TELLING STORIES:
APPLYING FEMINIST WRITING STRATEGIES TO “EMERGING CHURCH” THEOLOGIES

A Thesis in
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ABSTRACT

In my dissertation, I apply feminist frameworks and feminist writing strategies to an evangelical Protestant phenomenon called the “emerging church.” The “emerging church” arises from a conservative theological background and uses postmodern principles to call into question many of the taken-for-granted truth claims common to evangelicalism. I investigate four concepts generally accepted as critical markers of evangelical subjectivity—worldview permeated with Christ’s stories, belief in spiritual transformation, acceptance of Scriptural authority, and call to witness on Christ’s behalf—and assert that these positions need not be held with absolute certainty or truth to sustain Christian faith. Further, I contend that shifting paradigms from evangelical truth-claims to evangelical faith-stories provides more space for equitable gender relationships, awareness of the mystery of God, and more loving and responsible interactions with non-evangelicals. Attending to the embodied and fragmented qualities that shape our life-stories of faith, I believe, grants us a posture of humility that focuses less on correct doctrine and more on performing life-stories that account for faith and God’s beautify reflected in all humanity’s *imago Dei*.

My work speaks to multiple disciplines but is grounded in three critical convictions: first, that scholarship needs to address epistemologies of faith in serious and respectful ways; second, that gendered-inquiry needs to account for complex and contradictory subject-positions and stories that we live; third, that literacy acts of reading, writing, and interpreting can assist in showing the contingencies, boundaries, and possibilities of discourses and subjects. Demonstrate the social and political necessity of grappling with questions of faith, gender, and sexuality through respectful and ethical treatment of believers and non-believers. My dissertation derives from these convictions as I assert that investigating faith-claims matters for the kinds of communities, subjects, and stories we can be, tell, and imagine.
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FOREWORD

In September, I attended a conference hosted by Women of Faith—an evangelical and evangelist-minded organization based on products by the Christian publisher Thomas Nelson, Inc. My friend and I sat, packed into the Wachovia Center auditorium (home of the Philadelphia 76ers professional basketball team) along with 19,000 other women. I did not expect to agree theologically with either the speakers or the attendees of this conference, but I also did not expect to find a frame that brings all of the pieces of my dissertation together. Yet, as I listened to one of the speakers, celebrated gospel singer Sandi Patti, I sensed a new framework for my dissertation emerging.

Patti spoke of the 1995 bombing in her hometown, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. According to her, the First United Methodist Church that had stood next to the attacked site also faced significant damages to its decades-old stained glass windows. The central image—a stained glass window of Jesus praying—shattered, its pieces strewn about Main Street. Days after the devastating attack, church members roamed the streets, picking up the shards of glass and preparing to rebuild their sanctuary. As Patti explained, the church members found one concrete image amidst the rubble: a piece of glass bearing Jesus’ face.

When the members of the congregation completed their new church, they used that image of Jesus in a new stained-glass window. Around the refurbished window, the stained-glass artist inscribed the words: “Jesus takes broken pieces, and by His love, makes us whole.” As Patti finished her story, I recalled my dissertation and my emphasis on fragmentation and beauty in storytelling. That stained-glass image stuck with me, along with the tensions between brokenness and wholeness that unite not
only the shards of glass that comprise the church’s picture but also the fragmented stories and the disciplines I bring together in my scholarship.

Evangelicalism and the “emerging church” emphasize the brokenness of humanity resulting from the Edenic fall; and, as a result of the Genesis narrative that sets up evangelicalism’s and the “emerging church’s” originary story, all human relationships and all humans within that discourse are fractured by sin. Feminist poststructuralist theorists work with fragmentation as well, albeit in different ways; moving away from humanist conceptions of linear and coherent personhood, feminist poststructuralist theorists propose gendered subjects as constructs and constructors of discourses—achieved through the recognition of competing, contradictory, and fragmented discourses. Literacy practices of interpretation and composition help to frame those shards of glass—fractured stories and storytellers—within discursive practices, and to read and write against frames. Stained glass depicts beautiful images from obviously disparate elements—but the iron framing remains clear as the support structure, and the colorful visions shatter easily. Stories and storytellers, like stained glass pictures, fit into and break free from discursive frames.

Stained-glass pictures consist of two basic parts—the iron framing and the colored bits of glass. I imagine the iron framing as discourses: the discursive factors that bind, limit, direct, and shape the boundaries of one color from another. I imagine the colored bits of glass as stories—individual and collective—through which the discourses and the otherwise-hollow iron frames, are made meaningful. There is, of course, also the play of light that, while not physically part of stained-glass creations, influences the images by casting some colors into relief and others into shadow.

I see my methodology throughout my dissertation as metaphorically linked to stained-glass. I provide a frame (evangelical, “emerging,” and feminist discourses) and arrange fragments from multiple disciplines and multiple stories to compose a new
image: feminist theories and writing strategies applied to the “emerging church.” Like the Methodists from Oklahoma City who search for scattered shards of glass, I consciously and intentionally seek out fragments from feminisms, literacy theories, and religious studies to construct new stories—rooted in remnants of old stories but projected in a new light.

This stained-glass metaphor especially works for me and for my dissertation because the concept of broken glass translates between feminist poststructuralist theories in literacy studies and “emerging” theologies. Preeminent feminist and literacy scholar Bronwyn Davies titles one of her books *Shards of Glass*, and though she does not explicitly explain the text’s name in relationship to its content, the connections, to me, are clear. Davies articulates the conception of the poststructuralist subject: “[t]he individual subject is understood at one and the same time to be constituted through social structures and through language, and becomes a speaking subject, one who can continue to speak/write into existence those same structures through those same discourses” (Prologue, xx). Davies speaks and writes specifically about stories and literacy practices, and her understanding of feminist poststructuralist theories in this quote suggests that subjects constitute, re-constitute, and are constituted by discursive frameworks. Applied to the stained-glass metaphor that I employ here, this quotation demonstrates the weight that the iron frame carries in dictating the shape and structure of the image. Discourses determine stories.

But neither Davies nor I stop with discourses as determinant. As Davies indicates in the next line of her quote, “[b]ut, as a speaking subject, they can also invent, invert and break old structures and patterns and discourses and thus speak/write into existence other ways of being” (Prologue, xx). Through literacy acts, Davies argues, subjects can transform discursive patterns—challenging and changing the rules of the discourse and the kinds of subjectivities available within discursive
frameworks. I rely on this principle of resistance through literacy acts throughout my dissertation, and use writing as a means of disrupting discourses that hold gendered evangelical subjectivity in place. Relating back to my stained-glass metaphor, we can shift the lighting on the image to bring new colors and new pictures into focus; as speaking and writing subjects, we can frame the glass and smash it.

Further, as Davies writes toward the conclusion of *Shards of Glass*, “[w]e are each both the weaver and the web, the ones who tie the knots, and who are tied” (202). Within my analysis, this statement means that to stay within the fold of evangelical or “emerging” communities, disciples need to accept certain frameworks as common ground—such as the centrality of Jesus Christ as an incarnate God and the importance of reading Scripture. But, with the use of feminist poststructuralist theories like those expounded by Davies, I assert that neither the kinds of discipleship nor the reading and interpretive practices that produce and are produced by evangelical and “emerging” discipleship need to remain static to remain faithful. We can choose to shine the light on some shards of glass more than on others, to draw attention to certain images, to cast shadows on some pictures. We are both framer and framed, both illuminator and illuminated, but we need not accept that the old ways of framing fragments of gendered evangelical subjectivity are the only ways.

Without specifically attending to gender, “emerging” theologian Dan Kimball explicitly takes up the metaphor of stained glass in “The Stained Glass Perspective.” Like Patti and Davies, Kimball talks about fragmentation in his text, expressing, “God chooses us as art, and in this sense we are all broken pieces of stained glass” (207). In Kimball’s story, God seems to work independently as the artist—arranging human creations in patterns that reflect diving images. To Kimball, stained glass functions as a divine medium for making human brokenness beautiful. Juxtaposing this conception of stained glass with the Oklahoma City narrative Patti tells and the
theories Davies proposes, I argue—as I do in my dissertation—that while God’s creation narrative serves as the iron frame holding evangelical and “emerging” shards of glass together, within that discursive context, humans are both art and artists. The stained glass to which Kimball refers is a human construct created within a discursive frame that imagines God as the ultimate Creator.

In order to see new images, we need new frameworks, and my work contributes those new frames by asking the “emerging church” to reconsider its rigid reflections of discipleship and of gendered subjectivity and by urging feminists to explore faith as formative and transformative. All of this, I believe, happens through creative literacy acts. Just as the Methodists in Oklahoma City (re)collect the fragments of glass, just as Davies envisions subjects as “both the weaver and the web” (202), I assert that all storytellers are storytellers within stories; each fragment of glass tells a story that shapes and is shaped by the larger iron discursive frame. That frame, that discourse, defines the image of the shards of glass, but without those colored fragments, the frame is hollow and meaningless; and, even an iron frame melts at high-enough temperatures. We are both the art and the artists, making meaning and made meaningful in the same discursive moment.

Kimball would likely disagree with my assertions, as he suggests in the statements: God “assembles us, all of these little fragmented pieces of colored glass, and He puts us together….It’s as if Christ’s light shines through the pieces of art and poetry—each of us—on display as the Church to the world. We aren’t the light, but we are the stained glass that the light of Jesus shines through” (207). Kimball’s points about art and poetry, while beautiful, miss the point that I express with my work: that gendered evangelical and “emerging” stories, along with gendered evangelical and “emerging” storytellers, assemble God, too. Theologies and theologians and God become possible through discursive frames that expect sacred stories.
I facilitate students’ thinking about those discursive frames in one of my composition courses, where we discuss issues of religious texts, gender, and sexuality. This class is one way that I apply, expand upon, and further the research I begin in my dissertation. Because of the visibly public sociopolitical role that conservative Christianity plays in the United States—in ways that implicate gendered issues like marriage, parenting, abortion, and sexuality—I believe it is critical to equip students to rhetorically negotiate these charged issues that influence our lives as citizens. Each of these issues returns to a question of textual interpretation and rhetorical situations: namely, how do communities define gendered subjectivity, and what other definitions are possible? From a research perspective, I collect qualitative data from my students’ reading journals, in which I ask them to synthesize their interpretations, questions, and conclusions based on course readings and discussions. Through this research project, I explore how students read and compose texts that grapple with faith, gender, and sexuality. By examining how my students arrange, highlight, and select texts to work with, I seek to answer the question: in what ways do these students, through literacy acts of reading and writing, compose faith, gender, and sexuality? In other words, how do my students make sense of these shards of glass?

Throughout my teaching, my further research, and my dissertation, I draw attention to the discursive frames: that ironwork that holds the shards of glass together. I realized the link between my work and stained glass as I sat, packed into a sports stadium (sticky floors and all) with 19,000 other women. As I craned my neck to view the stained-glass image of Jesus, I thought of the layers of stories that contribute to that perception of wholeness; we pick up broken pieces and compose our selves with stories, but neither we nor our stories cease being broken like shards of glass. With my work, I make the claim that we don’t need the wholeness and cohesion for which evangelicals, and even some “emergents” strive. I deconstruct gendered
subjectivity and assert faith as always-already fractured by its hope in evidence unknown and unknowable. With my work, I make visible the iron frames that sustain stained-glass stories, and I argue that these stories are significant—iron seams and shards of glass included. With my work, I claim that we can even compose brokenness as beautiful.
Introduction to Stories of Faith: “Emerging Church” and Feminism

Hebrews 11:1

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

This is a story about God. It is also, because my words are the medium for this God-story, a story about me. What you see of God and what you see of me in this story will, of course, depend on what you’re looking for, but we’re here all the same.

For as long as I can remember (and memory is a tricky thing), I’ve contemplated God and craved God’s presence, and God mercifully obliges—or indulges—me. But God and theologies, our stories about God, are not the same. Indeed, theologians Stanley Grenz and John Franke call theology “a second-order discipline” in their 2001 text Beyond Foundationalism. As Grenz and Franke explain, “[t]heological discourse is developed in response to faith and arises in the context of reflection on faith and the attempt to articulate its content” (17). What Grenz and Franke mean, I think, is that theologies are products of discourses that already adhere to faith; discursively speaking, faith precedes theological discourse that bolsters and justifies already-present faith in a somewhat circular fashion. In any case, this is a story about God and faith told through theology, but already you can see the complexity of that statement, or, indeed, any statement, about God.

Some people attend church seeking God and some people abandon church seeking God, but just as theology and faith are not equivalent to God, neither is church. All of these words work together, gaining meaning through relationship to and distinction from one another. God, faith, theology, and church all play a role in this story, but it is difficult—if not impossible—to extract these terms from the faithful

1 All Scripture references come from the New International Version.
context in which I tell this tale or to isolate one word from another because, well, we rely on each other for meaning.

This is a story about what I hold most dear—painful and dangerous territory for an academic text; I make people uncomfortable. I did not get here by being comfortable. Sometimes theologies are about getting comfortable, but often theologies push boundaries in disconcerting ways for the faithful, and reading a bit of theological histories elucidates theological stories as potentially polemical. Theologies can conform to already-existing faith or transform it, but in either case theologies perform concepts of God through stories about God.

This story, like all theological stories, performs a particular understanding of God as understood by a particular community of Protestant evangelical Christians predominantly located in the United States. To be still more specific, this story examines a loose affiliation of Protestant evangelical Christians who participate in conversations about the “emerging church.” The “emerging church” arises from an innovative evangelical history and functions to invigorate spiritual traditions its adherents see as wayward or ineffective strategies for developing relationships between evangelical disciples, Jesus Christ, and cultural contexts.

Particularly, the “emerging church” simultaneously expands upon the traditional evangelical story elements of Biblical authority, Christ’s literal crucifixion and resurrection, individual conversion (being “born again”) and evangelism by urging its self-proclaimed members to serve God in the world more than in insulated institutions, to narrate faith instead of reducing the Bible to the sole example of God’s textual relationship to humanity, to convert by striving to be like Christ, and to witness in culturally relevant ways. Each of these “mandates” (none of which are codified and all of which are more descriptive than definitive) occupies a central role in an evangelical story focused on loving Christ but believing that institutions devised to
worship Christ require reformation. As such, the “emerging church” suggests a story of evangelicalism in-process with much proclaimed postmodern messiness and no definitive final goal.

However, “No emergence is perfect,” admits prolific storyteller-theologian Brian McLaren in his 2004 text *A Generous Orthodoxy*. McLaren openly tells us “[t]he process is messy” (284-285), and once more we see the challenges inherent in telling theological stories. The “emerging church” attracts me because I perceive much of my own hope and frustration in it, and so I situate myself along the borders of the “emerging church”—hesitant that my critiques may be ignored or resisted and yet hopeful that my theological performances might help with evangelical reformation. In my story, I apply feminist theories and theologies to dominant evangelical and “emergent” theological concepts in an effort to illustrate how some strands of feminism embrace postmodern messiness and how, if the “emerging church” engages with postmodern feminist theories and theologies, we might articulate a deeper, richer, though different, story of evangelical theology. My story is not just my own though, and I interweave pieces of my own narrative with pieces of “emerging church” narratives to illustrate the intersections of the stories we tell about God. I use my story not solely for its personal value but because it exemplifies the ways in which “emerging church” theologies and feminist theories might appear if practiced in conjunction—if, indeed, the “emerging church” attends seriously to gendered inquiry and if feminist theories acknowledge the significant role that faith plays as an epistemology.

Research Question

Feminist theories and theologies grapple with the postmodern “crisis” and the subsequent destabilization of certainty and identity in order to maintain political effectiveness and commitment to the embodied and material welfare of real people. Perhaps because I commit myself to some degree to both feminism and evangelicalism,
I see the conversations within postmodern feminisms as parallel to and useful for debates within the “emerging church” about postmodernity’s influences on “emerging” theological stories. In my application of feminist theories and theologies to the “emerging church,” I ask: to what extent can feminisms’ struggles with postmodernism contribute to “emerging” theological issues for the purpose of better understanding evangelical subjectivity within the “emerging church”? What discursive elements trace through both feminist and the “emerging church” stories of postmodern engagement? What are the limits of investigating the “emerging church” through feminist lenses, and in what ways are shifts in discourses of evangelical Protestantism incommensurable with feminist theologies? Through the deconstruction of evangelical gendered subjectivity and the constructive work of feminist writing strategies, I seek to answer the question: in what ways and to what extent can gendered-inquiry and examination of literacy acts (reading, writing, interpreting, and storytelling) generate possibilities for more gender-equitable subjectivities within evangelicalism, more ethical and understanding relationships between evangelicals and non-evangelicals, and more academic emphasis on faith as a legitimate—albeit limited (as are all epistemologies)—way of knowing?

Strands of subjectivity and storytelling weave their way through my exploration of these questions, demonstrating the ways in which discursive positionings sustain and are sustained by our life-stories. In order to investigate subjectivity and storytelling, I look to four concepts that tend to mark evangelical subjectivity:

1. **Narrativity**: belief in stories of Jesus Christ (His Incarnation as God in human form, His crucifixion as a sacrifice for humanity’s sinfulness, His resurrection as a promise that His disciples receive eternal life and need not fear death) as real, meaningful, and relevant to evangelical subjects’ perceptions of themselves; conviction of living out part of God’s story and contributing to that story by
trying to be like Christ.

2. **Conversion**: confidence that trust and participation in Christ’s stories (again, by striving to be Christlike) transforms individual lives, often leading to an experience of being “born again” that significantly marks evangelical believers’ subjectivity and evangelical life-stories with conversion as a pivotal “moment.”

3. **Textual Authority**: trust in the Bible and in Biblical teachings as accurately representing (though this representation itself is contentious—with some evangelicals arguing for “literal” readings of Scripture) God’s message for humanity’s edification.

4. **Evangelism/Witnessing**: principle of publicly and openly sharing experiences of faith and Biblical teachings in order to disseminate Christ’s stories for the purpose of inspiring converts; expectation that evangelical believers interact with non-believers and present “evidence” in support of evangelical beliefs (often creating a return to narrativity—the stories that link Christ with humanity).

By probing these aspects of evangelical subjectivity, we can more critically reflect on the complexity of faithful discourses as neither wholly oppressive nor wholly liberating but as actively shaping the way subjects live in and with discourses. Further, by examining the theological foundations of evangelical subjectivity, we see the reciprocity and contingency of efforts to construct a metanarrative through leaps of faith. Each element depends on the other elements, and all of the elements rest on the foundation of Christ’s stories as presented in the Bible as being accurate, such foundations inextricably link Christ as incarnate God with humanity and Christ’s stories with human stories and lives.

My scholarship, ultimately, looks to feminist hermeneutical strategies to investigate the ways in which texts and subjects reciprocally construct each other, and this research holds implications for all three of the disciplines in which I work:
feminist theories, literacy education, and theological studies. Feminist writers from multiple discourse communities and disciplinary backgrounds advocate for the analysis of religious rhetoric in academic contexts. Jeana DelRosso, author of the 2005 text *Writing Catholic Women*, claims “as a category of difference, religion—like race, class, sexuality, ethnicity—remains on the margins of academia, unconsidered and underanalyzed as a valid classification of literary and theoretical analysis” (4).

Agreeing, Aida Hurtado, in her 2003 essay “Theory in the Flesh,” expresses “[t]o claim the spiritual within the academy is blasphemous—it undermines the claims of ‘scientific’ objectivity and leaves us bereft of method. Not to know how best to incorporate the spiritual into institutions of higher education does not mean we should not pose the question” (218). Both of these scholars acknowledge that while faith remains a difficult facet of subjectivity to define, describe, and discuss, the fact remains that faithful discourses contribute to subject-formation; to ignore issues of religion and spirituality elides the reality that we shape and are shaped by such discourses, and thus these writers concur in encouraging critical investigation of faith in academia, much in the way that we analyze gender, race, class, and sexuality in academic settings. My research urges feminist theorists and theologians to attend seriously to faith as an epistemology not traditionally valued in academic contexts but significant in the lives of many gendered-subjects and helps the “emerging church” see the value of gendered inquiry as a means of rectifying gender-based inequalities (not as natural but as discursive) in evangelical discourses.

In terms of literacy education, my work explores literacy acts central to evangelical subjectivity (i.e., reading Scripture and telling life-stories that focus on the interaction of Christ and Christ’s stories with human lives—individual and collective), and this practice helps us to better grasp the position of students and teachers alike who take up and are taken up by evangelicalism. As Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo
famously state in their 1987 text *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, “[r]eading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world” (35). Freire and Macedo, for decades of literacy educators, demonstrate that literacy acts and worldviews influence each other, and my agreement that the texts we produce simultaneously produce our worlds and our subjectivities reinforces my belief that interrogating evangelical literacy practices provides insight into evangelical movements in the contemporary United States. Shirley Brice Heath reached similar conclusions in *Ways With Words*, a 1983 text where, after examining the literacy practices of conservative Christian students in a like-minded community, she concludes, “[n]ew syntheses and multiple interpretations create alternatives which challenge fixed roles, rules, and ‘rightness’” (234-235). Like Brice Heath, I seek to juxtapose academic disciplines and diverse texts to contest the rigidity of evangelical subjectivity that limits gender-roles in unequal ways. More recently, Bronwyn Davies’s scholarship in feminist pedagogies stresses the connections between literacy acts and subjectivity, ultimately concluding in *Shards of Glass* (1993) that we live stories. According to Davies, “[w]ho we take ourselves to be at any one point in time depends on the available storylines we have to make sense out of the ebb and flow of being-in-the-world along with the legitimacy and status accorded to those storylines by the others with whom we make up our lives at any one point in time” (43). Literacy acts, as all of these writers recognize, are both formative and transformative, defining through stories and texts who we are and who we might be. Both my own literacy acts represented throughout this document and my interpretation and juxtaposition of evangelical gendered-subjectivity as contested and contestable assist me in pushing the boundaries (though not erasing them—an impossible feat within discourse communities) of acceptable gendered living within evangelicalism.
This kind of scholarship also fits into disciplines of theological studies, where, as my works cited list indicates, numerous scholars take up questions and conversations related to the “emerging church.” Some of these scholars—most notably Frederica Mathewes-Green, Jo-Ann Badley, Tony Campolo, and McLaren—rely on gender-based inquiry to a limited extent, but I contribute a more theoretically rigorous and sustained feminist analysis that illustrates the relevance of feminist theories and theologies to an “emerging” movement that raises gendered issues including: the authority to speak, the right to ordination, and the interpretation of Biblical texts relating to women’s bodies and gender roles. Integrating feminist analysis into “emerging church” conversations allows me to adopt a marginalized position with the ability to highlight issues and generate queries from outside of evangelical discourses while still engaging in theological issues relevant to gender and, in turn, to feminisms.

Justification of Criteria

Feminist theorist Judith Butler grapples with the postmodern “crisis” in her text *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which she analyzes the effectiveness of feminist political organizing if the identity-category “woman” or “women” loses coherence and stability. As Butler writes, “[f]or the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued” (1). Here Butler describes the foundations of identity politics—an often useful strategy of achieving shared goals by unifying under the presumed commonality of “womanhood.” Identity politics, however, as many feminist theorists working with the postmodern turn understand, may elide differences among and between women; or, as Butler herself asks, “[i]s the premature insistence on the goal of unity precisely the cause of an ever more bitter fragmentation among the ranks?” (15). Indeed, as Butler’s question emphasizes, identity politics’ assertion of
unity and commonality might create more resentment of than appreciation of difference.

Whereas I use the term gendered evangelical subjectivity to highlight the discursive production of gendered evangelical subjects, evangelicalism relies on assumptions of stable and coherent identity as evangelical. Yet, a quick look at Christian history—riddled as it is with schisms both doctrinal and political—underscores the instability of the very term “Christian,” and denominational distinctions, however seemingly small, establish the identity-marker “Christian” as fragmented and contested. Precisely because of such fragmentation, I stress that my work and I reside within an evangelical Protestant camp typical of the United States, and while “evangelical” tells more about my affiliation than “Christian”—“evangelical” is no less a contested term. The “emerging church” as a movement indicates the differences within evangelicalism and tests the extent to which “emerging” disparity can exist before ceasing to remain within evangelical discourses. But while feminist theorists like Butler embrace the uncertainty of postmodernism and its disavowal of a concrete category of womanhood, evangelical theologians grapple to understand what happens to faith in a postmodern theological story, and, subsequently, the deconstruction of the believer or disciple. Shifting to postmodernism calls into question tenets of evangelical theology that find foundations in certainty—a certainty that many theologians recognize can no longer be taken for granted. For instance, in The Post-Evangelical (a title indicative of what direction the author envisions), Dave Tomlinson (2003) writes, “evangelicals are lodged in a cultural time-warp, still interpreting their faith using the language of, and in the shadow of, the modernist ‘big story’….But it’s time to move on. Evangelicals can no longer assume that others believe there is an objective truth out there, somewhere” (84). Just as Judith Butler asks whether premature presumptions of unity undermine the political effectiveness of
feminism, Tomlinson queries whether evangelical appeals to objective certainties make for effective relationships within the world. In this document, I argue that evangelicals need not cling to so-called objective truths in order to sustain Christian faith, and, in fact, relinquishing claims of absolute truth may result in more equitable evangelical gender relationships, greater awareness of the mystery of God, and more ethical relationships between evangelicals and non-evangelicals.

My move from truth-claims about God to faith-stories about God requires reconsidering the foundational beliefs that maintain seemingly stable and coherent gendered evangelical subjectivity. Butler, in her conclusion to Gender Trouble, goes on to assert “[t]he foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken. My argument is that there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (142). Imagine the impact of this understanding within evangelical theology if, rather than focusing on correct doctrine first, evangelicalism prioritizes good actions—with “good” once more a contested term open to contextual interpretations. This task of prioritizing righteous behavior over “right” belief seems to be one underlying mission of the “emerging church,” though the “emerging church” itself resists formalizing a mission statement. “Emerging” theologian Leonard Sweet describes this phenomenon in Postmodern Pilgrims (2000):

[p]ostmoderns have had it with religion. They’re sick and tired of religion. They’re convinced the world needs less of religion, not more. They want no part of obedience to sets of propositions and rules required by some “officialdom” somewhere. Postmoderns want participation in a deeply personal but at the same time communal experience of the divine and the transformation of life that issues from that identification with God. (112)
As Sweet’s statement illustrates, postmodern theological stories highlight God through life-performances, not through doctrinal statements; and, just as feminist theories wrestle with postmodern deconstruction of “woman” and “womanhood” to retain political efficacy, so too might evangelical theologians affiliating with the “emerging church” do well to struggle with the instability of postmodern God-stories and the subsequent deconstruction of “disciple” and “discipleship.” Not only can “emerging” engagement with postmodernism reintroduce mystery into its theological narratives, but it can likewise critique foundational principles that may obscure faith by prioritizing theological propositions over faithful living.

Toward that end, I focus on four key elements of evangelical subjectivity—narrativity, conversion, textual authority, and evangelism/witnessing—in my four body chapters. These four elements continually reappear as markers of evangelical subjectivity in descriptions of evangelicalism, and so I use these assumed foundations of evangelicalism and analyze the ways in which the “emerging” evangelical movement might benefit from dialogue with feminist theories and theologies that survive and thrive through the postmodern “crisis.” Though the pairing of feminist theories and theologies and evangelical theologies may seem awkward or uncomfortable, just such a juxtaposition of differing discourses dealing with the same deconstruction of sure foundations (for feminists, the unity of “woman/womanhood” and for evangelicals the certainty of “disciple/discipleship”) expresses the relevance of our performances rather than our identities.

