternal torment sounds pretty strong…

Gnashing teeth, grinding...

For Pam, there is no compromise or gray area. No ambiguity. If you don’t give you life to Jesus Christ, you will be sent to a real hell.

Jacob, a 27 year-old student, is equally emphatic.

Q: [According to what you believe, does the Dalai Lama go to hell when he dies?]

Yeah, there are some non-negotiables, and that’s one of them.

Steve is a 22 year-old aspiring pastor who goes so far as to compare the Dalai Lama with Hitler. The need for correct belief leads Steve to say that two totally different people are fundamentally alike.

Q: What about someone like the Dalai Lama, he’s a Buddhist, he’s heard the gospel, doesn’t believe in Jesus as savior?

Are you asking me to determine whether he is saved?

Q: I’m not asking you to judge him definitively. But I’m asking you, based on what you believe, what happens to the Dalai Lama when he dies?
I don’t know what he believes in his heart. He’s confessed with his mouth that he doesn’t believe in Jesus Christ and he was God.

Q: I mean I’m assuming that – I haven’t read any of his books.

With that assumption, it would lead me to believe that he did not accept Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. From my understanding, no, he would not find salvation. He would not have salvation.

Q: So it doesn’t matter how good he is as a person – how thoughtful, insightful, whatever, but if he doesn’t accept Jesus in his heart?...

There are a lot of really good people out there. But it depends on your perspective. According to Hitler, he thought he was doing Germany a really good favor by euthanasia. So it’s in the eyes of the beholder what good is.

Q: Hitler ain’t the Dalai Lama.

No, they are exact opposites. But from Hitler’s point of view, he thought he was good. And you brought up the idea that the Dalai Lama is really good, no matter how good he was, or no matter how much insight or thoughtfulness he had, no that doesn’t make him saved, in my understanding and under that assumption of the Dalai Lama.

Out of his need to believe dogmatically, Steve must see the Dalai Lama as damned. The murderer of millions becomes just like a paradigm of compassion because the two do what they believe is right. For Steve to make an exception is to call everything he believes into question. Rather than question his faith, Steve reduces the Dalai Lama to a subjectivity that is like Hitler’s. The need for correct belief in theological abstraction leads Steve to a dogmatic confidence that outweighs inductively weighing the evidence. Steve also told me that hell is as real as the chair sitting next to me.

24 year-old ministry student Clark begins straightforwardly before moving into one of his long and detailed analogies through which explains how and why he believes.

Q: To be completely clear, if you’ve got somebody who is aware of Jesus [who has] heard the gospel, like the Dalai Lama – a Buddhist, [and] hasn’t accepted Jesus into their heart, hasn’t confessed that – when that person dies, then they go to hell?
Right.

Q: And they go to hell forever?

Forever.

Q: They're done. It doesn't matter how good they are, or how kind they are, how compassionate they are?

Let's say you have a standard. This is 70 feet here. Say maybe the Dalai Lama, he's 52 feet, he jumps really high. You and me, maybe we're down here at 25 feet. The fact is you've still missed the 70 feet. You may be a great humanitarian and feed the hungry, but the fact is - the standard you've set for yourself is not in accordance with God's standard. Religion is man trying to do their best through self-righteous works and humanitarian efforts to reach their way to God. To say you know, gosh, I've been good enough God, you know, let me in. Christianity is God reaching down to man and pulling us out of the crap that we live in. The Bible says, no flesh shall be justified by the works of the law - good works as you may have them - you know, they don't impress God. You think about it logically - there's religions that base their whole existence of God by how good they are. Well, I'm good enough so therefore I believe in God. So why would a holy God, who's perfect, care about how good a little feeble human being is? In Hebrews 11 it says you cannot please God without faith. God rewards those who come to him and diligently seek him. Because beyond the revelation of creation, beyond the revelation of Jesus Christ, how else would you know that God exists? You wouldn't. So why all of a sudden would you being a good person clarify the whole issue of God? You have to believe that there is a God. Because no matter how good you are - that may not cause you to still believe in God, it may just make you more self-righteous.

So the difference with religion and Christianity is that Christianity is God coming down and saving man who for no reason should be saved. I mean, God could send us all to hell and he'd still be righteous. Because you know we've broken his standard. But because he loves us and because even before we knew him, he desired a relationship with us. He's reached down and he's said, you know what, I know you have all fallen short of the mark, but I'm going to give you a free gift of salvation. So I think the misconception is - how can a loving God send people to hell. No, he's not. You're choosing to go that way.

Here is a demanding God who expects perfection. It's no wonder Clark is so emphatic.

He "knows" he has to believe exactly as he does because God will damn him otherwise.

God will save people, but they are worthless outside of God's grace. God is totally
absolved from responsibility for creating this arbitrary and ruthless mechanism. People choose hell and don’t deserve anything different if they don’t believe in Jesus.

22 year-old biochemistry/biophysics and chemistry major Bruce, as is his custom, is quite direct.

Q: The Dalai Lama, not a Christian, dies. What happens according to your belief system?

To put it real briefly – Hell.

Q: He goes to hell?

He goes to hell.

God sent a sacrifice for his sin. I mean, it wasn’t like anything – it wasn’t like God gave us a free handout. It cost God something. I mean it really cost God something. It cost him 33 years of humbling himself enough to become human and suffering the most gruesome, humiliating, painful death probably known to man on the cross. And he offers that freely to the Dalai Lama. He says, you can have this. I want to be in communion with you, and look what I did to do this. And the Dalai Lama looks at him and he says, No, I think I’m good enough on my own.

When I asked Bruce about Buddhism and other religions, he said he would reject them and “believe the guy that rose from the dead.”

Rebekah, a 20 year-old Spanish major, epitomizes the pattern of honesty I observed in others. On the subject of salvation, Rebekah becomes serious.

Q: I always think about the Dalai Lama. A Buddhist who has rejected the gospel... so no matter how kind and compassionate that person is, that doesn’t matter ultimately. What matters is the belief in Jesus as the savior, and without that, you’re damned?

Right. He may be nice, but he still doesn’t live up to what one would need to live up to be in the presence of the Almighty Perfect and Holy God. I mean, we just can’t be good enough. You just can’t do it on your own. You need a propitiation for your sin.

You need the help. If you reject the help that God has provided, then you reject the salvation. You are choosing the consequent. You’re not being sent anywhere, you’re choosing to go there. God’s not sending you to hell, you’re choosing to reject the salvation he provided.
Q: And Hell is a place of suffering too, isn’t it?

If you were in a place where there was no trace of God, you would be suffering, yes. A bit later in the conversation, Rebekah became irritated and indignant, seeming for a second to shift some of her frustration toward me, although she said almost immediately she wasn’t directing her questions at me. Rebekah takes her literal-factual theology so seriously that she can’t understand how people can be Christians and not seek the salvation of others.

There’s no, you can kind of believe in Jesus. It just doesn’t make any sense. Like, how can you believe he’s your savior and you need him as a savior but other people don’t. And how mean of you to think that you have a savior and not to tell other people that they need him too. That just makes me question two things. Do you really believe he’s the savior of the world? Or, how genuine is your faith that he’s your savior? Or, do you even give a damn about other people? That’s two questions that come to mind. Do you care about anyone else, besides yourself, being saved or do you even believe you are actually saved by the blood of Jesus Christ — that he lived, and suffered, and died for you and for the world? And that he was really sent from the Father. I guess those are my two questions — either you don’t care about anyone, or you don’t believe he’s your savior.

Rebekah raises the implications of what is at stake for a literal-factual belief in evangelical theology: evangelization. There are no other options. If people believe in the Jesus of evangelical theology, they must evangelize others, for that follows from right theological belief.

Bart, a 54 year-old pastor, took me out to lunch after church. During the service immediately prior, Bart preached of Jesus as Lord, Liar, or Lunatic. Bart, like Rebekah, sees Jesus in a fixed and certain light, from which comes salvation exclusively through Jesus alone.

Q: So you’ve got to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. A famous example — the Dalai Lama — a Buddhist who knows of Jesus but still has not become a Christian — he’s still a Buddhist. When he dies, he would go to hell?
That's right. Either that, or Jesus was a liar. He said, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through [me]. Is he telling the truth? Is he deluded? Or is he a liar? You decide.

I believe he is who he said he was. And if he is, he sets the standard. Either match up, or don’t. The Dalai Lama knows about Jesus, so he can make a conscious choice – to follow and believe or don’t.

You know about Jesus. And you have to make a choice. The thing is – if you choose not to follow Jesus right now, you’re also making a choice to reject him. He says you’re either with me or you’re against me.

For Bart, there is no ambiguity. Accepting Jesus as savior is the only right course of action; to do otherwise results in eternal damnation.

Like today, we leave this interview, and you’re more intrigued, but you’re still not ready to make a commitment to Jesus Christ, then you have chosen to reject him. That’s not to say that you won’t maybe change your mind later. For today, you’ve rejected him. The Dalai Lama knows about Jesus and he’s chosen to reject him. Not reject him as a person – he [the DL] might admire some of the things he [Jesus] taught. But he’s certainly rejected him as God.

So, you can’t say yes, but he’s so sincere in his faith. He’s sincerely wrong. A lot of people are sincere.

Gail is a 21-year old psychology major whose beliefs strongly determine her view of the Dalai Lama’s salvation.

Q: So there’s never been any tension for you, like with the Dalai Lama or somebody like [that]? Unless the Dalai Lama gets saved, he’s going to be tortured for all eternity?

It’s harsh. Horrible. [She looks pained] That’s why there are so many missionaries in the world, I guess. I think it’s awful. And I don’t want it to happen. I don’t want anyone to go to hell. But, it’s like – God didn’t create hell for us, God didn’t say, okay, accept me or I’m going to damn you to hell. He didn’t – he gave his angels free will, and Satan tried to become as powerful as God. God had to judge him and created hell as a tormenting place for Satan. And Satan was like, screw you, I’m going to get back at you anyway I know how. I’m going to take away your lovers. I’m going to take away the one thing that you love the most. I’m going to take away your children.

God doesn’t damn anybody. Satan takes us away from God.
Like when people die, I don’t think they’re just like – ‘I didn’t get a fair deal. What’s up with this?’ I think they see God and they’re like, ‘Oh yeah, you’re right, I don’t know what happened.’ He’s just. He gives everyone [a chance]... The Dalai Lama’s chosen Buddhism over Christianity.

Q: But I mean, is that such a bad thing? It doesn’t seem like it’s an evil act. Especially if it’s involved in kindness and compassion and loving and accepting other people. But yet, for making that choice, there’s this mechanism in place that shoots you down into eternal torment.

It’s a rotten deal. But, it’s a rotten world. It’d be cool if the Dalai Lama got saved. [Gail smiled as though that idea were possible as well as pleasing to her].

Gail did not want to look deeply at what damning the Dalai Lama would say about God or her own evangelical faith. She absolved God of any possible guilt for the creation of a ruthless and arbitrary eternal torture device hell. Oblivious to the implications of her beliefs, Gail observes it would be “cool” if the Dalai Lama became a Christian.

Matthew is a 24 year-old Christian high school teacher.

Q: The Dalai Lama – [he’s had encounters with other cultures and is still a non-Christian.] According to your beliefs, wouldn’t he, as a non-Christian – and he’s consciously a non-Christian –

He’s made a choice to reject the Gospel.

Q: So does that mean that he would be damned when he dies?

I think so. I think that he’s held accountable for what he knows. And, he’s rejected the truth, so there’s not really any other option.

Q: And to be damned means what? To go to hell, which is separation from God, and also to be tortured for all eternity?

Basically, because everything that is good is from God. So, to separate all that is good is torture. So, it’s not like this sadistic torturing. It’s rather that you have nothing from God because you’ve chosen to reject his son.

When it comes down to it, God is God, and he set it up this way. He spoke and he said this is how it is. Either you reject me or you accept me. And to reject God is to reject what is good and what’s from him and so, I don’t know what to do. I mean, I hope and pray that the Dalai Lama would come to the knowledge of God through
Christ. But, if he doesn’t, if he rejects that – I mean, even Gandhi – the greatest people that ever lived are still – the Bible says that all you righteous deeds are like filthy rags before me, because sin is still there and someone has to pay for it.

Even for an intelligent high school teacher like Matthew, theological abstractions dominate all other perceptions and possible conclusions. Matthew’s theology overrides any potentially redeeming qualities held by the Dalai Lama.

There are four noteworthy exceptions to the damning of the Dalai Lama: Brian, Mark, Jane, and Stuart.

43 year-old sociologist Jane grapples with what to do with the Dalai Lama.

Q: What about the Dalai Lama? He’s rejected Jesus? [As a Buddhist, what happens when he dies?]

When he dies, my story says God is just.

If you know, you have to respond to that story – you have to choose, and there are consequences. If you choose in all integrity to say it’s not true and it is true, ... I don’t see how you can get around it. It’s easier to say in the end that God has a card up his sleeve, that there is some trick., Jesus said I’m the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the father but by me. That whole sense of like – rules change later? That doesn’t fit with how I see this story unfolding. The world I live in has a consistency to it. What would that say about a personal God [if the rules are changed at the end]?

Jane seems wrestles over whether to modify her theology – her theologically and spiritually determinative “story.” On the one hand, her theological story must be taken seriously and remain consistent. On the other hand, she is uneasy about the Dalai Lama being damned to hell, something required by the consistency of her story and the God she believes in.

It’s a yucky question – because what are you supposed to do? What am I supposed to say about the Dalai Lama. It’s like – the Dalai Lama is going to burn in hell forever. It’s like – I don’t like that image. That doesn’t sound right to me, it’s certainly not nice.
My understanding of God as loving and holy – both of those need to be included for an adequate description of God and this story I’m a part of. I don’t know how that God can then say everyone is in regardless of what they believed. So it becomes then a matter of degree …the Dalai Lama seems like a pretty good guy. But relative to a holy God, what seems to me to be a really good guy must not be a really good guy. In Isaiah, he talks about our righteousness being like filthy rags…our human goodness, the concept of – are you good enough? It’s not really that useful in the end. It’s more this sense of have you recognized the way – trying to acknowledge that a holy loving God is writing a story in a certain way and the key question is how do you respond to what God has done?

So, the question of the Dalai Lama and Hell. I think within a lot of religious traditions there are a lot of people who are doing the best they can with the resources they have within the tradition to turn away from that radical self-autonomy authorship of my own life – certainly there are strong elements of that in other religious traditions, but that’s not the story that I’m a part of…from within the Christian narrative as it’s outlined, I don’t know how to say Jesus says I’m the way/truth/life no one comes to the father except by me and all church tradition points to that event as something that reorients the disciples afterwards… oh my gosh, change of life, different way of looking, and in the history of the church people have been called back to that moment in time, then how can I say that’s irrelevant in the end if the whole story has from the beginning been pointing toward that and from that moment on pointing back to that – then I have a different kind of story.

Jane seems to feel she must stay within her theological “story.” To see her theological story as normative is to be in right relation with God. The story must be consistent and have integrity. To stick to the story without inductively weighing the evidence of experience or the evidence from other intellectual challenges (as others have done) would be to damn the Dalai Lama outright. And yet, Jane struggles over the fate of the Dalai Lama while trying to be as true to God and her theology as she can. Jane draws upon her own experience and reason to conclude that something else must happen to the Dalai Lama (instead of a tortuous existence in hell for eternity).

Q: It seems like you are a little uncomfortable with the notion of the Dalai Lama being damned to hell but at the same time, there’s the consistency of the story…?

Well, I don’t know what else to do with the Dalai Lama…he is a good example. I think that there is this thread of personal responsibility and accountability that runs through the Christian story. That God takes seriously human choice and gives
humans the ability to choose and choose wrongly and evaluate all the options. As we are doing that and if there is a true option, then the holiness of God, the integrity of God, would require God to treat the creatures he has made with free will, as CS Lewis says, to give these people what they have asked for. And if a person’s life, fair life, humane life, just life, has asked for and oriented themselves toward something else – if they know the alternatives, they are responsible for that choice. If they don’t know the alternatives, I believe that God is just and figures that out some way that is not spelled out. The relevant question is always – do I know, do you know? Do the people around me know [the story]?

It’s a really hard question. And I think part of it is the way hell is always portrayed as everlasting and forever. It’s a little difficult for me to put that together with a God that is Holy and loving. How does the Compassion of God and the Mercy of God work into this...

So, [my conclusion is an] annihilationist end-run. It’s really cheating...it’s to say that hell ... the end of the story is new heaven and new earth, those who have chosen to turn away from Christ so they get not the presence of God. So it’s the sense hell is separation from God but not life of torment but that life disappears. It’s not the strongest thread in Christian tradition – hard to make that argument within the evangelical tradition especially but it is a way to preserve the holiness of God, since I’m made this way – take it, and the integrity of God’s creatures who are made free to choose is to say, yes your choice matters – if your choice doesn’t matter, if you’re all in regardless of what you have chosen, then you have no choice and you are an automaton.

Q: So it’s a way of saying?

There is a ceasing of existence because you have chosen not-life

Q: And the ceasing of existence is the not – life, and the not-life is hell. You’re not going to a place of eternal torment, but you’re just ceasing to exist because you’ve chosen.

Yeah. If you have chosen not to participate in what God has provided, then that’s the end.