In the chart below, I summarize each of my chapters and the ways in which that chapter seeks to reinterpret a critical component of traditional evangelical theology through the lens of “emerging church” theologies assisted by feminisms; this literacy act of juxtaposing alternative texts establishes richer context for foundational evangelical beliefs and highlights the implications for gendered subjects struggling with
multiple meanings. My purpose in revising these theological stories is not to displace the importance of such concepts within evangelicalism but rather to offer alternative discourses that reveal the contingency of all our stories, as well as to simultaneously offer hope and caution to “emerging church” theologies from feminist theories that, while working toward different (and sometimes opposite) goals to evangelical theologians, might prove helpful in the emergence of postmodern theologies evangelicals can live with. Additionally, feminist theories can learn from working with(in) discourses that take seriously issues of faith and spirituality without sacrificing commitment to women’s well-being. Finally, literacy theories can learn how evangelical literacy practices construct not only evangelical subjects but also evangelical perspectives on sociocultural issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Theme</th>
<th>Trends in Evangelical Protestant History in U.S. and “Emerging Church”</th>
<th>Feminist Inquiry and Gendered Implications of “Emerging Church”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrativity</td>
<td>storytelling intertwined with witnessing and conversion as means of describing Jesus and His Biblical stories, depicting disciples’ relationships with Jesus and disciples’ stories, creating networks of disciples whose frameworks mesh with strategies of reading the Bible and the world; “emerging church” attempts at “narrative theology” to engage non-Christians</td>
<td>embodied narratives as indicative of gendered relationships with Christ; stories as means of displacing forces that disregard, silence, and oppress; feminist pedagogies of difference exemplified through narratives; multiplicity of stories and interpretations as literacy acts that reveal and respect differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversion</td>
<td>efforts to pinpoint a moment in which individual believers change, understandings of conversion as instantaneous, static, and usually permanent towards “emerging church” postmodern, process-oriented conversion</td>
<td>feminist resistance to essentializing moments of change/conversion, comfort with contradictions, and, most importantly, acceptance of embodied beings who are in-process and contradictory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual Authority</td>
<td>Sola Scriptura(^2) stemming from sixteenth-century Protestant</td>
<td>influences of cultural contexts on reading practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^2\) *Sola Scriptura* summarizes an understanding of needing only Scripture to make faithful decisions rather than relying on institutions and traditions; in many ways this “doctrine” leads into the Protestant Reformation emphasis on the “priesthood of all believers”—i.e., that all disciples are equally equipped to know the Holy Spirit, even if only some are called into professional ministerial roles.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Reformation movements</strong>; deinstitutionalization of congregations in preference of vernacular reading practices; emphasis on authority (sometimes literal) of the Bible; “emerging church” providing new texts (like internet and multiple interpretations of Scriptural passages) to complicate theological contexts</th>
<th><strong>(feminist pedagogies); alternative readings of Scripture that destabilize hegemonic institutions; disruption of traditional readings’ material consequences for women</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Witnessing</strong></td>
<td>“Great Commission”(^3) imperative to spread Christianity throughout the world; understanding of uniqueness of Jesus as universal Savior;(^4) “emerging church” reemphasis on servitude in the world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Definition: Evangelicalism**

This is a story about God, but because I believe my story (and really, any story) about God is but a partial story, it’s important to understand the theological standpoint of this particular evangelical story. Additionally, I use pieces of my story that exemplify “emerging” theologies at work with the help of imaginative feminist writing strategies, but my story matters here largely because it elucidates a thread of the “emerging church” story. Grasping the “emerging church” conversations is contingent upon recognizing that this postmodern movement emerges out of distinctly evangelical stories. I begin with Robert Webber, whose 2002 text *The Younger Evangelicals* describes three potential meanings of the term evangelicalism: 1. biblical

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\(^3\) The “Great Commission” refers to Matthew 28: 19-20, “19Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (NIV translation). Typically, this post-resurrection statement is understood as an imperative to convert all the world to Christianity.

\(^4\) Jesus’ uniqueness as the universal Savior is often attributed to the Biblical reference John 14: 6—“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” a statement often understood to mean that eternal life is only possible through Christ.
usage referring to the good news of salvation and atonement\textsuperscript{5} through Jesus Christ; 2. theological usage referring to Scripture as authoritative—a term not to be confused with “literal,” though some evangelicals strive for literal readings of the Bible; 3. historical usage referring to reformation movements within the church (14). Evangelicalism, as Webber’s explanations accentuate, resists easy classification or straightforward definitions, and many Christians who adhere to similar ideologies refuse the label evangelical just as Christians who identify as evangelical bring to that identification some diversity in belief; this is a complicated and sometimes contradictory story.

For the purposes of my story’s intersections with the “emerging church,” however, I concentrate on significant trends within evangelicalism that help to characterize this movement within broader Christianity. To a large extent, as Benedict Anderson (1991) asserts in \textit{Imagined Communities}, “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). As Anderson’s statement demonstrates, there is not a concrete and absolute evangelicalism but rather a shifting and fluid movement constructed and imagined by communities who (sometimes) call themselves evangelicals. The “emerging church,” perhaps in painful ways for some evangelical subjects and communities, serves as a reminder that evangelicalism is not a unified or monolithic discourse but a fragmented and contested one.

With the constructedness of this category in mind, I build my understanding of evangelical subjectivity on four trends that characterize evangelicalism within broader Christian stories. According to historian Mark Noll’s 2001 text \textit{American Evangelical}

\textsuperscript{5} The doctrine of atonement focuses on Jesus Christ as a sinless surrogate who willingly dies on the cross in order to reconcile fallen humanity with God, and in doing so, provides a means of salvation for humans. Because Jesus presents Himself as a perfect sacrifice, He serves as a substitute for the imperfect and sinful offerings of humans.
Christianity, evangelical Christians in the United States tend to accept the following principles:

- “biblicism”: belief in the Bible as God’s word to be interpreted as if the language were transparent (31)
- “crucicentrism”: belief in the literal life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in His atoning work on the cross (31)
- “conversionism”: belief in personal transformation stemming from the decision to follow Jesus Christ (31)
- “activism”: belief in the necessity of encouraging others to convert to Christianity (31)

Agreeing with Noll, feminist theologian Pamela Cochran, in her 2005 text *Evangelical Feminism: A History*, defines evangelicalism as “a nondenominational coalition of conservative Christians” (1-2) and identifies this Christian subgroup’s prominent features as “the authority of scripture, the efficacy of Christ’s atonement on the cross, the necessity of a personal salvation experience, and the importance of evangelism and a transformed life” (7). Wendy Murray Zoba’s 2005 *The Beliefnet Guide to Evangelical Christianity* offers the same central tenets of evangelicalism, indicating that these issues of biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism provide a useful lens for examining evangelicalism. Of course, in this story, we need to remember that these four concepts are organizing principles rather than concrete definitions, and that the terms themselves along with the descriptions provided here remain highly subjective.

Another historian, George Marsden, concurs with Noll’s, Cochran’s, and Zoba’s four categories “Introduction: The Evangelical Denomination,” his 1984 essay, but includes a fifth interrelated concept to consider in defining evangelicals as “Christians who typically emphasize 1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of Scripture;
2) the real, historical character of God’s saving work recorded in Scripture; 3) eternal salvation only through personal trust in Christ; 4) the importance of evangelism and missions; and 5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life” (ix-x). Although Marsden uses five points rather than four, the primary themes emerging from his description coincide with the emphasis on Scriptural authority, salvation through Christ, personal transformation, and evangelism in terms and concepts similar to those used by Noll, Cochran, and Zoba.

Unlike the previous writers I cite here, Ian Randall, with his 2005 text *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, does not provide the same clear categories, but acknowledges “[e]vangelicals hold to orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, but an overriding theme, as expressed in this hymn [from the book’s title *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*], is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ” (15). Despite the ambiguity and contestedness of the phrases “orthodox Trinitarian doctrine” and “personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” Randall remains in line with all of these other writers by focusing both his title and his definition on the person of Jesus Christ. Again, as with the rest of Randall’s definitions, the “personal relationship” depicted in his statement does not necessarily indicate atonement but prioritizes disciples’ interactions with Jesus Christ. The four thematic categories that I use in my work emphasize the four main descriptors that emerge from these writers’ work: narrativity focuses on the story of Jesus Christ that serves as the foundation for evangelical life-stories (like what Noll calls “crucicentrism”—the centrality of the story of Christ’s crucifixion); conversion emphasizes the significance of spiritual transformation indicated by these authors and as pivotal for evangelical believers; textual authority relates to Biblical readings and interpretations that define what it means for evangelicals to live out Christ’s stories; and, finally, evangelism relates to the activist impulse of evangelicals to spread the
gospel to those imagined as “other” or “not-evangelical” based on the belief systems outlined here.

Despite these efforts to demarcate evangelicalism, Noll’s 1994 text *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* recognizes “evangelicalism” has always been made up of shifting movements, temporary alliances, lengthened shadows of individuals. All discussions of evangelicalism, therefore, are always both descriptions of the way things really are as well as efforts within our own minds to provide some order for a multifaceted, complex set of impulses and organizations. (8)

My theological story hinges on the point Noll makes clear in his quote: that discussions of evangelicalism are not so much definitive as descriptive, and that such descriptions are always contingent on the ways in which communities of self-identified evangelicals imagine their subgroup. Like Noll, Marsden provides this caveat with his definition: “[e]vangelicals will differ, sometimes sharply, over the details of these doctrines, and some persons or groups may emphasize one or more of these points at the expense of the others” (ix-x). Again, the critical point that Marsden makes here and that Noll highlights in the previous passage is that evangelicalism is constituted to a larger extent by communities and believers who self-identity as evangelicals rather than by a core set of beliefs to which members must adhere.

In the United States, while a large majority of the adult population self-identifies as “Christian,” few within that movement claim “evangelical” as additionally descriptive of religious affiliation. According to the 2006 document “Self-Described Religious Identification of Adult Population: 1990 and 2001,” United States census results from 1990 indicate that of the 175,440 strong adult population, 151,496 (or 86.4%) self-identified as “Christian,” with less than one percent of that total Christian population self-defining as “evangelical.” By 2001, the total adult population in the United States
swelled to 207,980, with 159,506 (or 76.7%) self-identifying as “Christian” and again, less than one percent of the Christian population claiming “Evangelical” identity.  

As these statistics illustrate, while “Christianity” in a broad sense plays a major role in identity construction for adults in the United States (though that number may be declining and represents “identification” rather than membership or regular practice), evangelicalism seems to persist as a minority subgroup within Christianity. Importantly, this survey provided no definition of “evangelicalism” to its participants, relying instead on respondents’ self-identification and reminding us of Anderson’s note that we sustain our communities through imagined affiliation. Fewer still might claim “emerging” as a moniker, but while the goal of such statistics may be to delineate religious communities more clearly, stories of “Christianity,” “evangelicalism,” and the “emerging church” remain hopelessly entangled; I can tug particular threads for my story but I cannot completely unravel centuries of knotty strings.

**Evangelicalism: A Brief Social and Political History**

Oftentimes, evangelicalism and fundamentalism are conflated, but as I demonstrate here, these two subgroups of Christianity share history in the United States (especially in the twentieth century), but progress as movements with a common parent and different agendas. The “emerging church” shares these roots and “emerges”

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6 These numbers, as depicted in the source, are in thousands.

7 Fundamentalism emphasizes literal interpretation of the Bible, resulting in the convictions that Scripture presents a true and accurate portrayal of theology, morals, and history. Whereas evangelicalism holds Scripture as authoritative, fundamentalism believes in the infallibility of the Bible, meaning that, in practice, both evangelicals and fundamentalisms likely assert God as the creator of the universe, but evangelicals might view the seven-day timeline of Genesis metaphorically and fundamentalists would accept the timeframe as being akin to our traditional week. These differences, for the purposes of my scholarship, are critical. Fundamentalism and evangelicalism are both conservative Protestant theological movements, but the literacy practices espoused by fundamentalists make all issues—from creation of the universe to gender roles—predominantly rigid, inflexible, and closed to many alternative interpretation. Evangelicalism grapples with Scripture in a way that sometimes practices faith like fundamentalism but provides a framework of interpretation that permits metaphor and narrative along with “objective facts,” making evangelicalism more flexible to other discursive practices like my work and the “emerging church” itself.
out of evangelicalism—perhaps representing yet another splinter in the gnarled branches of Protestantism and Christianity more generally. Both evangelicalism and fundamentalism originate in the Protestant Reformation with the *Sola Scriptura* rally cry that strove to destabilize authoritarian institutions by persuading disciples that the Bible is the only necessary tool for a Christian. As Marsden ("Introduction: The Evangelical Denomination") points out, “[a]ll [evangelical Christian movements] reflect the sixteenth-century Reformation effort to get back to the pure Word of Scripture as the only ultimate authority and to confine salvation to a faith in Christ, unencumbered by presumptuous human authority" (x). These sixteenth-century Reformation roots retain visibility in contemporary constructions of evangelicalism that prioritize the authority of the Bible and a disciple’s relationship to Christ instead of to a particular institutionalized denomination.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, preachers from various Christian denominations moved across the Atlantic into the colonial space of the present-day eastern coastal United States. Among these leaders were popular revivalists John Wesley8 and George Whitefield, who performed theological praxis with the goal “that each person would know for himself a profound experience with God,” as Nathan Hatch expresses in his 1984 article “Evangelicalism as a Democratic Movement” (73). Hatch’s article title and his description of Wesley and Whitefield fit in with contemporary definitions of evangelicalism that concentrate on individual believers’ interactions with the Bible and with God instead of institutionalized organized religion. This trend explains why much of the “emerging church” movement comes not (as often) from seminaries or universities but from charismatic pastors and congregations—particularly, McLaren. The “emerging church” works its way from the

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8 John Wesley and, to a lesser extent, his brother Charles, are generally acknowledged as the founders of Methodism, though it is unlikely that their purpose at the time was to create a new denomination.
praxis of seminary-educated pastors like McLaren who notice congregational
dissatisfaction (especially among the young and the urban—two characteristics typical
of “emerging” affiliates) to more academic theological spaces and institutions. In many
ways, evangelicals and “emerging” evangelicals still operate with a grassroots, non-
denominational, and anti-institutional framework similar to what Wesley and
Whitefield practiced centuries ago.

Wesley and Whitefield play key roles as revivalist preachers in what historians
of United States Christianity term with expressed reluctance “The Great Awakening.”
In their collective 1983 text *The Search for Christian America*, Noll, Marsden, and Hatch
question the sweeping optimism of that moniker. During the mid-eighteenth century
(the time period to which the label “The Great Awakening” is applied), these authors
insist “the general trend throughout colonial America was toward lower and lower
numbers of people ‘adhering’ to churches. The figures, by modern standards (when
something like 60 percent of the population belong to churches, but only 40 percent
actually attend church regularly), are impressive. But they still show consistent
decline” (53). United States evangelicalism as a transdenominational, populist
movement finds its historical roots in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century revivals
that deinstitutionalized congregations and focused on individual converts’ relationships
with God. Much as Noll, Marsden, and Hatch assert, Jon Butler, in the 1998 article
“Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction,”
explains “The Great Awakening” not as an acme of evangelical influence in the colonies
of the present-day United States but as nostalgia for a “Christian” climate that never
existed to the extent many disciples might wish for in the United States—past or
present.

Despite the uncertainty with which we can apply the label evangelicalism to
United States history and the persistent difficulty of quantifying or bounding
evangelical identity, threads connect contemporary evangelicalism—and the “emerging church”—to its historical roots. Indeed, the theme of conversionism holds strong with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelical leaders like Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, and Dwight Moody. Randall focuses on this issue in his text and supplies the famous statement from Wesley’s 1738 conversion—“I felt my heart strangely warmed” (25)—to highlight the individualistic and emotional tendencies of evangelicalism. Similarly, in the 1720s, Randall cites Edwards as claiming conversion “is a great and glorious work of God’s power, at once changing the heart, and infusing life into the dead soul” (28). By the early- to mid-nineteenth century, Charles Finney used the “anxious seat” to call forth unconverted attendees of revivals and ask for an on-the-spot decision to follow Jesus Christ (34). Later in the nineteenth century, Dwight Moody employed similar strategies to urge revivalists to immediately commit their lives to Jesus Christ (37). All of these evangelical and revivalist leaders take part in a historical trajectory that to this day positions conversionism and personal relationships with God as critical components of evangelical Christianity in much of the United States Protestant tradition.

Revivalism persisted into the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century with charismatic leaders like Billy Sunday. 1925, however, stands out as a critical moment in evangelical history; in 1925, the Scopes “Monkey” trial pitted Clarence Darrow’s scientific principles of evolutionary theory against William Jennings Bryan’s literal interpretation of creation in Genesis (for more information, see Noll’s The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind). Retrospectively, the label applied to the type of Christianity espoused by Bryan at the Scopes trial is “fundamentalism”—a movement related to but not synonymous with evangelicalism. Noll (The Old Religion, published in 2002) writes “[i]n recent decades [fundamentalism] has stood not so much for a general defense of traditional principles of Protestantism, but for a particular combination of biblical
interpretations based on premillennial dispensationalism\(^9\) with attitudes and practices of nineteenth-century populist revivalism” (146). Originally, “Fundamentalism” referred to a series of publications (aptly called “The Fundamentalist Papers”) outlining the critical criteria of Christian faith, but as Noll explains, contemporary understandings of the word suggest expectations of literal Biblical translation and separatism from popular culture.

Marsden (“Introduction: The Evangelical Denomination”) describes fundamentalism as “applied most often to strict separatists, mostly dispensationalists” (xiv) and provides present-day examples of Jerry Falwell and Bob Jones (xi) as fundamentalist thinkers. Fundamentalist understandings of language as transparent and as Scriptural interpretation as a literal task mean that while fundamentalism and evangelicalism share common origins, revision, reinterpretation, and reconstruction are nearly impossible tasks within a fundamentalist framework. As John Bartowski reveals *Remaking the Godly Marriage: Gender Negotiations in Evangelical Families* (2002):

* Biblical inerrancy—the belief that the Bible is the literal and infallible Word of God—also achieved a privileged status in first-wave fundamentalist Protestantism. Early fundamentalists not only understood the Bible to be historically accurate, but construed scripture as the ultimate source of moral truth for individual believers. First-wave fundamentalists therefore rejected other sources of revelatory inspiration (e.g., speaking in tongues). Instead, they strove for a more codified and stable theological base—the timeless truths of the

\(^9\) The theological theory of premillennial dispensationalism understands historical periods as dispensations in which God reveals Himself in distinct forms; these dispensations continue until the final dispensation, which is preceded by the rapture (ascension of true believers into heaven) and anticipates a thousand year (i.e., “millennial”) reign by the anti-Christ.
Bible—in the face of rapid social change. This shift was a strategic move on the part of first-wave fundamentalist leaders—who were, by and large, men. (27) Bartowski’s argument shows the difficulty of negotiating alternative subjectivities (a key concept for my document) within fundamentalism because fundamentalists tend to imagine Scripture and discipleship as closed texts, thereby rendering the opportunity for revision challenging if not impossible. There is little room for my story or the kinds of feminist stories I use within fundamentalism, or, indeed, for the “emerging church” stories.

Evangelicalism, on the other hand, tends to espouse traditional gender roles but leaves available more possibility of revision. Cochran, in her feminist text, uses “the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942 and Fuller Theological Seminary in 1947” and the beginning of Christianity Today in 1956 as key dates in differentiating fundamentalism from evangelicalism. With the founding of these evangelical organizations and publications, Cochran argues, the then named “neo-evangelicals” “sought to move beyond the cultural and intellectual isolation of the fundamentalist movement” and “began to engage with nonevangelicals and consider what they could learn from contemporary thought” (18). Again, as Cochran’s text highlights, relationships to texts and relationships to mainstream culture are important points of difference for many fundamentalists and evangelicals. Throughout my analysis, I interrogate and push the boundaries of what kinds of interpretations of texts and textual relationships are and could be possible within the “emerging church.”

At the same time, evangelicals’ investment in mainstream politics (as opposed to fundamentalists’ engagement in politics from a more critically separatist perspective) means that, as always, religion and politics make interesting (and potentially dangerous) bedfellows in the United States. Still, it would be a mistake to assume a coherent or simplistic “evangelical” politics, particularly considering the complex and
conflicted history of evangelicalism itself. More to the point, “emerging church”
conversants—including myself—challenge traditional evangelical theology as well as
stereotypical evangelical political views, reminding us powerfully of why Tomlinson
titles his “emerging church” text *The Post-Evangelical.*

Nonetheless, just as my theological story and the “emerging church”
conversations arise out of an understanding of evangelical history, so too it can be
useful to understand this story “emerging” out of evangelical engagements with
politics. Esther Kaplan’s 2005 *With God on Their Side: George W. Bush and the
Christian Right*, explores the influence of the “Christian Right” on legislation and policy
in the United States. According to Kaplan, in November of 2000,

Bush’s polling numbers exposed how deep the family-values fault line had
become—and how important the Christian right has become to the
contemporary Republican Party. In an extremely close race, Bush beat Al Gore
by 14 percentage points among married people with children and by 30 points
among frequent churchgoers; whereas Gore beat Bush among working mothers
by 20 points, and among nonchurchgoers by 38 points. Bush also won almost
two-third of voters who described the nation’s moral climate as off on the wrong
track. While Reagan and Bush Sr. did well among white evangelicals, Bush Jr.
scored a wipe out: 75 percent of all white evangelicals and 84 percent among
the most observant. Evangelical conservatives made up only 12 to 15 percent of
Reagan’s electorate, but they added up to 40 percent of Bush’s. (75)

From a statistical standpoint, Kaplan’s evidence in favor of the “Christian Right’s”
political influence is astounding, and certainly she makes a convincing point that
religious affiliation affects the polls. Yet in this story, we must recall that theological
conservatism and political conservatism, often related, are not actually synonymous
and that terms like “evangelicalism” suggest unity where, as my “emerging church”
example indicates, there also exist fragmentation and difference.

Sara Diamond agrees with Kaplan in the 1998 text *Not By Politics Alone: The
Enduring Influence of the Christian Right*, where Diamond envisions evangelical
subculture with the agenda to convert popular culture. As Diamond writes, “[t]he
means include a phenomenal number of religious broadcast stations, publishing
houses, churches, and grassroots lobbies. The motivation is to preach the Gospel and
to save souls, but also, with equal urgency, to remake contemporary moral culture in
the image of Christian Scripture” (1). As can be inferred from both Kaplan’s and
Diamond’s texts, religion and politics reciprocally influence each other within United
States contexts, but the nature and reach of that influence can be more difficult to
determine because neither religion nor politics are singular, independent, or coherent
movements.

Still, as Catherine Albanese claims in the 1999 text *America: Religions and
Religion*, names like “New Christian Right” and “Christian Coalition” are not exclusively
the domain of self-identified Christians broadly or evangelicals specifically. In
deconstructing these terms, Albanese says:

Jerry Falwell claimed that some 30 percent of the members of his organization
were actually Roman Catholics, attracted to the Moral Majority by its
antiabortion politics. And scholars have noted that the New Christian Right
encompasses not only devout conservative Protestants but also sympathizers
outside the fundamentalist-evangelical camp. Besides Catholic involvement,
there has been, for example, a solid Mormon following and, as we have already
seen for the Christian Coalition, some Jewish, black, and Latino support. A
number within mainstream Protestant churches, even liberal ones, have been
fellow travelers. (378)
From a scholarly perspective, histories and definitions of terms like “evangelicalism,” “Moral Majority,” and “New Christian Right” need to account for the diverse alliances formed within all political and social movements, not necessarily out of ideological identification but possibly out of practical motives.

Furthermore, while the political stances adopted by conservative and sometimes evangelical or fundamentalist organizations through the “Moral Majority” and the “New Christian Right” oppose typical feminist understandings of abortion and family values, neither evangelicalism nor feminism is a monolith, and therefore neither can claim unanimity with regards to women’s rights, though trends are discernible. However evangelicalism may be perceived by “outsiders,” its history indicates openness to (at least debating) gendered issues. For instance, the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women’s Caucus (dating from 1973) cites its mission in its section “About Us” to “support, educate, and celebrate Christian feminists from many traditions” (np, emphasis in original). Another organization, Christians for Biblical Equality, centers its mission around the interpretation of Scripture in ways that position women and men as equal, and this organization, too, has evangelical roots. These organizations exist, of course, in conversation (and sometimes opposition) with groups like the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which affirms traditional gender roles where wives submit to husbands’ authority in the home and women submit to men’s authority in the church. The disparity between these groups—all evangelical affiliates—demonstrates the range and complexity of gendered subjectivity within evangelical discourses and disrupts easy assumptions of cohesive evangelical standpoints.

As these organizations, along with all of these other sources, indicate, evangelical Protestantism and United States history and politics remain inextricably intertwined but also resist simple definitions and reductive readings with regard to social issues. Still, cautions like that issued by Kevin Phillips (2006) in American
Theocracy exist: “[t]alk about the religion gap supplanting the gender gap in U.S. voting patterns ignores a larger interrelation: how conservative religious politics now includes its own collection of gender gaps and inequalities, a potentially explosive aspect” (370). While I find Phillips’s story overly reliant on sweeping generalizations of “conservative religious politics,” no doubt he seizes upon a discernible trend toward religiosity—a trend that only further enhances the exigency of my perhaps unlikely juxtaposition of feminisms and evangelical “emerging church” theologies for examining gendered subjectivity that impacts issues such as marriage partnerships (heterosexual and homosexual), marriage roles (authority and submission), abortion, and vocation (particularly the call to preach and the issue of gendered authority and submission once more).

Description: “Emerging Church”

This God-story, despite its being but a partial story, still requires peeling back the many layers, or the many stories, from which the “emerging church” emerges. Even more so than some of the other key terms in my story, the “emerging church” intentionally resists definition, focusing instead on its “ing” ending and thus its incompleteness. The “emerging church” movement takes place largely (though not exclusively) in the United States and applies postmodern frameworks of faith to evangelical theology, with postmodernism seemingly trickling into congregations from academic theological studies and with pastors turning to postmodernism as a means of addressing the vague dissatisfaction that they sense in their congregations.

Once more, postmodernism resists definition, but Jean-Francois Lyotard’s 1984 text The Postmodern Condition provides a useful starting point for considering what postmodernism “does” to an evangelical story; Lyotard writes:

[w]e have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the
communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name. (81-82)

Members of the “emerging church” conversation do not necessarily cite Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism, but seem to rely on the ideas set forth above—particularly the tension between universal and particular truths (“the whole and the one”), a rejection of literality and objectivity (“the transparent and communicable experience”), and an emphasis on mystery and doubt at least as much as certainty (“witnesses to the unrepresentable”). Perhaps the “terror” Lyotard describes indicates the uncertainty (and its related fears) of failing to provide absolutisms and all-encompassing metanarratives—and, indeed, “emerging church” theologians like me grapple with precisely this terror and its implications for destabilizing an evangelical story deeply invested in Truth.

For instance, “emergent” theologian Dan Kimball’s 2005 essay “The Stained Glass Perspective,” describes the cultural shift called postmodernism as an era of fragmentation akin to stained glass windows. According to Kimball, postmodern theology bears the following image: “God chooses us as art, and in this sense we are all broken pieces of stained glass” (207). Fittingly for postmodernism, in Kimball’s metaphor, human subjects and stories make up only parts of the stained glass picture, whose beauty derives from its assemblage of broken pieces. Interestingly, Kimball’s imagistic portrayal of postmodern faith fits with McLaren’s distinctions between modernity and postmodernity; whereas modernity, McLaren (2001) writes in A New Kind of Christian, sought “human reason to replace all mysteries with comprehension, superstition with fact, ignorance with information, and subjective religious faith with
objective truth,” postmodernity embraces the limits of rationality and the near-impossibility of objectivity (17). Additionally, theologians Grenz and Franke define “[p]ostmodernity embraces the narratives of particular peoples and celebrates the diversity and plurality of the world without attempting to discover a ‘grand scheme’ into which all of these particular stories must fit” (23, emphasis in original). Each of these writers indicates several key properties of postmodernity that mesh with Lyotard’s own definition: fragmentation of metanarratives and of foundational truths, locality of stories, mystery of the inexpressibility of God and (sometimes) theology, and an attendant “terror” of releasing objective control in favor of subjective uncertainty.

But, as I argue throughout this document, and more fully in subsequent chapters, sustaining faith need not rely on possessing or even aspiring to absolute truth.

Exploring this “terror” is precisely the purpose of my story, a story that investigates what happens to evangelical theology and gendered evangelical subjectivity when the “emerging church” embraces postmodernity. For instance, D.A. Carson, in his 2005 article “The Emerging Church” asserts “[a]t the heart of the Emergent Church movement—or as some of its leaders prefer to call it, the ‘conversation’—lies the conviction that changes in the culture signal that a new church is ‘emerging’” (np). Continuing, Carson claims, “Postmodernism, by contrast, recognizes how much of what we ‘know’ is shaped by the culture in which we live, is controlled by emotions and aesthetics and heritage, and can only be intelligibly held as part of a common tradition, without overbearing claims to being true or right” (np). Carson adopts a critically skeptical stance toward the “emerging church” and questions the validity and sustainability of theologies that resist universal truth claims. Carson’s wariness reminds us that postmodernism breeds uncertainty—and that kind of doubt carries serious consequences for those whose stories rely on faith, especially if that faith rests on foundations of absolute truth.
Grenz and Franke enter this story once more as well, recognizing “[a]t the heart of the foundationalist agenda is the desire to overcome the uncertainty generated by our human liability to error and the inevitable disagreements that follow” (30). My own story’s intersections with “emerging” theology and much of the “emerging church” story resides in a third space that holds productive tension between certainty and uncertainty, between faith and doubt, because to perform theology at all is to sustain some kind of faith that there are stories to tell about God. Those stories, of course, might change, especially with admissions like—“[t]he more we learn, the more we know that we don’t know, and the more aware of mystery we become,” which Sweet, Brian McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer express in their 2003 text *A is for Abductive*; God’s stories, like my story and “emerging stories,” contain many layers and few concrete definitions because with each layer we peel, another story-layer “emerges.” Modern evangelical concepts of gender create stories in which characters know their roles—males as authoritative husbands, fathers, preachers; females as submissive wives, mothers, helpers; postmodern “emerging” theologies lend themselves toward the kinds of gendered stories and subjects where truth is less absolute and performances are less rigid.

Yet even if the “emerging church” itself remains vague and shadowy, participants in this “emerging” story can at least be characterized, a feat Andy Crouch attempts “The Emergent Mystique,” a 2004 article where he identifies the demographic details typical of the “emerging church”: “[f]requently urban, disproportionately young, overwhelmingly white, and very new—few have been in existence for more than five years—a growing number of churches are joining the ranks of the ‘emerging church’” (np). Crouch’s comments indicate the novelty of the “emerging church” and also its marginality even within the subgroup of evangelical Christianity in the United States,
as well as the difficulty of defining “emerging church” membership when few congregations explicitly adopt the label.

Its novelty and its postmodern approach do not remove the “emerging church” from its evangelical history, however, and in many ways adherents to “emerging” conversations imagine revitalizing and restoring (at least evangelical) Christianity. As authors and website moderators Kimball and Josh Fox explain on their “emerging church” website “Vintage Faith”:

> [t]here is a rising feeling among emerging church leaders and followers of Jesus, that in many modern contemporary churches, something has subtly gone astray in what we call “church” and what we call “Christianity.” Through time, church has become a place that you go to have your needs met, instead of being a called local community of God on a mission together. Through time, much of contemporary Christianity has become more about inviting others into the subcultures of Christian music, language and church programs than about passionately inviting others into a radically alternative community and way of life as disciples of Jesus and Kingdom living. (np)

This passage, along with the site’s title “Vintage Faith” suggest efforts to return to a previously more pure Christianity—a golden era of discipleship (that likely exists only in imagination) to contrast contemporary “church” adulterated by subculture status. Again, this website resists providing a concrete understating of what counts as part of the “emerging church,” but this definitional statement identifies key characteristics important to the “emerging” story, namely: dissatisfaction with “church,” mission-mindedness (i.e., to serve rather than to be served, even by institutionalized churches), and engaging with culture rather than escaping from culture (providing radical alternatives is contingent on understanding what popular culture offers seekers). In many ways, I believe the “emerging church” seems less a movement or a conversation
than a replacement of evangelicalism’s period with a question mark or ellipsis to
denote not finality and surety but uncertainty and fluidity throughout history.

A useful article, posted on Wikipedia, more clearly than any of these other sources,
establishes four general criteria for the “emerging church.” According to this article,
the “emerging church” conversation stems from the following premises:

- **Mission-mindedness**: “Christians go out into the world to serve God rather than
  isolate themselves within communities of like-minded individuals” (np)

- **Narrativity**: “[t]eaching focuses on narrative presentations of faith and the Bible
  rather than systematic theology or biblical reductionism” (np)

- **Christ-centeredness**: “[w]hile not neglecting the study of scripture or the love of
  the church, Christians focus their lives on the worship and emulation of the
  person of Jesus Christ” (np)

- **Authenticity**: “[e]merging churches strive to be relevant to today’s culture and
daily life, whether it be through worship or service opportunities” (np)

Of course, articles on Wikipedia are not traditionally used for scholarly purposes, but
in this story, when so much of the purpose of the “emerging church” rests on
decentering authority and challenging what counts as theology (or as theory for many
academic audiences), such a collectively written source provides an important
perspective. Interestingly enough, the four categories established by Wikipedia mirror
the four categories set up by historians of United States Christianity to understand
evangelicalism—each piece a small fragment of a larger story.

All of these descriptions (mission-mindedness, narrativity, Christ-centeredness,
and authenticity for the “emerging church”; biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism,
and activism for histories of evangelicalism) emphasize relationships to texts—stories of
Christ as recorded in Scripture and retold by disciples, stories of disciples as linked to
Christ and retold as witnessing. The textual focus of evangelical and “emerging”
discourses heightens its relevance to literacy theories that explore the mutual
construction of subjectivity and literacy acts. Still, the hopeful story I write here
represents only part of the “emerging church” story, which is not without controversy.
R. Scott Smith’s 2005 text *Truth and the New Kind of Christian*, resists the “emerging”
tale, avowing instead “there simply is no good reason to give up the historic, orthodox
Christian position that we can and indeed often do know objective truth...Survival of
the Christian faith (at least in this culture) may well depend on our holding fast to that
truth” (190). More scathingly, Carson, in the 2005 text *Becoming Conversant with the
Emerging Church*, calls the “emerging church” approach to modernity and
postmodernity “theologically shallow because it overlooks the basic fact that no
worldview, no epistemological system developed by us in this fallen world, is entirely
good or entirely bad” (68). Smith and Carson certainly suggest a different “emerging”
story, but their points center on the critical question of what happens to theology—
perhaps even to God—without sure foundations of truth.

I bring feminist theories and theologies into the story precisely because
feminists address such issues in terms of the deconstruction of “woman” and its
serious implications for (potentially) ignoring material and economic concerns of real
women in favor of an abstract “womanhood” that erases difference. But feminist
theorist Judith Butler points out that postmodernism and antimodernism are not the
same thing, and “emerging” theologian McLaren agrees with this point. Rather than
asserting anti-foundationalism in feminism, Butler advocates “contingent foundations”
in her 1992 essay of the same name. According to Butler, “There is no ontologically
intact reflexivity to the subject which is then placed within a cultural context” (12). I
use this point to mean that neither the feminist theorist nor the evangelical theologian
exists outside of discourses of feminism and evangelicalism, because both the theorist
and theologian are produced within those very discourses.
Further, Judith Butler contends “that cultural context, as it were, is already there as the disarticulated process of that subject’s production, one that is concealed by the frame that would situate a ready-made subject in an external web of cultural relations” (12). Here Butler explains what I, for the purposes of my own story, claim as the proverbial “leap of faith”—that any theological story must leap from God to theology with the kind of faith outlined in Hebrews 11:1; in the production of these God-stories, we conceal the frames that sustain our tales, the discourses of faith that make such theological stories possible in the first place; throughout this document, I point out the concealed frames that bolster evangelical gendered subjectivity in order to show that such subjectivities rest on foundational texts—and, that dominant evangelical interpretations of those texts (like Scripture, for instance, and assumed tenets of evangelicalism) need not be the only contingent foundations to emerge.

Methodology: Theoretical Application

I frame the “emerging church” using feminist theories and theologies to understand the implications for subjectivity within this evangelical movement because postmodern feminisms persist despite the deconstruction of “woman” and I hold that evangelical faith can persist despite the deconstruction of “disciple.” There are, of course, different stories of feminism just as there are different stories of evangelicalism and the “emerging church.” In the 2001 text *Introducing Feminist Theology*, Anne Clifford identifies three types of Christian feminist theological thinking, though she does not specify what kinds of Christianity: 1. revolutionary rejection of traditional religious institutions and doctrines as irredeemably patriarchal; 2. reformist efforts to equalize leadership opportunities and provide inclusive-language translations; 3. reconstructionist attempts to reconceptualize values and discourses that sustain oppression within Christianity (32-34). In this framework, my story is a
reconstructionist story committed to Christianity but striving to shift its discourses in
hopes of “emerging” with more ethical gendered evangelical subjectivities.

In my story, I rely on the feminist theological work of Regina Coll, Mary
McClintock Fulkerson, and Serene Jones—especially the latter two, who work with the
same postmodern issues that penetrate the “emerging church.” Feminist theology
provides another perspective to the “emerging church” that differs from traditional
masculinist theologies often expected in evangelical stories. Coll’s 1994 text
Christianity and Feminism in Conversation argues that feminist theology, unlike
traditional masculinist theology, must be consciously ideological:

[f]eminist theology is deliberately and consciously ideological; its stated bias is
the liberation of oppressed women and men from the burden of patriarchy. As
such, it sees the claims and concerns of Christianity in relation to its effects on
women. In its consciously ideological stance, feminism is revisioning,
reclaiming, and reconceiving. (16)

Traditional masculinist theology is, of course, ideological, but not necessarily
consciously so. My own understanding of feminist theology and my use of postmodern
feminist theologians like McClintock Fulkerson and Jones help me tell a story not just
of women but of subjectivity, of the ways in which “emerging church” discourses might
produce evangelical subjects and of the ways in which evangelical subjects might
(re)produce discourses that address the limitations and inequalities inherent in rigidly
defined masculine and feminine subjects.

Similarly, McClintock Fulkerson explains her methodology of using—as I do in
this document—poststructuralism¹⁰ and feminism to investigate Christian theologies.

¹⁰ Feminist theorist Patti Lather, in her 1992 essay “Post-Critical Pedagogies,” defines
postmodernism as “the shift in material conditions of advanced monopoly capitalism
brought on by the micro-electronic revolution in information technology, the growth of
multinational capitalism, and the global uprising of the marginalized,” whereas she
describes poststructuralism as “the working out of cultural theory within that context.”
In *Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology* (1994), McClintock Fulkerson writes:

>[f]our clues are evident regarding how this feminism understands the effect of location on knowledge: (1) that all of the tradition is finite and open to scrutiny; (2) that specific bias is identified with formulations that deny the full humanity of women—an ideological content; (3) that theological knowledge is a change-oriented practice; (4) that a marginalized position in the social formation should be epistemologically privileged. (40-41)

As her above statement demonstrates, McClintock Fulkerson views all theological work with suspicion because all theological work operates within ideological contexts that exercise limitations (in theological and material ways) on women. However, working within feminist theological frameworks allows McClintock Fulkerson and I to emphasize theology-in-transformation—a fitting model for the process-oriented “emerging church.” And, finally, as McClintock Fulkerson’s final point emphasizes, marginal positions may provide more impetus and better understanding for transformations of the “emerging church” as well as evangelical subject-formation. My own position as marginal to the “emerging church,” which would likely regard my feminist perspective suspiciously, helps me to see the scaffolding discourses that support evangelical gendered subjectivity as well as alternative literacy practices to challenge and transform those discourses.

Likewise, Jones, an ordained minister and professor of theology at Yale Divinity School, discusses the ways in which she uses feminist theories to challenge discourses of femininity within traditional theology in her 2000 text *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*. Jones outlines the same purpose that I espouse in

In addition, Lather admits, “I also sometimes use the terms interchangeably,” which is the stance that I adopt here because both serve as theoretical frameworks that interrogate the accessibility of truth, the cohesiveness of subjectivity, and the multiplicity and fragmentation of narratives.
my story; she writes: “Far from being a disinterested academic enterprise criticizing Christianity from the outside, my Christian feminist theology locates itself within the Christian faith and attempts to serve and strengthen the community from inside” (11-12). Considering herself first a Christian and second a feminist, Jones employs feminist theories in such a way as to challenge and fortify faith. But taking up and being taken up by both feminism and evangelicalism makes me at the same time both an outsider and an insider in the “emerging church.” So, like Jones, I strive to strengthen the “emerging church” from within as well as to indicate the importance to feminism of seriously attending to religious discourses as meaningful sites for gendered inquiry.

Of course, Jones, particularly in the 2001 essay “Bounded Openness: Postmodernism, Feminism, and the Church Today,” recognizes the limitations of what kinds of stories can be told within particular discourse communities. Acknowledging such discursive boundaries, Jones describes “a conversation between the three enterprises [in her title] as one in which postmodernism and feminism are pulled into (or unwillingly dragged into) the strange universe of faith and unfolded from inside this perspective” (55). Each of these “three enterprises” changes in the encounter, as Jones explains, because “postmodernism and feminism, in turn, push against the contours of this strange universe, shifting its infrastructure and pressing its borders. But they do so as characters performing on a predominantly Christian stage, the universe of faith” (55). This perspective parallels the stance that I adopt in my story’s intersections with the “emerging” conversations: the employment of critical theoretical tools like feminism and, in this case, poststructuralism, to analyze and revise exclusionary and oppressive discursive scripts within the “emerging church,” but always from a perspective that puts faith first (even as organized by flawed institutions) and thereby limits the extent to which such theories can alter religious discourses.
For instance, while feminist theories often prioritize gender as the main mode of analysis, evangelical discourses emphasize sin and salvation first and foremost, meaning that status as Christian or non-Christian plays a more important role in the “emerging church” than gender. Still, feminist debates over identity politics indicate keen awareness of subject-formation and its consequences, suggesting that “emerging church” discourses shifting the subjectivity of what it means to be evangelical (or post-evangelical) can benefit from feminist theories and theologies—especially since feminisms and evangelicalism, to retain cultural efficacy, share the necessity of sustaining and deconstructing terms like “gender” and “discipleship,” respectively. My story focuses on narrativity, conversion, textual authority, and evangelism within the “emerging church” because these concepts shape evangelical Protestant subjectivity and shifts in theological stories necessitate shifts in the formation of theological storytellers.

**Methodology: Writing Strategies**

Transforming discourses of subjectivity within evangelicalism, within the “emerging church” specifically, remains my central goal, and to achieve an alternative story, I use writing strategies that disrupt expectations about what counts as theory and as theology and I rely on literacy acts to illuminate, challenge, and transform understandings of gendered evangelical subjectivity. I believe that typical writing practices reproduce typical results—not at all compatible with my goal of altering discursive scripts that reduce God and disregard, oppress, and ignore certain kinds of non-normative evangelical subjectivities.

My writing this story is the first disruption, compatible with Virginia Woolf’s (originally published) 1929 text *A Room of One’s Own*, where she asserts: “[t]he book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women’s books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so that
they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work. For interruptions there will always be” (78). Woolf’s statement indicates the social contextualization of all writing and the ways in which women’s writing, in particular, remains subject to interruptions that have not traditionally plagued men’s writing.

Decades later, feminist writer and poet Adrienne Rich speaks of revision as “a part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (35). Feminist writing and revision, as Rich explains with this statement and the rest of her 1979 text *On Secrets, Lies, and Silence*, assist in the disruption of sociocultural texts that subordinate women. Leslie Rebecca Bloom agrees with both Woolf and Rich in their assessments of feminist writing as a potentially disruptive practice. According to Bloom (in the 1998 text *Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation*),

> [o]ne of the purposes of examining subjectivity in women’s personal narratives is to redefine what it means for women to write, tell, discuss, and analyze their life experiences against the back-drop of the prevailing discourses that seek to silence them. To change the master script is to change reality; to change reality is to participate in making a history different from the one the status quo would produce. (64)

As each of these feminist writers demonstrates, women’s access to the privilege of writing troubles discourses that strive to ignore and silence women. Further, as Bloom explains in her statement, to interrupt “the master script” is to offer alternative texts that render inclusion and equity for women more possible, suggesting that writing practices and generic choices are critical feminist decisions. Critically, these discursive ruptures occur as a result of literacy acts—reading, writing, and interpreting against the grain of hegemonic discourses. The centrality of literacy acts to my investigation of evangelical gendered subjectivity contributes to conversations not only of feminism and
theology but also of literacy theories and education as a vehicle toward better understanding how texts and literacy practices shape and are shaped by our subjectivities.

Each of these feminist writers asserts the urgency of women’s writing, but Davies (A Body of Writing), provides strategies for producing texts with the potential to disrupt the status quo. Using a poststructuralist feminist framework (which I also use), Davies claims “[i]n this reading there can be no outside. In other words, we can refuse the binary text/not-text, and see all as text” (135, emphasis in original). In this quotation, Davies uses text as a term that transcends written or spoken language, looking instead at all reality—material and conceptual—as generated by networks of competing discourses and as texts within multiple, complex, and sometimes contradictory contexts. Textual interpretations of stories and of subjects, I argue throughout this document, matter not only for theories of feminism, theology, and literacy, but for evangelical and “emerging” practitioners who struggle with what kinds of marriage partnerships and family roles are acceptable, what kinds of femininities and masculinities are validated, and what kind of church and social vocations are available.

From this perspective of seeing all as text, Davies (again, in A Body of Writing) urges feminist writers to construct new storylines, a task that requires introducing different textual forms into existing (and resistant) contexts as a means of interrupting the texts and their subsequently assumed interpretations. Davies explains,

[w]e do not know what we can speak/write into existence until we’ve done it, since even those imaginary worlds through which we conjure up a possibly different from this world are discursively produced. We need to write and speak utopias, we need to rewrite the past and the present, we need to write and speak all of our selves, not just our minds but our bodies, to imagine who we
might be if we were not constituted within the bonds of the male/female dualism. (54, emphasis in original)

Changing social texts that sustain the binary male/female and its attendant inequalities requires changing the ways in which we read and write texts. As Davies points out, imagination occupies a central role in constructing new texts and new societies—indicating that feminist writers wishing to challenge conceptions of what counts as theological thinking cannot adopt the same writing practices without sacrificing much of the disruptive potential of producing texts that centralize women’s gendered concerns.

In agreement with Davies, fellow feminist poststructuralist writer Laurel Richardson in “Writing: A Method of Inquiry” (2004) explains that generating new metaphors allows new possibilities to emerge because each metaphor reveals and conceals different aspects of a text. Feminist poststructuralist writing practices, argues Richardson, work as a methodology by pushing at the boundaries of texts and highlighting different viewpoints through shifting metaphors. Concurring with Richardson, I apply feminist writing strategies to my investigation of “emerging church” theologies in the following chapters in an intentionally interruptive way.

These are the theoretical and methodological ideologies that inform my story and, as such, the text that follows often fails to conform to expectations of traditional scholarship. Many of the following chapters incorporate poetry and narrative along with more typical academic prose to purposefully disrupt you, the reader. By adopting these strategies, I hold to the possibility of producing new discursive frameworks that would not be available if this work were to conform to scholarly practices beyond the fold of poststructuralist feminism, because, as each of the writers described previously in this section indicates, the current texts possible for forming feminine subjectivities are utterly inadequate. Is it possible, as Audre Lorde asked, to dismantle the master’s
house with the master’s tools? Perhaps. But my story and my methodology assume that the surest way of shedding the master’s oppressive rules is to exit the master’s house; this practice does not necessarily mean discarding the master’s tools but it does mean adding tools (like genres and storylines traditionally unacceptable in academia) to strategically interrupt the reader, the reading process, and the texts that so violently erase women.

Such theoretical and methodological ideologies inform the analysis of each of the texts selected in my unorthodox story’s intersections with the “emerging church.” The primary source material on the “emerging church” is generated through internet searches (as well as consistent references to websites within books and articles about the “emerging church”) and heavy reliance on Zondervan’s EmergentYS line—Christian publishing house’s effort to stimulate conversations about the “emerging church.” I read each of these primary texts for traits identifiable within evangelical Protestant history in the United States as well as in the “emerging church (narrativity, conversion, textual authority, and witnessing) and juxtapose those readings with feminist theoretical and theological lenses that bring into focus specific issues related to subjectivity and gender.

Obviously, these writing practices and theoretical concepts—especially narrative theology and ethical evangelism—pertain to literacy education as well, and the implications of disrupting dominant discourses and dialoguing through storytelling highlight educational foci of my work, though these pedagogical issues may not directly relate to institutionalized classrooms (as authentic learning often does not). Finally, as justified previously, I perform these analyses by using disruptive feminist writing practices (particularly through the incorporation of alternative genres) to further challenge the “emerging church” and its implications for evangelical subjectivity and gendered subject-formation.
“Emerging” Conversations: Gender

My story does not always explicitly pick up the thread of gender within evangelical Protestantism and the “emerging church,” but this section provides key background information representative of the kinds of gender-inquiry taking place within “emerging” debates. Though I will depart in subsequent chapters from explicitly discussing gender, the four themes that I explore thread their way through facets of evangelical subjectivity, and, as a result, influence the kinds of transformations that are possible within evangelical discourses of gender. By organizing around key theological concepts instead of gender specifically, I examine the foundational principles that define subjectivity—the very ideologies that shape what it means to be a gendered evangelical subject. Shifts in beliefs about narrativity, conversion, textual authority and witnessing necessarily initiate changes—or, at the very least, questions—about gendered subjectivity. If we can no longer affirm with certainty universal narratives, clear distinctions between saved and unsaved, “authoritative” readings of Scripture, or categories of those in need of evangelism, then we can no longer affirm with certainty what it means to be gendered, or, indeed, what it means to be evangelical. Theology narrates the story of faith—what we hope for with evidence unseen—suggesting that perhaps the “emerging church” tells a story more of mystery than propositions, which, I believe, may emerge a more faithful story.

The “emerging church” stems from evangelical Protestant stories—and, though the histories may illustrate gaps in discussions of gender within evangelical Protestant circles (and there is much variety even within these communities), the “emerging church” draws upon threads of specific gender conversations from the history from which it “emerges.” By exploring discussions related to gender within evangelicalism and the “emerging church” here, we see the ways in which transitions in theological stories bear serious implications for gendered subject-formation.
One theologian, Mark Driscoll, claims gender as one of the eight most important issues for the “emerging church” to consider; according to Driscoll, gender discussions involve:

- whether or not people are created with inherent gender differences,
- whether or not those gender roles have any implications for the governments of home and church,
- and whether or not homosexual practice is sinful. This also includes
- whether or not it is appropriate to use gender specific names for God, such as Father, like Jesus did. (“Mark Driscoll: Understanding the Emerging Church”—2005, np, emphasis in original)

Several critical questions arise from Driscoll’s explanation of the widespread influence of gender-based inquiry: what does it mean to be gendered? What roles and positions are and should be available based upon gender? How is power exercised within home and church? What kinds of relationships within home and church contexts are appropriate and desirable? How are we to refer to God and how do and might our names influence our relationships? Such questions illustrate the range of gendered issues within evangelical Protestantism and the “emerging church,” and in my analysis, I seek to enter into this ongoing conversation about the relational aspects of gender because assumptions and beliefs about gender influence nearly all aspects of evangelical life. Because gender tends to be such a prominent category within evangelical Protestantism, my use of feminist theories and theologies can contribute to the “emerging church’s” efforts to transform “church” in relevant and responsible ways.

Several writers—published in physical texts as well as in internet blogs—address issues of gender and “emerging church” failings and opportunities for shifting discourses of gender. In a 2003 essay published in an “emerging church” collection and entitled “Living as an Exile,” Jo-Ann Badley admits, “[a]lmost immediately I met with discrimination as a woman in the evangelical community, discrimination that the
male evangelical leadership justified with Scripture” (106). At the same time, Badley uses her “outsider” status within evangelical circles to better understand God and theology: “[i]n the final analysis, my deeper understanding of God came because of who I am” (111). Both of Badley’s statements indicate that gendered inquiry can help us to form more fulfilling relationships within evangelicalism and, most importantly, with God. Also, as Badley’s quotes suggest, issues of textual authority—how Scripture is used, for what purposes and in whose interests—and issues of relating to God—a relationship influenced by our embodied humanity—are critical gendered issues. As I continually assert, our literacy practices form and inform our subjectivities—and alternative hermeneutics like feminisms can help us to transform discourses of gendered evangelical subjectivity as well.

Though Badley does not explicitly refer to feminism, her concerns resonate with feminist theories and theologies and she clearly values gender-based inquiry as a means of transforming theology. Frederica Mathewes-Green, though she declares her suspicion of feminism within her text and within the title of her 2003 essay “Twice Liberated: A Personal Journey Through Feminism,” also understands the importance of gender-based inquiry for the “emerging church.” Despite her disavowal of the label and agenda of much feminist thinking, Mathewes-Green affirms, “I still hold some convictions I gained during my feminist journey—ideas about the goodness of our natural bodies, about the intrinsic equal value of men and women, about the right every person should have to prove their abilities without prejudice” (144). On the other hand, Mathewes-Green argues “[t]he presumptions of feminism seemed to divide, implying that issues pertaining to women could be separated from, were more important than, other issues” (140). On this point, Mathewes-Green and I depart ways, and while I can often sympathize with her frustrations with feminisms (along with frustrations with evangelicalism), my story purposes to demonstrate that
highlighting issues of gender is never solely about women and men but about the values and assumptions about humanity that pervade all theology from how embodiment influences our stories of and about God, to how feminist theories and theologies challenge the completeness of concepts of conversion, to how we understand Scriptural mandates, to how we strive to witness commitment to Christ. Implicit within feminist poststructuralism is the belief that supposedly binary terms (like female and male) gain meaning only in opposition to each other; so, while Mathewes-Green sees feminism as separating women from men (and, essentially, perpetuating that binary), I see my feminist theoretical framework as meaningful for females and males as the binary disintegrates.