It allows me to not freak out – if you take hell really seriously – we have a friend who takes hell really seriously and he’s just scary – to really take it seriously it would change how you would respond to people all the time. I would want to be a pushier person, saying you’ve got to believe this – this is not an option, I mean it’s really scary - That kind of thing. But, this is a way to say your choices matter/ God has integrity – God has provided a way, the story is all true, there’s justice in the end and you get in the end what you choose. God is life and apart from him there is no life.
Hell is not actually talked about in the Bible really much at all. There are metaphors of being outside – like weeping gnashing of teeth. [Those] metaphors of hell are later church overlay.

This shows the application of a Jane’s personal preferences to the text and theology.

Jane’s view is slightly different from a traditional evangelical one. Instead of seeing the Bible as supporting hell, Jane concludes the Bible does not support the existence of a real hell because she finds hell distasteful. What is especially remarkable is Jane’s “Jesus seminar-like” appeal to privilege earlier over later layers of scripture. Given Jane’s hostility to liberal Protestantism, it’s surprising she would make this connection.

Stuart is a 58 year-old English professor. He begins articulating evangelical Christian theology and then persuasively connects that to healing and wholeness on this earth.

Q: [What are the essential Christian beliefs]?

That God has intervened in human history through the incarnation. That’s the essential. And if you’re going to get this all the way right, confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, believe with your heart, that God raised him from the dead, Paul said. That’s it. And for whatever reason you can’t say that, then you and I are parting serious company here, no matter how much I like you, no matter how much I appreciate your character. I can acknowledge you’re a better man than I am, but that’s not really the issue. That make sense to you?

To me, being a redeemed human being, being saved, means that you have acknowledged that with the redemptive work of God you accept the responsibilities of being a full human being even if you don’t feel like it. And that’s to your good. So to me, that’s another way of saying being healed. And the Bible talks about it in those terms, too. And the Old Testament speaks of God as being one who heals us of all our diseases. I don’t think that means your throat infection; I think that means those things that are most profoundly wrong with me. There are plenty of them.

Q: Self-defeating behaviors?

Self-defeating behaviors, selfishness, arrogance, fear, stinginess, anger, resentment, all that stuff that poisons all of us. Self-interest at the expense of other people – that looks good but ends up isolating us.
The Fall is an account of separation – separation from your creator, separation from one another, separation from the creatures of the world, separation from the environment. You've got it all wrong now.

I think [being saved] means trusting God for directions on putting it back together. Which is what I think heaven is.

Getting it put back together. It seems to me the language that we have about heaven is about the restoration of all those kinds of relationships that we all understand have been damaged or fractured.

And conversely, one of the guys that I heard at that conference came from Princeton, a Pulitzer prize-winning poet who had 72-73 different identities disconnected from the others.

When you're disconnected from other human beings, disconnected from an appropriate sense of self, disconnected from communication with God - that's awful. That's hell.

Paul talks about being free from the law of sin and death. Well, what is that? That's disconnection, disintegration, lack of coherence, lack of identity. And the people we connect most dramatically with hellish behavior are illustrative of that. Adolf Hitler.

Hell to Stuart is a pathological disconnection from others, from God, from oneself. Right relation with God creates a liberating freedom from that in reconnection to what gives life.

Brian is a 48 year-old soft-spoken engineering professor with short, graying hair pulled back into a pony-tail. Brian felt “called” to return to Christianity after exploring Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, and other eastern religions. The Zen-like sayings, stories, and wisdom of the desert fathers showed Brian that Christianity has its own mystical tradition containing an alternative enlightenment type of wisdom with an emphasis on mystery. He prays the “Jesus prayer,” meditates, takes 45 minute contemplative walks in the woods, and believes in the inerrancy of scripture and the need for belief in the vicarious atonement of Jesus. For Brian, faith involves a tension between the rational and the mystical.
Q: What about somebody like the Dalai Lama that’s a Buddhist, committed Buddhist, who has heard the gospel, they know about Jesus, yet they choose to be a Tibetan Buddhist. What happens to them? And that’s an especially interesting question for you – you’ve looked at other traditions.

Well, that’s another one of those things that rational methods will not lead us to the answer. But, let’s try a little bit of reason on this. What is the highest good? It’s this communion with God. To know God. Then what’s the greatest evil.

Q: Separation.

Right. It’s separation from God. By rejecting Him, you are separated. The greatest evil is eternal separation from God. The Dalai Lama has chosen to reject God. He gets what he has chosen – eternal separation from God. Does that mean that he’ll burn forever in literal flame? His flesh will melt – I have no idea. But, I sincerely doubt it.

If he chooses not to be with God, he will get his choice, he will be separated from God for eternity. And beyond that, I can’t say.

As I’ve gotten older, I feel like I’ve made a commitment to my faith, and I need to follow through. And part of that is the definition of faith, a belief that can’t be proved beyond certainty. In fact, a central tenet of the Christian faith is the concept of faith. It’s by faith that we are saved, not by works, lest any man should boast as St. Paul said. So, it is my belief that faith is the key to the Christian belief system that sustains me.

[quote by Leslie Newbingen from Truth to Tell] He said that all our knowing is a personal commitment in which there is no external guarantee that one cannot be mistaken. So, when you have faith you take a risk that you may well be wrong. And I acknowledge that. I may well be wrong. My faith may be wrong.

Knowing is a fiduciary act – an act of trust. You trust your community, you trust your senses, you trust the authority of the church – the Scriptures, you never really know for sure. You don’t have the same sense of certainty about these deep matters that you have that I can lean back on this chair.

I’m constantly plagued, if you will, by doubts arising by my acknowledging that this is so. There is very little that I can be actually certain about.

I don’t know, but I recently read a book by the Dalai Lama called [The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective On The Teachings of Jesus]. It’s his commentary on the Christian faith. It’s very good. And he’s a very good example. He’s obviously a very intelligent, very spiritual man.

Q: He’s not a Christian.
And he's not. And probably never will be.

Very insightful. I enjoyed reading the book. And he's got a piece of the truth. A big piece of it.

Q: So, what do you think about him?

I think that he has deep spiritual insight. But, he is missing a key part of the truth.

Q: What's he missing?

He's missing the Gospel.

Q: You mean he's missing?

The good news.

Q: Which is?

You don't have to be good – you have to put your faith in him that is perfect.

Q: So, he's not having – what he's missing – is the faith in Christ?

Right.

Q: You mentioned off the tape that you feel like because of your taking seriously the possibility that you might be wrong, that puts you in a position where you don't feel like you have the confidence necessarily that other evangelicals have.

Yeah, it may sound a little contradictory to say that on the one hand, I feel I have the confidence that I'm on the right track. But then, since I acknowledge that I could be wrong about anything that I say and anything that I believe, I don't have the sense of peace and comfort that a lot of evangelicals seem to have. There's no doubt that there is a God, and the Bible is literally correct – they seem to have no doubts. At least, they've never articulated to me – they don't admit that they have them. I do.

Q: You have doubts about?

About all of this that I've said.

Q: That you're on the right track?

Sure.

Q: Faith in Jesus is the only way to salvation?
Yeah, I have doubts.

I can’t claim to you to be a hundred percent certain about anything. But, on the other hand, I can’t prove to you that Rachel Funk is my biological mother. That’s not an original thought. I should credit Augustine with that.

I’m very confident that she is. I’m very confident that my faith is correct.

Unlike most, Brian is willing to admit that he doesn’t have all the correct answers about faith. Instead of affirming the need for a dogmatically correct belief, Brian acknowledges that he might well be wrong about everything he thinks.

Mark, a 59 year-old professor of history, is in an especially interesting place, given that his father never became a Christian.

Is my father in hell? I have to say this, and I’ve thought of it many times. He never made any commitment to the Christian faith. But, in the end, I don’t know what the state of his heart was. My mother always thought that my father had become a Christian in the last few months of his life. I don’t think he gave any evidence of it, but my feeling is — much more now than when I was younger, if you really don’t know, it’s best not to speculate. I would say that about eternal matters like that. I would say it about a lot of other things as well. I could speculate until I’m blue in the face. But, in the end, I really don’t know. And maybe it’s a comforting thought that I really don’t know.

Q: [If there is this serious threat of hell, why do anything but evangelize and attempt to save souls?]

Well, that’s a hard question. There are evangelicals who think they should be full time evangelists. Carnell talks about this from 1st catechism in the Case for Orthodoxy — what is the chief end of man: to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. That’s the basis of what I’ll call the Calvinistic worldview. We’re not Christians just to win other people to Christ, but by everything we do — by eating and drinking and sleeping — whatever we do to God’s glory, if you hold that view, if you have a wider worldview, it incorporates all kinds of things that are specifically Protestant. The idea of vocation — if I’m getting paid for 8 hours of work, I work 8 hours of work, and not 7 and a half.

A fair and balanced approach. If I talk to people, I may be concerned about their souls, as indeed I should be, but they’re human beings and I don’t treat them like something that has to have the right stamp on them or [it’s disapproved]. That reformed Protestant idea that Christians are a leaven in the world (if you use New
Testament terms) – a leaven of course for the betterment of the world. The world is passing away, only heaven is eternal. But, at the same time, we were placed on earth to make sure our souls were redeemed, to make sure our families are redeemed, also to make an influence.

You see it in almost every tradition – mother Theresa, Mennonites, Christians who want to go into politics to change society for the better. This all arises out of the idea that we’re not here just to save souls, but we’re here to make the world a better place while seeking eternal values. And, I guess that is my understanding. But, when the right opportunity comes, I’ll talk about your soul. But, I’m not here to grab you and [push] the four spiritual laws on you – there aren’t many people that do that, but there are some people who feel guilty [cause they don’t].

If a Christian feels that he’s illuminating his little corner. That he’s light in his society … if he’s lived a life in harmony with his highest convictions, if he has caused people to glorify God more because he’s there rather than hate God more because he’s there – then he’s doing what a believer is supposed to do.

So, I would say from my point of view, and I think at least the Reformation’s point of view, that’s what God [expects of the Christian] – to do the best he can in whatever you do.

Q: And then ultimately would you say also it’s not up to you to save someone? It’s the action of God or the Spirit.

Yes.

And CS Lewis, who I read a lot, like a lot, lived what some people call a dichotomized life. Lewis never talked about his faith to his students. He never talked about his faith to his colleagues. He wrote books and became a world-famous Christian. Now you could say he was a coward in not proselytizing his students – no, he’s a university lecturer. Do something else, not do that. As one of his colleagues, if Lewis had ever tried to evangelize him, he would have told Lewis where to get off in a hurry. But, I think that wasn’t the reason. In academic life, you don’t talk about Christian things. The English are very stoic, very reluctant to open their heart at all. And besides, Lewis not only wrote ground rules, but he believed he was there to do other things.

Mark agrees with Lewis’s separation of faith from his academic profession.

Mark’s next move suggests we ought not read self-identified evangelical Christians too literally. Mark begins to appeal to Christian belief but before he’s done,
he's celebrating a secular Jew (Ludwig Edelstein) whose life becomes the model example of how a Christian should glorify God.

[Edelstein was a German-born Jew who migrated to America after Hitler took power in 1933 to help found the Institute for the History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins. He taught at Leipzig, Johns Hopkins, the University of Washington, and Berkeley, before settling at the end of his career at Rockefeller University in New York.]

[Edelstein] would never cut a corner or leave a stone unturned to find the truth, gave his time unstintingly to students – always read what colleagues requested, a man of the highest personal integrity. Not mawkish – when I finished reading, I thought what better can you say about a man. I don’t believe he was a Christian – I think he was a secular Jew. After you’ve seen all his books and said what a great scholar, and then read and find, what a great man, it sort of makes the scholarship pale. And I almost photocopied that and sent it to some Christian friends of mine because I thought what better thing could be said of any of us when we die, than that we had done what Edelstein did. A man of integrity, he was helpful, he was encouraging, he fulfilled the highest ideals. Not just a university scholar –

So, I would say to me that’s what one is talking about when one says the chief end of man is glorify God and to enjoy him forever. To glorify him in what you do and to appreciate the benefits which he brings to you – to those who honor him.

Q: And if one doesn’t do that, if they die and they haven’t accepted Jesus, then the way the theology goes – the way the belief goes, then they’re damned.

Right. Well, I would probably not put it in those words. What I would probably say is God gives every human being a choice to serve him or not to serve him. And people can choose to serve God or choose not to serve God.

And Romans 1 and 2 make it very clear that every human being has sinned and therefore deserves death spiritually. Eternal death. That every person has a conscience that tells us that certain things we do are wrong and that therefore we have something within us that provides us our own sense of not having fulfilled even our own best hopes for ourselves.

Q: [The Dalai Lama, a Buddhist, has heard the gospel but has not accepted Jesus according to the facts as they are on the surface. When he dies, he would be damned?]:

Yes, but I wouldn’t put it in the same way. What I would say is this. It seems that Scripture says that we’re damned for our sins. That we genuinely know what is right and we decide that we don’t have to do it.
That God has given us an inbuilt moral sense of what is right, and that we will willfully choose on occasion not to do it because it’s not convenient or because it serves are purposes not to do it.

As I read Scripture, it’s the sin in their life [not whether heard Jesus or not]. Scripture makes it plain that God is absolutely just.

Mark is reluctant to speculate about who will go to heaven or hell.

Q: [So in relation to the Dalai Lama]?

God knows his heart and I don’t.

He’s not a professing Christian. I don’t know what the state of his soul is otherwise. So, I think what I have to do is say God will judge each person as the NT makes very clear – what that person has done in his life, that’s his works will reflect his faith. And Matthew 24 or 25, I think it’s 25, it’s a very uncomfortable portion of Scripture aimed mostly at professing Christians who haven’t maintained their testimony.

And I think what that means is that people are not going to be judged by their words but by their actions.

In the case of the Dalai Lama, I am not sure it’s very profitable for me to say. On the one hand, I believe that Jesus Christ is the way to God. On the other hand, I have to say, the Dalai Lama will have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ as you and I will, and I’m glad I don’t have to judge him. God knows his heart and I don’t.

In other words, we really can’t say [who will end up in hell], and we have to leave it up to God.

I think he’s [the Dalai Lama’s] frankly misguided in what he thinks and teaches. The whole system he believes in. I think he’s just wrong. And, I would have to say that he probably would fall under condemnation of Scripture for being a false prophet. But I have to say, beyond that, I’m not prepared to go. Because my opinion is not worth very much because I know so little about it. And for that reason I guess I would be reluctant to condemn him. Not because I think he’s right, but because do you condemn anybody you don’t like?

While initially Mark indicates the Dalai Lama will be damned, Mark later shifts to explaining how actions are more important because they reflect authentic faith. Mark still believes in divine judgment, but his emphasis on “actions” stands in contrast to what most of the other evangelicals said. Mark concludes that who ends up in hell should be
left up to God. In a humble and sincere way, Mark vocalizes his thinking process, moving from seeing the Dalai Lama as damned to expressing uncertainty as to the fate of the Dalai Lama’s salvation.

Mark, Jane, Stuart, and Brian are all from the older group of subjects – they are also the most educated. Perhaps that explained their more nuanced perspectives coupled with (in the case of Mark, Jane, and Brian) all of them struggling somehow between what they were supposed to believe and what their conscience told them to be true. The rigidity and exclusive insistence of evangelical claims about salvation indicates the power of its literal-factual orientation to the Bible and theology.

\[1\] C.f. Josh McDowell *More than a Carpenter* Chapter 2: “Lord, Liar, or Lunatic?”
\[2\] C.f. Gerald M. May’s treatment on p. 159 in *The Awakened Heart*: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.”
\[3\] I think I heard the expression “be careful about reading [something] too literally” from Chris Anderson.
Chapter Five The Transforming Power of Evangelicalism

This chapter examines reports of the transforming power of evangelical faith. When evangelicals surrender to God through Jesus Christ, they experience radical joy, inspiration, and determination. God empowers and heals them of addictions to alcohol, psychological afflictions, self-absorption, and isolation. Life takes on new depth, vitality, and meaning as evangelicals become fully themselves through centering and trusting in God. Evangelicals encounter a God who provides guidance and sustenance in the daily circumstances of life.

For Pam, a 21 year-old ministry student, the relationship with God provides liberation from a painful psychological affliction. Pam struggled in high school with an eating disorder. She was not fully bulimic or anorexic, but “basically didn’t eat much.” Pam became “totally caught up in grades, athletics, good looks.” She continues:

I got so much attention in high school that it became who I was – my identity. I got wrapped up in that and this culture we live in is obviously about that. Coming to college, I really struggled with that [eating] – that was my way of feeling good about myself, [asking] was I skinny enough? It’s something I think I’ll struggle with for years – a process.

Q: How does that relate with your faith and walk with God?

It’s all totally intertwined. When I’m finding my peace, satisfaction, value in the Lord, I’m not concerned what people think about me. When I want the approval of others, when I want to feel good about myself – when I want all that, that’s when I fall back into wanting to look good and wanting this and wanting that. Basically, when I’m walking right with the Lord, it’s not a problem. And when I’m not, it is.

Surrendering her concerns to God frees Pam from painful self-criticism and self-absorption. Instead of anxiously striving to escape who she really is through obsession with changing herself, Pam is able to find peace and freedom when she lets go and trusts
in God. It’s only through fully giving her life to God that Pam can embrace who she really is.

Q: What does it mean to be saved?