All of these issues—which I take up in further detail in my respective chapters—affect and are affected by discourses of subjectivity within the “emerging church.” Anthologized authors like Badley and Mathewes-Green are not the only “emerging church” adherents talking about gendered subjectivity and its boundaries within evangelicalism, once more illustrating the prevalence of this issue within evangelical conversations—though these conversations are not limited to United States contexts. On the Australian “emerging church” website Signposts, bloggers discuss a podcast between Steve Taylor and Jenny McIntosh (two established bloggers within the movement) that specifies three critical gendered issues: “in the way the Bible is used”; “in not seeking representation in speaking and in leadership”; “in continuing a ‘culture’, patterns of being and talking, that are male in nature” (np). Each of these issues intersects relationally with textual authority of Scripture and telling stories of Christian experience—indicating again that the four concepts I discuss in the following chapters are indeed gendered issues because nearly every thread of evangelical discourse interweaves with gender and, in some way or other, marks the lives and bodies of gendered disciples.
Another Australian site, Emergent Kiwi, features discussion between bloggers about the appropriate uses of Scripture as well as the role gender should play in church leadership. Under the discussion heading “gender and leadership,” one blogger who identifies as “rayd” writes:

[What i’m saying is that men and women are both equal, but they are so in different ways. God made men better at some things than women and women better at others than men. Amy certainly is capable of being a leader, and she is one, a very good one. But God has set each of us tasks to glorify him differently. How i see it anyway is that women are more so likely to conform to other ideas, and look at different approaches to how the bible can be interpreted and are therefore more likely to eisegesise [sic] or misinterpret the bible for how they want it to be. (“rayd” April 17, 2005, lowercase in original)]

This blogger uses Biblical authority—specifically, the mandate against women’s teaching from 1 Timothy 2:12-14\(^\text{11}\) to support claims that women are Scripturally prohibited from taking on leadership roles within the church. Furthermore, “rayd” calls upon discourses of complementarianism—a theory that the genders were created in the equal image of God but to perform different functions; in one sense, female and male are meant to “complement” each other’s roles, and, in a second sense, female and male within this discourse ideally mirror (or complement) the relationship between the church and Christ. In its ideal, complementarianism uses the analogy that male is head of household with woman as helper just as Christ is head of the church that helps achieve Christ’s mission. However, “rayd” further complicates these discourses by introducing the conception that women are more likely to misread the Bible—

\(^{11}\) I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. 13For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.
perhaps relating back to the issue in 1 Timothy that the serpent deceived Eve, not Adam.

Discourses of complementarianism pervade evangelical dialogues about gender, and this trend shows up within the “emerging church” conversations, perhaps because this movement turns a critical eye toward evangelical traditions. Ed Stetzer, in his internet article (nd) “Understanding the Emerging Church,” sustains the discourse of complementary gender roles by asserting: “[r]evisionists are questioning (and in some cases denying) issues like the nature of the substitutionary atonement, the reality of hell, the complementarian nature of gender, and the nature of the Gospel itself” (np). Stetzer’s remarks demonstrate how deeply these issues divide Christian communities, even when members claim the same affiliation with evangelicalism. Describing some of the “emerging church” theology as “revisionist,” Stetzer encourages a negative perception of “emerging” theology as altering or changing “The Truth.” Cautioning readers against such theological dangers, Stetzer warns, “The revisionist emerging church leaders should be treated, appreciated and read as we read mainline theologians—they often have good descriptions, but their prescriptions fail to take into account the full teaching of the Word of God” (np). As both “rayd” and Stetzer’s comments point out, gendered inquiry, while not new to evangelicalism, enters into dangerous theological territory and raises concerns for more conservative thinkers by destabilizing the authority of Scripture and of church teachings, and, indeed, the foundations of evangelical subjectivity as inherently gender-based.

Although complementarianism is a discursive challenge for women speaking out as evangelicals (or at all, for that matter) because the complementarian discourse limits what, when, how, where, and if women can/should speak, not all “emerging” conversations grapple with complementarianism. This fact again demonstrates the differences even within evangelicalism. In a blog on the site TheOoze.com, “STeve”
examines issues of gender-representation within the “emerging church,” interrogating the “SEXist [sic] church,” culture, “The Sexist ooze moderators,” and “the emerging church linked with white, middle-class technology.” After dealing—somewhat flippantly—with each of these possible causes, “STeve” dismisses each as a potential contributor to women’s underrepresentation in the “emerging church” and returns to discourses of personal choice:

[a]nyone can start a blog. Anyone can plant a church. Emerging church is all about the new, about living in the culture, about stepping into the tomorrow. It is opportunity. If there is a gender imbalance, perhaps the best people to fix it are those who feel excluded, stepping up to offer the words of eternal life. (np)

While “STeve” makes no reference to complementarianism here, discourses of individualism and agency weigh heavily in his statement that the gender balance exists because women need to “step up”—without serious consideration of the multiple discourses (like complementarianism) that inhibit and prohibit women’s speaking; of the access to leisure time as well as a computer with internet capabilities necessary to blog; of the financial and social resources necessary to successfully plant a church; or of the cultures—secular and ecclesiastical—that degrade women (consider that the prevalence of pornography online makes the internet seem less “innocent” for many female users). Unlike “STeve,” I argue that gender imbalances within the “emerging church” are not individualistic but discursive.

Another blog-spot, the Emerging Church Network, takes yet another perspective on gender representation and inclusion with the “emerging church” in a conversation entitled “Women in the Conversation.” One blogger asks:

[c]ould it be that some have the perception that the emerging church is a “good old boy” club, and this prevents many women from even attempting to integrate? I mean, women have had quite the struggle in the Church in general,
just to have their voices heard, maybe they see the emerging church as a battle that they choose not to fight? (mlepper—February 9, 2006)

Rather than relying upon discourses of complementarianism or individualism, “mlepper” considers the contexts in which evangelical women might consider speaking up; interestingly, this blogger uses the phrase “have their voices heard,” indicating that women may be speaking without audience, and perhaps the same is true of the “emerging church”: that gender imbalance exists not because women fail to speak but because others refuse to hear women’s speech. For example, Tony Campolo, Speaking My Mind, Tony Campolo (2004) cites an incident of male audience members turning their chairs around during a woman’s sermon—effectively displaying their displeasure with the speaker’s gender by forcing her to preach to their backs (35). Such a possibility raises important questions for my own consideration of gendered subjectivity within the “emerging church” as I seek to investigate discursive possibilities not only for evangelical women speaking but—more importantly—for evangelical women being heard. Just as Gayatri Spivak answers her famous question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” with an affirmative and a subsequent interrogation of who will listen, the layering of gendered discourses within evangelical and “emerging church” theologies suggest that women may speak already without being heard.

Other bloggers on the Emerging Church Network support my reading of the situation; in particular, one poses: “[p]erhaps the problem is not so much women talking more as it is men listening more. What would emerging church look like if it were truly free of sexism?” (mark—March 22, 2006). This blogger, “mark,” challenges traditional discourses of evangelical masculinity and femininity by shifting the roles typically assigned by complementarianism, asking men to listen more so that women might be heard. Jen Lemen, in her article “Emerging Women” (n.d.) about women’s leadership within the “emerging church” movement, also agrees with this shifting
assessment of gender positioning within evangelicalism. She insists, “old ties to a more conservative evangelical ethos are painfully apparent as key male leaders in the movement struggle to recognize female peers and share power so these essential voices can stand beside them to lead the way.” Like “mark,” Lemen attempts to shift discourses from “a more conservative evangelical ethos” that ignores or refuses women’s voices as viable and worthy of attention to discourses in which male leaders recognize and support female leaders—even to the extent, Lemen suggests, of shifting who complements whom.

I find the “emerging church” an invigorating site of inquiry because, as yet, no clear discourse of gendered relations (between genders or to theological issues like the ones I address later in my text) has, well, “emerged” as dominant. My samples from these conversations about gender indicate that the “emerging church” is fertile ground for renegotiating gender within some evangelical spaces, though of course the possibility of reaffirming complementarian theology also exists. I look to the “emerging church,” hesitantly affiliating myself with both evangelicalism and with feminism in hopes of being heard in this conversation; my faith in the church hangs in the balance as I contemplate what discursive possibilities and limits influence my speaking, writing, and being church along with other evangelical women. As McClintock Fulkerson (1991) explains in her essay “Sexism as Original Sin: Developing a Theacentric Discourse” “[s]ubjects are caught and bound, capable of resistance, only as they are constituted particular positions within discourses. The paradox, then, refers to the web of corruption and possibilities for resistance that occur within particular social discourses” (673). Theological stories and conceptions of gendered subjectivity can change—but only to the extent to which they remain recognizable within discourses of evangelicalism and the “emerging church,” or else, as McClintock Fulkerson’s quote makes clear, the story becomes alien to the discourse. I find it
unlikely that the “emerging church” or evangelicalism will ever abandon discourses of sin and salvation as priorities over discourses of gender, because, after all, evangelical movements are simultaneously earth-bound and heaven-minded; what I hope to achieve through gendered inquiry is to indicate the ways in which gendered subjectivity pervades all facets of evangelical and “emerging” theologies and to push these discourses to be a bit more heaven-bound and earth-minded.

This is a story about God. It is also a story about telling stories—about what kinds of stories we can live in and with and through. What stories you can live in and with and through will, of course, depend on what you’re looking for. Me and my story and many “emerging” stories, well, we’re looking for God through leaps of faith called theological stories, but as we thread through the mysteries of God’s many stories, we may find more questions than answers, and we may emerge in telling alien tales.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter 2 “Telling Stories: Feminist Theories and ‘Emerging’ Narrative Theologies,” I examine the ways in which “emerging church” theologians grapple with the demise of evangelicalism’s metanarrative in postmodern contexts. I demonstrate that while “emerging” evangelicals might no longer consider ourselves masters of God’s stories, using narrative theology works as an effective bridge between human and divine narratives. Feminist theories of embodied narratives further enhance “emerging” understandings of Christ’s incarnation as I display the centrality of (gendered) embodiment in the formation of evangelical subjectivity. By troubling the narrative foundations of both evangelicalism and its derivative “emerging church” as contingent stories, I delineate the degree to which theologies depend upon the lived-stories of their subjects. This chapter engages with feminist theories of embodied narratives and urges feminisms to seriously consider faith as an embodied epistemology; in addition, this chapter speaks to literacy theories of narrative and
furthers conversations about the ways in which stories of faith define and are defined by our subjectivities.

Chapter 3, “Becoming Christian: ‘Emerging’ Subjectivities and Conversion,” continues my analysis of the interconnectedness of storytelling and subjectivity in the “emerging church.” Whereas typical evangelical models of conversion assume individualism, agency, and certainty of salvation, the “emerging church” emphasis on postmodernism destabilizes such sure foundations. Using feminist writing strategies and feminist theories of subjectivity, I explain that this destabilization reflects a positive transition for the “emerging church” as it signals not the stagnation of “being” evangelical but the continual process of “becoming” evangelical by living out God’s stories. My revision of conversion as process rather than product means that not only is there more room for God’s work (rather than individualistic human agency) in theological stories, but that there is also greater space for gendered equity in contexts where all subjects exist in ongoing stories—and, therefore, this chapter contributes to feminist conversations about subjectivity by detailing the ways in which deconstruction of categories like “woman” or “believer” can appreciate, rather than elide, differences of faith.

The (contingently) foundational stories of evangelicalism, appear, of course, in the Bible, which I take up in Chapter 4, “The Master’s ‘Emerging’ Narrative: Text, Counter-texts, and Textual Authority.” Here I turn to evangelicalism’s foundational texts of Scripture and investigate the ways in which evangelical and “emerging” gendered subjectivities inscribe and are inscribed by reading practices. While evangelical literacies tend to locate meaning within texts themselves, “emerging” literacies indicate more openness to understanding meaning as produced within acts of readings negotiated between texts, readers, and discourse communities. Using feminist theories and theologies as counter-texts to critique discourses of textual
authority and its implications for gendered-subjectivity, I illustrate the explosive potential for “emerging” subjects who engage in reading practices that find meaning not inside books but in embodied life-stories that honor Scriptural complexity.

Recognizing the contingency of foundational narratives, destabilizing certainty and completeness of “identity,” and revealing reading as negotiated meaning-making that can challenge the status quo help to question the coherence of evangelical and “emerging” (gendered) subjectivity. Without the sense of a rational and consistent personhood, evangelism changes, as I elucidate in Chapter 5, “Emerging’ Evangelism: Changing the Subject of Witnessing.” In this fifth chapter, I delve into distinctions between traditional evangelical practices of evangelism and “emerging” conversations about what witnessing should look like. Once more, I use feminist theories and theologies with particular emphasis on embodied subjectivity and difference to assist the “emerging church” in recognizing the contingency and partiality of its stories and to perform the Gospel-mandated “Great Commission” in ways respectful of human difference. In this chapter, I apply feminist concepts of difference along with an understanding of literacy practices and texts as always contingent to demonstrate ways theological communities can understand the contingencies of discourses as necessitating ethical and responsible behavior toward non-evangelicals.

With this stress on establishing ethical lines of communication across differences, I move into my sixth and final chapter “Feminisms, Stories, Faiths: (Un)Tying Knots and ‘Emerging’ Questions.” In this sixth chapter, I broaden the conversation from specifically evangelical and “emergent” confessions of Christianity to public Christian conversations more generally in the United States. I present three examples of situations in which my research can be applied to disciplines of feminist theories, literacy education, and theological studies. In feminist discourses, I claim the importance of feminists grappling with issues of faith not only as a way of knowing but
also as a critical life-influence for many women worldwide. Using the composition classroom as the arena for exploring issues of gendered and sexualized subjectivity and literacy education, I assert the necessity of wrestling with issues of faith (and intersections with feminism) in writing as a means of engaging with public debates. Finally, I provide insight for the “emerging church” conversation that takes into account my own investment in evangelical discourses along with critical questions resulting from my gendered-inquiry to help ethically-transformed evangelicalism emerge.
**Telling Stories: Feminist Theories and “Emerging” Narrative Theologies**

**Apples to Apples**

In the beginning, a beautiful garden bloomed along the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers, and in that garden, all the birds of the air and beasts of the earth and creatures of the sea flourished. All of these gifts the King—sovereign Lord, Creator and Sustainer of the universe—offered Adam, yet the man of the earth remained dissatisfied because no suitable companion for him existed amidst the luxurious Garden of Eden. One day, sensing the displeasure of Adam, the King drew the earthly man into a deep sleep, and, plucking a rib from Adam’s breast, formed a new creature. Rousing from his sleep, Adam awoke with the incantation “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” as he set eyes upon the most beautiful, and also the first, woman.

Now the woman Eve was beautiful, indeed, and bold. So when the serpent, slithering toward her in that bountiful garden hissed: “ah, my dear, there is another tree...with the most beautiful apples—each one a bursting, liquid ruby!” Eve became curious. Plucking a ripe fruit from the tree sagging with apples, Eve eyed the red gem perched on her palm. At the instant her teeth sunk into the succulent fruit, its juice trickling from her sin-stained lips, Eve fell to the ground, the apple rolling from her limp hand.

Adam found her beneath the tree, and carried her wilted form out of Eden; expelled from their garden home, they wait, in distress, for the Prince of Peace to restore their home and make right the error of woman that withered the Garden of Eden.

* * * * *

My story is a familiar story, and it fits, to an extent, with the dissatisfaction typical of “emerging church” stories, but it also makes strange another familiar story—just as “emerging” stories make strange other evangelical stories. After all, as
theologians Grenz and Franke claim, “to be a Christian is to be a storyteller.”
Explaining this statement, these theologians remark: “to be a Christian entails coming
to see the story of God’s action in Christ as the paradigm for our stories. As
Christians, we share an identity-constituting narrative” (48). Indeed, “emerging”
conversant McLaren (A New Kind of Christian) defines theology as story—“the story of
how people have sought and learned about God through the centuries”—rather than “a
list of beliefs or an outline of beliefs” (161). It is telling, then, that the “emerging
church” embraces narrative theology in efforts to transform evangelical propositions
and belief statements, and, in doing so, turns to postmodernism, or, perhaps more
accurately, embraces the postmodern turn in efforts to tell theological stories.

But shifting into storytelling mode makes the “emerging church” a dangerous
theological space, particularly when we contemplate postmodern perspectives on
narrativity. According to postmodern theorist Lyotard, narratives “determine criteria of
competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied” as well as “define what has
the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves
a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do”
(23). Like the scientific stories Lyotard critiques, much of evangelical theology uses
narrative as justification without probing the assumed metanarrative on which it relies.
Because evangelical discourses take for granted the knowability of God’s truth (or,
rather, God’s Truth), the production of theological stories seeks defense by ignoring the
great leap of faith through the unknown that separates God from theology.
Postmodernism calls into question the metanarratives on which all our narratives
depend, requiring us to account for the contingency of our stories, though, as Lyotard
points out, this is a difficult task since both we and our life-stories are enmeshed in
mutually legitimating cultural discourses. The mutual constitution of stories and
subjectivities makes my investigation of “emerging church” narrative theologies in
conjunction with literacy theories particularly pertinent because the evangelical subject is a storyteller, and “emerging” theologies indicate changes and challenges to traditional evangelical stories and storytellers through literacy acts like telling stories.

Not only does postmodernism dismantle the metanarrative—the overarching, universal story, but it also disrupts the binary between true stories and fictional stories. As feminist theorist Davies articulates in *A Body of Writing*, stories signify one distinction between humanism (a modern theory of personhood) and poststructuralism. Within humanism, says Davies, “[s]tories are versions of events that occur in the real world. An important distinction that is made by competent agentic adults is between ‘true’ and fictional stories.” Within poststructuralism, contrasts Davies, “[s]tories are the means by which events are interpreted, made tellable, or even livable. All stories are understood as fictions, such fictions providing the substance of lived reality” (57). Beyond telling stories, Davies describes, we *live* stories. Yet if we live in, with, and through fictions, what spaces exist for true stories, particularly in the evangelically-oriented “emerging church”?

As if in response to this question, Webber invokes faith in his text *The Younger Evangelicals*: “in the postmodern world, both believers and nonbelievers are people of faith. One has faith in the story of the Bible; the other has faith in the story of reason, science, some other religion, or the god of his or her own making.” Whereas Christian apologetics finds its foundations in providing rational arguments for faith in Jesus Christ, Webber envisions a new kind of “case for the Christian faith” as “no longer reason against reason but faith against faith in opposing stories” (92). In a framework of narrative theology embracing postmodernism, it seems that the “emerging church” sustains cultural relevance through telling stories—compelling fictions that inspire its affiliates to live in, with, and through “emerging” narratives. Fiction in these postmodern contexts no longer stands in opposition to fact as false or untrue, but
instead works as imaginative potential infused with the possibility of transforming what happens between the leap of faith and the stories we are willing to live.

My opening lines represent an intersection between my story, an evangelical story, and, perhaps, an “emerging” story I can live (with). I consciously rewrite Eve’s adventures because her story is my story, too, as well as a key starting point for understanding gender in evangelical contexts. Additionally, my narrative methodology meshes with the “emerging church” emphasis on the multiplicity of theological stories as opposed to the typical evangelical stress on propositions. Discussing the gendered implications of story and revision, DelRosso explains the parallels between classic fairy tales (like the Sleeping Beauty and Snow White motifs I have used in my own revision of Eve’s story) and Genesis creation accounts. According to DelRosso,

Eve, too, longs for knowledge and wanders into the forbidden when she eats the apple offered to her by the serpent. Like the [stereotypical fairytale] princess, Eve is punished for her sin by the disintegration of the world she has known, the world of the garden. And like the princess, Eve and her descendents must wait many years before salvation will arrive in the form of a brave man, a messiah—in the Christian tradition, Jesus Christ. Only through the passive and self-abnégating waiting that is embodied in the redeeming figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who produces and acts as intercessor to this savior, may the sins engendered by Eve’s first, original, and independent actions, be forgiven and salvation be ensured. (57)

As DelRosso’s comparison points out, from “[i]n the beginning,” both Eve and the Virgin Mary take part in gendered stories. Such stories—regardless of their assignment as “truth” or “fiction”—play important roles in the formation of evangelical gendered subjectivity. I am not the first and undoubtedly not the last feminist writer to play with Eve’s story, and I begin with Eve’s garden chronicle as a widely-known
starting point in imagining what kinds of stories of gendered subjectivity might “emerge” by investigating narrative theology in light of feminist theories of story. By attending particularly to feminist theories of embodiment and narrative, we can imagine what “emerging” stories faithful to an incarnate God might reveal about gendered subjectivity’s multiple reflections of *imago Dei*.

**Beyond the Garden Walls**

Eve trudged along the path leading from the garden walls, her shuffling feet raising dust with each slow step. The sun, sinking into a horizon Eve had not known existed, cast shadows that sent shivers across her skin. Splashes of rose and gold and violet spilled onto the earth, and Eve was both frightened and excited by the wildness of colors uncontained by garden walls. Pausing for a moment, she licked the apple’s sticky-sweet residue from her fingers, and marched forward into a twilight swiftly shifting into night…

* * * * *

Storytelling, admits Davies (*A Body of Writing*), is a complex matter for three reasons: 1. “new stories are always at risk of being interpreted in terms of the old”; 2. “our patterns of desire are not easily disrupted, in particular to the extent that they are defined as signifying one’s essential self”; 3. “the function of story in holding the existing order in place has not yet been fully understood” (79). Applying Davies’s insight to the “emerging church” means recognizing: 1. the “emerging church” carries cultural and historical baggage of traditional evangelical stories; 2. neither evangelicalism nor the “emerging church” is wholly liberating or wholly oppressive, and shifting from one story to another requires rethinking not only our God-stories but also our faith and our selves; 3. we cannot predict what kind of “emergence” will occur based on the stories we re-tell.
Just as the “emerging church” falls within the trajectory of evangelical Protestantism, so too my story of Eve participates in the revision history that Christian feminist theologian Colleen Carpenter Cullinan employs in her 2004 text *Redeeming the Story*. According to Cullinan, “[t]he story of redemption was often told in such a way that women were identified as the source of sin and death in God’s once-perfect world” (2). In Cullinan’s widely-accepted interpretation of the Eden story, women take the fall for the Fall of humanity, but Cullinan provides the possibility of changing the subject of that story (and its powerful influence over evangelical subject-formation) through narrative theology. Ultimately, Cullinan claims, “the problem is less with the theology than with the story”—the ways in which we describe fallenness and redemption in the Eden tale. To resolve the gendered implications of this kind of interpretation of the Garden of Eden narrative—a literacy act that influences the kinds of subjectivities available to female disciples—Cullinan asserts, “this is a problem that can only be solved with a new story” (2-3, emphasis in original). I agree, and use narrative elements as alternative literacy practices in order to disrupt the hegemonic hold of traditional evangelical stories on evangelical subjects. Further, by participating in “emerging” narrative theologies, I assert the potential for new theologies and new stories.

None of the “emerging church” writers I have read specifically refer to Cullinan’s work, yet several trace the narrative of fallenness and its significance to evangelical Protestant discourses. Two postmodern theologians (not explicitly affiliated with the “emerging church” yet cited by many of its affiliates), Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, mention in their 1995 text *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, “the overarching narrative movement of creation, fall and redemption, the epic drama of God’s purposes for the world and for humanity being worked out through Israel, Jesus and the church” (69). Although these authors locate themselves within postmodernism, they
retain a sense that at least God possesses a metanarrative, an “overarching narrative movement” unfolding through humanity. At the same time, Middleton and Walsh identify “To the postmodern mind, metanarratives are mere human constructs, fictive devices through which we impose an order on history and make it subject to us (hence they may be termed ‘master’ narratives)” (71). These statements provoke the question: who is “master” of the evangelical narrative?

Or, we might ask, where do God’s stories and humans’ stories converge and diverge? McLaren likewise uses language from Genesis creation (and subsequently, the Fall) accounts in his aptly titled text *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (2003), in which he asserts “I believe we are connected to the Creator, irrevocably, by a story, a true story that begins with the words ‘In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,’ a story that ends with ‘Behold, I make all things new.’” Mirroring his title, he continues, “[t]his story that begins and ends with creation is all about creation in between its beginning and end, this story we find ourselves in” (24). McLaren seems to believe that we enter into and leave the story that begins and ends with creation after it begins and before it ends, perhaps indicating once more that God is master of the metanarrative of which we humans see only glimpses; further, McLaren in his earlier companion text *A New Kind of Christian* admits “we live in different universes—depending on the kind of God we believe in and on our understanding of the master story we are a part of” (161). McLaren might just as suitably say we live in different *stories*—some of us eager for revision, some of us holding tight to the status quo, most of us a bit of both. Intertwined with and in between beginning and end there is creation, but with all stories of “emergence” I wonder to what extent “emerging” theologies can differ from traditional evangelical theologies without exiting the evangelical “master story” altogether.
Mark Miller’s 2005 *Experiential Storytelling* (part of the EmergentYS line), provides just such a caution in revising (though he does not use that particular term either) theological stories. In directing “emerging” affiliates to construct powerful narrative theology, M. Miller warns “[s]ome stories, however, should not be tampered with. This includes but is not limited to biblical stories. Be careful that you do not edit too much so the story loses its integrity” (47). As M. Miller’s statement suggests, each story contains an essential “integrity” that must not be sacrificed, and there is a line between editing enough and editing too much (tampering?) that must not be crossed. Perhaps M. Miller issues this admonition because he understands the open-endedness of telling stories as dangerous: “[a] sermon tells people what to think. A story forces people to do the thinking for themselves. It can feel dangerous because it allows for interpretation” (41). M. Miller’s title emphasizes the centrality of stories within “emerging” theologies because he, like so many members of the “emerging church” conversations, recognizes the intrinsic power of narrative; as M. Miller muses:

[a] few years ago would you have paid more than a dollar for a cup of coffee? Now you walk into a coffeehouse where you hear cool music, watch the coffee-bar attendants make your drink, perhaps relax on one of the hip pieces of furniture, and think that a $3 cup of coffee is a bargain. Why? Because you bought more than coffee—you paid for an experience. It’s caffeine for the senses. (16)

Stories play a critical role in “emerging” theologies because of this experience economy—what feminist theorists often refer to as embodied narratives. Or, as postmodern theologian Sweet, in *Postmodern Pilgrims*, clarifies, “It is one thing to talk about God. It is quite another thing to experience God” (31). Narrative theologies seek to bridge the gap between God and theology—once more that leap of faith—through stories that speak to our embodied experiences. But many theological stories might fill
that gap, and, as M. Miller’s caution reminds us, some stories hold the power to disrupt hegemonic interpretations; this recognition of narratives’ centrality to subjective experience and narratives’ interruptive potential reinforces my argument that literacy acts matter in (re)vising stories and subjectivities within “emerging” evangelicalism.

Embodiment, too, matters quite a bit in evangelical gendered subject-formation because there tend to be such strict roles based on bodily readings. Some feminist theories of embodiment interrogate the ways in which gendered narratives legitimate bodily distinctions through discourse. As feminist Butler points out in *Gender Trouble*, “[b]odies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender,” leading Butler to pose the question: “[t]o what extent does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender?” (8, emphasis in original). Butler’s question makes clear her position that neither bodies nor gender exist outside of discursive frameworks that define and bound the kinds of subjectivities possible. In response to critiques that she disregards the substance of bodies, however, Butler clarifies her stance in the 1993 text *Bodies that Matter*, where she asks “[h]ow can we legitimate claims of bodily injury if we put into question the materiality of the body?” (53). To answer, she writes:

[i]f the bounding, forming, and deforming of sexed bodies is animated by a set of founding prohibitions, a set of enforced criteria of intelligibility, then we are not merely considering how bodies appear from the vantage point of a theoretical position or epistemic location at a distance from bodies themselves. On the contrary, we are asking how the criteria of intelligible sex operates to constitute a field of bodies, and how precisely we might understand specific criteria to produce the bodies that they regulate. (55)
According to Butler, discourses establish “criteria of intelligible sex”—or, the agreed upon assumption that bodies do and should be differentiable based on specific physical features that fall into either the male or female discursive realm. But such gendered bodies, Butler argues, do not exist outside of their discursive frameworks because only within discourses themselves do the physical features, as well as the lived experiences, attributed to female subjects hold meaning. Using Butler’s work as a theoretical foundation, I assert the significance of evangelical and “emerging” storylines in bounding not only gendered discourses but also gendered bodies—by which I mean that evangelical stories determine definitions of marriage, vocations of preaching and teaching, and the validity of speaking subjects. By indicating the contingencies and operations of such narratives, I intend to demonstrate the ways in which stories bind subjects through another of our literacy acts: the ways we read bodies.

Feminist theologian McClintock Fulkerson agrees that bodies are indeed meaningful, though not, perhaps, most so because of their materiality. In her article “Changing the Subject,” McClintock Fulkerson (1996) asserts “[t]he claim that discourse constitutes bodies, institutions, or any other reality does not reduce bodies to language, however. Language is only one of the many sign systems” (137). As McClintock Fulkerson reminds us, we read bodies through discourses just as we read written texts through discourse-laden perspectives. Especially in incarnational theology¹² we see that bodies matter; by reading Jesus as embodied God, evangelical and “emerging” theologians accept the importance of discursively positioning bodies—

¹² Christian incarnational theology adheres to the belief that Jesus Christ is a divine deity manifested in the flesh (as suggested by the carne root of the term); this theory holds that Christ is both fully God and fully human, and that He assumes human form in order to experience the human condition—including death—and, because of His divinity, to conquer death for humans. By offering Himself as a sacrifice for humanity’s sins (dating back to the fallen state of Eden, when humans first disobey God in the Christian story) and thereby conquering death, Jesus prepares the way for humans to achieve eternal life with Him. Christ’s incarnation in human form prepares the way for this cosmic chain of events that rest at the heart of evangelical storylines.
without which the crucifixion and the resurrection lose their compelling meaning in these particular God-stories. Jesus incarnate fulfills the criteria set forth by Scripture as an embodied God, and by reading His body through discourses that value Biblical foreshadowing, evangelical and “emerging” narratives of Christ make the cross and the empty tomb meaningful. Christ’s body defies the boundaries of human and divine and of life and death because particular discourses permit us to read His embodied story in such a way, just as discourses of subjectivity allow evangelical and “emerging” Christians to interpret gendered bodies through certain lenses. Literacy acts—particularly reading—play a critical role in changing and challenging those lenses, because, as I argue, we read bodies through our interpretations and readings of stories that sustain discourses.

Bodies Matter

A woman named Eve walks into a church. Members of the congregation whirl around and barrage her with the following questions:

1) Do you accept responsibility for the fallen state of humanity?

2) Do you acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins?
   a. Infant or adult baptism?¹³

3) Do you believe in the presence of Jesus Christ in the sacrament of communion?
   a. Transubstantiation, consubstantiation, or symbolic?¹⁴

¹³ Denominations within Christianity differ on when baptism should occur, with some preferring infant baptism as a rite of passage signaling a disciple’s entrance into a community of believers and other denominations preferring baptism at an age when disciples can understand, choose, and take responsibility for the covenant themselves.

¹⁴ These doctrines refer to particular Christian conceptions of the Eucharist, or Lord’s Supper, or communion—all different names for the same practice outlined in Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:22-24, and Luke 22:19. Each of these passages shows Jesus breaking bread and drinking wine with His disciples and comparing the bread and wine as physical reminders of His body and blood. Christians recount this action in various ways, with transubstantiation holding that a priest actually transforms the host/bread into the body of Christ and the wine into the blood of Christ,
4) Do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?
   a. Have you recited the sinner’s prayer?

   “Follow me,” said Jesus—and a woman named Eve walks out of a church.

   * * * * *

   Bodies matter in narrative theology, not least of all because the heart of the
   “Christian” story is the incarnation—Jesus Christ-as-deity assuming human form,
   Jesus Christ as embodied God. Without the body of Christ (entering the world via the
   Virgin Mary’s womb and rising from the grave to reveal an empty tomb), evangelical
   stories lose much of their meaning. Writers like Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, in
   their co-authored text, critique modern evangelical stories for losing sight of our
   bodies, asserting “[i]n modernity we dissected bodies. In postmodernity we decorate
   bodies and develop them. The body is the storyboard of choice” (47). Later in their
   collective text, these same authors urge:

   [e]merging Christian leaders must grapple again with the reality that human
   beings happen in bodies—sexual bodies, hungry bodies, tired bodies, aging
   bodies, electrochemical and genetic and environmentally sensitive bodies. As
   Christians, we will see ourselves as far more than minds (or spirits) that
   temporarily need bodies (mere throwaway containers, an embarrassing
   concession to the material world) to get around. Instead, we will grapple again
   with the ancient Jewish insight that when God made us, God made us as
   bodies, and pronounced those bodies very good. (49)

   Our bodies—sexual, hungry, tired, aging, electrochemically, genetically,
   environmentally sensitive—form the medium for “emerging” theological stories. Just as
   the incarnation inscripts a theological story onto the body of Christ, narrative theology

   consubstantiation describing the elements of bread and wine intermingling with the
   physical body of Christ, and symbolic as holding that the bread and wine are simply
   bread and wine that remind us of Christ’s offering both in the meal and on the cross.
calls for an attention to the ways in which stories “emerge” through discourses both
linguistic and embodied. My use of feminist theories and theologies indicates my
conviction that gendered bodies matter too, though Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer
leave out that category of embodiment—but without the gendered embodiment of
figures like the Virgin Mary\textsuperscript{15} (to whom Jesus incarnate is born), evangelical and
“emerging” theologies lose a central piece of their story.

“Emerging” author Andy Crouch underscores postmodern physicality in his
with the flip side of the postmodern coin, Botox and other forms of cosmetic surgery.
What is being expressed by these forms of body modification if not the idea that our
bodies are sites of meaning, even transcendence?” (84). Indeed such forms of “body
modification” reminds us that we read bodies; even without “modification,” each
wrinkle, scar, gesture, and expression tells a story—an embodied story—just as Mary’s
virgin form and Christ’s crucified body tell stories. Further, in Sweet’s \textit{Postmodern
Pilgrims}, he claims “[y]ou can tell a story and never use words, much less words that
come to a point. In fact, the story of the Gospels is told most effectively with bread and
wine—images and elements of the earth, images and elements you can taste, touch,
see, smell, and hear” (124). Sweet’s reference to the Eucharist as sacraments that
most effectively tell the story of the Gospel through physical elements of bread and
wine affirms the embodied characteristics of “emerging” stories. Throughout Christian
history, embodiment plays an important role, but within evangelicalism, more
emphasis lies on the \textit{word} than on Jesus as \textit{the word made flesh}, making

\textsuperscript{15} Evangelical theologies, along with many other Christian theologies, maintain that
Mary, the mother of Jesus, conceived as a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit,
even though at the time she was engaged to marry Joseph. Mary’s status as a
righteous woman and a virgin are important indicators of Christ’s entering the world
sinless. See Matthew 1:18 for the Biblical reference to these events.
supper (as opposed to Roman Catholicism, where the Eucharist is a necessary component of each mass) and its interpretations of Scripture that rigidly define gendered bodies. Evangelical discourses pay both little and much attention to embodiment, but my claims about the production of gendered subjects—in all our embodied variety—provides important insight for “emerging” stories as always-already gendered.

Yet while Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, in their collective text, refer fleetingly to “sexual” bodies and many “emerging” writers emphasize a renewed concern for sacramentalism within the “emerging church,” I look to these theological stories for understandings of gendered bodies and stories within evangelicalism. In Gender (2002), Frederica Mathewes-Green provides one such story, where she insists that her journey through feminism (she no longer calls herself a feminist) taught her “[t]he right to be at home in our bodies. This means the right to have our bodies left whole and healthy, unaltered for any goal of social engineering or impossible ideal of beauty” (18). This lesson from Mathewes-Green’s encounters with feminism resonates positively with other “emerging church” writers like Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer who proclaim the goodness of our natural bodies. Mathewes-Green and I differ in our understandings of feminism and femininity, however, and here I begin to struggle with the gendered evangelical stories she offers to the “emerging church.” At one point in Gender, Mathewes-Green asserts “[i]f you imagine a composite of all women, of all ages, from all over the world and through all time, the central fact of shared existence would be childrearing” (83). Child-bearing and child-rearing take center stage in Mathewes-Green’s evangelical story and in the Virgin Mary’s story, yet these experiences are not part of my story and I can only guess at the many others excluded from her sweeping story. My use of a more diverse range of feminist thinking demonstrates the differences that destabilize any cohesive category of woman or of disciple.
While Mathewes-Green and I share certain hesitancies toward some kinds of feminism (though Mathewes-Green likely to a larger extent based on her written works), I find feminist theories tell useful stories to rightly disrupt the kinds of generalized claims about being female—even in evangelical contexts. For instance, Joan Scott’s 1991 essay “The Evidence of Experience” questions claims based on personal experience because “[t]he unifying aspect of experience excludes whole realms of human activity by simply not counting them as experience” (785). Mathewes-Green’s assumption that child-rearing adequately represents the experience of all women falls into the disturbing trap that Scott describes in her essay—that females without such experiences are utterly erased from the evangelical image. However, Mathewes-Green’s story fits into the traditional evangelical Protestant story of gendered subjectivity, particularly the usage of Scripture to emphasize females in motherhood or caretaking roles; in fact, bloggers on the Emergent Kiwi site raise this very issue with relation to 1 Timothy 2—the same chapter that advises women to remain silent.

Blogger “steve” asks: “if you use 1 Timothy 2:12 literally, don’t you then have [sic] run into problems with v. 15—where women are saved through childbirth; which leaves open the question of how ‘literally’ women who don’t have children are saved?” Both Mathewes-Green and “steve” intersect with evangelical and feminist discourses of gendered subjectivity, yet the stories each one tells about possibilities for embodied narratives within the “emerging church” suggest different trajectories, reminding us once more that the multiplicity of stories makes for complicated (and sometimes conflicting) interpretations. Rather than looking at these complications and conflicts as problematic, however, I urge evangelical and “emerging” theologians to embrace such dissonance as a postmodern reminder that we see only fragments of stories.

Several feminist theologians offer guidelines that are useful to my examination of and participation in the storylines surrounding and constructing the emerging
church. McClintock Fulkerson, in *Changing the Subject*, asserts “Our interpretive codes are related to the pleasures and blindnesses that attend our own construction in a sinfully broken set of social arrangements” (17). Keeping such conditions in mind, Fulkerson urges us toward “a theological vision of the fallibility of knowledge—a liberation doctrine of ‘finitude’” (17). Like the Eve of my second vignette, we must acknowledge our sinfulness and march out into darkness—guided by faith and certain only of our own inability to know fully, in spite of Eve’s apple incident. From a feminist perspective on human rights, Martha Nussbaum’s provocative 1999 text *Sex and Social Justice* also articulates issues of human wrongdoing:

> the criticism we may make of “religious practices” and “religious discourse” will be criticisms of human beings, often vying for political power; they do not presuppose that any of these religions has an unchanging and unchangeable core of misogyny, or even that the misogynistic elements are religiously central rather than political in origin. (87)

Although Nussbaum does not invoke language of sin and redemption in her assessment of religious criticisms, her words resonate with such concepts; criticisms, she seems to argue, are founded in human sinfulness. And, while Nussbaum and I surely differ on the purpose and process of redeeming religion, we both seemingly recognize that such redemption is possible—that religious faith does not possess “an unchanging and unchangeable core of misogyny” (87). Finally, Rosemary Radford Ruether’s canonical 1983 work *Sexism and God-Talk* helps establish the field of feminist theology; in that text, she claims “Feminist theology makes the sociology of theology visible, no longer hidden behind mystifications of objectified divine and universal authority” (13). Feminist theology, as these writers and I insist, provides new storylines, and within the “emerging church” movement, there is much work to be done and there are many stories to be told.
Storying Faith

“Follow me,” said Jesus.

Eve hesitated—remembering her cozy little bedroom in her cozy little home: the aroma of coffee wafting to her nostrils, the soft cream sheets with pink stripes, the indentation in the mattress where the cats always lay, and three cats—silky black, dappled brown, and gray striped. Home! So…comfortable. Plenty of apples in the fridge, plenty of bubble bath under the sink. Who was this Jesus, anyway?

“Follow me,” He said, “and become a fisher of disciples.”

“Follow me,” He said, “and let the dead bury the dead.”

“Follow me,” He said. And she got up and followed Him.

*   *   *   *   *

Many of the primary postmodern Christian theologians are white men with seminary educations—the same theologians who have been setting and changing the rules for centuries. So, while Grenz and Franke admit “all our utterances can only be deemed ‘true’ within the context in which they are spoken” (42), published materials about the emerging church still suggest that theological truths are white, male, heterosexual, and seminary-educated. With this in mind, my question—who is master of “emerging” theological narratives—persists.

Even some of the working descriptions of postmodernism and postmodern culture used by writers entering the “emerging” conversations hint at a reluctance to release control over evangelical “master” narratives. Dan Kimball’s authoritatively titled 2003 text The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations identifies what the author deems “the post-Christian era”—what he considers characteristic of postmodernism:

[i]n the post-Christian era (beginning c.a.d. 2000), the values and beliefs of a person raised in America are shaped by a global, pluralistic atmosphere. This
person has instant exposure to global news, global fashion, global music, and global religions. There are many gods, many faiths, many forms of spiritual expression from which to choose. In a postmodern atmosphere, a person grows up learning that all faiths are equal but that Christianity is primarily a negative religion, known for finger-pointing and condemning the behavior of others. (59-60)

I am troubled by Kimball’s unproblematic assumption of globalism and plurality within this passage, and, to put Kimball’s description of United States culture into relief, I provide below feminist theorist Uma Narayan’s depiction of Indian food from her 1997 text *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*:

“Indian food” as it is represented by “Indian restaurants” in Western contexts has, like most immigrants, undergone a series of adaptations and assimilations to the dominant context. The levels of “spiciness” and “hotness” of the dishes served are often evidently toned down to suit the less-seasoned palates of many Western consumers. While some items served in such ‘restaurant cuisine’ approximate some of the everyday fare eaten in Indian homes, a good deal do not. The food in Indian restaurants in the West usually approximates a particular genre of North Indian cuisine, bearing only limited resemblance to the food I ate at home, or to the food served in many of the regional restaurants around India. (174)

While Kimball is correct that Christian affiliation can no longer be taken-for-granted in the United States (if this were ever appropriate), his grocery-list of global choices granted to residents of the United States because of postmodernism laments the demise of Christianity without accounting for Christian consumption. In Narayan’s passage, we see the ways in which “Westerners” literally consume other cultures and appropriate other cultures according to “Western” desires and tastes. Kimball’s
postmodern, post-Christian generation may eat up “global news, global fashion, global music, and global religions” (59-60) that bear little resemblance to the cultural contexts in which such commodities are originally located and that do little to challenge the egocentricity of the “Western” consumers. I juxtapose these passages because in many ways I fear that the emerging church’s nod to religious plurality is merely another means of consuming and commodifying the competition—a perhaps too familiar storyline for evangelicalism—but also a storyline that feminist theories and theologies can help us to revise.

McLaren, one of the most prominent figures in “emerging church” theology, addresses such concerns about consumerism within his critique of modern Christianity; in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren (2004) identifies the problems with modernity “with its absolutisms and colonialisms and totalitarianisms as a kind of static dream, a desire to abide in timeless abstractions and extract humanity from the ongoing flow of history and emergence, a naïve hope to make now the end of history” (286). In addition to criticizing the stagnant vision of modern Christianity, McLaren’s landmark book *A New Kind of Christian* defines several characteristics of modernity—conquest, control, machination, secularity, objectivity, individualism, consumerism—that the “emerging” postmodern church seeks to disrupt (16-18). Demonstrating such points, McLaren cites modernism as “an age when people often quoted the maxim ‘Money can’t buy happiness’ but seldom acted as if they believed it” (18). Relating such problematic modern perceptions specifically to church-going, McLaren compares the Christian church to the mega-brands Wal-mart, Disney World, and Coca-Cola: “If you want useful plastic kitchen articles, you go to Wal-mart….If you want a standard, scripted vacation, you go to Disney World. If you want a fizzy, sugary drink, you go to Coca-Cola. And if you want a spiritual pick-me-up, you go to church” (156). These passages indicate that McLaren at least considers some of the issues Narayan raises in
her discussion of dislocating cultures from their contexts, but while McLaren’s observations are insightful and important, the “emerging church’s” fulfillment of its postmodern promises, particularly in relation to the formation of evangelical or “emergent” subjectivity, is still, well, emerging. Integrating feminist theories and theologies into “emerging” conversations provides me with a perspective that respects gendered embodiment as meaningful but rejects femaleness as monolithic, and this same perspective can help the “emerging church” respect faithful subjectivity and storytelling as meaningful but reject the evangelical story (or even evangelical stories) as the master story.

Right now, it seems as though the “emerging church” is struggling to shake off its modern shackles, and the “emerging church” remains a tangential movement because many Christians in the U.S. are unprepared or unwilling to relinquish the modernism that makes Christianity so matter-of-fact. Just as we entrust our loyalty to Wal-mart, Disney World, and Coca-Cola, and appropriate ethnic cuisines for our comfortable consumption, many of us Christians appreciate the strictness, the standardness, and the certainty that questions like those in this section’s opening vignette epitomize. Especially when we speak of storying subjectivity, a complementarian perspective where femininity and masculinity are clearly defined—just as evangelical beliefs are distinctly outlined—troubles not just the stories we tell but the stories we live. Davies articulates this point with relation to gender and sexuality (but not specifically in religious discourses) in A Body of Writing, where she writes “[p]eople whose gender is not immediately obvious create an uncertainty in the correct reading of signs. The assigning of meaning to the pictures or words on the door is necessarily a collective action” (27). The “pictures or words” in Davies’s quote refer to the bathroom doors—but imagine how much greater our uncertainty if we insert puzzling bodies that disrupt our readings not into a public bathroom but into an
evangelical discourse insistent on demarcated gender differences. Further, what if we blur the boundaries between evangelical and non-evangelical? Throughout His ministry, Jesus mingles with unlikely members of society—tax collectors, women, lepers—indicating that He cares quite little for the displays of religiosity of the religious elite of His day. Rupturing identity categories like woman and evangelical disciple creates controversy because we lose categories that render our experiences meaningful; but, deconstructing such categories and allowing for difference within them serves as a critical reminder that we may be storytellers but we are not masters of the stories.

As Davies (A Body of Writing) attests, “[t]he process of subjectification, then, entails a tension between simultaneously becoming a speaking, agentic subject and the corequisite for this, being subjected to the meanings inherent in the discourses through which one becomes a subject” (27). The tension of gendered subjectivity within the “emerging church” exists because women speaking our stories (as I do here) chafes against strands of dominant evangelical discourses of gender. Evangelical understandings of gender are neither simplistic nor monolithic, but there certainly persists tension in asserting my story as “a speaking, agentic subject” within a discourse that liberally applies the mandate of 1 Timothy states that women must learn in silence. We still need orthodoxy, but we need orthodoxy that embodies difference in Christian stories in a way that modernism cannot but feminism can. It is much more concrete to believe in consubstantiation than in Christ, but if Jesus calls “Follow me,” who is ready to step into the unknown with nothing but faith?

Heart, Mind, Strength, Soul, and Subjectivity

Eve’s baptism took place in a small stone church that stands on a corner where two highways meet. She remembers nothing of the event, and no records survive to commemorate her baptismal birthday. Years later, Eve’s confirmation took place in
another stone church on Church Street; she doesn’t remember that event either, though rumors suggest her name endures on the church’s roster.

Eve’s baptism by fire goes on today; now this, she remembers. These are the moments of panic and of pain when a voice in her head whispers “I will never leave you or forsake you!” These are the moments of vulnerability when she prays for flight and God responds “you will grow wings like eagles! You will run and not grow weary!” These are the moments of breathless joy when her soul sings “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength!” These are the moments when Eve knows she is a Christian.

* * * * *

But Eve is not just a Christian—especially considering that her Jewish heritage predates her Christian heritage. Eve works in at least two kinds of stories—Jewish and Christian—illustrating once again the complexity of storytelling and the ways in which even stories of different faiths overlap and intersect. In A is for Abductive, Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer encourage us “that the only narrative that really counts is God’s” (194). But, part of living in and with and through faithful stories (even different faith stories, as Eve does) shows us only glimpses of God’s story. Perhaps God owns a metanarrative, yet even if that were the case, human epistemologies can only bridge the gap between theology and God with faith, and faith, by definition, lacks evidence. Even if God owns a singular metanarrative, we must work with multiple narratives because we simply cannot access a metanarrative. This caution against the human metanarrative is appropriate for Christians who consume others’ stories in a single swallow, but feminist theologians remind us that too often women’s stories have been discounted. How can we imagine glimpses of God’s narrative without accounting for the stories of women? Feminist theologian Kathleen Fischer, in her 1988 text Women at the Well, stresses “[s]torytelling is the most spontaneous and basic way of naming
experience. It is also an ancient and honored tool for preserving the wealth and variety of experience. One task of spiritual friends is to help women find the images that link their faith stories” (10). Later in her text, Fischer offers storytelling strategies and asks women to tell “[w]hat God once was for me What God is for me now What I hope for from God’s future” (24-25). Fischer’s lack of punctuation between these elements emphasizes the fluidity of our faith stories, and the didactic element to her text illuminates the exigency with which feminists regard women’s storytelling.

Another feminist writer, Kwok Pui-lan, likewise illustrates the urgency of women telling their stories of faith; such an act, she asserts, “requires us to shift our attention from the Bible and tradition to people’s stories in her 1988 essay “Mothers and Daughters, Writers and Fighters.” The exclusiveness of the Christian claim often stems from a narrow and mystified view of the Bible and church teaching” (29). I acknowledge the Bible and church teaching and tradition as critical parts of significant stories, but again, Narayan is useful in outlining the “emerging church’s” necessary work; according to Narayan, “[f]eminist analyses of ‘traditional practices’ affecting women should refrain from leaving their status as ‘tradition’ unexamined” (77). As Narayan’s own text demonstrates, all stories are suspect, and a critical postmodern theology, if it takes seriously its mission of “emerging” freed from the fetters of modernist Christianity, must acknowledge its own gaps and blindesses. By asserting universal and absolute truths, evangelicals lay claim to a metanarrative of which we never were and never will be masters. Such claims deny the depth and mystery of a God who, like Eve, may appear in many stories with multiple meanings and interpretations. Because evangelical and “emerging” subjects imagine ourselves as participants in God’s stories, we cannot see (if there is) a storyboard that pulls all the pieces together, and, instead of seeking an omnipotent or omniscient perspective that lets us manipulate the pieces, we need to work with our limited vision. For me, those
gaps and blindnesses indicate a disjuncture between Scripture that proclaims females as the co-image bearers of God yet relegates feminine manifestations of that *imago Dei* to rigid gender stereotypes that deny the fullness of both genders’ giftedness to preach, teach, and love. I see these issues not as master of a story but as a student of feminism and theology trained for such visions.

Diane Stinton expresses such blindness “Africa, East and West,” a 2004 essay. Stinton explains the story of a “Western” missionary in Africa who calls Christ “the Saviour and Redeemer of all humankind.” In response to this explanation, a Maasia elder slowly stood up and said to the missionary: “You have spoken well, but I want to learn more about this great person Jesus Christ. I have three questions about him: First, did he ever kill a lion? Second, how many cows did he have? Third, how many wives and children did he have?” (105) As Stinton’s anecdote reveals, our understandings of Jesus and our questions about the Bible are inextricably intertwined with our cultural contexts. For “emerging” theologian McLaren, this practice means recognizing the multiplicity of narratives of Jesus within already-established Christian denominations. In *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren identifies the “7 Jesuses” he has known: the Conservative Protestant Jesus, the Roman Catholic Jesus, the Pentecostal/Charismatic Jesus, the Evangelical Jesus, the Eastern Jesus, the Anabaptist Jesus, and the Jesus of the Oppressed (45-63). As McLaren’s examples illustrate, Jesus is not a static character—not in an individual believer’s experience and not in broader manifestations of Christianity either. McLaren makes room not for Jesus but for Jesuses—and if the “emerging church” follows suit, it can reap the reward of knowing Jesus more fully by experiencing the stories of Jesuses.

But not all contemporary theologians engaged in “emerging church” conversations express such comfort with the fluidity and partiality of postmodern

> [w]e have lost the overarching story of God and man. So we piece together our own stories. What is interesting is that most people in the emerging culture have no problem believing in “God.” But this “God” is pieced together from a mix of world religions and various personal beliefs. Since having contradictory beliefs is not a problem in postmodern culture, this is acceptable. (73)

Whereas modern Christianity assumes and insists that God and the Christian story are both linear and cohesive, postmodern Christianity realizes the absurdity of such claims; God, if we are just and honest, is too big for us to construct an “overarching story” without contradictions. While Kimball seems to find the loss of God’s “overarching story” troubling, I feel more comfortable with a God “pieced together from a mix of world religions and various personal beliefs” because the alternative seems too simplistic—not to mention too exclusionary—to represent a God of all the universe. In addition, Kimball’s use of “man” to exemplify all humanity illustrates the invisibility of women within his conception of the “emerging church.” For too long, “man” (and, to be more specific, a white, middle-class, heterosexual, able, educated “man”) has been taken-for-granted as the center of Christian theology. Situating Kimball’s criticism within evangelical Protestantism and alongside M. Miller’s injunction to resist tampering with some stories reminds us of the powerful weight given to getting theology right in evangelical discourses, and certainly, Kimball makes an important critique in asserting that not all theological stories speak rightly about an evangelical God. At the same time, evangelical stories that assert humans as inherently sinful and fallen need to recognize the ridiculousness of reaching for an overarching narrative that fully explains God, from whom we humans are (so goes the evangelical story)
irreparably separated by sin. Jesus serves as a mediator between heaven and earth, God and humanity, and His willing sacrifice on the cross gives us the gift of salvation—but that gift is not earned by humans but by Christ, who may master a story we cannot.

Once more, McLaren’s *A Generous Orthodoxy* is, indeed, generous; according to McLaren, “[r]ather than trying to capture timeless truth in objective statements systematized in analytical outlines and recorded in books and institutionalized in schools and denominations, narrative theology embraces, preserves, and reflects on the stories of people and communities involved in the romance of God” (290). Within my own Christian narrative, my own romance with God as McLaren might say, God does not always manifest the same way. So, while God may remain static, our perceptions of and interactions with God are dynamic and reflect a multi-faceted God—a God Who cannot be shaped into an “overarching story” by limited and broken human faculties. If a particular “we” have “lost the overarching story of God and man,” it is because “we” wrongfully claimed that story as exclusively ours in the first place. Evangelical discourses limit what kinds of stories can “emerge” from “emerging church” theologies, and so we who invest ourselves in these postmodern stories need to consider carefully what compromises are sustainable within the discursive limits that bound our subjectivities as a certain kind of Christian. By denying our access to absolute truths and by resisting universal propositions, I (and many “emerging” affiliates) already work against evangelical projects of setting up the one true faith. Additionally, suggesting that neither gender nor discipleship are clear-cut and obvious, I put myself in opposition to evangelicals who treat Scripture as if it were an instruction manual instead of a collection of histories, songs, poems, sermons, letters, and visions inspired by God but not necessarily easy for humans to interpret in cohesive ways. Where evangelicalism typically sees one story, whole and complete, I imagine multiple
stories—broken but bolstered by faith, just like so many questioning “emerging”
conversants who no longer believe the evangelical theological metanarrative.