The Bible says – confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Basically, putting your faith in Christ. Perfect example – Saul converted to Paul, the first thing he said was, Lord, what do you want me to do. That change of what do I want to do versus what do you want me to do. Surrender - surrendering – signing the title of my life over to someone else. So, believing that Jesus is God, that Jesus was God’s son sent down to die for our sins, believing our sins are taken away because we have confessed them, entering into a relationship with the Lord. And it [being saved] also implies repentance, I think sometimes repentance isn’t preached enough – repentance is a turning away from the old to the new. That doesn’t imply you have to be perfect. It’s in your heart – “Lord, I don’t want to walk in that way anymore, I want to follow you. I want to walk in your ways. Help me.” Surrender.

Q: Sounds like [there are] two key things here. Being in a relationship and believing some things. You have got to believe Jesus is the son of God sent down to die for everybody’s sins. So, it’s those two things? But, ultimately it’s that surrender?

They go together. It’s like if you are in a relationship with your spouse, but you don’t believe what they tell you, it wouldn’t make any sense – it’s like if I’m married to someone but I don’t believe your name is really this, or I don’t believe you were really born in this state, or I don’t believe that you are really going to provide for me, what kind of relationship is that? It’s nothing. In order to be in a relationship with Him, you have to believe what He says. You don’t want to be in a relationship with a liar. Belief and relationship go hand in hand.

Belief in Jesus as God leads to surrender to God through Christ. This relationship involves radical trust plus a deep level of intimacy. Evangelicals must believe their theology in order to trust in God.

I don’t want to go [to hell]. It’s that choice – it’s as if a life with Christ on earth isn’t enough, that to me is enough - getting to walk with Christ on earth, enjoying his presence on earth – but knowing that this is but a shadow of what we’ll encounter in Heaven. When I’m truly in the presence of the Lord and walking right with him – the joy that’s there. I think we now see in a mirror dimly but then we’ll see face to face, it says, we will know him as we are known. When you think that he knows every hair on our head, it’s written on the palm of his hand, his thoughts toward us are more than the sand on the shore – & when we are in glory, we will know him as
we are known. We will know him to his fullest extent – that’s just unfathomable to me. We have that promise. I want to be there.

Q. Death is not an end, but it’s really a beginning?

Exactly. And when you think how long our life is compared to eternity, our life is like that [snaps fingers] – we’re going to wake up and our life is going to be like that [snaps fingers]. We speak of spiritual truths, but that’s the real reality [the afterlife] – that’s more real than this is.

Eternity is more of a reality – the choices we make here will affect our reality there.

Strong beliefs in an afterlife go hand-in-hand with a healing surrender to God.

Like Pam, Erica, a 22 year-old English major, also suffered over her appearance and how she negatively saw herself.

In my life, like I was talking to you about before, I had an eating disorder for 7 years. And, it’s something that’s really - ... - it involves more than just food, it’s like an entirely different way of thinking about things. You know – if I get to a certain weight or look a certain way, I’ll be fine. It’s a huge thing. That’s something that God has totally changed in me. He’s changed the way that I view myself, because I realize the things that are important about me and the things that aren’t. The most important thing to me is not how I look, it’s not whether or not anybody else likes me – that’s not the most important thing about me, and it’s not important to God. I mean he does want me to be healthy, and to be wise with the things I choose to eat – and I should probably eat, and exercise, and sleep – those are probably healthy things.

As I gave [my eating disorder] to God, and said okay, I don’t care if you make me fatter, which is what I’m totally scared of, I don’t care what you do with me, but make me how you want me to be. He changed my mindset. I now can enjoy food. I can enjoy going out. I do think I eat pretty health-fully. I think because I gave those things to God, not only do I look at myself differently, but I have actually changed and I think I look better.

You can think whatever you want about that. Maybe you think I’m vain, whatever. But, when you give something to God, he cares about the things you care about. The Bible says you can cast your cares upon him because he cares about you. And so, God knew that I cared about that. So it’s not like I completely disregard the way that I look. I don’t have any makeup on today, and I feel fine. Basically, when God puts his hand to something, when God works on something, it’s better than you could have ever done on your own.
And, it's like people have gifts for music, or for writing – they might be good at them, but if they had given that to God, and let him use that gift, [then] it would be even better.

Like Pam, Erica is fundamentally unhappy with who she is and seeks to change herself. Through turning to God, Erica learns to accept and value herself as she is. What Erica cannot complete on her own, she is able to achieve in conjunction with God.

Within the last two years, a seven-year eating disorder is successfully brought under control. Erica moves from feeling anxious and negative about not looking perfect to a state of positive self-worth and liberation. God answers Erica's prayers and helps to free her, empowering her to take practical steps to find healing. Now, Erica sees and experiences life in a more positive, hopeful, and confident way.

Wayne, a 62 year-old retired forester, indicates personal crises are the catalyst for becoming an evangelical Christian. Wayne's life improves since having become "born again." He becomes more kind and compassionate, feeling the conviction of God's love for all people, not just those who are socially acceptable or those he feels comfortable with. This leads him to begin prison ministry.

Q: What led you to this way of being a Christian?

Basically what happened were crises in my life. The first part of it was when [my son was] over in Saudi Arabia [for operation desert shield/storm 1990-1991]. That began a really stressful year. Right after Christmas of 1990, when [my wife of 20 years] was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, that turned my world upside down. We didn't want to tell [my son] because we figured [he] had to focus on what [he was] doing to stay alive. And so we did tell [him] that [his] mom had been in the hospital for a couple of weeks with some lung problems. Apparently, without heavy duty chemotherapy, according to the doctor, [my wife] would have only lived for about six weeks after she was diagnosed with lung cancer. And it was a major involvement of both lungs, and it was inoperable. That was kind of the beginning of my life being turned upside down. Of course, [she] lived until about June 1st, and that was what, about five months. And that was with the heavy duty chemotherapy.

Q: How was your life before and how is it different now?
I’d say that like most everybody, before I accepted Christ, I was a very prideful person, and self-focused. In fact, I was the center of my own universe. In a way, I was my own god, because I gave myself credit for everything that I had and that I did. And I found it – I finally had a revelation just a couple of years ago it’s been – actually, I had a major idol in my life. Really, it was until [my wife] died. And that idol in my life was the Marine Corps. Because an idol is something, anything in our lives that comes between us and God. And it’s something that you go to for strength. So if I would get into a situation in my daily life before I accepted Christ, most of the time until I heard that [my wife] had terminal lung cancer – until that time, all the things that I was faced with, all the adversity in my life – what I’d do is I’d go back to the Marine Corps for strength. I didn’t go to God for strength. I’d go back and I’d rethink and relive maybe experiences I had at Parris Island and I’d draw strength from that. But what happened, when my life really went into crises – see, I thought I had control over everything. And the first inkling that I didn’t have control was when [my son was] over there in Saudi Arabia. And I knew I had absolutely no control over whether [he] lived or died over there. So that’s a big change, and I see that same thing in all these guys I work with. There’s no room for God in their life. It’s like talking to Brett about maybe going to church – it interferes with his fishing. So you can see how much importance he relegates that to. And so he’s in control of his life, and so are all these other guys.

Q: Or so they think?

Or so they think. But all of a sudden, you think you are in control of everything and things are going good, and then all of a sudden, here’s – well, I don’t have any control over what happens to [my son in Saudi Arabia], and all of a sudden I don’t have any control over the fact that [my wife] I know is going to die. And that, that all of a sudden – going back to the Marine Corps doesn’t do any good. You don’t get any strength from that. It doesn’t help in that area at all.

After finding his illusions of control shattered, Wayne learns to rely on and trust in God.

Now Wayne’s “strength” is in God and not his past experiences in the Marine Corps or his own ability to control his destiny. No longer does Wayne have to try to do everything himself; he can trust in the saving power of God.

While on a prison ministry trip in California, Wayne awakens in the night with a realization of compassion for all people including even the most disreputable prisoner. Wayne experiences this as a confirmation and validation of his “call” to go into prison yards to share the gospel with “hard core” convicts.
It was about Two o'clock in the morning in the Fresno Hilton and I woke up and once again it was like ... the tears were shooting out of my eyes ... spurting out of my eyes. I knew I had in my head all of this about God's love, mercy, forgiveness, and everything — and it was like a force that was moving that from my head to my heart, like a piston, and I knew at the center, the core of me, I knew that the sorriest guy in that jail that wasn't saved, that hadn't accepted Christ, was as important to God as my next door neighbor over here, as all my neighbors that aren't saved. Stuart, Jerry, and all those people...I knew that, and I knew that that's what I needed to do — that ministry. So for me, that was an affirmation from the Lord that I was in his will to do that ministry. There was no doubt in my mind about it, and I was given what I needed to do that ministry. And so that next day, when I went back into that same pod, there was a young guy who'd just had his 21st birthday in the jail, and he was one of the guys that had prayed for me. I asked him, did anything out of the ordinary happen to you last night? And, I didn't tell him anything. He said ... and he's a Pentecostal, usually the Pentecostals have the spiritual gift of tongues, he said the presence of the holy spirit was so powerful in the jail he just involuntarily began to speak in tongues while he was taking a shower, and so I told him what had happened, what had my experience had been. So for me, it was like my Christian life just took off like a skyrocket.

Q: Was it sadness, joy — the tears?

That's the only way I know how to describe it [is a feeling of moving from head to heart. I have a hard time explaining it]. The whole experience of hearing all the powerful Christian testimonies from the Bill Glass [prison ministry] people, and I believe it was the work of the Holy Spirit to not only prepare me for the ministry but to give me an affirmation that I was in God's will to do it.

God calls Wayne to prison ministry, filling him with a powerful sense of purpose. Wayne believes beyond doubt that he is carrying out God's will; as such, Wayne sees people differently. In this process, Wayne discovers a new compassion, recognizing all people (including the lowliest and most disreputable prisoners) as valuable and loved by God. A powerful experience of the Spirit confirms to Wayne that he is acting in accordance with God's will.

Wayne explains how he was prior to accepting Christ as his personal savior and how he is now.

So yeah, I'd say I was an arrogant person. I know I was given to a lot of obscenity and profanity. Picked that up in the Marine Corps, too. Didn't use it around women,
but I figured well, that’s the way men talk and that’s the way I talked. I know that I was abusive to people that I worked with. A lot of them thought it was great – I guess they liked to be abused.

Q: You were abusive to them? How?

Oh, those that were Christians I know were offended by my manner of speaking.

Q: You mean like obscenities?

Taking the Lord’s name in vain.

And I know that too much drinking – drinking was too important. That’s something that I think the Lord really took away from me. I know it wasn’t too long after I’d accepted Christ that the boys called me up cause it was always a big important thing to go to the J and L [tavern] Fridays after work. And I know that I drank too much there, cause that’s when you’d really start enjoying it – after you’ve had too much to drink. But, I went back, I thought I had to maintain contact with these guys – you know, maybe I can witness to them. Well, witnessing to drunks in taverns and bars is a highly specialized ministry that you need to be called on by the Lord to do it.

Anyway, I went this one time, and these guys had been drinking beer for a couple hours ahead of me. So, I sat down and they poured me out a beer, and I started listening to them talking. And it was like the Lord showed me – the same guys are talking about the same stuff they were 20 years ago. It could be 20 years ago. Was the same kind of drunk talk. And, it doesn’t really make a lot of sense. And yet they think it’s so eloquent – they’re being eloquent, and they are really having these in-depth discussions and conversations, but it was - empty. It was really sad. And then I look around and then I see all these guys in there, and I see all these guys in there that I’ve been seeing in there for years. And I’m thinking, this is the center of their lives. Right here. This is the most important thing they do, is come in here. This is their whole life. It was about all I could do to gag down the beer and leave. And that’s been about it.

That’s been about seven years ago. …

There’s nothing there with any eternal consequences that they have any interest or concern with – it’s all kind of banal, I guess you could say.

As an evangelical Christian, Wayne gains new perspective, able to see his friends and himself with new clarity. Previous activities that he accepted and enjoyed have now become meaningless and negative. He discerns how he was abusive in his manners of speech, and he can see where his friends have stagnated in their personal development.
Wayne realizes how his old life was one of escape into the illusions of control, coherence, and pleasure through the intoxication of alcohol abuse.

Q: So you think you drank too much before?

I think I did. I mean there were many times when I was sweating it, trying to get home. If I'd have been stopped...or if you were in an accident, you're going to know you had too much to drink. Anyway, I've known others that were delivered of hard core heroin addiction, stuff like that.

Some things disappear, and others the Lord works through the Holy Spirit from within to bring about change. And what the Holy Spirit does is he brings conviction upon you about certain things, and what happens when you are convicted about them is that you don't want to do them anymore.

It's not – I'm just going to quit on my own. The way the Holy Spirit works is – you don't want to do it anymore. And when you're convicted and then you're obedient to it, then you have that empowerment. And the lord uses that to do a work within us, somehow, to bring about whatever it is.

Wayne feels God has freed him from his past alcohol abuse that previously had led to dangerous jaunts home from the tavern after having had too much to drink. In the cases of Pam, Erica, and Wayne, God is understood to have brought clarity and healing into the turmoil and fracture in their lives.

Jamie, a 19 year-old ministry student, plans to go to Hungary where she'll serve as a missionary.

Q: What led you to this way of being a Christian?

I was raised in a Christian house, the youngest of four. The other three siblings all went through areas where they struggled and failed, major backsliding, not holding to their faith. So, I would watch that growing up, and watch their mistakes, and try to be as right on as I could. I accepted Christ at six.

Q: What do you mean when you say you accepted Christ?

To make a profession that I acknowledge Jesus Christ came to earth to die for my sins, acknowledge I'm a sinner and deserve to go to hell, and I believe that, and will follow Christ.
Being six, you can’t really grasp it. But, still I tried to live the good Christian life as I grew up.

I guess the big turning point was probably two years ago. A year and a half ago. Reading through Romans, actually, talking about the pious Jews looking down on the gentiles, and it just hit me about pride. And it dawned on me that I was no better than any of them. Little sins I’d been doing – lying, little tiny ones, were just as great, just as deserving of punishment. So, I had to make a decision of what do I do? I’ve had all this pride in my life. I can’t say if I wasn’t saved for all those years, but that was a big turning point as far as following Christ. It became a very real part of my life how prideful I’d been.

Q: [How did your faith change from being more of a routine practice?]

Before, it was routine, it was something to do. But, once I realized it was nothing I did, realized what actually happened when a perfect sinless God took my place – took my sins and I had absolutely nothing to do with it – it had turned from a routine into a love. And, just a humble, I don’t deserve anything of what he did for me.

So, the big thing was it changed from routine to love.

Jamie’s faith changes from a chore to an intimate, loving activity.

Rebekah is a 20 year-old Spanish major.

The relationship with God is so intimate and personal. He’s the lover of my soul, you know. I mean yeah, I feel alone, but not in that deepest of deeps part, not in that part.

I don’t know, things that stick with you. God’s not so concerned with how I feel but He’s just glad that I’m his, he’s just glad, like when you hold your little baby in your arms, you may be looking, the baby may be looking off in all kinds of different directions and not even paying attention to you, but you’re just happy that that baby’s in your arms. And that’s how the Lord thinks of me, you know? Like I may be off in so many – my eyes may be on so many different things, maybe on things that they shouldn’t even be on or whatever, but he’s just satisfied that I’m in His arms, because I accepted His son’s sacrifice. he’s just happy that He gets to hold me for an eternity and not let me go because he’s satisfied with my sin because of His son.

Q: You just know that thought, deep down? You may have these times when you’re in the darkness, but after 2-3 days at the most something breaks through – like you’ll get a letter, you’ll run into somebody. Something happens and you move out of that. When you’re out of it, and most of the time, you really realize that sense of God just wanting to have you in his arms somewhat analogous to a parent with a baby. You just intuitively sort of feel that?
Well, I mean – that’s the foundation of it all. That’s the basis of the gospel. To paraphrase, God wants to hold you, but there’s a problem with sin in the way, so God sent his son and Jesus Christ died for you so that He can hold you, cause that’s what He wants to do, you know? I mean I think a lot of times those times come because – the times of loneliness come because I’ve gotten away from that. Because maybe I’m focusing on my own holiness, or I’m focusing on works, or I’m focusing on people that I don’t need to be focusing on. So, all of a sudden, I’m feeling far away from my true love, you know? And it brings me back to that core thing. That he just wants to hold me, and he made a way so that he could. And that’s it. Period. It brings you out of a place of brokeness. It’s like, thanks Lord, thank you. I love you too. You know?

Rebekah explains how her life changed after she became a Christian.

And for the first time too I had hope. And I mean not like in a casual way. I was full of hope. And it wasn’t like a naïve hope. I had a reason to be hopeful. It was the first time that I had a reason to be hopeful! I had evidence to be hopeful.

And I had hope. I guess the two things that just come to mind when I think of that time and why it was so different and why I described it as being full of the holy spirit. Because I had hope for the first time, and because that abyss in my soul was whole for the first time.

Q: Was there peace too? Contentedness?

In a really, really deep sort of way. But there was also a lot of anxiety. It was like, what is this going to mean for my life? Like, my life is going to change. Like everything about me is going to change. There really is a God. And I can really hope in something. My life is going to change. If there really is a God, I’m going to live for Him. Forget living for all this other crap. I’m going to live for God if He’s really there. So there was also an anxiety like – what next? Ahh.

But there was also like a deep peace. I wish there was a word to like...it was deeper than deep. There’s deep, and then there’s like deep. It was the deep deep. The abyss deep.

Rebekah finds liberation from the pain and meaninglessness that pervades her soul. Prior to becoming an evangelical, Rebekah lives a life of empty sex with men she doesn’t love, alcohol to kill the pain, drugs to take her away from herself. Just as Wayne, Erica, and Pam ran from themselves through avoidance behaviors (alcohol abuse and eating disorders) until they found God through Christ, so too does Rebekah seek to escape who
she really is. Now, her earlier disassociation is replaced with a sense of purpose.

Abundance of life and healing is found following the will of God. Authentic self-acceptance is not found until God is embraced. Self-rejection and denial gives way to new life in Christ.

Q: What does it mean to be saved?

Just trust. Bank it all. Trust that what Jesus did for you at the cross is the way to salvation. And trust that now the Lord is going to be satisfied with your sin because you believe what he said about his son and you believe what is son said about him. Just trust that. Stop trusting in other things – your intellect, your own good works, and you just surrender. Surrender that to the work of the cross.

Trust fully in God is to trust in the literal-factuality of the atonement. Surrendering everything to God is connected to believing in the vicarious atonement of Jesus. God vindicated Jesus and so we can trust that God will vindicate us. Rebekah trusts God will save her in the present and in the afterlife.

Q: Surrender everything to Jesus?

Yeah, lose your life that you might gain it. I almost want to read a verse from Titus. Or do you want me to put it in my own words.

Q: Yeah, can you put it in your own words?

It's just like all the loneliness and just those times at night when you're empty – I just remember nights being awake and not being able to sleep, just being full of confusion or boredom or just feeling so alone – or just those times when that darkness invades your soul. I don't know that you've ever experienced anything like that, but just this fear of foreign darkness, it's just invading your soul, and invading your reality. And you can't escape it. In that moment... I've experienced it a few times, and they're brief, but that is hell, right there. That is the closest to hell that I'll ever get. Those moments of invading darkness, bleakness, hopelessness, aloneness, emptiness. Being saved means never ever ever having to do that again. Ever, ever, ever. It means just all of your insufficiency not mattering anymore because Jesus becomes your sufficiency. It just means being okay, you know. It just means being okay.

To be held forever, and loved forever, and live forever. Everything that I've ever dreamed of. I could dream the richest, sweetest, most colorful, intimate dream ever,
and it wouldn’t even come close to the reality of what I’m going to be living for the rest of eternity. Just being saved from anything that isn’t full. Just being able to enter fullness, all the time. Being saved from this – and even worse than this. Being rescued.

The emotional and psychological pain that previously led Rebekah to self-destructiveness becomes a motivation to embrace God in Christ. Being saved frees evangelicals from the dark depression that tries to destroy their spirit in this world. Instead of being oppressed by fear and darkness, people can be content to simply exist.

22 year-old biochemistry/biophysics and chemistry major Bruce sums up quite clearly why he benefits from his faith and from God.

Q: What do you receive?

I receive assurance. I receive a completeness of life. I receive a hope for the future. I receive meaningfulness for everything that I see about me – not that I necessarily understand everything, but it becomes meaningful because I know it’s in God’s good will even if I don’t necessarily know what that will is. I receive the ability to handle any circumstance and handle it with a sense of joy – I distinguish between joy and happiness. Happiness is dependent on circumstances. Joy is independent of circumstances. Joy isn’t necessarily a bubbly, happy feeling, but a lack of worry perhaps would be a way to define joy. And sometimes I have fairly frequent sinus headaches, and sometimes when I’m having those headaches I feel the most joy in my life because I can just sit there and praise God and remember the fact that the rightness of the world does not depend on how I’m feeling but on what God’s doing.

Bruce implies that without his faith, life would be lacking and adverse circumstances (like his regular sinus headaches) would be all the more oppressive. Through his faith and relationship with God, Bruce gains confidence however difficult his situation. Like Rebekah, Bruce finds hope. Like Wayne, Erica, and Pam, Bruce orients himself to God, finding a satisfaction in doing so that sustains him even when he feels ill. In each case, the relationship with God through Christ makes life more worthwhile.
An interpretive comment on the meaning of evangelical faith comes from an unlikely source: Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann, the source of demythologization (a technique for re-interpreting the Bible for a contemporary audience by rejecting its literal-factuality), writes about the fruits of right relationship with God.

The authentic life, on the other hand, would be a life based on unseen, intangible realities. Such a life means the abandonment of all self-contrived security. This is what the New Testament means by “life after the Spirit” or “life in faith”. For this life we must have faith in the grace of God. It means faith that the unseen, intangible reality actually confronts us as love, opening up our future and signifying not death but life. The grace of God means the forgiveness of sin, and brings deliverance from the bondage of the past. The old quest for visible security, the hankering after tangible realities, and the clinging to transitory objects, is sin, for by it we shut out invisible reality from our lives and refuse God’s future which comes to us as a gift. But once we open our hearts to the grace of God, our sins are forgiven; we are released from the past. This is what is meant by “faith”: to open ourselves freely to the future. But at the same time faith involves obedience, for faith means turning our backs on self and abandoning all security. It means giving up every attempt to carve out a niche in life for ourselves, surrendering all our self-confidence, and resolving to trust in God alone, in the God who raises the dead (2 Cor 1. 9) and who calls the things that are not into being (Rom. 4. 17). It means radical self-commitment to God in the expectation that everything will come from him and nothing from ourselves. Such a life spells deliverance from all worldly, tangible objects, leading to complete detachment from the world and thus to freedom. ¹

Though Bultmann rejects the literal-factuality of first century Christian beliefs, his perspective of the lived-Christian life fits the way evangelicals center in God. Through literally and factually embracing the first century mythical belief system and trusting in God, evangelicals find forgiveness and freedom from self-preoccupation. As such, evangelicals “die” to their “false” selves to be “born again.”² Life is transformed through relationship with God who meets them as “love” giving new life and freeing from bondage to a painful past. As sins are forgiven, evangelicals learn to trust in God regarding their future.
Life with God leads to freedom from self-absorption, making life worthwhile and peaceful. When evangelicals take a “step of faith” to trust in and surrender to God, God confers upon them guidance and healing. Existence becomes meaningful as they are empowered by a relationship with a loving, intimate God known in Christ.

---

2 Marcus Borg, email correspondence 8/4/02. Here Borg is writing about the term “dying to self” which is part of the process of being reborn in Christ that evangelicals and other Christians experience. According to Borg: “The issue is dying to our ‘false self’ (to use Thomas Keating’s phrase). The ‘false self’ is the isolated pre-occupied self, as well as the self conferred by culture. And the ‘false self’ is the natural result of socialization. Hence, we all need the process of being ‘born again.’”
Chapter Six Intellect and Piety: A Case Study

The purpose of this chapter is to examine and illustrate in detail how life is viewed according to an evangelical perspective. Mark, a 59 year-old history professor, is a thoughtful, intelligent person who values being an evangelical Christian. Mark’s stories provide a case study elaborating upon evangelical strengths illustrated in the previous chapter: to trust in and surrender to God brings a healing and fullness to life. Evangelical faith “works” on a personal, spiritual level. Through trusting in God’s direction in life and in the Bible, evangelicals find freedom and authentic existence. Evangelical faith can fail when extrapolated outside the personal realm. Evangelicals extrapolate from the fulfilling personal experience of God’s acting in small ways in their personal life to God’s acting more dramatically in the rest of the world. A combination of literal-factual theology coupled with the conviction of God’s involvement in people’s lives leads evangelicals to believe God is in control of nations, natural events, and other people. In this larger context, the authenticity of evangelical faith breaks down. Mark shows how evangelicalism is rich when applied on a personal level and limited when applied to the larger world.

Mark begins by speaking of the non-rational and deeper-than-emotional God who is present across the terrain of his life.

You know, they [CS Lewis and George McDonald] appeal to me on an emotional level, on an aesthetic level, but they wouldn’t appeal to me in some way if there wasn’t a spiritual level. Because as a Christian, I have to think that spiritual truth informs everything. I love music. I used to say and I think this is still true - that my three favorite [hobbies] are reading, listening to sacred classical music, and travel. And I like all three. But, not all [are] rational. I love a certain kind of music. It’s aesthetic, but it also has a sacred component to it, a spiritual component to it. The same way with certain kinds of art that I like, perhaps. So, it’s that spiritual component that to me as a Christian – it’s just kind of – it’s a part of everything. And, I can find it in surprising places.
Q: Really? You mean just sort of in everyday life?

I find it in everyday life with my doctrine of providence that I see things every week but probably every day, I think I see the hand of God. But more than that, I read a lot of secular literature. I read a lot of biography, that's maybe my favorite form of literature outside of theology and history. And, I see things in there that as a Christian I interpret in a particular way. Maybe the biographer didn't, maybe the subject didn't -- but I see the hand of God moving. I mean, somebody says, my life just seemed to happen to turn out that way, [and] it turned out wonderfully. I think, is that an accident? Even for a non-Christian. If you don't believe in luck, you believe in providence. Then, even for non-believers, God often brings extraordinary things in your life.

So, it's as if I have a worldview that encompasses everything. I would say a person who reads Christian -- who reads only sacred literature, is missing out on a lot. You've never heard Beethoven? This beautiful, secular music. You've never read a good secular novel in which you see maybe some surprising things. So, to me that's a kind of link - my Christian worldview -- that ties lots of disparate things together.

God transcends the intellectual and becomes deeply personal. Mark gives the credit for positive events in his life to God. The realization that God is active in all aspects of his life provides Mark with confidence and validates his evangelical beliefs. Mark does not mention God as bearing any responsibility for catastrophe or bad fortune.

Q: Could you give another example of something that just might be in the day to day -- where you might see the hand of God?

The idea of providence is based on the idea of a sovereign God who really determines what happens in the universe. And, if you read any Christian literature -- Protestant, Catholic, Puritan, Evangelical, up until about 1900, the doctrine of providence was assumed -- that God really does things in your life. And, I remember where I first read about this, I was teaching a Sunday school lesson. Somehow I discovered this and wanted to find out something about this doctrine, so I read a book on providence, and reading that book really made me convinced that everything that happened in my life was determined by God. And, I began to see things that were put together in my life that could be explained by luck, but I just didn't think they were. I could give you a long list if you had time, but I'll give you a couple of examples, because it's usually in the minor things, not the major things. Promotion to professor -- that's not providence.
Mark obtains insight from a book and then applies that insight to his experience. First comes intellectual assent to belief and then comes the seeing of experience through the filter of that belief. This is similar to the way evangelicals see the Bible, God, and life through already determined assumptions about the nature of reality. Mark also observes that God's activity is usually manifest in "minor" occurrences, not "major" ones.

But let me give you an example. When my kids were fairly young — I'll say maybe 8, 10, and 12. They were in a musical at our church. This kind of a cute little musical called. We had a very good musical director. They practiced for probably 3-4 months every week, one afternoon a week. And, I was going to go to Philadelphia to attend a conference and I'd ordered my ticket, but I hadn't gotten it yet. I'd ordered it and here I discovered I was going to be gone the Sunday they would perform. They were very disappointed Dad wasn't going to be home for this. I said, well, I've already ordered my ticket. And my daughter said, you can change it. I thought, well, I'll try. So, the next day I was sitting at my desk and I rang up whatever flight it was and asked if there was any flights out of Philadelphia? Yes. Are there any tickets available? No, all sold out. And, as probably was the case, because all those convention people were leaving on Sunday afternoon, after the conference. I remember I talked for some time to her, and I checked every single possibility of getting out of Philadelphia on Sunday afternoon which would put me in Eugene at about 4 so I could get back about 6. Nothing. Nothing at all. And so I hung up. And, I knew my daughters would be disappointed. So, I bowed my head and prayed for 3-4 minutes. And, if God wanted me to attend, he would find a way. And so, then I called the airline again and to my dismay, I got the same lady I had talked to 5 minutes before. And, I was embarrassed to ask her if there were any seats.

[laughter]

I could hear the exasperation in her voice. She said, with not very carefully concealed disdain, no, I just checked 5 minutes ago, and there aren't any seats. And I said, would you mind checking again? I heard this kind of gasp on the other end and she said, a seat has just become available sir. And, you know, that's so miniscule, so minor, that you could say well, luck happens. To me, that's not luck. To me, it's a thing I've seen repeated hundreds of times if not thousands of times in my life in many different ways. And to me, it indicates that God controls our life. He controls the situation. He's as interested in small things as he is in large things. That, it never hurts to pray. That if God is really in control of things, then we ought to pray about little things. I see providence many times during the week. What I call special providence, not a miracle but something in which God does something special that I couldn't expect. Often the answer to prayer.
But, I see one or two striking examples to me virtually every time I travel abroad. And, I go once or twice a year — usually to Europe. And I have seen so many cases in which I’d been lost, [didn’t] know where to go, I’d run out of money, needed a taxi or something. I can just name case after case after case where I believe God has providentially intervened to get me where I needed to go, to find a ride [when] I didn’t have any money, or get me to a hotel where I’d forgotten the name and place of the hotel. I mean just cases like that. So, that I’ve come almost to expect that when I go to Europe something is going to happen that I haven’t counted on, and somehow I’m going to get out of it.

And there’s where your worldview is really determined. If you believe in contingency, and a Darwinian universe, then sure, it all happens by luck. But, if you’re Christian, it’s part of that pattern that you see God working, not in a theoretical way, not just in pages of Scripture, but every day of your life. I believe frankly that that is one of the very strongest arguments for a Christian belief. That God providentially acts and that if you’re a believer, you’ll see it if you’re looking for it. And, I’m not even surprised anymore, the things that happen that I couldn’t expect to happen.

Because he is able to unexpectedly acquire the plane ticket and see his children perform, Mark infers that God has intervened to make it possible. From that divine intervention, Mark concludes that God is in control of everything in life, even the “small things.” Thus, evangelicals should trust in God and pray about everything because God can bring at least some good if not radically alter the situation for the better. God is in complete control, listens to evangelicals’ prayers, and acts on their behalf. Mark’s lived-experience provides inspiration as well as evidence for the validity of his theological beliefs.

On a trip to Moscow, Mark loses his friend and travel guide. Unable to speak or read Russian, Mark is alone in a railway center the size of Grand Central Station. Mark explains how God’s intervention rescues him from becoming hopelessly lost in a foreign city.

I entered this one divide and I didn’t know whether to go right or left. I didn’t have the foggiest notion, so I went left. The only reason I went left I’m sure is because I’m left handed. Instinctively, from the gut level, I’ll go left instead of right. So, I went left and I got on this train and I thought, well, gosh, now I know they’re
changing trains at least once coming in, so I'll stay on the same one and get off at
the change. But, I really didn't know where I was going. I was really flying blind.
And, I was going to get off at the next station, and all of a sudden I heard somebody
shout, [Mark!] I looked around, and here was my Hungarian friend. And, he had
ended up on the same car going back. I said, well, I'm glad to see you. I said, I guess
we get off probably at the next station. He said, no, we don't get off there, we go to
such and such a place. Then he said, we have to change not once but twice. It turned
out to be rather complicated. He could read Russian. He knew how to get there. If
he hadn't seen me on that car, I would still be wandering around on the outskirts of
Moscow. I mean, what are the chances, in that huge city, of having the one man in
Moscow who knew me and could help me being on the same train at that time and
on the very same car - and in my getting there. I mean it's statistically highly
improbable. And, I have to think that God providentially provided him to be there.
To me, it's work out that sort of way so many times, it's not even surprising. I should
be more surprised than I am. But, to me, that's an indication that every day of my
life, God is involved in my life and watching over me.

Q: Is it that God's involved? Or, more than that, that God's in control?

God is in control. I make decisions based on the best evidence I have available, and
they're often wrong. I can't tell you the times I'd made mistakes and I should have
ended up in bad places and I think I was saved from the bad outcomes of my
mistakes by God's providential order. Not always, but sometimes. It's not that I'm
saying all things really turn out for the best and they're all good, because I've had my
share of disappointments – I've had my share of things go wrong, and things
haven't turned out the way I wanted. But, I guess I just see these things happen so
many times –

There's a verse in Lamentations that says, thy mercies are new every morning. And, I
think I see the meaning of that. If your experience of God is based on what
happened last week or last year, it's not a living relationship.

So, when I talk about head and heart, which I think in the Christian life ought to be
balanced, I also have a feeling of an ongoing experience with God. Not just in
prayer, and in church, and reading Scripture, and fellowship with other Christians but
also in life. It just seems to me that I see God in life, in my life. In events that
happen. That to me is one of the great privileges (I guess I would say) being a
believer.

Mark's faith leads him to look carefully at his situation and discern God's involvement in
his being found. Mark is empowered by his belief that God acts in unexpected and
liberating ways to take care of evangelicals. God can bring good out of any situation, no
matter how confusing, mysterious, or difficult.
Next, Mark extrapolates from his positive personal experience to infer the nature of God's involvement in the larger world. Mark thinks that just as God can determine little events in his life, so too can God make big changes in world events.

I feel that Scripture has a good deal more than that, because it teaches us what God is like, what the world is like, what Satan is like. And, that is something that has come to me maybe more than anything else from reading Scripture theologically. To see what it teaches about the world.

I'll give you just one example. Psalm 37 is a psalm that has impacted me very strongly. The theme of Psalm 37 the wicked will flourish like a huge Oak tree everywhere evil - evil rulers, evil empires, are around you. They seem to flourish. The just man is beaten down. It isn't the righteous who are on top, it's the wicked people. And, the poor man who's righteous is likely to say, why not join them if you can't beat them? And the point of the psalm is - don't do that. The little that a righteous man has is better than the wealth of the wicked man. And, then it goes on to say, God's time for the wicked man will come. You saw the oak tree flourishing - suddenly, [everything's] gone, his fall comes quick. It may seem too long in coming, but it comes very quickly. And, it's - I've read that many, many times and I remember thinking, there's more here than pietistic psalm. There's something that teaches me something about the real world that we're living in.