Perhaps, though, the “emerging church” will emerge unwilling to compromise its
stories to evangelicalism, and we who affiliate with such postmodern stories will find
ourselves in the title of another McLaren text—*A New Kind of Christian*. In this text,
McLaren identifies the ugliness of modern attempts to force God into a model that
humans can fully grasp:

> God can’t ever really be an object to be studied. He refuses to donate tissue
samples for our microscope slides or to lie down on our dissection tables
(although that might be an interesting understanding of the cross)—it’s what we
do with a living, loving God—tack him down like an insect in a display case or a
frog in a dissection tray. (161)

McLaren’s parenthetical note reminds me of last Good Friday—the liturgical marker of
Christ’s crucifixion. I sat in the sanctuary listening to a warbling voice singing the
mournful song “Where You There When They Crucified My Lord?” as darkness
systematically enveloped the congregation. Between the dimming lights, the dirge-like
lyrics, and the memory of my grandmother’s coffin descending into the dark, cold
earth, I never felt so close to the cross. I wept: images of my small Nana in her coffin
and the Christ tacked to the cross flashing before my eyes as my roommate wrapped
me in her arms. We crucified Christ once; must we continue to pin our God to a
dissection tray for our self-serving mission of modernism? Must we strive to be
masters of the story?

*Imago Dei: Who Do You Say that I Am?*

> “Who do you say that I am?” asked Jesus.
> “You are King of Kings! Prince of Peace! Shepherd! Messiah! Savior! Redeemer!” Eve exclaimed in excitement.
Jesus gazed at Eve in silence; uncomfortable with his reticence, Eve broke in, reciting the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostle’s Creed, singing hymns and songs of praise, quoting Scripture, and referencing theologians’ remarks about the nature of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus stood, still and soundless.

Then, slowly, Jesus reached out and grasped Eve’s hand.

* * * * *

According to Christian feminist theologian McClintock Fulkerson (1991) in “Sexism as Original Sin,” “Christian feminist theologies come from the experience of conflict many women feel between loyalties to traditional Christian beliefs and practice and feminists’ demonstration that women have been marginalized in Western religious and cultural traditions” (653). As McClintock Fulkerson explains, Christian feminist theologies arise at a point of tension between two kinds of discourses that share common history as well as different practices; my story arises there too, along with my hope for the “emerging church” to tell a new kind of evangelical story. Of course, as McClintock Fulkerson herself elucidates in another 1998 article entitled “Is There a (Non-Sexist) Bible in This Church?” the kinds of stories we can tell depends upon the kinds of discourses in which we do our telling. Or, as McClintock Fulkerson states: “[w]hen we pay attention to the interpretive community that has named and produced the conventions that so attribute and construe the text, we would say that it is as used in a particular way that the biblical text comes to have the meaning of this Jesus narrative” (229, emphasis in original). Just as I admit early in my story that what you see of God and what you see of me here will depend on what you’re looking for, McClintock Fulkerson recognizes that the stories we tell are largely produced in the act of telling by embodied storytellers embedded in discourses. “Emerging” stories begin in evangelical discourses, and evangelical discourses represent understandings of gender
that range from complementary and hierarchical masculinity and femininity fixed within Scripture (see *Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*) to equality between females and males as co-image bearers of God (see *Christians for Biblical Equality*). These positions within the same discourse community differ, yet the full range can be supported by literacy acts that prioritize particular Biblical texts—suggesting that even Scripture, mediated through the human and embodied practices of reading and interpretation, tells multiple stories just like me and Eve.

So, in examining the apparent evangelical impulse to claim mastery of the Christian story, we must explore the discourses in which such practices develop and the possibility of expanding such discourses to include alternative stories. Christian theologian Lesslie Newbigin (Newbigin does not affiliate as an “emerging” author but his work is widely cited by “emerging” writers) addresses the issue of authority within the “Christian” metanarrative in his acclaimed 1989 text *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Newbigin writes, “[p]art of the reason for the rejection of dogma is that it has for so long been entangled with coercion, with political power, and so with the denial of freedom—freedom of thought and of conscience. When coercion of any kind is used in the interests of the Christian message, the message itself is corrupted” (10). Coercion based on sexism and misogyny, because it has been so long written into the script of Christianity, is difficult (some feminists say impossible) to disentangle from Christianity itself; within human cultures that are always-already sinful, there is no “pure” Christianity to which we can return for uncorrupted narratives. Instead, we need to build the “emerging church” through new tales that witness women’s faith—or else we risk erasing and repeating the cyclical trauma of women in Christianity. The sexism and misogyny embedded within the evangelical tradition are literally inscribed on the bodies of women, particularly in the Scripturally-based mandates that women must be submissive and silent. But the Bible lends itself to other readings and
interpretations, too: of Eve’s boldness and ambition, of the Virgin Mary’s righteousness and bravery, of Mary Magdalene’s faith and vision, to name a few possible additional and alternative storylines.¹⁶

Storytelling, then, is a significant and essential strategy for rewriting women’s roles within the “emerging church.” But for this to happen, the “emerging church” needs to recognize women’s stories, which, like the stories encouraged by postmodern theologies, are contingent, contextual, and oftentimes controversial. Feminist theologian Cullinan acknowledges the (ab)uses of stories that dictate authority and submission based on gender:

> [t]he obedience that women, children, and slaves owe to their husbands, parents, and owners is detailed in the household codes of Ephesians and Colossians, and these passages were for centuries seen as central to a Christian understanding of the proper organization of society. Again, the obligation (for the powerless) to remain obedient was always seen as far more significant than the obligation (for the powerful) to act with justice. (17)

Such stories and counter-stories make messy theology—especially when we consider Cullinan’s claim that “the proper organization of society” hinges on the tension between authority and submission, on the very question of who retains mastery of the story. Later in Cullinan’s own text, she explicates the plight of juxtaposing Eve and Christ (as I do in my vignettes interweaved through this story) because so much of Christian doctrine associates Eve “as the source of all human sinfulness” and Christ as the source of all salvation; this gendered contrast between Eve and Jesus, Cullinan remarks, has dire gendered implications: “[c]ombined with the notion that all women

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¹⁶ According to Mark 16:9-10, after His resurrection from the dead, Jesus reveals Himself first to Mary Magdalene, who then informs the twelve male disciples of the event. Not all Biblical scholars acknowledge these verses as reliable, but a similar incident occurs in John 20:10-18, where Mary Magdalene waits alone outside the tomb even after the twelve male disciples have left, and it is she who reports His resurrection to them.
are Eve’s daughters, and thus share her impulse toward disobedience and her responsibility for the first sin, this is a tremendously destructive idea” (18). And, as noted previously, much of the evangelical conversation regarding gender and appropriate gender roles relies on Scriptural references that assert women’s subordination—often based on the contention that Eve was created second and sinned first (1 Timothy 2:12-14). These stories are important to gendered evangelical subjectivity, but they are not the only stories or characterizations of Biblical women available, as feminist recovery work or a careful reading of Scripture clearly reveals.

However, while such discourses of gender are common within evangelical history (past and present), some “emerging” conversants challenge these interpretations of evangelical gendered subjectivity. Spencer Burke, an emerging church theologian and author of the 2003 article “From the Third Floor to the Garage,” summarizes the plight of women within Christianity:

at one time women were prevented from voting or owning property—a position the church heartily endorsed. Throughout history Christians have been eager to shackle women both in and out of the church. Given a less-than-stellar track record, is it really so heretical to think that the evangelical church may be wrong about homosexuality as well? Isn’t it wise to at least ask the what-if question from time to time, if for no other reason than to test our contemporary application of Scripture? (30)

Burke’s “what-if” questions highlight two polemical issues within contemporary Christian churches (evangelical and non-evangelical alike) related to gendered subjectivity. Yet whereas modern theology rests on certainty and mastery of the narrative, postmodern theology produces the possibility for being wrong, for not knowing, in ways that modern theology simply cannot tolerate without its foundations crumbling. Here Burke asks powerful, but unpopular, questions of Christians and,
ultimately, of God. In this same essay, Burke admits “I realized that God could handle severe honesty. Authenticity, in all its messiness, is not offensive to him. There is room for doubt and anger and confusion. There was room for the real me” (35). Going further than Burke’s statement, I would argue that there is not only room for “doubt and anger and confusion,” but that these emotions are central to storying an “emerging church” that doesn’t reproduce the same inequalities as past evangelical stories.

Doubt and anger and confusion trouble the master story but perhaps in productive ways that highlight gaps and omissions and errors integral to telling “emerging” stories that honor a fully embodied God.

By honoring an embodied God, I mean incorporating the femaleness of Mary’s pregnancy and the maleness of Christ’s incarnation, but also the ways in which Jesus transcends human categories—even of gender. Honoring an embodied God also requires taking into account the discursive conditions that both glorify Christ’s physical suffering and subsequent transcendence of human form and allow female oppression based on certain criteria for physical forms. Subject positions available for evangelical and “emerging” females are dependent not upon bodies that exist outside of discourses, but, as feminist theorists like Butler and McClintock Fulkerson clarify, by the ways in which discourses permit reading bodies. Authors like Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer (in A is for Abductive) consider women’s subjectivity in their text on the language of the “emerging church.” Questioning modern theological stories, these authors ask “[h]ow do we acknowledge the damage done to women in modern and pre-modern times without trashing the biblical revelation and the progress of the gospel that coexisted with cultures that failed to give women the respect due to them as co-image bearers of God?” (326). I am suspicious that a text authored by three men assumes the right to ask questions on women’s behalf, but I become even more
suspicious when these authors criticize feminism in their appraisal of modern sexism and misogyny.

On the topic of feminism, the authors claim “[f]or modern Christians who felt that faithfulness to Scripture required perpetuation of the patriarchal culture of biblical times, this change is as threatening as it is to radical modern feminists who wished to cast the sexes in perpetual warfare rather than perpetual companionship” (325). This quote frustrates me because it lumps together “radical modern feminists”—without bothering to cite names of such feminists or to acknowledge the long tradition of Christian feminism and fails to define what that term means to these authors; it frustrates me that these so-called feminist women are held responsible for the “perpetual warfare” of patriarchal culture—as if living in harmony with men who refuse to respect women could generate “perpetual companionship.” Surely there must be alternatives other than “perpetual warfare,” but I remain unconvinced that the only other option is a “perpetual companionship” that seems to leave the status quo intact. Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer seem to move in productive directions in posing questions that realize potentially oppressive discourses of gendered subjectivity, but rather than dismissing feminism as something wholly foreign to the mission of the “emerging church,” I urge “emerging” affiliates to look to feminist theories and theologies as prospectively fertile ground for generating new evangelical storylines. Engaging with feminist theories and theologies helps us to see that evangelical and “emerging” interpretations of gendered subjectivity are always-already produced by and dependent upon complex discursive networks of meaning-making.

Feminist storylines are infiltrating the “emerging church,” but many writers remain wary of explicitly applying the label feminist to the gendered questions we are raising. Continuing in their investigation of gender, Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer assert: “modern chauvinists beware. Although many postmodern women may have
tired of the feminist label, they are no more willing to become the church’s silent, cookie-baking, baby-sitting, coffee-serving, seen-but-not-heard brigade than their late-modern mothers and aunts” (327). Again, in my close reading of this passage I take issue with the phrase “tired of the feminist label,” when my experience suggests that at least as many women have tired of the evangelical label, too. But Mathewes-Green in her text Gender argues explicitly against using the term “feminist,” though she also acknowledges positive remnants of her experiences with feminism. Still, Mathewes-Green warns:

[but there is one caution I would offer: don’t call yourself a feminist. There’s something wrong with the very term, the very identity—something wrong identifying yourself as over-against someone else (men, the establishment, the “bad guys”). The term feminism unnecessarily divides the world into competing teams, into those who supposedly have power and those who do not. (83)

I respect the story Mathewes-Green shares of her experiences with feminism and admit that my own experiences are not unproblematic or untroubled by my efforts to bring feminist theories and evangelical theologies into conversation. At the same time, I disagree with the definition of feminism Mathewes-Green cites, but quite likely this stems from my understanding of discourses as always-already in competition and with different statuses in different communities. Rather than dismissing the label feminism, however, I believe that such tension results in productive transformations and perhaps by interweaving feminist and evangelical stories, new stories may “emerge.”

My story and Mathewes-Green’s story intersect interestingly, but ultimately, we reach different conclusions about where “feminism”—at least as a term—fits into the “emerging church.” This is not to say, of course, that feminist theories do not already seep into evangelical and “emerging” discourses, though perhaps without the
specification of “feminism.” For instance, unlike Mathewes-Green, who deals openly with questions of feminism, “emerging” author Badley speaks openly about experiences of sexual discrimination in evangelical contexts and aligns herself with feminist storylines to negotiate these conflicts. Badley’s experiences resonate with my own story—and we both turn to the grace of God seeking resolution, though whereas I name my self and my experience as feminist, Badley does not do so in this text—despite the feminist characteristics of her words. According to Badley,

> finally I receive as grace the fact that I was born a woman. God has taught me to love being an ugly duckling. In the final analysis, my deeper understanding of God came because of who I am. Being faithful to the particularity of my person opened the door to knowing God. And all of this is so unexpected. Just the other day a former student introduced me to her friend. She described me as “a woman Baptist theologian.” Her friend thought there must be an oxymoron in that sentence somewhere. We laughed. God makes good jokes.

(111)

Each time I read this passage, I am troubled by Badley’s reference to woman-as-ugly duckling—even though I know the ending of that story, too. Certainly Badley identifies critical feminist ideas in this passage—especially the emphasis on embodied personhood and the embracement of conflicting subjectivities—but I still long for another story from this passage, a way out of reading women as ugly ducklings in our Christian feminist communities. Many feminists and Christians alike sense there must be an oxymoron in the phrase “Christian feminist communities”—but perhaps that is God’s “emerging” good joke.

Another “emerging” writer, Renée Altson, wrestles with typically feminist issues in *Stumbling Toward Faith*, her 2004 text, though she, like Badley, does not openly name her text or her self “feminist.” Without explicitly referring to feminism, Altson
writes her story, published as part of Zondervan’s EmergentYS line, as a counter-story to evangelical discourses of gendered subjectivity. And, as Altson reveals in her text, she understands the hold such discourses possess over subjectification within evangelicalism: “it was easy for the church, for my father, to write definitions on me. They had years of patriarchy, a conviction of the second-class status of women, with original sin and the fall itself backing them up” (32, lowercase in original). Once more the story circles back to Eve and the beginning of evangelical stories of gender, but even as Altson acknowledges the hegemony of patriarchal discourses in evangelicalism—with institutions and authority and Scripture sustaining such foundations—she tells a different story, a story of staying within the evangelical fold but striving to be a different kind of subject, and she writes her story to make it available as an “emerging” alternative tale.

Still, theologians Nicola Creegan and Christine Pohl offer an alternative storyline engaging both feminism and evangelicalism, suggesting that such conversations need not exclude the term “feminism” to retain discursive relevance, though these writers do not affiliate with the “emerging church.” In their 2005 text Living on the Boundaries, Creegan and Pohl articulate “evangelical feminism is possible; we embody the overlap of the maps. We may not have worked out all the details and we may deal daily with conflicts and tensions, but it is possible to the extent that we are already bringing these assumptions and commitments together in being both feminist and evangelical” (178-179, emphasis in original). Statements like this prompt the question: what kind of evangelical and what kind of feminist? The answer—hesitant and contingent as it is—lies in the stories that writers and evangelical feminists like Creegan, Pohl, and me embody and imagine. If the “emerging church” seeks a new kind of evangelical subjectivity, then mustn’t we ask ourselves what kind of evangelicalism we want to
story? And, isn’t it a plausible question to reconsider the application of feminism in these “emerging” stories—since some of us already embody that kind of narrative?

These questions remind me powerfully of an ancient prayer issued by Saint Theresa of Avila; this same prayer appears on the “emerging church” blogspot Signposts and reminds us of the embodiedness central to evangelical stories. In the words of Saint Theresa of Avila: “Christ has no Body now but yours/No hands, no feet on earth but yours/Yours are the eyes through which he looks/Compassion on this world/Christ has no Body but yours” (“Romero and Saint Theresa of Avila Prayer”). As these lines illustrate, evangelical theologies stories are, at heart, stories we live as embodied beings—and, if the prayer of Saint Theresa of Avila is fulfilled—stories through which Christ lives through His disciples’ embodiment. More scholarly thinkers like Newbigin likewise strive to comprehend the Gospel as a continuing story in which disciples live and take part, and, as Newbigin affirms “[a]t the heart of the story, as the key to the whole, is the incarnation of the Word, the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus” (99). An incarnate God, Jesus Christ tells a theological story of embodiment—indeed, from birth in the manger to death on the cross to the empty tomb, Christ’s body bears a theological tale that for evangelical believers forever links earth and heaven through flesh. I challenge the “emerging church,” in all its postmodern messiness, to take seriously the incarnation in stories seeking to respond to the question Christ first poses of His disciples in the Gospel: Who do you say that I am? Christian subjectivity unravels in postmodern contexts, but through our embodied narratives, we can weave together divine images of Jesus through the stories we live.

* * * * *

Dear “Emerging Church” Affiliates—
Who do you say that I am? Well, both evangelicals and feminists alike have answered that question on my behalf and on Christ’s behalf, too. For Christians, I am the outcast, the original sinner, the bold and beautiful woman who necessitated the coming of Jesus Christ. For feminists, I am a palette for repainting pictures of Christian women, a centuries-old storyboard on which tellers of tales map out my transformation from fallen to fairytale princess to feminist. And, when evangelical and feminist stories meet, I am a bit of both. I am the first woman and the first medium—stretching my hand out for an apple that forever linked earth and heaven.

Evangelicals and feminists are mediums, too. Both groups exist on the margins, using culture as a necessary vehicle for conveying meaning to the mainstream but always wary of getting too close to the cultural center. Both evangelicals and feminists value affective labor—care and justice—though both groups also trouble these terms for us, too. Both movements are sometimes hated by the world because we stand in opposition to values that demean human beings who reflect, however imperfectly, *imago Dei*.

In spite of all of these similarities, evangelicals and feminists remain suspicious of each other when dialogue could mutually enrich each of these social movements; evangelicals, especially “emerging” evangelicals, need to seriously contemplate the stories women embody in the postmodern church. Feminists can help. Feminists need to carefully consider the spirit in conjunction with the mind and the body. Evangelicals can help.

To the affiliates of the “emerging church,” I challenge you to be a medium—the position that characterized me as the original sinner and the position that tacked Christ to the cross—because it’s the only posture that effectively disrupts the dominant modernist hierarchy that sets up the earthly and the divine as separate spheres. Mainstream culture often imagines both evangelicalism and feminism as monolithic
entities characterized by the loudest and ugliest voices, but if you listen to feminist theologians who love the church with all our hearts and minds and strengths and souls, we can envision a new church that tells a different kind of story. Emergence, never complete, can carry a chorus of evangelical and feminist voices—dissident but not cacophonous—in storylines that reveal beautiful glimpses of imago Dei as we live out the embodied mission of (re)telling an old, old, story.

--Eve

* * * * *

Bodies and stories matter in “emerging” theology, as these are the interconnected vehicles through which we make meaning. At the center of evangelical theology resides the incarnation of Christ, a story that reminds us that human bodies are both important and ephemeral. Rather than defining rigid roles for stories or for bodies as fact or fiction, male or female, my application of feminist theories and theologies to “emerging” conversations recalls that Christ’s story is ultimately a story not of establishing boundaries but of breaking them down. Throughout my own text, I interweave fictional stories with academic analysis as a means of further breaking down boundaries and of practicing the very critique for which I call. My story, Eve’s story, and “emerging” stories intertwine not to create more categories but to push “emerging” boundaries on what kinds of God stories are possible for us to live in, and with, and through. We live by telling stories, but the kinds of stories permissible depend on our discourse communities, and I challenge evangelical and “emerging” storytellers not to settle for stories that fail to honor the full meaning of the incarnation narrative—a tale rooted in human substance and surpassing our human imagination in its divinity, all made telling by our discursive frameworks.
Becoming Christian: “Emerging” Subjectivities and Conversion

Being and Becoming

This is a story about transformation because evangelical stories are always, to some extent, about transformation. Conversion, or being “born again,” marks a significant rite of passage in forming evangelical subjectivity, though, as Randall admits in What a Friend We Have in Jesus, “evangelicals have been divided—at times deeply divided—over questions such as the relationship between the human and divine elements in conversion or the extent to which instantaneous rather than gradual conversions should be expected.” In some sense, Randall differentiates between product- and process-oriented conversion narratives: being and becoming. Yet, as Randall admits, despite the divisions within evangelicalism over the definition of conversion itself, “all [evangelicals] have agreed that there is a need for personal trust in Christ, a change of spiritual direction and a new spiritual relationship with Christ” (40). Conversion resides at the heart of evangelical subjectivity; without such transformation, it becomes difficult to differentiate and define what it means to be evangelical—yet shifting from modern conceptions of personhood to postmodern conceptions of personhood questions the certainty on which evangelical affiliation rests. Using feminist theories and theologies once more, we see that just as feminisms survive the destabilization of “woman” (or even “Woman”) brought about by postmodern epistemologies, so too can evangelicalism exist with less sureness of its disciple/subject—and perhaps even “emerge” with transformed conceptions of gendered subjectivity.

17 The phrase “born again” signifies an experience of spiritual rebirth, though the use and meaning of this term varies from denomination to denomination; some denominations equate baptism with being “born again,” while others insist that the phenomenon of being “born again” take place before baptism. The term originates in John 3:1-5, where Jesus claims that to see the kingdom of heaven, a person needs to be born again, not of the flesh but of the spirit.
As a reformation movement, the “emerging church” struggles with the transition from modern evangelical conceptions of personhood to postmodern evangelical (or “emerging” or “post-evangelical”) understandings of humanity—and this struggle particularly influences conversations about conversion. The very moniker for this evangelical conversation suggests fluidity; by using the metaphor of “emergence” to adjectivalize a subculture within evangelical Protestantism (perhaps a subculture within a subculture), the “emerging church” references the historical, social, and cultural trajectory of a certain form of Christianity within the United States. However, the metaphor of “emergence” prioritizes the future-oriented church rather than the past or the present, though historical and contemporary discourses shape the future possibilities of the “emerging church.” The very name of the “emerging” movement suggests transformation and the conversion of evangelicalism.

Etymologically, “emergence” threads its way to the English language through French derivations of “émerger”—“é” meaning “out of” and “merger” meaning “to dip” (“emerge, v.” Oxford English Dictionary). Both of the first two definitions offered by the Oxford English Dictionary refer to rising from a liquid, suggesting that the metaphor of the “emerging church” emphasizes fluidity and, like liquids, an ability to retain substance (unlike a gas, which would likely evaporate) and at the same time conform to differently shaped containers (unlike a solid, whose bonds are too stiff to accept another shape without changing state). Notably, this liquid metaphor appears in one of the most popular “emerging church” blogspots—“The Ooze”—a name that undoubtedly reflects the liquid properties affiliated with this metaphor of “emergence.”

Definitions three and four under “emerge, v.” (“emerging” simply refers the reader to the verb form) in the Oxford English Dictionary mention gaining visibility in spite of obstacles. Again, these definitions seem to adhere to constructions of the “emerging church,” many of whose supporters consider this movement a kind of
contemporary reformation. Like all reformation efforts, particularly the Protestant Reformation that shares many founding theological principles with the “emerging church” (like deinstitutionalized authority and the necessity of accessible texts for all believers), the “emerging church” positions itself as struggling to arise from the theological and institutional limitations and shortcomings of evangelical churches (namely, viewing the modern evangelical stories as less relevant to postmodern seekers). As such, the metaphor of “emergence” implies at least passive resistance from the non-emerging church, the foundational theological story that envelops the “emerging church” and perhaps restricts the visibility and power available for the “emergence” to occur. Finally, as indicated continually by writers within the “emerging church,” the metaphor destabilizes completeness and finitude, offering instead a church in the process of emerging rather than a final product: the “emerged church.”

Regardless of who names the “emerging church” or who belongs to it, the movement’s name assumes an organic, living church that may be strategically modified with a verb-turned-adjective as part of a mission to revitalize a presumably sleeping or dying church. The “-ing” ending signifies process and becoming—and this active metaphor may illicit excitement as well as uncertainty and anxiety about the speculative future of evangelical Protestantism. Fittingly, conversion occupies a central role in the “emerging church” not only on the level of individual evangelicals but also on cultural and discursive levels; investigating conversion solely in terms of a person misses the point of the “emerging” church—a converted or transformed understanding of what it means to do and be church in an evangelical story. McLaren elucidates this description of conversion in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, where he states: “I believe that we must be *always reforming*, not because we’ve got it wrong and we’re closer and closer to finally ‘getting it right,’ but because our mission is ongoing and our context is dynamic” (191-192, emphasis in original). As McLaren’s statement makes
clear, reformation is not an end result but a constant process, where the mission must match the context in its dynamism—not its stagnation. In keeping with this concept of conversion, I use this chapter to weave together vignettes of my own fictionalized conversion narrative, “emerging” conversations specifically about conversion, and potentially transformative “emerging” engagements with feminism to illustrate the multiple discursive threads of conversion entangling the “emerging church.” This tapestry of conversion narratives, at times purposely interruptive, demonstrates that conversion occurs not at the individual but at the discursive level, and “emerging” transformation narratives contain the possibility of disrupting discourses that limit the kinds of gendered subjects we can “be” or “become.”

Who Am I?

It was a dark and stormy night. I tugged at the old iron handle of the church door, seeking shelter from the thunder and rain. Warm candlelight bathed my blinking eyes as the door creaked open and I stood in sharp relief—a rain-soaked girl outlined by lightning staring back at the wide-eyed congregation.

But maybe that’s not the way it began at all—so dramatic with storms and candles and such things. Maybe it was morning and sunny or maybe I’ve imagined the whole scene. Maybe I can no longer tell the difference.

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Poststructuralist theorists Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harre, in their article “Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves” (reprinted in the 2000 text A Body of Writing) articulate: “[a]n individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate” (89). Participating in evangelical and “emerging” discourses as an insider necessitates being constituted and reconstituted through discursive practices that mark conversion as a
key to belonging in the discourse. But, as Davies and Harre suggest, such belonging is not a single act but a continual process. As these authors continue, “who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one’s own and others’ discursive practices, and within those practices, the stories through which we made sense of our own and others’ lives” (89). “Who one is” in terms of evangelical and, to an extent, “emerging,” subjectivities depends upon the stories available within evangelical and “emerging” discourses. Conversion narratives act as one of the primary stories of subject-formation within these discourses—but what happens not only to these stories but also to the subjects producing and produced by these stories if “emerging” discourses begin to trouble the certainty of salvation assumed by modern evangelical tales of transformation? And, what happens to discourses of evangelicalism as transformation tales “emerge”?

Also using poststructuralist theories, feminist theologian McClintock Fulkerson challenges the individualistic and agentic “self” conceived of by modern epistemologies—and her analysis of discourses provides a useful starting point for understanding the degree to which “emerging” conversations can transform evangelicalism without abandoning evangelical discursive practices. For one thing, argues McClintock Fulkerson (“Sexism as Original Sin”), “[s]ubjects are caught and bound, capable of resistance, only as they are constituted particular positions within discourses. The paradox, then, refers to the web of corruption and possibilities for resistance that occur within particular social discourses” (673). My own stories hold relevance for the “emerging church” only insofar as the “emerging church” attends to feminist discourses—and, likewise, any feminist stories I might tell must answer to evangelicalism if such stories hope to catalyze conversions; there is also, of course, the possibility that my stories will be read as not feminist or as not evangelical because of my discursive practices. Stories and subjects of stories always risk falling into old
interpretive patterns, and, as McClintock Fulkerson’s article explains, resistance is possible within discursive limits; excluding sin or salvation from evangelical conversion narratives seems unlikely if not utterly impossible, but there may be room for feminist stories along lines where “emerging” evangelical and feminist threads intertwine. But while excluding sin or salvation from evangelical discourses seems unlikely, we might shift from fixed or absolute meanings of such terms (and of the disciples who supposedly espouse such beliefs) to emerging meanings also continually caught up in the conversion processes.