I'll never forget sitting on this bus, reading about the fall of Ceausescu. I thought - this is something that I can understand happening because it's the way that Psalm 37 describes the fall of the wicked. They flourish for a long time, but eventually they'll be cut down.

It made a very strong impact on my thinking. In fact, if I ever write a book on Christianity and history, I'm going to put that example in. Because reading the way it was described in the Time account of this man who had spent many years of his life creating an absolute dictatorship and his people lived in complete fear -

Q: Really repressive.

Oh, terribly repressive. And suddenly, in a matter of a few hours, everything ebbed away.

It's remarkable. He went out to speak. There was one Hungarian who lived in town in Rumania who had begun to protest communism. Until this one brave Lutheran minister started to protest the communist regime, no one would do anything because you could end up with your throat cut the next day. But somehow, he got away with it. I'm trying to think of the name of that town. And, he began to preach, and it became this light in this dark country in which thousands of people would come. And so finally, the secret police came to arrest him and thousands of people stood
around the church. They were prepared to give their lives if the tanks were going
to roll in. They couldn’t arrest this Lutheran pastor and Ceausescu was outraged at
this. He had a famous [and] fierce secret police. He had his capital, Bucharest,
honeycombed with tunnels underneath. He had a television set so he could
communicate with all the major players at the top level of Rumanian society.

He could speak with all the governors of the provinces just by sitting in front of the
television camera, carry on his communication with television. And when there
started to be some rioting he ordered the minister of the interior or maybe it was a
general to put it down, and the person said he wouldn’t do it. He wouldn’t order his
men to fire on the people. [The general] was shocked by Ceausescu’s order. This
man would shoot his own son if he had to.

He decided to – in the old communist style – to give a speech and crush all the
opposition. So, he arranged to have this large group of several thousand people – he
went out on the balcony to talk and there had been some students who had been
protesting at university, and when they heard that Ceausescu was going to talk, they
made their way a few blocks to the square and stood back. And here he came out
and was going to start haranguing in good old Russian style, speaking several hours –
and he spoke awhile, and suddenly, these university students started shouting and
heckling him. He was so discombobulated he stopped – and all this was being
televised nationally. He stopped and he looked flabbergasted and he tried to continue
and couldn’t. So, he went inside. And everyone in Rumania saw this. Here was the
great man who was shouted down by a few students. In the old days, the students
would have been dragged off and shot. And, within a few hours, he’d left the palace
to escape. It was just like – he had this power, and it was like it just ebbed away.

Q: It was gone.

It was gone. And, he took a helicopter and he was taken to someplace and people in
his entourage saw his weakness – they realized that if he didn’t go, he’d be taking the
whole bunch with them. So, a few of his top people who surrounded him arrested
him and his wife, put them on trial in a kangaroo court, tried them, and shot them.

Q: Is that right?

Yeah.

Q: Shot both of them?

Shot them both. All of this happened not in days, weeks, months – but only in a few
hours. A man on top of everything – suddenly it evaporates. I remember reading this
extremely fascinating account in Time magazine – you know that’s Psalm 37. I
would wonder how a man could lose his power so quickly. That’s the way God deals
with tyrants. They think they can rule by fear and God erects a kind of boundary –
you go this far, and then that’s it. You can see that in so many tyrants – you can see
it in Hitler, you can see it in Pol Pot. And again, it seems to me that I have a handle on understanding God's ways in politics. Not by miraculous intervention, but what I call God's temporal activity. He acts through natural affairs, ordinary affairs, but at some point [the evil leader will fall]. That's indicated everywhere in Scripture. If you want to know what I mean, go home and read Psalm 37 and I think you'll see what I mean.

Mark sees a ruthless dictator rapidly deposed under incredible circumstances as divine intervention; God removes the evil leader just as in Psalm 37. Mark derives validation and reinforcement for his evangelical faith by turning to Psalm 37 because for him, this psalm speaks both to God's activity in the personal as well as the global. While Psalm 37 speaks well to a devotional trust in God, it fails to offer consistent advice regarding geopolitical events.

Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; For like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, The justice of your cause like the noonday sun. [Psalm 37: 1 – 6]

God takes care of God's followers even though evil people prosper.

God's followers must trust in God, for God will strengthen them even in times of trial.

If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand. I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed. [Psalm 37: 23 – 26]

Even in adversity, God will provide just as God has in the past.

I have seen a wicked and ruthless man flourishing like green tree in its native soil, but he soon passed away and was no more; though I looked for him, he could not be found
Consider the blameless, observe the upright; 
there is a future for the man of peace. But all sinners will be destroyed; 
the future of the wicked will be cut off. [Psalm 37: 35 – 38]

Even if the immoral, selfish, and outright evil are successful, believers are enjoined to have faith because eventually evil “sinners” will be punished in this world.

Psalm 37 speaks about how to live the spiritual life. By trusting in God, the faithful are rewarded. Believers should not obsess over what they dislike, and they should not become envious of those who manipulate and hurt others. Evangelicals should not worry about what they have no control over but instead ought to live their lives as authentically as possible through centering in God, the opposite of fearful self-protection and self-obsession. Psalm 37 offers devotional spiritual advice that mirrors the way in which evangelical Christianity works persuasively in the lives of its adherents on a personal, pietistic level.

However, Psalm 37 fails if evangelicals see it literally-factually, concluding God limits and eventually removes all evil leaders from power. Evangelicals feel compelled to see God in this way because they apply literal-factual presuppositions about the Old Testament to contemporary events. God did not stop Hitler before millions suffered and died: if God intervened, God took God’s time. God did not stop Mao or Stalin or the butchers in Algeria or the mass murderers in Rwanda. Millions were murdered and God did nothing. And yet, to adhere to a rigidly literal-factual view of the Old Testament means evangelicals are compelled to deduce that what inerrant Scripture said about the world several thousand years ago is applicable today. If God destroyed evil rulers then, God will destroy evil rulers now. Mark’s literal-factual view of the Bible and his experience of God acting in his own personal life reinforce Mark’s conviction that God is
in complete control. Mark told me to read Psalm 37 as if the meaning about God being in control of evil rulers would be obvious, indicating the power of the presuppositions that govern Mark’s thinking.

Evangelical trust in God facilitates their faith. God is active, influencing personal events for the good of believers. Positive events in evangelical’s lives reinforce their convictions about the inerrancy of Scripture and the omnipotence of God. Divine intervention in personal lives is extrapolated to the world-at-large, whereby evangelical theology breaks down in its failure to account for the relationship between a loving God and the blackest of evil.
Chapter Seven Analysis: Strong Piety and Limited Theology

This chapter investigates the limitations placed on individuals by evangelical theology. Evangelical thinking often limits comprehension of the Bible, theology, and other important aspects of modern life. Such thinking is characterized by a largely unconscious projection of preconceived ideas drawn from nineteenth century theology coupled with a narrow, insular focus that rejects the validity of other perspectives. Evangelicals are not aware of the impact of modernity upon their beliefs, nor do they see the conflict between their modern perspectives and the immorality in the Bible. However, even though evangelicals emphasize inerrancy in scripture, they prove capable of acting contrary to its teachings with regard to ethical issues like slavery. For all its limitations, evangelicalism focuses its adherents upon God in ways that transform their lives.

In the Scandal of the Evangelical Mind, evangelical Christian and Wheaton college professor Mark Noll identifies evangelical thinking that leads to the oversimplification and misunderstanding of important, complex issues. Noll laments the "uncritical adoption of intellectual habits from the nineteenth century." According to Noll, there are "several" patterns of 19th century thinking that "undercut the possibility for a responsible intellectual life":

These included a weakness for treating the verses of the Bible as pieces in a jigsaw puzzle that needed only to be sorted and then fit together to possess a finished picture of divine truth; an overwhelming tendency to "essentialism," or the conviction that a specific formula could capture for all times and places the essence of biblical truth for any specific issue concerning God, the human condition, or the fate of the world; a corresponding neglect of forces in history that shape perceptions and help define the issues that loom as most important to any particular age; and a self-confidence, bordering on hubris, manifested by an extreme anti-traditionalism that casually discounted the possibility of wisdom from earlier generations.
Many evangelicals believe that they can go to the Bible and derive clear truths about God and life without having to take into consideration history or social and cultural perspectives that influence their conclusions. This is especially problematic when people reach conclusions they believe to be either inspired by God or the actual words of God. Through this approach, the Bible is oversimplified to present conclusions that are at variance with its complexity. These can limit or ruin understanding of a passage, whether for personal devotion or a broader understanding of God's activity in the world. To study the Bible and to view God narrowly in these ways bodes ill for considering such issues as salvation, God's revelation, and the meaning of the Bible.

The evangelical approach fails to recognize how its modern biases influence its interpretations, thereby misidentifying its conclusions with the prescriptions of an all-powerful God. Noll elaborates on this evangelical dilemma by quoting contemporary dispensationalist Craig Blaising. Blaising criticizes the limits of dispensational thinking:

the problem is the failure to recognize that all theological thought, including one's own theological thought, is historically conditioned by the tradition to which that theologian belongs as well as personal and cultural factors such as education or experience. These factors condition an interpreter to think in a certain way. Awareness of them can be a step towards recognizing a misunderstanding.

Noll and Blaising suggest people are influenced by their time and culture. Without critical assessment of evangelicals' viewpoints, they cannot discern the difference between their own modern perspective and what lies in the text. Only through conscious examination can people discern what is a product of their culture and what is grounded in their theology. Evangelicals want to privilege their theology as though it is inspired directly by God and hence, without error. This confuses God-ordained insights of
theology for all times and places with the historically and socially limited values of past foreign cultures.

Some evangelical leaders demonstrate the limited approach that concerns Noll. Bart’s deliberate isolation from other theological perspectives in Christianity leaves him unequipped to speak to the needs of his congregation. A 54-year old pastor, Bart comments: “I have never gone to seminary. I didn’t take any courses on the deeper things of theology or transubstantiation or [this sort of] garbage. I just know what the Bible says.” Bart might think his knowledge is pure and that he’s reaching legitimate conclusions by opening his Bible to hear from God. When his orientation to the Bible and theology is linked to assessments of salvation and the right of others to practice their own religions, problems can result due to this judgmental and narrow orientation. Pastor Bart severely impedes his ability to lead his church to greater encounter with themselves and God if he refuses to at least consider the merit of other theological positions. Modeling a one-sided, arrogant dogmatism limits Bart’s ability to broadly engage the full potential of theology and the Bible. As for the other interview subjects, only a few (Mark, Jane, Brian, and Stuart primarily) seem well-versed in differing perspectives regarding scripture. The majority of those interviewed were quite confident in their own perspectives while making little or no mention of other points of view.

Noll says the “lack of self-consciousness” in evangelical thought limits a perceptive understanding of theology and life. Noll refers to the specific problem of over-confident Bible interpretation and then moves to the consequences of such thinking. The issue is not the interpretation of this particular passage (which is omitted) but the style of thinking involved:
When, for example, Scofield interpreted obscure, contested biblical passages—like the “weeks” of Daniel 9:24—as if his interpretation was the only one possible and as if the bearing of his interpretation on the general meaning of the Bible was intuitively compelling, he modeled a style that had anything but beneficial effects on evangelical thinking. If intellectual life involves a certain amount of self-awareness about alternative interpretations or a certain amount of tentativeness in exploring the connection between evidence and conclusions, it was hard to find any encouragement for the intellectual life in the self-assured dogmatism of fundamentalism.

To infer from “obscure” and “contested biblical passages” that there is only one possible meaning suggests a rigidity of thought closed to outside perspectives. By reflecting upon the logic of their perspective while taking into consideration other points of view, evangelicals might be able to more effectively interpret the Bible in meaningful ways.

Evangelicals lack humility regarding the important, complex matter of salvation. The majority of those I spoke with expressed little tentativeness in assessing who is eternally damned. Pastor Bart told me that it was only possible to believe in Jesus exactly as he did, and that I’d better choose his correct approach because my eternal salvation was at stake. This rigid and unbending certainty about an evangelical monopoly on the truth is precisely what Noll warns against. Evangelicals cannot be sure of the validity of their own orientation without at least being open to what is of value in the orientations of others. Those who affirm a God of love that would damn the Dalai Lama to hell for all eternity demonstrate such narrow-mindedness. With the exception of Mark, Stuart, Jane, and Brian, the rest of the subjects are over-confident on matters like salvation that seemed to require more consideration and restraint. Distinct from all the other interview subjects, Brian emphatically states that the Dalai Lama is a wise and spiritual person who should be taken seriously for the large share of “the truth” that he holds.
Evangelical Christians must develop a Christian worldview that speaks effectively to complex issues and areas of interest in modern society. Noll asserts that for Christianity to be viable, evangelicals must be thoughtful, intellectually aware, and in proactive engagement with the world. Noll writes:

For Christian thinking about the world, the key question is what happens to a community when it tries to work out a Christian orientation to, say, the conundrums of modern nuclear physics, to the complexities of health care reform, to the meaning of traditional legal principles for a pluralistic society, to the interpretation of classical texts, to efforts at evaluating Communism in the twentieth century, to the issue of how music reinforces or subverts traditional morality, to the debate over which books should be assigned as the literary canon—that is, to a whole range of modern questions in which it is absolutely essential to exercise sensitivity concerning the interpreter’s stance over against the data being interpreted, self-criticism about the way pre-commitments influence conclusions, and critical awareness of the symbiotic connects between methods and results. If that community’s habits of mind concerning those things to which the community pays most diligent attention and accords highest authority—that is, to the Bible and Christian theology—are defined by naïve and uncritical assumptions about the way to study or think about anything, so will its efforts to promote Christian thinking about the world be marked by naïvete and an absence of rigorous criticism.7

Noll suggests that Christians must think in Christian ways about science, jurisprudence, politics, history, and music. In assessing cultural concerns, Christians must exercise both a “Christian orientation” as well as an intellectual one. Just as incomplete thinking can limit one’s understanding of these issues, so too will it adversely affect how one sees God and theology. Therefore, the evangelical view of the Bible and theology must, like evangelical thinking about the broader culture, reflect a thoughtful, engaged understanding. Evangelicalism that lacks self-awareness of the way its presuppositions affect the outcomes of evangelical thought about the Bible, theology, and broader culture bodes ill for Christians and their neighbors.
Unaware that their understanding of a scripture passage is predetermined by their theology, evangelicals are apt to develop a point of view adversarial to others. Likewise, if they see the Bible naively divorced from its social, cultural, and historical contexts, evangelicals can conclude that women should be prohibited from speaking in church or that homosexuality is wrong in the eyes of God. Evangelicals make these views the concerns of God, justifying prejudices in God’s name. By failing to differentiate between God’s will and the rules of an ancient culture, evangelicals naively justify their assumptions.

Evangelical historical unawareness is demonstrated by their attachment to inerrancy of the Bible. By inerrancy, some interviewees indicated they meant inerrancy in the original biblical documents, but all seemed to find the message of God’s teaching in the scriptures inerrant. In this, they abandon their roots in the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther was very critical of three books of the Bible: Hebrews, James, and Revelation. According to Richard Marius, Luther says of James: “it stands against the apostle Paul and all the rest of scripture in teaching that works justify.” And, James, “contradicts Paul directly, said Luther, in that ‘James’ declares that in his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham was justified by his works; Paul said in Romans that Abraham in that moment was justified by his faith.” Hence, Paul and James portray scripture contradicting itself over theological matters. As for Luther’s view of Revelation: “In it Christ is neither taught nor proclaimed.” Even if one rejects Luther’s perspective, Luther’s treatment of scripture suggests that a more balanced approach lies in interpretive humility, not confident inerrancy. Evangelicals emphasize inerrancy because more than
Weighing the evidence is at work: evangelicals' conclusions are predetermined by the presuppositions they apply to the Bible over and above what the Bible itself says.

Two more examples illustrate Noll's concerns regarding evangelical thinking. First, evangelicals often are unaware of the difference between their theology and what the Bible asserts. In conjunction with this, evangelicals often are unaware of how their perspective is conditioned socially, culturally, and historically. 22-year-old English major Erica explains her understanding of the Bible's stand on slavery.

Q: There's nothing in the Bible that would support or condone slavery?

No.

I mean there are situations in the Bible where there are—whatever station you are in life when you become a Christian, you should stay. [If married you shouldn't get divorced, get rid of kids, etc.] I mean, [if] God called me when I was like that, that's how I [should] stay.

If God called you when you are a slave to someone, that doesn't mean that you try to emancipate yourself. There is a historical context in the culture in which this particular passage is set. There was this guy who had run away from his master and one of the apostles was writing to the master and saying, please take so and so back, he's become a brother, but please respect him. And let him serve out his time and then let him go. And so, I have no idea how people supported slavery—but there is that instance where the apostle was saying to this guy, take him back, treat him with respect, allow him to do whatever he does, and let him go.

According to the evangelical Christian NIV Study Bible, the following passages pertain to slavery. While Erica's confidence is laudable, she is quite mistaken about the Bible not supporting or condoning slavery.

1 Tim 6:1 “All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered.”

Eph 6:5 “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.”
Col 3:22 “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.”