* * * * *

It was a dark and stormy night. I tugged at the old iron handle of the church door, seeking shelter from the thunder and rain. Darkness greeted darkness as the door creaked open, and I could barely discern the flickering altar candles from the flashes of lightning behind me—the rain soaked girl sneaking into the sanctuary.

Why am I telling you this story? It’s all lies anyway.

There was no storm. There was no church. There was no wine.

And there is no story.

* * * * *

In *Gender*, Mathewes-Green tells two conversion narratives: first, her conversion (back) to Christ and second, her conversion to feminism, though she unravels that latter transformation in “Twice Liberated: A Personal Journey Through Feminism.” Of her “Christian walk,” Mathewes-Green recites the following tale in *Gender*:

[a] month after graduation, our hitch-hiking honeymoon brought Gary and me to Dublin. The late afternoon light was glaring as we stepped inside a dusty church and stood there blinking. I walked over to examine a white marble

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18 “Christian walk” is a common term used in evangelical discourses for disciples to describe their faith journeys or experiences as a believer.
statue in the back: Jesus pointing to his Sacred Heart, which was twined with thorns and springing with flames. I remembered the words from Sunday school: “Behold, the heart that has so loved mankind.” A few minutes later I realized I was on my knees. When I stood up, I was a Christian. (14)

This story, in many ways, fits the typical conversion narrative prized by evangelical communities; standing in the presence of Jesus, the convert recognizes the Savior for Who He Is (in this case, as constituted by evangelical discourses, though there are many stories to explain the person of Jesus), falls prostrate before the Lord, and arises a new creation. At the same time, Mathewes-Green’s story is atypical in that she reaches this point in her narrative through unconversion and alternative conversion (though I do not necessarily see conversion to evangelicalism and to feminism as incompatible) into feminism. As Mathewes-Green describes, “[a]s a college freshman, I embraced the early-seventies feminism with the eagerness of a cult devotee. I use the language of religious conversion intentionally….I had rejected my childhood Christian faith, but feminism offered membership in a parallel enlightened community” (26). Her conversion to feminism precedes her conversion to Christ, and, indeed, it seems that in some ways she imagines her inclusion in feminist community as a replacement for the childhood faith she “rejected”—perhaps falling into line once more with the prodigal narratives of return so deeply rooted in evangelical discourses of transformation.

McLaren, who coauthored the 2003 *Adventures in Missing the Point* with Tony Campolo, agrees that a story like Mathewes-Green’s fits the discursive expectations of conversion for many evangelical affiliates. According to McLaren, “[f]or people who come from evangelical and fundamentalist backgrounds (as I do), life is about being (or getting) saved, and knowing it. I was taught that the ideal Christian could tell you the exact date—and maybe even the hour and minute—when he was saved” (19). Such certainty forms one of the critical foundations for modern evangelical subjectivity, and
McLaren, as an “emerging theologian” invested in and suspicious of evangelical discourses, shares significant insights into the importance of clear, coherent conversion narratives. As McLaren explains,

[are you saved? was a question that everyone understood meant one or all of the following: You had accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. You believed that Jesus died on the cross for your sins, and you believed his death, not your good deeds, made it possible for your sins to be forgiven. At the end of a church service, during the “invitation,” you had said “the sinner’s prayer,” then during the “invitation” walked to the front of the church—this was the “altar call”—or perhaps only raised your hand to acknowledge your conversion. You gained an assurance that you were going to heaven after you died. (19, emphasis in original)

“Being” evangelical, then, means the promise of heaven. After a series of embodied acts signaling inclusion within the community, following, of course, the “invitation” or “call,” a convert enters an exclusive group assured of eternal salvation; the consequences of disrupting this linear and confident narrative are enormous. Without the certainty of salvation implied by the modern evangelical conversion narrative, we can no longer be sure of our inclusion in or exclusion from the heavenbound—a fear that contemporary fiction like the Left Behind series prey upon with considerable financial success.

McLaren’s coauthor (for Adventures in Missing the Point) Tony Campolo alludes to such scare-tactics in his description of “dispensationalism”—a theological story in which “God removes first his own Holy Spirit and then his besieged and nearly defeated Christians so that he can finally judge unbelievers apocalyptically and lethally.” This is the kind of theological story—“the Rapture”—emphasized in the Left Behind texts, and, as Campolo writes, “with its implicit threat of being left behind, of time running out—
[it] is used by Dispensational preachers to great evangelistic effect. It has been a very effective goad to conversion” (59). Troubling conversion narratives within a postmodern framework of storytelling means that we lose some of the assurance of being saved, and, instead, wrestle with subjects-in-process always at risk of being left behind.

* * * * *

Well, the way I heard it was this: a dark stormy night, some old church, and a sneaky girl wet with rain. But I’m not sure you should trust my version of a story that may never have happened. It was a dark and stormy night when the church door slammed shut behind me, leaving me alone in the dim, chilly sanctuary. Stealing softly up the center aisle, pivoting my head to inspect the shadowy corners of the room, I eventually reached the altar. Here I am, Lord.

Everything is shifting shadows; everything is blurring with streaking rain. All this incense fogs my senses and my story is coming out all wrong. It was a dark and stormy night when the church door slammed shut behind me, and as the congregation’s heads whirled toward the sudden sound, I stood, hands on hips, daring them to challenge my presence in their church. Triumphantly, with all eyes turned toward me in that bright room, I marched down the center aisle. Here I am, Lord.

Wait a minute...why was the congregation there at night?

What kind of ritual, what kind of magic was I intruding on?

* * * * *

Reconceptualizing evangelical subjectivity along postmodern lines within the “emerging church” introduces the risk of not knowing and of being left behind, but there are also considerable possibilities for gender equality with the shift from product to process. And many “emerging” theologians question the static conceptions of conversion that pervade modern evangelical stories. For instance, Tim Conder’s 2006
text The Church in Transition cites his “discomfort” with modern conversion expectations because they perpetuate “the disconnectedness and isolation of this experience from other Christian traditions and from an ongoing life of faith” (83). Further, Conder argues, “[o]penness to the emerging culture perspective on the subjectivity of experience reminds us that the spiritual life is not always linear. Spiritual journeys are filled with strange and surprising turns—failures that are redemptively shaped into convictions and wisdom, and arduous efforts that bear no apparent fruit” (107-108). As Conder’s comments clarify, we cannot capture a moment without the contingency of its history and context. And, both the stories we tell and the subjects producing and produced by such stories are neither static nor linear but traversing a net of complex and sometimes competing discourses. We, like Eve, always move in multiple storylines.

Throughout the Gospel we see the kinds of conversion narratives that Conder emphasizes—not linear but tangled and twisted, not in an instant but in fits and starts and “regressions.” Conder refers to the disciples of the Gospel as “front-row witnesses to numerous healings, exorcisms, and powerful teachings before they gain the insight that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah” (147). Like many “emerging” theologians, Conder places community before correct doctrine, depicting the Biblical disciples’ conversions “where a person first enters into a community and it’s the involvement with that community that ultimately transforms the whole of his or her life” (148). I would go further than Conder in seeking the disciples’ real understanding—since even after the crucifixion the disciples expect to find Christ’s body in the tomb and fail to recognize their Teacher on the road. Clearly, even the disciples closest to Jesus during his ministry often missed the point—calling into question modern evangelicalism’s obsessions with getting the story right, perhaps at the cost of living the story faithfully.
McLaren (in *Adventures in Missing the Point*) points out these distinctions in his own questions about conversion narratives and in his polemical assertion that in a theological story focused exclusively on salvation (and, thus, on winning converts), “[t]he more converts we make, the worse the world will become” because we focus only on eternity (53). Using imagery of a journey or a race, McLaren queries:

[i]s salvation for you a one-time experience? Or is it a lifelong journey? Is it about rescue from your uncomfortable circumstances (as it was for the ancient Jews), or rescue from this world after death (as it is for many modern Christians)—or is it about being rescued from a life that is disconnected from God and God’s adventure, both in this life and the next? Is salvation about stepping across a line—or is it about crossing a starting line to begin an unending adventure in this life and beyond? (27)

In keeping with McLaren’s own metaphors, we see how postmodern narrative theology changes conversion from a destination to a journey. By blurring the line between pre- and post-conversion, McLaren also clouds the distinction between saved and unsaved—a shift that, as I will demonstrate later in this story, holds telling implications for evangelism. Most evangelical conversion narratives acknowledge that being “saved” involves a life-long journey of sanctification19 by which believers are formed into holy creatures according to God’s will and purpose, but McLaren’s questions change the subject of the evangelical conversion narrative from product to process—a fitting shift for an “emerging” movement that asks disciples to become Christ-like before or without the absolute assurance of salvation typical of modernity. Like McLaren, “emerging” theologian Spencer Burke (*Making Sense of Church, 2003*) critiques modern narratives of conversion. Summing up the motto of modern

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19 Sanctification refers to the process of being made holy and set apart as belonging to God; typically, this concept is tied to justification, the act of a human being made righteous before God in spite of humanity’s inherent and inherited sinfulness.
evangelicalism, Burke asserts: “[w]hen it comes to spirituality, modern people believe that anything is possible if they just work hard enough. Duty and discipline are the keys to discipleship. It’s important to get better, move ahead, and ultimately arrive” (72). Within discourses of “emergence,” however, what happens when we no longer desire or no longer know where it is we’re trying to go? Perhaps even in postmodern theology there is a destination, but the emphasis is less about where we end up than about what we do along the way.

Here I am, Lord, kneeling before this altar, alone in the flickering candlelit sanctuary, waiting for you to set something on fire and speak to me through the flames. Isn’t that your style? Waiting, shifting my weight from one knee to the other in discomfort, I hear voices behind me, rising up like incense, singing “Here I am, Lord” in shrill sopranos, mellow tenors, and an off-key alto always one beat ahead of the others.

Here I am, Lord, kneeling before this altar, alone in the flickering candlelit sanctuary, waiting for you to set something on fire and speak to me through the flames. It’s amazing more churches don’t house fire extinguishers in their sanctuaries. I wonder, what’s the penalty for putting out the fire of God? Now all I need is an angelic visitation—some incredible message like immaculate conception that I can’t possibly explain to the world—and my story will be complete.

Here I am, Lord, kneeling before this altar, alone in the flickering candlelit sanctuary, waiting for you to set something on fire and speak to me through the flames. God doesn’t speak to me through the flames. God doesn’t send an angelic visitor. God sends an ordinary, small-town pastor into the sanctuary through the back door. A sickly fluorescent light illuminates the room, disrupting my divine expectations and jolting me back into the real church—hardly equal to the sacred space of my imagination.
“Emerging” into the unknown in terms of subjectivity means once more challenging the humanistic presumptions of personhood on which modern evangelical conversion narratives are based. Webber (The Younger Evangelicals) describes a trajectory of conceptualizing conversion throughout twentieth- and twenty-first century evangelicalism in the United States. Moving from “Traditional Evangelicals” who advocate “Decisionism” and “Instant Conversion” to “Pragmatic Evangelicals” who assert “Personal commitment” and “Gradual Conversion,” Webber directs our attention to “Younger Evangelicals” who emphasize community and conversion as a process (224-225). These shifts mirror the epistemological transitions from humanist to poststructuralist conceptions of personhood portrayed by Davies in A Body of Writing, though Davies does not deal explicitly with religious discourses or conversion in that text. Still, Davies’ work provides a useful theoretical perspective for understanding how the trajectory of conversion Webber describes parallels the transitioning sense of personhood she depicts, though she and Webber are not participating in the same conversations. Within Davies’s explanation of a humanist framework, conversion by Webber’s description of personal choice (“Decisionism” and “Personal commitment”) makes sense because, as Davies writes, adult identity is assumed to be “continuous, unified, rational, and coherent.” Further, Davies writes, humanism suggests that individuals make decisions “based on rational thought and are thus coherent choices that signal the coherence and rationality of the individual. People who do not make choices on this basis are regarded as faulty or lacking in some essential aspect of their humanness” (57). Webber’s explanation of “Decisionism” fits into the kind of more general personhood Davies describes as agentic and able to execute rational choices, signaling the humanistic theological principles driving the “Decisionist” movement.
These beliefs contradict what Davies calls poststructuralist theories of
personhood, where “subjectivity is therefore necessarily contradictory,” “fragmentation,
contradiction, and discontinuity, rather than continuity of identity are the focus,” and
“[d]esires are integral to the various discourses through which each person is constituted
and are not necessarily amenable to change through rational analysis” (57, emphasis
in original). The kind of personhood Davies outlines as poststructuralist fits with
Webber’s emphasis on “Younger Evangelicals” as envisioning both conversion and
community as process-oriented. Davies’s explanation of poststructuralism embraces
difference, fragmentation, and desire as part of the becoming process—and, while
Davies does not speak specifically to religious communities, her interpretation of
subjectivity can help the “emerging church” to recognize that conversion—individual or
collective—rarely adheres to linear, rational, product-oriented models. In addition, my
own story and my own experiences of God fit the fragmentation and desire-laden
decisionism of poststructuralist discourses more closely than the coherently rational
expectations of humanist discourses. Perhaps shifts in evangelical conceptions of
conversion signal the same experience, at least in the “emerging church” where
narrative theology pulls more weight than rational apologetics, which traditionally
strive to defend and communicate Christian doctrine through logical arguments.

Still, as always, in its emphasis on mystery, postmodern narrative theology calls
attention to all that we do not or cannot know, a disturbing principle for many
evangelicals who stake certainty of salvation and subjectivity on a coherent conversion
narrative. In the “emerging church,” we might not know who we are or where we’re
going.

* * * * *

So, there I am: awaiting the Lord at the flaming altar and what do I get but a
plump woman pastor robed in green or maybe white—do the details really matter? She
said nothing—at least nothing worth remembering. Or, maybe she spoke words so powerfully magical that I selfishly refuse to share them with you, my unwanted audience. For my purposes here, this robed figure said nothing; she simply strode forward and dipped her fingertips into the baptismal font.

There I am kneeling at the altar with scenes flashing before my eyes: a woman holding up the paper-like wafer embossed with a cross and shouting “I’m supposed to eat this?”; a pastor warning us not to chew the host and not to partake if we feel nauseous (I always feel nauseous); a girl tearing at the crusty bread with dirty fingernails; crumbs swirling in a chalice of wine; a man walking away from the altar sighing mmm as the wine-soaked wafer dissolves against his tongue.

There I am kneeling at the altar chanting “Here I am, Lord” longing for a bit of wine-soaked bread to savor. The plump pastor walks toward me, at least I imagine the footsteps I hear padding along the worn carpet are hers; who can tell for sure? She dips her fingertips into the baptismal font, swirling the water into a tiny consecrated whirlpool. Before our very eyes, the bottom drops out and we fling headlong into the font, whirling and twirling into a sacred stream scented of incense.

(Gendered) Subjects-In-Process

Postmodern conversion narratives imply a sense of uncertainty and incompleteness—two characteristics that translate into revised gender roles as discourses of evangelical subjectivity shift. For women, in particular, conceiving of subjectivity as fragmented and contradictory carries tremendous weight. As Julie Ingersoll (author of the 2003 text *Evangelical Christian Women*) writes, a central tenet of evangelicalism involves “‘making every thought captive to Christ’ or ‘bringing all of creation under the Lordship of Jesus.’” What this means in this instance is every aspect of these women’s lives is wrapped up in their conservative Christian subculture” (137). Of course, these principles apply to all evangelicals, not only females—but the
emphasis on female submission within evangelical discourses means that transformations in dominant conceptions of gendered subjectivity (perhaps through postmodern conversion narratives) might be more liberating for women than for men.

Submission plays a critical role in the formation of evangelical gendered subjectivity, as Tomlinson expresses in his portrayal of traditional evangelical family structures:

[t]he husband is the head, and, therefore, the final authority. As the main breadwinner, he is also responsible for providing for his family and for the behavior and discipline of the children. The wife’s place is to support her husband and, if necessary, submit to him. As homemaker, she is responsible for domestic affairs and looking after the children. (51-52)

However, Tomlinson argues that these expectations are changing with the Christians for whom he names his text—The Post-Evangelical. This “emerging” generation of evangelicals, Tomlinson asserts, “assume sexual equality and take for granted the right of a woman to follow a career. They have no reservations about ‘house husbands,’ if that’s what both partners agree upon, and they see no reason why men should be in charge. Family roles are negotiable” (52). Surely such transformations appear in many “post-evangelical” households, suggesting that counter-discourses of gendered subject formation are “emerging,” but that does not negate or erase the gendered legacies of evangelical subjectivity.

Nor are postmodern shifts in evangelical subjectivity necessarily liberatory. Even a concept like submission, seemingly oppressive for evangelical women, conveys more than one meaning in evangelical discourses. Marie Griffith’s 1997 text God’s Daughters explores the multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings of submission—a fitting analysis for a postmodern perspective on evangelical subjectivity. According to Griffith, “the doctrine of submission becomes a means of asserting power
over bad situations, including circumstances over which one may otherwise have no control....the ideology of submission contains a rich variety of meanings that, in practice, prove more intricate than they initially seem” (179). Submission, in Griffith’s sense, implies not only relinquishing power but also asserting power in an otherwise uncontrollable situation. Further, and more specifically in response to gendered subjectivity, Griffith claims:

submission provides women a strategy for getting what they want, which in these cases appears to be the taming of men’s naturally monstrous urges into gentleness, appreciation, and affection and the creation of ideal Christian families. In this sense, submission may tactically help the relatively powerless recover their power and create a space within which they can feel both fulfilled and free. (186)

Griffith’s analysis disrupts easy assumptions of power within evangelical families by illustrating ways in which women might use submission and presumed powerlessness to gain control of situations and to meet desires and needs. Though Griffith does not affiliate with the “emerging church,” her comments certainly contribute to shifting understandings of subjectivity within postmodern theological stories where we can no longer be certain of our roles as subjects. At the same time, Griffith’s description of submission adheres to traditional gendered stereotypes for both men and women, suggesting that in the situation she depicts, females exploit feminine wiles to “tame” men’s “natural” and uncontrollable urges. Such a view of submission may help both females and males reach particular objectives, but while Griffith’s perspective attributes power to submission, it also carries the risk of reproducing gendered subjects. Both modern and postmodern conversion prompt changes in all facets of disciples’ lives—even submission—but while the former tends to close off the kinds of
gendered-subject positions available for converts, the latter asks us to be open to subjectivities still in process.

Griffith’s exploration of submission both troubles and sustains binaries between male/female and powerful/powerless, reminding us again that discourses of evangelical gendered subjectivity allow interpretations of liberation and of oppression. Tony Campolo’s work in *Adventures in Missing the Point* applies the same deconstructive strategies that Griffith uses with evangelical situations to “emerging” gendered subjectivity, but goes further in outlining the implications of turning household gender relations postmodern. Much is at stake, Campolo asserts, in altering evangelical discourses of gender. For men, Campolo declares, “[i]f a man’s masculinity depends on being dominant, then he will feel he’s losing status in the eyes of other men if he is led by a woman. His self-worth is threatened when a woman is above him in a hierarchical system” (129-130). At the same time, however, Campolo reminds us that gains and losses are as unclear as lines between male and female or saved and unsaved in postmodern theological stories. Speaking about the controversial issue of women’s preaching, Campolo claims “reasons against ordaining women are masked by theological rationalizations generated by male chauvinists—and even by some women who find a variety of benefits for themselves in the traditional position that the church has prescribed for women” (130). Males, Campolo’s perspective reminds us, are not the only ones who benefit from patriarchy, and, no doubt, many evangelicals—female and male—support clearly defined gender roles because such categories serve specific needs and interests. If, in this postmodern story, we are always in the process of becoming evangelical, then we sacrifice clarity—the certainty of salvation and the categorical roles for gendered subjects—to “emerge” into mystery without assurance that troubling evangelical subjectivity will lead to anything other than trouble.
Years of reading Alice’s adventures have not prepared me for magical baptismal fonts whose bottoms drop out and whose whirlpools drag vulnerable supplicants from their sanctuaries. That’s the way with God, dousing me with water when I specifically asked for flames. But here I am, swirling and twirling in this sacred stream. Should I take my shoes off?

What happened at the bottom of the baptismal font was this: the woman pastor and I skipped lightly along the water, spinning madly until the stream stopped in a small pool. Standing in the small pool, still at last, the pastor and I looked at each other and nodded. Agreeing silently, we took turns hurling each other back into the whirlpool’s vortex, three times of course for the triune God of our faith. There may have been a white rabbit involved; I’m not sure. Details always get fuzzy when white rabbits enter the scene.

In Speaking My Mind, Campolo describes the trouble he faces as he tries to disrupt gendered binaries within evangelical communities. Describing a dialogue he often encounters after talks about evangelical marriage, Campolo writes, “it is not unusual for some man to stand and say ‘You haven’t answered the real question.’ And when I ask, ‘What is the real question?’ he answers, ‘Who’s supposed to be the head of the house?’” (44-45, emphasis in original). Such conversations illustrate the desire for certainty that runs deep within evangelical discourses; if we struggle to discern the differences between saved and unsaved and between male and female—how are we supposed to act? Yet even as Campolo works to interrogate gendered subjectivity within evangelicalism and the “emerging church,” Campolo bears many of the markers of evangelical authority: he is male, white, seminary-educated, and works as a professor at a respected evangelical institution, suggesting that he enters these kinds
of conversations with a different audience reception than the female preachers who, in Campolo’s example, are forced to preach to the backs of their male audience members. Our understandings of subjectivity dictate how we move about in the world, what kinds of stories we live and tell, and postmodern narrative theology calls for a different kind of story—meaning that much of what we hold as certain crumbles in postmodern stories.

Certainly, Campolo’s desired response interrupts the story of evangelical gendered subjectivity, as he muses: “[w]hen I hear such a question, I am inclined to say, ‘If you were really a Christian, you wouldn’t ask a question like that. The Christian never asks who’s going to be master. Instead, the Christian asks who’s going to be the servant. A true Christian never asks who’s going to be first in any hierarchy but rather who’s going to be last’” (44-45). Campolo’s commentary fits both my story and the “emerging” story; after all, isn’t Christ the ultimate medium—the incarnate God who disrupts the boundaries between divine and human? Throughout His ministry, Christ troubled the divisions of society—whom to speak to, whom to eat with, whom to call righteous—yet traditional evangelical stories about God create rigid subjectivities in response to a fluid God. Rules and regulations share a place in both Christ’s ministry and in theological stories, but at the heart of Christian personhood as embodied in Jesus, we find not a ranking of saved, unsaved, male, and female but a God who transcends those boundaries.

Still, as Campolo acknowledges in his text, “[s]ome sexists argue that according to Saint Paul, there actually is an inferior status for women as a result of God’s curse, because of what Eve did in bringing about the fall of Adam in Eden.” In response, Campolo remarks “I can only refer them to Scripture that tells us that in Christ, we have a new humanity, and in this new humanity the curse of the Fall has been undone (Rom. 5:14-21)” (39). In addition, the Scriptural reference Galatians 3:28 supports the
stories Campolo and I tell: “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” These Biblical verses stand in contrast to passages like 1 Timothy 2:11-14, where Paul justifies women’s submission to men by claiming Eve as created second and deceived first. None of these references negate the others, showing (as I will expand upon later in this story) the difficulty of interpreting Scripture as well as the complex and competing discourses that form the foundations of evangelical personhood and gendered subjectivity. Weaving together feminisms and faith, I argue not for new binaries—male or female, authority or submission, liberation or oppression—but for an understanding of all meanings as mediated through literacy acts and through discourses that incorporate gendered subjects into storylines.

Where you lead me, God, I will follow. Into that church. Through the baptismal font. Down the rabbit hole. I never bargained for my baptism, my journey down the rabbit hole, and I never bargained for you hearing this after-the-fact reconstruction, either. But me and my story, we’re like that white rabbit: we seem sweetly innocent with our waistcoats and watches, but details get fuzzy when we enter the scene. I’m going to lead you on a journey, a simple journey that neither one of us bargained for.

Will you follow?

What happened at the bottom of the baptismal font was this: the woman pastor and I skipped lightly along the water, spinning madly until the stream stopped in a small cave. Standing barefoot on the damp, chilly rock floor, I watched as the woman pastor slipped into the dark recesses of the cave and trudged back, a small plastic wading pool in tow. She dropped the pool at my feet—narrowly missing my naked toes—and the hard plastic slapped on the wet rock floor. With one foot, wrinkled pink toes and all, the pastor pushed the wading pool toward the whirlpool and with splashes that smacked against the plastic, the kiddie pool slowly filled with water.
Here’s what really happened at the bottom of the baptismal font: I kicked that plastic kiddie pool, smack in the center of the vulgarest, yellowest duck. Ignoring the pain in my toe and the fact that, by now, the pool was too full of water for me to move it, I crossed my arms across my chest and glared at the woman pastor. Tugging awkwardly at her green robes (which may have actually been purple), she averted her eyes and smoothed the seams of her vestments.

* * * * *

This is a story about transformation because evangelical stories are always, to some extent, about transformation. But changing discourses and changing storylines means changing who we think we are and who we say we are—and, quite possibly, who we say God is. For a new kind of evangelical to “emerge,” we need to tell new kinds of stories about evangelical subjects. Engagement with feminist theories and theologies can help those new stories “emerge” if we are willing to listen where so many evangelical storytellers heretofore heard only the silence they expected.

Evangelical and feminist stories sometimes intersect, and as my story already suggests, feminist resistance movements can arise within evangelical discourses. One organization, currently under the name Evangelical and Ecumenical Women’s Caucus (EEWC) defines its mission “to provide educational opportunities for Christian feminists to grow in their belief and understanding” (“About EEWC”). This organization originates in the 1970s, the same period when, as Ingersoll asserts, “evangelical feminism (also known as Christian feminism or biblical feminism) grew in significance and became a powerful force in this conservative Christian world.” The results, according to Ingersoll, indicate that

[t]wo generations of evangelical Christian women have now grown up believing that God could and did call women to ministry; that God had plans for their lives and that he had gifted them accordingly; that they were obligated to God to
use wisely the gifts and talents He had given them; that marriage was intended to be a partnership of equals; and that parenting was the most serious calling given to both men and women. (2)

These statements may not represent the dominant evangelical discourses, but, then again, neither does the “emerging church.” Simultaneously, Ingersoll’s example still relies heavily on expectations of remaining within the faithful fold, of marrying, and of parenting, indicating that the kinds of Christian feminisms she illustrates continue to work toward a model where heterosexual parenting is the ideal. Ingersoll’s instances may shift the distribution of power and (to an extent) change the way evangelical households run, but overriding assumptions of evangelical female subjects as wives and mothers remain dominant—showing that discursive transitions both open and limit subjectivities. These examples reveal once more the tangled discourses that shape and are shaped by gendered evangelical subjects; in addition, these examples suggest that intersections of evangelical and feminist stories may provide more fuel for radical transformation of discursive practices and positionings—a trend that seems likely and desirable based on “emerging” conversion narratives that change the subject of postmodern theologies.