Tit 2:9 “Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our savior attractive.”

Obey your slave master as you would Christ? It’s probably quite fortunate that those who stood against oppression have not paid close attention to the teaching of these passages. As L. William Countryman observes, these passages demonstrate “passive” “ethics” and an “exhortation to submission.” If Martin Luther King, Jr. or Gandhi or Nelson Mandela took these instructions seriously, we might have never seen a successful United States Civil Rights movement or Indian independence from British colonial rule or South African freedom from apartheid. Clearly, Erica did not learn of her stand against slavery from the teachings of an inerrant Bible because the Bible teaches obedience to slave owners. Erica is unaware of the relationship between her own theology and the Bible. More likely, Erica obtained her anti-slavery position from school or significant others who understand slavery as wrong because of their modern western cultural-conditioning. She is not aware that her understanding of slavery as bad (a modern notion) contradicts her literal-factual theological understanding of the Bible as inerrant. Further, Erica is not aware of her cultural-historical position as a modern person, and she is not aware of the conflict in her own relationship to the text she claims is normative.

In the second example illustrating Noll’s concerns about evangelical thinking, uncritical and even unconscious evangelical theological beliefs are projected upon a biblical text. Evangelicals often do not see the scripture before them, but the beliefs they
brought to the text in the first place. The notes in the evangelical Christian **NIV Study Bible** clearly demonstrate how evangelical Christian beliefs determine what evangelicals find when reading a text. In Matthew 19:16-22, a man asks Jesus how he can obtain “eternal life.” Jesus tells him, “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.” The man says he’s done this and inquires as to what he might do further. Jesus responds, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” In essence, Jesus is telling the man there are certain deeds he must perform; that is, “If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.” And yet, the NIV text notes below read to the contrary. Under the note for Mt 19:16, it reads: “The rich man was thinking in terms of righteousness by works. Jesus had to correct this misunderstanding first before answering the question more fully.”

Except, Jesus doesn’t correct this man’s misunderstanding. The man asked what he must do, and Jesus told him to do things – to obey the commandments. Jesus is not arguing against obeying the commandments or being righteous, but rather he is asserting one should do the right things; i.e., to obey the commandments. Under the note for Mt 19:17, it reads: “The requirement to ‘obey the commandments’ is not to establish one’s merit before God but is to be an expression of true faith. The Bible always teaches that salvation is a gift of God’s grace received through faith (see Eph 2:8).” Only, here Jesus is not talking about faith but action. This is not the text of the Bible but projected theology.
The authors of the notes in this evangelical study Bible have concluded from a passage about works that the passage couldn’t be about works. The commentators emphasize a Protestant theology of salvation through faith alone instead of what is actually written. The commentators have projected their evangelical theological beliefs upon the text, reaching literally the opposite conclusion from what the words actually say. Even though evangelicals claim the Bible is their authority, their authority is really a theological position reinforced by their religious community that draws from the Bible to support its theological claims.

Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong cites several examples to illustrate why a literal-factual orientation to the Bible breaks down.13 Not only does the Bible contain obsolete science, but it promotes a violent immorality.

In the Book of Joshua, [a primitive] view of the cosmos once again was operative when Joshua ordered the sun to stand still in the sky so that the slaughter of the Amorites by the Israelites might continue to occur without the interruption of nightfall (Joshua 10: 12, 13). Ignoring the rather dubious reason for such a miracle and the tribal hostility that made Israel assume that the killing of the Amorites was God’s holy cause as well as theirs, this account is still not something our modern minds can accept. The sun cannot be ordered to stop, for it is not journeying through our sky. Rather, the earth is turning on its axis. If, out of an inadequate cosmological knowledge, Joshua really caused the earth to cease turning, the gravitational effects would have destroyed this planet forever. From every side, this story is based upon pre-scientific conclusions that are today believed by no one.14

The Bible cannot be literally-factually true if it says that God stopped the sun so that a massacre ordered by God can continue, unless God is a homicidal maniac. And yet, evangelicals insist that the Bible as a whole is inerrant. Spong derisively indicts evangelical beliefs in the inerrancy of the Bible and what follows from them as “delusions” that “can be immensely satisfying.”15
However, this is at best an overstatement. Jane tries to defend the massacres in Joshua not because she supports the notion of God as a homicidal maniac or because she is delusional; rather, she must either accept or reject her theological system as a whole. Given her orientation is literal-factual and the text indicates God ordered the massacres, Jane feels compelled to take that seriously (unlike the rape story, which is simply reported and does not involve God directly). For Jane, there must be a continuity and a consistence maintained in her theology for it to be viable.

L. William Countryman observes that evangelical Christian theology defines and presupposes what an evangelical perceives as real regarding the Bible and the world. Referring to evangelicals, Countryman writes:

they claim that their Christianity, and theirs alone, is truly biblical. These Christians imagine that the nature of biblical authority is perfectly clear; they often speak of Scripture as inerrant. In fact, however, they have tacitly abandoned the authority of Scripture in favor of a conservative Protestant theology shaped largely in the nineteenth century. This fundamentalist theology they buttress with strings of quotations to give it biblical flavor, but it predetermines their reading of Scripture so completely that one cannot speak of the Bible as having any independent voice in their churches.16

Countryman cites the subordination of scriptural authority to evangelical theology as a “tacit” operation; thus, evangelicals project their theology onto the Bible without consciously expressing this or realizing they are doing it. The Bible is marshaled to support the claims of the theology, but the theology takes priority over the biblical text.17 This 19th century approach creates the same problems that Mark Noll cautions about above: that evangelicals can uncritically go to the Bible and obtain factual information about life and reality without paying attention to historical, social, and cultural concerns or taking seriously other points of view. Part of clear thinking and humility in scholarship
comes from realizing where outside influences might be causing a perspective to be skewed.\textsuperscript{18}

Contrary to Spong, an evangelical approach does not come out of a delusional misapprehension of reality. Rather, evangelicals are so determined to trust, revere, and submit to the authority of the God behind the Bible that they overemphasize its authority. Evangelicals take the Bible seriously because they take God seriously; it’s an attitude that recognizes God as unambiguously the Lord of their lives. While one might take issue with the contents of evangelical beliefs, there is much to respect about their dedication and orientation to God. The clarity with which they see their duties in relation to God focuses their spiritual practices in relation to the divine. The conscious effort to trust God and see God in control facilitates an openness to life and a trust in God that empowers evangelicals.

And yet, for all their rigid beliefs, evangelicals should not be read too literally. Christian contemplative and psychiatrist Gerald May writes: “I find that many people’s images and concepts of God are very different from their real-life experiences with God.”\textsuperscript{19} In the same way, people must be careful about becoming too alarmed or too sure about what evangelicals are like based on beliefs about salvation or a future genocidal judgment of God. Traffic with evangelicals shows that they assent to their beliefs because they are their “way in” to a fulfilling life and relationship with God. Just because they believe in a genocidal God or fail to perceive flaws in the Biblical text or their theology doesn’t make evangelicals dangerous or genocidal or stupid. They must believe the things they do about the Bible and about theology in a literal-factual way so as to access that
life-giving faith. If they don’t, as Bruce says, they will just toss out the whole Christian package. Whether that’s true or not, that’s the perception.

May also writes: “When we are not free, when we are caught up in too many things, the best thing we can do is pray for the gift of simplicity. Practices can often help us to be receptive to the gift, but we need to make sure they are serving simplicity instead of getting in its way.” Evangelical Christianity both serves simplicity and gets in its way; or, to put it differently, forces simplicity at the expense of the complexity that is there. But the service of simplicity evangelicalism provides for its adherents is very real. Within the bounded structure of evangelicalism, Christians are limited, but they are also freed to act and to be. Unlike others, they don’t have to trouble with mysteries and contradictions and unanswered questions. Instead, they go straight to God. The movement is from one’s self-interest and self-concern to the seeking of God’s will. This seeking is diligent, effortful, and frequent. Prayer occurs often. Evangelical beliefs provide them a guide, a system by which their experience can be trusted and understood in order to meet the God behind and within those beliefs. Finally, precisely because modernity emphasizes the importance of truth as factuality, so too is evangelicalism appealing in these modern times. Evangelical emphasis on literal-factual truth appeals to moderns for whom empirically verifiable truth is the only real truth. Perhaps even those who dislike evangelical beliefs can recognize that in the end, it’s better that evangelicals have some faith and some sense of fellowship than none at all.

Evangelical beliefs do not always predetermine evangelicals’ perspectives of scripture. On some level, evangelicals understand that parts of the Bible are immoral and
incredible. Regarding the controversial support of slavery in the New Testament,

countryman writes:

The Evangelicals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who led the fight against human slavery were intensely devout people, who would have been scandalized had anyone suggested that they were violating the ethics of the New Testament [by going against its injunctions that slaves passively always obey their masters]. Perhaps it is putting matters too strongly to say that they ‘violated’ them. Yet they certainly did turn their backs on them in this matter.21

What held true for the evangelicals of the nineteenth century holds true for evangelicals today in the twenty-first. Erica does not realize the Bible condones slavery, demonstrating her own unawareness of what the inerrant Bible says coupled with her own modern conditioning against slavery. Theology, awareness of God, culture (to include the media, television, Internet), and interaction with the community (Christian and secular) all influence evangelicals.22 However confused Erica is about her reasons, she stands against slavery. Thus, for all of their insistence upon an inerrant Bible and a literal-factual theology, evangelicals demonstrate the capacity to transcend the limitations of their point of view.

Evangelicalism radically focuses its adherents upon God. Beliefs are the sacramental vehicle bringing evangelicals into relationship with God. Evangelical thinking is often limited by its overconfidence and unconscious application of predetermined conclusions. Many evangelicals do not take seriously or even consider the conflicts and complexities of scripture highlighted by Martin Luther and others. The Bible posits a morality that justifies passivity and supports genocide, making a claim to inerrancy in message for all times and places implausible and even scandalous. While
evangelicals are able to circumvent the immorality of the Bible, they would do well to rethink biblical inerrancy for the good of their faith.

1 Noll 126.
2 Noll 127.
3 Noll 119. Noll defines dispensationalism as "an understanding of the Bible that divides the relationship with God to humanity into sharply separated epochs. The Bible is taken to provide explicit divine interpretation for these epochs, or dispensations, that extend from Adam to the end of the New Testament, as well as for the dispensation foretold in Scripture for the end of time. The intervening "age of the church" is sometimes treated as a parenthesis, where the ebb and flow of events serve primarily to prepare believers for God's final in-breaking upon human history. The method of dispensationalism is a literalism in which great care is taken to arrange passages of Scripture from throughout the whole Bible...to establish biblical truths, especially truths concerning the end of the world. The key to dispensationalism's popularity has been an ability to render the prophetic parts of the Bible understandable to ordinary people and applicable to current circumstances...The supernaturalism of dispensationalism has always been intense. The unmediated agency of God is thought to lie behind all wholesome activities on earth; the mediated agency of Satan is perceived behind all natural and human evil."
4 Noll 129.
5 Noll 129.
6 Noll 125-126.
7 Noll 130.
8 C.f. Borg pp. 24-26. Citing Lev 18:22, 20:13, 19:19, Borg explains the significance of uncritically seeing the Bible as coming from God. He writes: "If we think of the Bible as a divine product, then the laws of the Bible are God's laws. To illustrate with a contemporary Christian controversy, the single law in the Hebrew Bible prohibiting homosexual behavior between men is found in Leviticus: 'You shall not lie with a male as with a woman: it is an abomination.' The penalty (death) is found two chapters later. If we see the Bible as a divine product, then this is one of God's laws....But if we see the Bible as a human product, then the laws of the Hebrew Bible are ancient Israel's laws, and the prohibition of homosexual behavior tells us that such behavior was considered unacceptable in ancient Israel. The ethical question then becomes, 'What would be the justification for continuing to see homosexual behavior as ancient Israel did?' The question becomes even more acute when we realize that this law is embedded in a collection of laws that, among other things, prohibit planting two kinds of seed in the same field and wearing garments made of two kinds of cloth. We do not worry about these matters; most of us wear clothing made of blends without giving it a second thought. We readily recognize some of these prohibitions as the laws of an ancient culture that we are not bound to follow. Why, then, should we single out some as the 'laws of God.'" Borg then moves to substitute asking for the rationale behind Israel's perspective in the place of seeing these ancient rules as God's rules. Treating 1 Tim 2:9-15 and the prohibitions against women teaching and speaking, Borg identifies these as perspectives from early Christianity. Consequently, neither homosexuals or women can justifiably be discriminated against according to "God's will" because when one sees these passages historically, it becomes clear they say more about an ancient cultural belief in a specific historical context and not about God's view of women or homosexual men.
In his explanation of why Christian theology must be demythologized so as to be relevant to the modern person, Rudolf Bultmann writes: “The cosmology of the New Testament is essentially mythical in character. The world is viewed as a three-storied structure, with the earth in the center, the heaven above, and the underworld beneath. Heaven is the abode of God and of celestial beings – the angels. The underworld is hell, the place of torment. Even the earth is more than the scene of natural, everyday events, of the trivial round and common task. It is the scene of the supernatural activity of God and his angels on the one hand, and of Satan and his daemons on the other. These supernatural forces intervene in the course of nature and in all that men think and will and do. Miracles are by no means rare. Man is not in control of his own life. Evil spirits may take possession of him. Satan may inspire him with evil thoughts. Alternatively, God may inspire his thought and guide his purposes. He may grant him heavenly visions. He may allow him to hear his word of succour or demand. He may give him the supernatural power of his Spirit. History does not follow a smooth unbroken course; it is set in motion and controlled by these supernatural powers. This aeon is held in bondage by Satan, sin, and death (for “powers” is precisely what they are), and hastens toward its end. That end will come very soon, and will take the form of a cosmic catastrophe. It will be inaugurated by the “woes” of the last time. Then the judge will come from heaven, the dead will rise, the last judgement will take place, and men will enter into eternal salvation or damnation. This then is the mythical view of the world which the New Testament presupposes when it presents the event of redemption which is the subject of its preaching. It proclaims in the language of mythology that the last time has now come. “In the fullness of time” God sent forth his Son, a pre-existent divine being, who appears on earth as a man. He dies the death of a sinner on the cross and makes atonement for the sins of men.

All this is the language of mythology, and the origin of the various themes can be easily traced in the contemporary mythology of Jewish Apocalyptic and in the redemption myths of Gnosticism. To this extent the kerygma is incredible to modern man, for he is convinced that the mythical view of the world is obsolete. We are therefore bound to ask whether, when we preach the Gospel to-day, we expect our converts to accept not only the Gospel message, but also the mythical view of the world in which it is set. If not, does the New Testament embody a truth which is quite independent of its mythical setting? If it does, theology must undertake the task of stripping the Kerygma from its mythical framework, or “demythologizing” it.

Can Christian preaching expect modern man to accept the mythical view of the world as true? To do so would be both senseless and impossible” pp. 1-3 in Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate.


Spong 133.

Countryman ix-x.

Borg writes of the evangelical orientation in Reading the Bible Again p.5: “their approach is itself modern, largely the product of a particular form of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant theology. Moreover, rather than allowing the Bible its full voice, their approach actually confines the Bible within a tight theological structure.”

Pp. 16,17,19 Countryman discusses the ways we are all conditioned by our “unexamined” “preconceived notions” that create in us “unconscious expectations” about what the Bible means and reveals. Countryman also discusses the power of “prior conviction” when trying to use the Bible to prove doctrines of scripture that the Bible can’t effectively prove. Hence, those who attempt to do so will likely be “alarmed” among other things.


May 119.

Countryman 14.

Cf. Countryman 54.
Chapter Eight Analysis: Faith Stages, Modernity, and Life-Giving Faith

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the ways evangelicals think about their faith according to psychological theory plus to explore how the impact of modernity leads to the evangelical “way in.” In the first part of the chapter, I will use the theoretical framework of “faith stages” as explained by Liebert and Fowler to describe and explain the psychology of evangelicalism. These stages identify maturation in faith development along a continuum of sequential stages. Faith stage theories illuminate why evangelicals see and believe as they do, identifying common evangelical thinking patterns connected with a particular, current stage. Guilt, identification of the Bible with God, refusal to question their evangelical faith or God, and other traits will be examined. In the second half of the chapter, I will discuss the relationship between modernity and evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is successful in part because it provides access to God through a literal-factual orientation appealing to moderns.

Insights from Faith Development Theory

James Fowler and Elisabeth Liebert offer faith stage theories that help to explain the nature of evangelical belief. These theories provide a psychological framework for describing the ways in which different people orient themselves to reality in relation to their levels of faith development. Modeled after other psychological development theories, faith stage theories identify people’s beliefs and thinking patterns regarding what is most important to them. “These stages describe uniform and predictable ways of being in faith…not primarily matters of the contents of faith.”1 Hence, faith stages illuminate the way evangelicals believe, not what they believe. Even though their
terminology differs, Fowler and Liebert share a similar understanding of faith development.

Elisabeth Liebert posits seven stages of faith development (listed here in sequential order). Her “Presocial” stage encompasses infancy, prior to language but through the time of the infant realizing a subject-object distinction. The “Impulsive” stage treats childhood’s imaginative resonance with the meaning of symbols and the determination of what is good or bad by how it affects individual people. Liebert’s “Self-protective” stage occurs in late childhood and early adolescence. Here, correct moral behavior is equated with “obedience to rules,” “Truth” is identified with “Authority,” and thinking occurs dualistically (“right versus wrong, good versus bad”). In the “Conformist” stage, people think concretely and stereotypically, seeing their own well-being closely connected to that of the “group” to which they belong. Conformist people are generous and nice as well as “harsh” in the judgment of themselves and others. This stage most closely accords with evangelicalism and can become the “permanent [stage] for many adults.” Those in the “Conscientious” stage demonstrate the “emergence of adult conscience,” the ability to “reflect critically on self and outlook,” and the capacity to “demythologize.” In the “Interindividual” stage there is manifested an ability to see “two contradictory statements” as “true” or one “statement” as “true and not true at the same time.” Also, Interindividuals have the capability to grasp the meanings of symbols with a “second naïvete” (see Fowler’s Conjunctive stage below). Those in the “Integrated” stage comprise only about one percent of the population and are characterized by those who perceive an intimate relationship with all people and with God.
James Fowler also provides seven faith stages, listed here in sequential order.

“Primal Faith” is the stage of infancy. 

“Intuitive-PROJECTive faith” treats those of age two when language begins to emerge. “Perception, feelings, and imaginative fantasy make up children’s principal ways of knowing – and transforming – their experiences.”

For those in the “MYthic-LITERAL” stage, faith is “a matter of reliance upon the stories, rules, and implicit values of the family’s community of meanings.” “Synthetic-Conventional” is the stage applicable to most of the evangelicals interviewed. Here, various images of a self are synthesized into a personal “identity.” Also, beliefs are “tacit” and acquired from “significant others.”

The “Individuative-Reflective” stage contains those who critically choose their “beliefs, values, and commitments” from a position of strong self-authority. The “Conjunctive” faith stage occurs during “midlife or beyond” and involves seeing God in a paradoxical way as well as having a new respect for the powerful “influence” of the “unconscious” on “reactions and behavior.” Those in the Conjunctive stage demonstrate a “second naivete, a postcritical receptivity and readiness for participation in the reality brought to expression in symbol and myth.”

Conjunctive people have a “genuine openness to the truths of traditions and communities other than [their] own” and truth is more than can be explained with either/or distinctions. Fowler’s final stage is “Universalizing Faith,” where people work “toward justice” and value others in a way analogous to the merciful love of God.

Liebert explains the rationale behind using developmental stages in order to better understand someone spiritually:

The developmental theories which undergird this book indicate how slow and often arduous human development can be, and how frequently people find it easier to “settle in” than to evolve. These theories also suggest why some people
can’t seem to grasp what others see as self-evident, and why they understand quite different things when examining the same event.\textsuperscript{18}

Thus, what might seem clear and obviously true to an evangelical might appear blatantly false to a non-evangelical (and vice-versa). Where an evangelical might believe with certainty that Jesus walked on water, a non-evangelical might dismiss this with equal certainty.\textsuperscript{19} Faith development stages help to explain why evangelicals may hold different perceptions from others as well as why evangelicals may not evolve past the Conformist or Synthetic-Conventional stages.

Faith stages never fully encompass the qualities of a person. Liebert cautions: “the real people who come for spiritual direction never fit neatly into stages.”\textsuperscript{20} She adds: “Furthermore, from the moral and spiritual point of view, ‘higher’ cannot be equated with ‘holier.’”\textsuperscript{21} Faith stages describe the ways people live their faith, not their moral character. While such stages are illuminating, it’s important to realize they “are abstractions, generalizations about a coherent worldview culled from a relatively wide range of behaviors.”\textsuperscript{22}

Faith stages indicate psychological and spiritual development within people by illuminating how they think about and relate to the world. For evangelicals, their literal-factual orientation brings them into relationship with God. These ways of thinking and perceiving create powerful assumptions about the meaning of their lives and experiences.

According to Liebert:

[In structural development] One’s ordering system supplies operative assumptions, but is itself rarely available for conscious reflection because one looks out at the world from within its perspective.\textsuperscript{23} Stages are remarkably stable systems, since they represent entire “logics” or systems of meaning-construction.\textsuperscript{24}
Without sufficient dissonance to require a new structure, the person will not change.\(^{25}\)

People are so deeply entrenched in their particular faith stage perspective such that it strongly informs how they see the world. Movement into a higher stage does not come easily, especially when one sees the Bible and theology in a literal-factual light. If people believe their system is inerrant, they are even less likely to be open to change. Only the necessary “dissonance” (such as “anxiety and depression”) can produce the questioning required to move people into a new faith stage orientation.\(^{26}\) To move to another stage involves a difficult transition – “a death to a self that makes a particular kind of meaning.”\(^{27}\)

Evangelicalism often is characterized by dualistic, oppositional thinking that precludes a nuanced view of the world while emphasizing the morality of authority. Liebert denotes two stages that are relevant to the evangelicals interviewed. The first is the Self-protective stage.

This stage [the Self-protective stage] is typical through late childhood and early adolescent years. One of the more interesting and observable transitions which frequently occurs during late high school or early college years, is that from dualistic thinking to relativistic thinking. The dualistic thinker sees all issues of truth and morality in terms of in-groups versus out-groups, right versus wrong, good versus bad, or we versus they. Morality and personal responsibility equals obedience to rules, self-control, and the unquestioned assumption that Authority (whatever that is seen to be) is identical to the Truth. This same style of thinking characterizes fundamentalism.\(^{28}\)

For people in the Self-protective stage, thinking is all or nothing – people either fit or they do not fit. Many evangelicals define their Christian in-group as the saved and all others as lost, identify “truth” with the authority of the Bible (as understood through
evangelical theology), and the rightness of their own position as invalidating all others. In most cases, the evidence for salvation is not seriously questioned.

The second relevant stage Liebert treats is the Conformist stage, which "typically arises in adolescence, but becomes a permanent style for many adults." The Conformist stage follows the Self-protective stage. Like the Self-protective stage, the Conformist stage relies upon simplistic thinking. Liebert elaborates:

Conformist individuals exhibit stereotypic thinking, clichés, and all-or-nothing statements. ... in order to judge among alternatives, they may appeal to the external order for norms. Right and wrong admit of few exceptions; things are the same for everybody. Their relatively unnuanced approach to life encourages a sentimental and idealistic outlook.

Liebert's Conformist stage operates for most of the evangelicals interviewed. Belief and theology has to fit within prescribed parameters. To damn the Dalai Lama to hell for all eternity is to operate according to "right and wrong" admitting of "few exceptions." For Bart and Steve, Jesus is either Lord, Liar, or Lunatic. Bart observes several times that there is no way around this: either Jesus was who he said he was, or he was a liar, or he was crazy. Jane, Stuart, Brian, and Mark once again prove to be exceptions. Even so, they resist reaching theological conclusions that might lie outside evangelical theological boundaries. When confronted with the question of the Dalai Lama's salvation, Mark struggles with the need to advocate correct theological position. While Mark initially sees the Dalai Lama as damned, he subsequently abandons that position in favor of uncertainty.

Guilt is another evangelical characteristic illuminated by the Conformist stage. "A common trait among Conformists is guilt. 'Conformists ... feel shame even for inadvertent infractions of rules.' Further, '...these persons tend to be very hard on"
themselves, and to appear very judgmental of others’ behavior.” This is true among many of the interview subjects. Two examples follow.

Jane, a 43 year-old sociologist, shows a disproportionate amount of guilt in reflecting upon her childhood.

At age eleven, I went to Presbyterian church camp in Western Pennsylvania. I realized I had done wrong. I was guilty. So right about that time that developmental psychologists say kids are able to process a sense of abstract guilt, I was like, right on the money. So, I asked God to forgive me and made an eleven year-old profession of faith, said I want to be a Christian, that I think this is true and you know, I’m sorry for doing these things wrong. And, felt a huge sense of the lifting of my little 11 year old guilt.

Q: What did you do wrong?

Dinking around as a kid, not always telling the truth quite right.

Jane demonstrates disproportionate guilt. She does not identify any specific wrongdoing while clearly believing she needs to be rescued from “eleven year old guilt.” While she doesn’t seem to have done anything of consequence, Jane takes a hard stance toward herself for what appear to be slight deviations from correct eleven year-old behavior.

Jacob also relates being freed from his guilt at age 13.

I’d been focusing on being a sinner against God. If you believe what is in scripture that sinners need salvation – that means they are in need of safety, they are in danger. In danger of what? In danger of being separated from God, separated from God for all eternity. Basically, that’s hell.

So, I was in peril of going to hell. That started to weigh down on my mind greatly. Finally, when I gave my life...when I knelted down and prayed, I was taking into account all the sins I started to do. The sins that put me in danger – I was still committing them. I wasn’t going the right direction. Or, I couldn’t save myself. Today, I was taking a count, I did this, this, and this.

I knelt down and prayed by myself, and it was like this huge heavy burden lifted off [when I gave my sins to the lord]. Felt like somebody had physically lifted a burden off my back. Off of me, period. My chest, back...I got up, I was crying, and it was one of the happiest days of my life.
It wasn’t like I was tormented like two minutes before. I was in sorrow for causing God pain, and then glad that he had forgiven me.

Like Jane, Jacob worries he has done terrible things at an early age without elaborating on what he has specifically done to be so guilty. God will send him to hell at age 13 if he’s not careful.

Liebert asserts that if people stay in the Conformist stage, they make a choice to keep their “life artificially simple and clear.” This is analogous to conscious literalism, where people choose not to examine other evidence but stick tightly to their preconceptions. Liebert writes:

[If one is to] transition out of Conformity...the seeker must decide whether to explore the implications of unruly emotions or conflicting stories, despite the painful disorientation which may result from the undoing of one’s worldview. Some persons will foreclose the possibility of change or even regress to an earlier dualistic level. Such persons...have in some sense “chosen” to keep life artificially simple and clear.34

The “unruly emotions” and “conflicting stories” may be encountered, but people can choose whether to embrace them and grow or not. This is complex because what creates “sufficient dissonance” to precipitate a change in one person may not do so for another person.35 Even though his father was disabled by chronic arthritis, Mark (then in high school) never experienced a crisis of faith. He does not question God or his evangelical beliefs despite the misfortune suffered by his father.

James Fowler’s Synthetic-Conventional stage is comparable to Liebert’s Conformist stage. In explaining its meaning, Fowler indicates two defining traits:

Synthesis in the first instance, then, means a drawing together, an integration into one, of that viable sense of self-hood that we have come to call identity. The other aspect of synthesis crucial to the forming of the synthetic-conventional stage has to do with the drawing together of one’s stories, values, and beliefs into a supportive and orienting unity. In this stage a person struggles with composing a
"story of my stories" – a sense of the meaning of life generally and of the meaning and purpose of one’s own life in particular.36

Meaning in life is bound up within people’s identities and the stories within which they locate a foundation for their lives. For evangelicals, their story is the story of their theology, centering on the vicarious atonement of Jesus for the sins of humanity. People are empowered by, and called into, that story. Jane emphasizes the consistency of her “story,” which is not the story of her own life, but the story of God’s activity in Jesus that empowers her.

Fowler explains that for some, Synthetic-Conventional Faith “becomes a long lasting or permanently equilibrated style of identity and faith.”37 Mark, Richard, and Stuart all fit this category, having been evangelical Christians for the majority of their lives.

Like Liebert, Fowler indicates evangelical Christians and others of Synthetic-Conventional Faith make a choice not to fully question the implications of their belief system:

For both adolescents...and adults who find equilibrium in [the Synthetic-Conventional Stage] the system of informing images and values through which they are committed remains principally a tacit system. Tacit means unexamined; my tacit knowing, as Michael Polyani calls it, is that part of my knowing that plays a role in guiding and shaping my choices, but of which I can give no account. I cannot tell you how I know with my tacit knowing.38 A person in [the Synthetic-Conventional Stage] is aware of having values and normative images. He or she articulates them, defends them and feels deep emotional investments in them, but typically has not made the value system, as a system, an object of reflection. For many reasons, however, people resist or avoid these invitations to awareness of and a more conscious responsibility for their beliefs and values. They reaffirm their reliance on external authority and their commitments to their particular values images of which they are aware.39
This unexamined quality of evangelical faith explains why evangelicals are content to hold contradictory or implausible beliefs in tension. Thus, the commentators in The NIV Study Bible know what they believe but do not see the tension between their theology and the way it is projected upon the text. They do not consciously reflect upon their theology and the way it operates. Part of evangelical resistance to awareness of the implications of their beliefs comes from the affinity with those beliefs. There are no reasons to question beliefs if they resonate meaningfully as literally and factually true (like natural literalism). However, like Liebert, Fowler identifies that there is a choice made here wherein evangelicals choose not to explore their beliefs more fully (like conscious literalism).

For people of Synthetic-Conventional faith, the Bible is identified with God. This is not because evangelicals seek to be idolaters; rather, they don’t distinguish the symbol (the Bible) from the divine reality it points to. From this identification of the Bible with God comes evangelical claims of inerrancy of scripture. The Bible as sacred object is closely identified with the evangelical theology that determines its meaning. Thus, when evangelicals speak of the Bible, they really mean the Bible as interpreted according to their theology. Fowler writes:

"For persons in [the Synthetic-Conventional stage], with its largely tacit system of meaning and value, the symbols and ritual representations expressive of their faith are organically and irreplaceably tied to the full realities of their meaning systems. Said another way, the symbols expressive of their deepest meanings and loyalties are not separate from the what they symbolize."  

Since Synthetic-Conventional evangelical belief regarding "meaning and value" is "tacit," evangelicals are unaware of the fullest implications of their belief system. God and the Bible speak with the same voice; they are, in some ways, one and the same.
Those in the next stage (Individuative-Reflective Faith) can separate meaning from the symbol that contains the meaning through a process of “demythologization.” Thus, a flag as symbol is not the same as what it represents. People in the Individuative-Reflective Faith stage can make a distinction between God and the Bible. For those in the Synthetic Conventional stage, an “attack on the flag...amounted to an attack on a sacred set of images and myths that grounded identity and worth.”

It is not so much that persons [of Synthetic-Conventional Faith] are locked into their particular symbols in a kind of fundamentalism of symbolic forms. Rather, symbols of the sacred – their own and others – are related to in ways which honor them as inseparably connected to the sacred. Therefore, worthy symbols are themselves sacred. They are the depths of meaning.

Evangelicals hold the Bible and evangelical theology in the highest esteem. They don’t separate the God they worship from the Bible through which that God is known. If someone calls into question the veracity of the Bible, this could be taken “as an assault on the sacred itself” since the sacred is inextricably bound up within that which symbolizes it – the Bible and the literal-factual theology which interprets it.

For Synthetic-Conventional persons to transcend their stage position, they must undergo an event that “precipitates [an] examination of self, background, and life-guiding values.” It would not appear that there has been such a willingness to question and examine regarding the majority of those I interviewed. Several of them looked closely, but did not deeply question what they believed. You can’t conclude something containing errors is inerrant without projecting your own understanding upon it ahead of time. Evangelicals are partially examining and partially “discovering” the “truth” of their own projected preconceptions. Even as evangelicals will assert they inductively reason
through the evidence, their reasoning process only goes so far. For evangelicals to move into a higher faith stage, they must “step back” and critically examine their beliefs.

Fowler cautions that when one sees a symbol as symbol, a “certain naïve reliance upon and trust in the sacred power, efficacy, and inherent truth of the symbol as representation is interrupted.” This explains evangelical resistance to questioning their theology because their power lies in the reliance and trust. Precisely the trust in the inerrant Bible as the symbol of evangelical theology makes possible the evangelical opening to, and trusting in, the God that comes to them via the Bible.

The tacit beliefs of Synthetic-Conventional Faith can powerfully affect a person even if that person is not even fully aware of them or what they mean.

It is a synthesis of beliefs and value that has, at this stage, a largely tacit (as opposed to explicit) character. By this I mean that the beliefs, values, and stories that compose a person’s faith outlook and support his or her emerging identity are not yet objectified for critical reflection by that person. The synthesis is supportive and sustaining; it is deeply felt and strongly held; but it has not become an object of critical (self) reflection and inquiry. In this stage one is embedded in one’s faith outlook.

The emphasis on a literal-factual theology that is a combination of story and interpretation (what the Bible says and what that means) provides the evangelical with strength and inspiration. Contra most of the interview subjects, Stuart, Jane, Brian, and Mark do not adhere to an entirely literal-factual theological orientation.

**The Confusion of Mythos and Logos**

The conditioning of modernity upon twenty-first-century Americans is another important reason for evangelicalism’s success. Mythos provides the “meaning” that keeps people from falling “into despair” by directing their “attention to the eternal and universal.” In contrast, logos is concerned with reason and factuality. According to
Armstrong: “In the pre-modern world, people have a different view of history. They are less interested than we are in what actually happened, but more concerned with the meaning of an event.”\textsuperscript{47} Hence, pre-modern people have a mythical consciousness concerned with articulating meaning rather than historical fact.

To ask whether the Exodus from Egypt took place exactly as recounted in the Bible or to demand historical and scientific evidence to prove that it is factually true is to mistake the nature and purpose of this story. It is to confuse mythos with logos.\textsuperscript{48}

People can approach this type of story to obtain a spiritual meaning independent of whether it factually happened (mythos), or they can erroneously approach the story in a literal-factual way (as logos), thus misunderstanding it.

Logos was equally important. Logos was the rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought that enabled men and women to function well in the world. We have lost the sense of mythos in the West today, but we are very familiar with logos, which is the basis of our society. Unlike myth, logos must relate exactly to facts and correspond to external realities if it is to be effective.\textsuperscript{49} Logos is practical.

Logos and mythos are different and function in divergent ways. To think in terms of one when the other is called for is to produce a misunderstanding.

Armstrong asserts that the confusion of mythos and logos stems from the Protestant Reformation.\textsuperscript{50} Religious myths that were not previously understood literally-factually are now seen as logos. As a result, European Christians lose touch with their mythical ground. This occurs with increasing secularization that leads Protestant Reformers to claim their approach to the scriptures is traditional when it is, in fact, modern. Armstrong writes:

The reformers claimed to be returning, conservative-wise, to the primary source, the Bible, but they were reading Scripture in a modern way. The reformed Christian was to stand alone before God, relying simply on his Bible, but this would not have been possible before the invention of printing had made it feasible
for all Christians to have a Bible of their own and before the developing literacy of the period enabled them to read it. Increasingly, Scripture was read literally for the information it imparted, in much the same way as modernizing Protestants were learning to read other texts.51

Studying the Bible on one’s own and reading it literally are “new” ways of reading, not ancient ones. The modern shift from “mythos and logos” to the privileging of “logos alone” that began in the Reformation continues today. Christians reading literally are missing the point: more and more, they are reading imaginative mythos as factual logos.

Part of the reason evangelicalism is so appealing is that it speaks in the literal-factual language of modernity. As Marcus Borg observes, “modernity has led us to be preoccupied with factuality – with scientifically verifiable and historically reliable facts. Indeed, modern Western culture is the only culture in human history that has identified truth with factuality. We are ‘fact fundamentalists’: if a statement isn’t scientifically or historically factual, it isn’t true.”52 This attitude is not just held by evangelicals but by many people as moderns.

According to Armstrong, to turn “Christian myths into scientific facts” produces “a hybrid” that is “neither good science nor good religion.”53 To see mythos as logos is a mistake. However, evangelical Christianity works precisely because it enables its adherents to obtain mythos through seeing it as logos. For evangelicals, the “way in” to encounter with God is mythos experienced as logos. They turn their lives over to Christ, give up alcohol abuse, read the Bible daily, seek God’s will, go into prisons to save the lost, and fear for their friends’ salvation in an afterlife.

In his 18 October 1931 letter to Arthur Greeves, CS Lewis writes of important conclusions reached just prior to his becoming a Christian. He writes:
Now what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn’t mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself... I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere except in the Gospels. The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho’ I could not say in cold prose “what it meant”.

Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened: and one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God’s myth where the others are men’s myths: i.e. the Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call “real things.” Therefore it is true, not in the sense of being a “description” of God (that no finite mind could take in) but in the sense of being the way in which God chooses to (or can) appear to our faculties. The “doctrines” we get out of the true myth are of course less true: they are translations into a language more adequate, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Does this amount to a belief in Christianity? At any rate I am now certain (a) That this Christian story is to be approached, in a sense, as I approached the other myths, (b) That it is the most important and full of meaning. I am also nearly certain that it really happened...

There are two key operations at work: seeing the Christian story as factually true and receiving it as a myth. The myth conveys the meaning and significance that resonates with Lewis. When Lewis could finally set aside his resistance to the Gospels and hear Christianity as myth, he was able to access the mythic meaning that previously had only been available to him via the Pagan tales.

In the case of evangelicals, the operations are slightly different. Where Lewis’s “way in” is to hear the stories as myth, the evangelicals’ way in is to hear the stories literally-factually. Just as Lewis gains access to deeper life-changing meaning through deeper mythic resonance, evangelicals gain their own mythic truth via a literal-factual orientation. Lives are not transformed by what happened two or three thousand years ago even if it was miraculous (like the raising of dead people or the destruction of...
Sodom/Gomorrah); lives are transformed by encountering mythic meaning today which speaks truth about meaning and significance in life regarding a relationship with God. For Lewis, deep meaning is encountered through letting his guard down and hearing the Christian stories as myth. For evangelicals, it’s unconsciously receiving mythic meaning through a literal-factual theology that uses the Bible and spiritual practices (prayer, praise and worship, Bible study, fellowship) to bring them into relationship with God.

Evangelical determination to focus on God is located in the lived-experience of the Spirit. Even though Matthew, a 24 year-old high school teacher, affirms the need for a literal-factual theology, he realizes its importance is relative to how it facilitates a direct encounter with God. Matthew exhorts his students beyond intellectual knowledge of God based on the right scriptural or theological answers. Intellectual knowledge alone is nothing, he says. If all people know is the Bible, they’re missing what is most important. They’ve got to know God. Experience God. While evangelicals limit their faith through submitting it to the authority of a conservative theology that makes use of scripture, that does not invalidate the power of their faith or their experiences. To use a contemporary evangelical expression to illustrate: evangelicals are not “on fire” because of logos alone, they are “on fire for the Lord” because of the mythos they’ve attained via logos.

Many factors make an evangelical Christian faith perspective compelling to its adherents: resonance with the literal-factual “way in,” combination of natural and conscious literalism, dedication and focused submission to the will of God, and openness to God’s will for them. God is central. It’s not just the beliefs and practices and stages, but the God who the evangelical meets through those many different avenues and more.
While Spong, Armstrong, or I might be turned off by a literal-factual approach that would render the Bible and evangelical theology incredible, evangelicals draw strength precisely through this literal-factual orientation.

However people feel about evangelical Christianity, there is no doubt that it is a powerful spiritual orientation that informs and enriches a believer's experience of life and relationship with God. James Fowler speaks to lived evangelical faith and the relationship with God that is characterized by evangelicals:

By conversion, here, I do not mean simply some dramatic experience of conviction and release that occurs once, after which things have forever been made right. Rather, by conversion I mean an ongoing process – with, of course, a series of important moments of perspective-altering convictions and illuminations – through which people (or a group) gradually bring the lived story of their lives into congruence with the core story of the Christian faith. Conversion means a release from the burden of self-groundedness....It means embracing the conviction that we are known, loved, supported, and invited to partnership in being with the one who from all eternity intended us and who desires our love and friendship. Conversion means a recentering of our passion. It is a falling in love with God who became like us and who invites us and empowers us to a relationship like that of a parent to an adult son or daughter. It means making an attachment to the passion of Jesus Christ – a loving, committed, and ready-to-suffer passion for the in-breaking commonwealth of love and justice. Conversion means realignment of our affections, the restructuring of our virtues, and the growth in lucidity and power of our partnership with God's work in the world. Conversion, then, is not so much a negation of our human development as it is a transformation and fulfillment of it. It is not so much a denial of our adulthood as it is the liberation and empowerment of our adulthood toward entering into partnership with God. Conversion does not mean the negation of our sense of specialness and destiny so much as it means a radical regrounding of both, drawing them into the movement of a much larger drama that can call forth all the potential for greatness and heroism in service that any of us has been given.

For all of the limits to evangelicalism, it is a rich and authentic spiritual faith. If Fowler is right and conversion is a process of reorientation in God that results in personal liberation and compassion for others, some of the evangelical Christians I've met demonstrate Fowler's definition as much as anyone I've ever known.
2 Elizabeth Liebert, Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000) 77, 79.
3 Liebert 77, 82.
4 Liebert 84.
5 Liebert, 84, 92.
6 Liebert 85.
7 Liebert 103, 110, 107.
8 Liebert 121, 123.
9 Liebert 77, 223.
10 Fowler 40.
11 Fowler 41.
12 Fowler 42.
13 Fowler 43.
14 Fowler 47.
15 Fowler 49.
16 Fowler 51-52.
17 Fowler 54-56.
18 Liebert 19.
19 John 6:19-21 [NIV]
20 Liebert 34.
21 Liebert 34.
22 Liebert 78.
23 Liebert 35.
24 Liebert 36.
25 Liebert 37.
26 Liebert 81.
27 Liebert 127.
28 Liebert 84.
29 Liebert 85.
30 Liebert 85.
31 Liebert 88.
32 Liebert 88-89.
33 Liebert 93.
34 Liebert 37.
35 Fowler, Becoming, 47.
36 Fowler, Stages 161.
37 Fowler Stages 161.
38 Fowler Stages 162.
39 Fowler Stages 162.
40 Fowler Stages 162-163.
41 Fowler Stages 163.
42 Fowler Stages 163.
43 Fowler Stages 173.
44 Fowler Stages 180.
45 Fowler Becoming, 47.
46 Armstrong xiii.
47 Armstrong xiv.
48 Armstrong xiv.
49 Armstrong xiv-xv.
50 C.f. Armstrong 33, 63.
51 Armstrong 66.
52 Borg 16.
53 Armstrong 355.
55 Fowler Becoming 115. I left out one sentence partially applicable to evangelical Christians: “It [conversion] means accepting, at a depth of the heart that is truly liberating, that our worth, our value, our grounding as children of God is given as our birthright.” I think all of this applies to an evangelical, but he/she would see it as derived from having obtained salvation through believing in Jesus, not being saved from the beginning as some liberal Christians believe.
Afterword

My hope is that I can share what I have learned to enlighten both liberal and evangelical Christians.

To liberal Christians, I want to say: evangelicalism is an authentic and legitimate faith. You may not like it, but it works. Don't read evangelicals too literally. My lived-experience of them is quite different than I might have expected based on their beliefs. I have seldom encountered so many kind, honest, and sincere people who were willing to sit down and "get real" with me about what most deeply mattered to them. Further, liberals can learn from evangelicals' humility before God, lived-faith practice (reading the Bible and prayer), and effort to give their lives to God through Jesus. Evangelicals have much to teach about surrendering to, and living for, God.

To evangelical Christians, I want to say: ensure you have humility regarding salvation, the Bible, and those who think differently than you do. Don't just read theology or biblical history by evangelical authors, but listen to other perspectives with as much openness as you can muster. Don't artificially limit yourself to the truths found in your theology or the Bible. If God is the Lord of all as you believe, God can be present in other religious traditions and philosophies as well: Stoic philosophy, Buddhism, and others. Finally, I suggest you prayerfully think through what you believe. If you do, you'll find that some aspects of belief are more important than others. The life-giving relationship with God through Jesus Christ takes precedence over everything.

I have gained a new respect for evangelicalism. On the one hand, I still disagree with evangelical concepts like biblical inerrancy and exclusive salvation through Jesus. On the other hand, I've come to see my own life differently. The evangelical
determination to focus upon God has inspired me to take more seriously God as known in Jesus Christ. In some ways, this project has become my own "way in."
Bibliography


Appendix: Interview Subjects

1. Pam
   Interviewed 8/13/01, 2 hours
   Age 21
   Female
   Single
   No children
   BA English
   Full-time ministry
   Religious background: Non-denominational Christian
   Current church/religious affiliation: [Non-denominational Protestant]
   Label to describe religious faith: resists labeling her religious faith – settles on
   “born again disciple of Jesus Christ”

2. Jane
   Interviewed 1/30/02, 3 hours
   Age 43
   Female
   Married
   One son (almost 12)
   PhD in Sociology
   College Professor
   Religious background: United Presbyterian (“mainline,” “big suburban country
   club”)
   Current church/religious affiliation: Baptist
   Label to describe religious faith: “evangelical, theologically conservative-
   politically liberal”

3. Jacob
   Interviewed 10/26/01, 2 hours 15 minutes
   Age 27
   Male
   Single
   No children
   College student
   Religious background: Plymouth Brethren (Rumania)
   Current church/religious affiliation: Plymouth Brethren
   Label to describe religious faith: “A Christian – a Bible-believing Christian”

4. Steve
   Interviewed 2/4/02, 2/18/02, 2 hours 30 minutes
   Age 22
   Male
   Single
No children
College student
Religious background: baptized Lutheran, confirmed Methodist 8th grade, confirmed Presbyterian 10th grade.
Current church/religious affiliation: Baptist
Label to describe religious faith: “Christian, understanding that a Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ and not one who merely believes in Jesus.”

5. Richard
Interviewed 1/11/01, 1 hour 30 minutes
Age 66
Male
Married
4 sons [45, 41, 39, 34 – 12 grandkids]
PhD Organizational Administration (dissertation in cross-cultural studies on how you adapt administration to a culture)
M. Div.
M.S. Sociology/Anthropology
College professor 24 years, (prior to that) missionary in Brazil 20 years
Religious background: evangelical Baptist
Current church/religious affiliation: evangelical Baptist
Label to describe religious faith: evangelical – “same camp as Billy Graham, agrees with fundamental teachings on the inerrancy of Scripture and the deity of Christ.”

6. Janet
Interviewed 8/9/01, 1 hour 30 minutes
Age 61
Female
Married
One daughter (39)
Some college
Holds barbers license and worked a number of jobs, including post office and food service
Religious background: family not religious though she “accepted the Lord in high school,” in churches on and off over time (to include non-denominational Protestant and Disciples of Christ).
Current church/religious affiliation: Baptist
Label to describe religious faith: evangelical

7. Clark
Interviewed 11/30/01, 3 hours
Age 24
Male
Single
No children
BS Liberal Studies
Undergoing [Non-denominational Protestant] school of ministry
Religious background: not really any church but a “cult” because it denied the
deity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.
Label to describe your religious faith: “Christian – Jesus is the Son of God, was
raised from the dead, etc.”

8. Wayne
Interviewed 8/9/01, 3 hours
Age 62
Male
Married
Two children (son 31 and daughter 28)
B.S. Forest Management
Forester (retired)
Religious background: raised in Presbyterian church
Label to describe religious faith: “Born again Christian”

9. Erica
Interviewed 9/28/01, 2 hours
Age 22
Female
Single
No children
Senior in college, English major
Religious background: Catholic
Current church/religious affiliation: [Non-denominational Protestant]
Label to describe religious faith: “Charismatic and evangelical”

10. Stuart
Interviewed 11/18/01, 3 hours
Age 58
Male
Married
Four children (daughter 31, son 30, daughter 29, son 23)
M.A. English
College professor
Religious background: Conservative Baptist
Current church/religious affiliation: Conservative Baptist.
Label to describe religious faith: “Traditional Protestant, Conservative
Evangelical – “Jesus was God, Virgin birth, etc.”

11. Bruce
Interviewed 1/16/02, 1 hour 30 minutes
Age 22
Male
No children
Senior in college, biochemistry/biophysics and chemistry
Aspires to acquire a PhD and teach chemistry at university level
Religious background: Conservative Baptist ("since 9 months before I was born")
Label to describe your religious faith: "fundamentalist in that the Bible is entirely accurate, wholly inspired."

12. Martin
Interviewed 10/20/01, 3 hours
Age 44
Male
Married
2 daughters (18, 14)
1 year college
Store manager – coffee shop
Religious background: Southern Baptist
Current Church/Religious Affiliation: [Christian]
Label to describe religious faith: "Charismatic"

13. Rebekah
Interviewed 10/14/01, 2 hours 45 minutes
Age 20
Female
Single
No children
Junior in college, Spanish major
Profession: not sure – "whatever the Lord wants"
Religious background: "raised Ba’hai and nothing"
Current Church/Religious affiliation: [Non-denominational Protestant]
Label to describe religious faith: "saved by the power of a great affection [God’s affection for her]"

14. Bart
Interviewed 10/28/01, 2 hours
Age 54
Male
Married
2 children (son 27, daughter 24)
Bachelor’s in Business Administration plus the equivalent of an AA from [Non-denominational Protestant]
Pastor [Non-denominational Protestant]
Religious background: Presbyterian
Current church/religious affiliation: [Non-denominational Protestant]
Label to describe your religious faith: “born again Christian, conservative-evangelical”

15. Gail
   Interviewed 10/7/01
   Age 21
   Female
   Single
   No children
   Junior in college, psychology
   Religious background: Presbyterian
   Current church/religious affiliation: [Non-denominational Protestant]
   Label to describe your religious faith: “Personal relationship with Jesus Christ”
   [that’s as close to a label as she’d like to go – avoids labels because they
   “prejudice/cause judgmental-ness”]

16. Brian
   Interviewed 12/18/01, 1/28/02 3 hours
   Age 48
   Male
   Married
   2 daughters (10 and 8)
   PhD in Industrial/Systems Engineering
   College Professor
   Religious background: “raised as an evangelical Christian in a variety of churches
   – the most influential: ‘Christian and missionary alliance.’”
   Current church/religious affiliation: Calvin Presbyterian
   Label to describe your religious faith: “Orthodox Christian” – holds to the “tenets
   of the Nicene creed” and “Mere Christianity are at the core” of his beliefs.

17. Jamie
   Interviewed 10/21/01, 1 hour 45 minutes
   Age 19
   Female
   Single
   No children
   One year college
   Training for ministry
   Religious background: Baptist
   Current church/religious affiliation: [Non-denominational Protestant]
   Label to describe religious faith: “Christian – non-denominational.”

18. Matthew
   Interviewed 10/13/01, 3 hours
   Age 24
Male
Single
No children
BS Math
Teaching high school
Religious background: various evangelical/charismatic churches
Current church/religious affiliation: [Non-denominational Protestant]
Label to describe your religious faith: Charismatic

19. Mark
Interviewed 11/28/01, 1/16/02, 3 hours
Age 59
Male
Married
Three daughters (30, 28, 26)
PhD History Classics (Greek and Roman languages) and ancient history
College professor
Religious background: Baptist – “quite fundamentalistic”
Current church/religious affiliation: Baptist (“conservative” “evangelical”)
Label to describe your religious faith: “evangelical Christian”