Evangelical, though not “emerging,” feminists Creegan and Pohl discuss the relationships between evangelicalism and feminism, asserting that pairing these discourses can be a fruitful theological exercise. As these writers stress, “[i]f women are ontologically and eschatologically\(^\text{20}\) equal with men (and equal heirs in Christ, as the third chapter of Galatians asserts), then patriarchy weighs very heavily on human history and on women’s and men’s lives” (129). Referring as I do in my own story of evangelical gendered subjectivity to Galatians 3:28, Creegan and Pohl understand feminism and evangelicalism as mutually enriching discourse communities, though,

\(^{20}\)Eschatology refers to theologies dealing with questions of “end times”—i.e., what happens after individual death or a world-ending situation.
admittedly, this is a high-stakes dialogue in which the differences between evangelical and feminist stories tend to garner more prominence than the similarities.

McLaren (A Generous Orthodoxy) sees the implications of renegotiating evangelical gendered subjectivity, although he does not name his strategy as feminist. He writes “I realized how impoverished my Protestant faith was with its exclusively male focus.” After this admission, McLaren muses, “[h]ow much we missed by failing to see the beauty of the incarnation through Mary—a beauty that magnifies the value of women, erases the shame of Eve, makes visible the importance of spiritual receptivity, celebrates the fecundity and fertility of simple submission” (228). As I read the story, Adam and Eve share the shame and not Mary but Christ undoes the work of the Fall. McLaren challenges the normatively male perspective of evangelical stories by resorting to the classic dichotomy of Eve and Mary; thus, while he rightly and encouragingly reminds us that feminine and masculine bodies contribute to the incarnation of Christ, he simultaneously elides faithful female examples from all the Scripture between Eve and Mary and sets up another binary focused on stereotypical femininity as opposed to a perhaps more postmodern continuum.

“Emerging” theologian Tomlinson approaches a continuum in his discussion of women’s ordination, a debate he says persists because of the “claim that since God revealed himself in masculine form, and chose male priests in the Old Testament to represent him, women cannot properly represent him” (100). Again, we return to embodied narratives as critical components of evangelical gendered subjectivity, and, as I argued earlier, bodies matter quite a bit in these “emerging stories,” and, in some situations, should gain more attention than they currently do. Christ and Mary, understood through incarnation theologies, assert that gendered human bodies matter a great deal in evangelical discourses. Traditional evangelical theologies tend to adopt an either/or stance to gendered bodies—where bodies either determine the subject
positions available (who can preach, who can marry whom) or bodies lose priority as eschatological stories take center stage. I propose for a both/and perspective on gendered bodies that accounts for the fullness and mystery of the incarnation—where earthly embodiment matters because it shapes our experiences just as it shaped Christ’s experience on the cross and Mary’s experience of pregnancy and childbirth. But we also transcend bodies. We are both embodied and more than bodies. If we conclude Christ’s stories with bodies, we are missing key elements of the narratives because Christ-incarnate represents a rather unique embodiment and, in the end (or maybe it is the beginning), Jesus transcends His body. Christ and we His disciples are both embodied and more than bodies—a strange and telling story, indeed. Tomlinson reaches a similar conclusion in his investigation of the incarnation and the male-metaphors we use to name God: “this argument leans too heavily on the ‘is’ side of the metaphor and loses sight of the ‘is not’ side. The ‘otherness’ of God cannot be contained in either masculine or feminine images” (100). Christ—from immaculate conception to virgin birth to crucifixion to resurrection—challenges all that we think we know about subjectivity because in Christ we see divine and human, embodied and transcendent, even male and female, inextricably entangled. Whereas modern conversion narratives tend to focus on the boundedness of evangelical subjectivity (what we are), postmodern conversion narratives look beyond those boundaries to the transcendent—what we are becoming. Jesus-as-medium disrupts finite categories that human discourses create to make meaningful our life-stories, and postmodern conversion narratives shift our thinking from discursive certainty to imagination; we are always-already bounded as modernism rightly suggests, but we are more than bounded, too—a tension inherent in postmodernism’s efforts not to oppose modernism, but to build on it.

* * * * *
My hope is in you. Somewhere in New Jersey (of all places), there is a little grave covered with snow and a priest trying to convince me that these white flakes make a peaceful white blanket. I don't believe him.

My hope is in you. Somewhere in New Jersey (if you can believe me), two faithful women lie dead and I memorize Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be and mark myself with the sign of the cross. This is old magic—the kind of incantation that melts snow into holy water with the thick scent of incense. Our prayers rise up too fast, floating away before I can savor the sounds rolling around on my tongue. These are the kinds of prayers that taste like wine, with tannins swirling as my thick tongue stumbles Our Father Hail Mary Glory Be.

My hope is in you. But you’re not somewhere in New Jersey and you never asked to be brought along on this story-journey down a rabbit hole through a consuming fire out into the snow. Bless me, Father, for I have sinned—never have I confessed before a priest, but here I am, spilling my soul to you, my unwilling audience on this journey of lies.

My hope is in you to keep this story alive despite the whirlpool and the consuming fire. Please, Father, I am a sinner and a granddaughter and I need to partake in the body and blood of Christ to pass along an ancient magic that lies dead in hands clutching rosaries. Yes, yes, I believe: the body of Christ given for you; the blood of Christ shed for you. This is old magic! This is the kind of incantation that turns holy water to wine and tickles my tongue with its tannins. Yes, yes, I believe.

* * * * *

Discourses are messy, and our stories, subjectivities, and discursive practices all fall within the messy realm of discourses—in the case of my story, of this “emerging” story, an evangelical discourse. But try as we might to separate the stories, subjectivities, and discursive practices from one another—to isolate individual
threads—we’re working within that knotty ball of strings and we are hopelessly entangled in mutually constitutive practices. So, when McLaren affirms in *A Generous Orthodoxy* “I began to see how my personal salvation was not *apart from* the salvation of the world but was *a part of it*” (59, emphasis in original), I tend to agree. In contrast, Mathewes-Green claims

[a] culture cannot be converted. Only individuals can be converted. God knows how to reach each individual; every conversion is an inside job. We cooperate by listening attentively for God’s directions and speaking the right words at the right moment, doing a kind deed, bearing Christ’s light and being his fragrance in the lives of people we know. This is the level where things change, one individual at a time, as one coal gives light to another. When enough people change, the culture follows—though, again, the hope of ever having a perfect culture is futile. (“Under the Heaventree” 179)

I love the imagery of this passage, but I find its message somewhat incomplete. One coal can ignite many coals, and even in a fire where only “one coal gives light to another,” sustaining any light at all requires certain contextual conditions of heat, dryness, proximity of coals (to each other and to the fire source), appropriate wind levels, etc. Fires resist linearity, too, and a more accurate metaphor might recognize that the fire and the coals reciprocally sustain or smother each other depending on the environment.

Conversion, I believe, just like Mathewes-Green’s coal-fire, requires certain environments—discursive contexts receptive to change and resistant of the status quo. Individual subjects (or coals) catch the fire because the conditions exist within the discourse for maintaining the flames. How can conversion operate only at individual levels when those very individuals are always-already subject to discourses, which, in turn, construct and are constructed by cultures? Many traditional evangelical stories
of conversion accept and advocate the kind of conversion Mathewes-Green depicts, signaling that the modern individualistic discourse of transformation retains a stronghold in evangelicalism. That story, however, is not the only story “emerging.” The “emerging church,” though many of its theological stories differ from traditional evangelical narratives only in emphasis, signals conversion on discursive levels.

* * * * *

Somewhere in New Jersey there are two churches: a gaudy cathedral with gilt angels glowing with cracked gold paint and a white sanctuary where my parents got married. One priest wears white; one, the Franciscan, wears brown. These are vessels of old magic—somewhere in New Jersey—and I sneak into the church (merging in my mystical memory) to steal an incantation for myself. Follow me, says the mystic, and I will lead you on a journey you couldn’t have bargained for. There are no churches. There are no storms. There is only the magic of storytelling, and I have already proven myself a liar.

Somewhere in New Jersey there are “Two Catholic Funerals”:

Hail Mary:

Hear the supplication of a sinner stained with mascara,
A girl on her knees with one hand in a coffin
Full of grace.

Blessed art thou among women
Begging for body and blood
To wash the stale bile from my mouth,
To bear the phrase “better off”
To bite my tongue from barking back:
“Her foundation is two shades too dark!”
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb—

Jesus.

Holy Mary
You wouldn’t cry, make a scene at the cross;
You’d genuflect like a good catholic girl—
Kneel through the funeral knell,
Kiss the corpses and
Smile at giraffes and rosaries stuffed in stiff fists.

Mother of God
I even believe in immaculate conception, in the son you bore,
But these crosses on the biers—
Studded with sparkling stones,
Beads beating out hail mary-s, our fathers, glory be-s—
Feel too big for me to bear.

Pray for us sinners now
When words fail and faith flounders in efforts
To hold back vomit,
To celebrate scrabble and thirty years without husbands,
To see springy curls and sweatsuits—
Instead of sickly pastel pink and purple. Purple?

And at the hour of our death
Don’t fuss with my foundation or smear my mascara;
Don’t force the rosary into my fist;
Don’t forget my face—
Smudged and stained,
My hand in a coffin and
My heart at the cross.

* * * * *

Instead, McLaren (*A Generous Orthodoxy*) provides a different kind of formula for postmodern conversions: “[f]irst, you engage in spiritual *practices* like prayer, Bible reading, forgiveness, and service. Then you see what happens; you remain open to *experience*. Finally, you report your experience to others in the field of spirituality for their *discernment*, to see if they confirm your findings or not” (199, emphasis in original). Interestingly, in McLaren’s postmodern model, evangelicals gain access to evangelical discourse by acting like—evangelicals; the role is not static but performative, produced through actions acceptable within the community to which you wish to belong. This process reminds me powerfully of feminist theorist Butler’s (1990) claim in *Gender Trouble*, that “gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (24). In this light of applying Judith Butler’s theory of gender and performance to the “emerging church,” evangelical might be better off as a verb, too, that finds its motion in deeds deemed fitting within evangelical discourses. McLaren’s work in *A Generous Orthodoxy* already moves toward evangelical-as-verb, expressing the goal of conversion—“Jesus didn’t want to create an in-group which would banish others to an out-group; Jesus wanted to create a *come-on-in group*, one that sought and welcomed everyone” (247, emphasis in original). Imagine evangelical subjectivity
as a verb—as, perhaps, the “emerging church” strives to do through its naming—and consider the possibility that being Christian as a verb rather than as a noun means not being in but welcoming in.

Conversion, within the model offered by traditional evangelical stories, represents the acme of agentic individualism—choosing Christ. Postmodern narrative theology and “emerging conversations” contest that formula, offering a more mysterious and contextually based version instead. Summarizing the problems with many usages of modern conversion models, authors Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer critique: “[c]onversion has gone from being a U-turn off a self-driven rut and onto a God-driven highway to a choice of which highway to take to get where you want to go (as evident in the Christian bumper sticker ‘God is my co-pilot’)” (77). “Convert,” these authors imply, ought to mean something radically different than making a personal decision that God can get you where you want to go—and the ironic emphasis on “co-pilot” resists simplistic agency by suggesting that maybe (just maybe) we humans aren’t really masters of this narrative, either.

* * * * *

It was a dark and stormy night. I tugged at the old iron handle of the church door, seeking shelter from the snow. A whirl of white flakes ushered me into the dark sanctuary as the door creaked closed behind me. Standing there—a sneaky girl with icicles for eyelashes—on the flaming red carpet of the aisle, snow dripped off my bare feet into puddles of holy water.

Here I am, Lord, I whispered, and God responded I will never forsake you. Slowly, I tiptoed up the aisle, my pink wrinkled toes squishing snowflakes into the moldy old carpet. At the altar, in place of the white stone baptismal font stood a plastic kiddie pool plastered with vulgar yellow ducks—their orange beaks glowing in the flickering candlelight.
Where you lead me, Lord, I will follow, I chanted, my fingertips caressing the frozen surface of holy ice filling the wading pool. Here I am, Lord—shouted a loud hoarse voice; the woman pastor, again. I hadn’t bargained on her, but here she is, carrying a chalice—wine slopping over the sides and staining her green robes red. In the wavering candlelight, I notice her lips are marked with splotches of red wine and behind the kiddie pool she has strategically placed a fire extinguisher. Finally: we are going to do this thing with some style.

* * * * *

At the start of my document, I explained this text as a story about God for which I am the medium, and I warned you that what you see of God and what you see of me will depend, as always, on what you’re looking for. I intersperse my imaginative narrative with analysis of conversion in evangelical and “emerging” discourses to intentionally disrupt reading practices because, ultimately, that is what God’s conversion does—it interrupts the otherwise steady flow of our own purposes and plans. But conversion, despite the individualism of modern conversion narratives, cannot truly be transformative if it occurs only on the personal level, because we individuals (evangelical, “emerging,” or otherwise) live out our stories within discursive and material contexts. Postmodern conversion narratives ask us to see the interrelationship between our life-stories and our discursive practices—along with the attendant boundaries and possibilities for transcendence. It is not a question of changing individuals or of changing discourses but of imagining discursive possibilities for stories we live in and with and through. The story I tell here draws my imagination into productive tension with the theoretical to demonstrate that conversion narratives exist as constructs of discourses that expect tales of transformation. My story disrupts traditional evangelical generic conventions for conversion narratives, asking us to look
not at the converted individual but at the discursive apparatuses that make such transformations livable.
Dangerous Literacies

What do a fifteenth-century monk, a fictional detective, and a contemporary boy wizard share in common? All three, it seems, pose significant threats to the well-being of Christian communities past and present. Stories of Savonarola, Brother William of Baskerville, and Harry Potter—separated by centuries, by bounds of so-called reality and fiction, by diverse discursive realms in which to live out their narratives—represent texts that run counter to (at least some) discourses of Christianity and that supposedly challenge the authority of the primary Christian text: the Bible. Disparate as these examples might seem, Savonarola, William of Baskerville, and Harry Potter demonstrate the extent to which sacred texts are guarded from potentially threatening counter-texts, and, ultimately, that texts and literacy pose possible dangers to certain kinds of subjectivities.

To some degree, my acts of writing as an evangelical woman jeopardize the clear categories of gendered subjectivity prevalent in evangelicalism; I, along with all the other evangelical women who counter the textual authority that mandates female submission and silence, embody dangerous literacy, and my story intersects with the stories of Savonarola, of William of Baskerville, and of Harry Potter, and of the “emerging church” in its critical questioning stages. In particular, my employment of feminist theories and theologies serves as another counter-text to provide a critical perspective on standard evangelical theological stories; feminist theologian McClintock Fulkerson (“Changing the Subject”) even defines her discipline in opposition or as other to unspecified theology: “Since feminist theology assumes that centuries of male hegemony have produced sinful social habits and structures which deny the full *imago Dei* of women, a corrective requires some kind of affirmation like the feminist principle”
Referring to feminist theology as “a corrective,” McClintock Fulkerson sets up an alternative discursive framework for understanding Christian gendered relations. As I weave these dangerous literacies into conversations about textual authority in the “emerging church,” I illustrate not only the multiplicity of texts and counter-texts vying for authority but also the explosive implications of destabilizing authoritative evangelical texts; calling into question the authority of Scripture in evangelical and “emerging” contexts means challenging the gendered subjectivities that derive their foundations from Biblical texts, and in so doing, I (along with many “emerging” writers) establish hope for imagining alternative subject formations.

Ways with Words

I first met Savonarola in the Piazza della Signoria (Florence, Italy), where as a study-abroad student in a comparative literature and art history course, I heard his story. In that very plaza, Savonarola, a fifteenth-century monk, so the story goes, executed the “Bonfire of the Vanities”—an enormous conflagration of supposedly sinful artifacts including a number of texts and manuscripts. Shortly thereafter, Savonarola himself was hanged and burned in the same square. Meanwhile, I sat on a curb in the Piazza della Signoria savoring the last bits of my gelato and trying to ward off a crowd of pigeons scrambling for my crumbs. After struggling in broken Italian, I had just reluctantly agreed to a photograph with two leather-clad men, and my travel-weary feet burned—but that was the only fire I could discern.

None of my encounters with God thus far involve the kinds of fires that consumed Savonarola, yet my story, “emerging stories,” and his story are linked to Christian stories that ignite powerful emotions over texts. Savonarola burned texts that stood in opposition to what he considered Christian purity, and like the dangerous manuscripts he set in the flames, Savonarola himself died by fire, excommunicated
and named a heretic by the Pope when his words threatened the stability and authority of the fifteenth-century church. The dramatic shift that occurs between the climactic “Bonfire of the Vanities” and the denouement of Savonarola’s excommunication and execution suggests the tendency of hegemonic discourses to consume opposition, though the counter-texts may transform just as Savonarola transitions from burning dangerous texts to being burned as a dangerous text. So far, no news of “emerging church” bonfires has reached my ears, but in the context of evangelical theology, many “emerging” perspectives on textual authority kindle passionate debate about the definition and location of Gospel truth in postmodern epistemologies. Oftentimes, postmodernism becomes conflated with absolute relativity, but, as feminist theorist Butler reminds in “Contingent Foundations,” utterances of truth are always-already “constituted through exclusions which, taken into account, expose the foundational premise as a contingent and contestable presumption.” Further, Butler asserts, “[e]ven when we claim that there is some implied universal basis for a given foundation, that implication and that universality simply constitutes a new dimension of unquestionability” (7). Meaning does not disappear for Butler in postmodernism, but rather takes on the infinite referentiality of resting on unstable foundations; for evangelicals who rely upon universal truth, this kind of foundational referentiality implies losing sight of God’s truths, but really, I argue, postmodernism simply makes evident the leaps of faith required in moving from God to theology.

Moreover, postmodernism does not necessarily sound the knell of Truth by advocating the equality of all truths. Instead, as McClintock Fulkerson writes in Changing the Subject, “[r]ecognition of the instability of discourses is, of course, not the claim that all meanings have the same force or recognition. While all discourses are constitutive (we cannot appeal to the natural over the constructed), not all are equal” (363). This is an important statement from a feminist theologian working actively
within Christian contexts, for through the acknowledgement of the constructedness of truth, we may actually enter into a posture of greater humility and receptivity for hearing the truths of God rather than our own legalism and propositions. Admitting that we are wrong and require redirection fits squarely within evangelical discourses of confession of sin and redemption, and such utterances occur continually in states of assumed human fallenness. Additionally, McClintock Fulkerson sees discursive destabilization as “an opening for criticism of hegemonic discourses by the silenced discourses, but it is also the admission that some beliefs in a community can be granted—need to be granted—more force than others” (363-364). Scriptural authority is granted considerable force in evangelical and “emerging” discourses, but postmodern epistemologies allow for reconsideration of who author(ize)s the master narratives of the Bible. My own application of feminist frameworks further demonstrates the ways in which literacy acts determine and define—with the attendant possibility of revising—gendered subjectivity derived from interpretations of that alleged master narrative of Scripture.

“Emerging church” affiliates enter conservations about Scripture’s textual authority with theological exigency—aware that the validity of evangelical authority is contingent upon its relationship to the Bible. As Grenz and Franke make clear in Beyond Foundationalism, “Christians are a ‘people of the book.’ Our communal identity is bound up with a set of literary texts that together form canonical scripture. In addition, acknowledging the Bible as scripture lies at the heart of participating in the community of Christ” (57-58). Because, however, evangelicalism resists institutionalization, this transdenominational movement focuses more on the “priesthood of all believers” and “sola Scriptura” than many confessions of Christianity; these two theological remnants of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation emphasize that no special calling or credential is required to adequately read the Bible
(though the vocation of pastor retains respect) and that the Bible is the only earthly tool a Christian needs. By juxtaposing feminist hermeneutics with evangelical interpretations of Scriptural authority, I work toward an understanding of a single text—the Bible—generating multiple interpretations that significantly influence the ways in which we read gendered bodies, stories, and subjects not as closed texts but as fluid networks of meaning.

Randall (What a Friend We Have In Jesus) likewise asserts that evangelical subjectivity depends more on Scripture than on liturgy. According to Randall, “[s]ince the Bible has been regarded by evangelicals as the word of God, evangelical spirituality can be described as Word-centered. The heart of daily evangelical devotion has been a period of study of the Bible and of prayer” (57). Scripture, for evangelicals, plays the most dominant role in establishing relationships with God—as opposed, for example, to Roman Catholic emphasis on the Eucharist or Pentecostal focus on speaking in tongues; this does not mean that other confessions of Christianity do not hold the Bible in high esteem but that evangelicalism regards Scripture as primary and pays significantly less attention to alternative forms of revelation. Within the postmodern theological context of the “emerging church,” critical conversations circulate concerning how to read and interpret Scripture in contexts of contingent truths. These conversations, perhaps more than any of the other conversations within the “emerging church,” influence evangelical subject formation and evangelical conceptions of gender because all evangelical stories find their foundations in the stories of Scripture. Tampering with Biblical stories and beliefs about the Bible itself catapults the “emerging church,” along with me and my story, into the territory of dangerous literacies, and issues of textual authority may be the catalyst for the “emerging church” to go up in flames.
Unlike fundamentalism (with which evangelicalism is often conflated), evangelicalism tends to rest upon the “authority” of Scripture as opposed to the literalness of Scripture. Both theologically conservative movements sometimes refer to Scripture as “inerrant,” though this word—like “authority”—defies simple definitions. Zoba, in the text *The Beliefnet Guide to Evangelical Christianity*, explains:

> [t]he word *inerrancy* is derived from the Latin, meaning “not wandering.” Its usage in this context implies “not wandering from the truth.” For evangelicals, inerrancy means that when scripture says something, it is telling the truth and not ‘wandering’ into falsehood. Does this mean that evangelicals believe God dictated the Bible word for word, thus making each word unflawed? Many would say no. But if you asked if they embraced the traditional tenets of faith of the Protestant Reformation—the authority of the scripture, the virgin birth and divinity of Christ, Jesus’ atonement for sin, the bodily resurrection, and the second coming of Christ—evangelicals would say yes, unequivocally. (73-74, emphasis in original)

As we can see, the central elements of evangelical stories stem from Scripture, and, therefore, it is necessary to understand the ways in which Scripture itself is produced and understood by evangelicals in order to measure the consequences of postmodern challenges to Scriptural authority.

Interestingly, “emerging church” theologians acknowledge that what evangelical stories say about Scripture differs from what Scripture says about itself—particularly in terms of authority. McLaren (*A Generous Orthodoxy*) points out “[f]or modern Western Christians, words like *authority, inerrancy, infallibility, revelation, objective, absolute*, and *literal* are crucial. Many churches or denominations won’t allow people to become members unless they use these words in their description of Scripture” (164, emphasis in original). Discursive inclusion, McLaren argues, depends upon making
claims for the Bible that the Bible refuses to make for itself, yet “emerging” discourses identify how central such concepts are in upholding evangelical subject formation in relation to an authoritative text. Tomlinson agrees, troubling assumptions of “inerrancy” with statements like “the Bible makes no such claim for itself. Indeed, the Bible says remarkably little about itself or the nature of its divine source….Inerrancy is an ideology introduced into the text from the outside” (110). Both McLaren and Tomlinson challenge evangelical stories about the Bible with the counter-text of what the Bible says—or does not say—of itself, and, perchance, evangelical ideas about Scriptural authority tell more about evangelical desire than of the nature of Scripture. In terms of gendered subjectivity in evangelical and “emerging contexts,” my argument indicates that traditional gendered expectations may have more to do with human power relations than with divine mandates.

Lost in Translation

Desire plays an integral role in the investigations of Brother William of Baskerville, the fictional fourteenth-century monk who inquires into a series of murders in Umberto Eco’s The Name of the Rose. Along with Savonarola and “emerging” storytellers, Eco tells a tale of dangerous literacies. My copy of Eco’s story is a translation from its original Italian, but some themes of texts and counter-texts emerge nonetheless. Brother William inquires into the hermetically-sealed library for which the abbey is famed, and despite Eco’s protagonist’s suspicions that the library and the murders are interconnected, the abbot denies Brother William access to the stacks. The abbot rationalizes this decision with the statements “Because not all truths are for all ears, not all falsehoods can be recognized as such by a pious soul” (37) and “it cannot be visited by just anyone” (38). Even with these protections, by the end of Eco’s suspenseful novel, the abbey and its precious library expire in flames just like Savonarola and his books. Together, these fiery tales depict the inflammatory
potential of texts and counter-texts, the careful attention the powerful take to safeguard the hegemony of authoritative works, and the possibility that certain readers need to be protected from our own acts of literacy.

Both Savonarola’s and Eco’s stories stress the importance of restricting access to authoritative texts as a means of sustaining control over interpretation; some feminists interpret Eve’s story the same way—a reasonable reading considering that Eve reaches for an apple on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, a name that suggests once again the slippery link between access, obedience, and knowledge. However, evangelicalism locates itself within histories of Protestantism that contest and post-date the narrative contexts in which Savonarola and William of Baskerville were burning (purposely or not) books; the advent of sola Scriptura during the Protestant Reformation and the concomitant development of the printing press allow for greater access and readership of authoritative texts like the Bible. Evangelical subjectivity largely thrives on this widespread dissemination of Scripture because it provides freedom for individual readers to generate interpretations without institutions or hierarchies in place, which, in essence, is the principle of sola Scriptura. At the same time, the multiplicity of interpretative possibilities increases—as does the threat to its alleged authority—along with the increase of Scriptural dissemination.

One of the first and most critical debates over the authority of the Bible deals with translation issues—translation in the senses of working from an oral tradition to a textual tradition of literacy, revising the written text from its original languages into other languages over time, and determining the extent of human influences in a text called the “word of God.” In Misquoting Jesus, Bart Ehrman (2005) takes up this first issue of orality and textuality. Ehrman argues that, in some ways, the first Christians began with oral renditions of Scripture out of practical necessity: “the books that were of paramount importance in early Christianity were for the most part read out loud by
those who were able to read, so that the illiterate could hear, understand, and even study them. Despite the fact that early Christianity was by and large made up of illiterate believers, it was a highly literary religion” (42). Also, as Ehrman points out, even the original twelve disciples (in addition to the masses to whom Jesus and the disciples preached) were, by and large, unable to read and write, considering that Jesus calls primarily Galilean peasants (39-40). Ehrman, not surprisingly in this discursive context, uses two passages from the Bible itself to buttress his claims: first, “[w]hen they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13); and, second, Paul’s admission to his audience “[b]rothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth” (1 Corinthians 1:26). Ehrman uses both of these verses to bolster his claims about the illiteracy of primary disciples in Christian beginnings. From its origins, it would seem, Christian communities necessarily rely on human mediation like memory of oral traditions and reading aloud from textual traditions to perpetuate God’s word through Scripture.

The situation Ehrman describes stands in stark contrast to the evangelicalism out of which the “emerging church” arises, an evangelical Protestantism in the twentieth- and twenty-first century United States where a disciple’s ability to read Scripture at the very least is taken for granted. However, as Ehrman explains, a largely illiterate community worked to translate the oral gospels into written gospels, leading Ehrman to claim: “the people copying the early Christian texts were not, for the most part, if at all, professionals who copied texts for a living….they were simply the literate people in the Christian congregation who could make copies” (50-51). From our contemporary perspective, the professional status of the scribes might matter little,
but, as Ehrman attests, this fact held staggering implications for the translation work, not least because

[one of the problems with ancient Greek texts (which would include all the earliest Christian writings, including those of the New Testament) is that when they were copied, no marks of punctuation were used, no distinction made between lowercase and uppercase letters, and, even more bizarre to modern readers, no space used to separate words. This kind of continuous writing is called \textit{scriptuo continua}, and it obviously could make it difficult at times to read, let alone understand, a text. (48, emphasis in original)]

Undoubtedly, the status of the scribes, combined with the syntactical and grammatical challenges of ancient Greek, leave room for human error—though whether such errors occurred remains hotly contested within evangelical communities. When we consider these early translation contexts and the variety of Scriptural options, we recognize, if nothing else, that the New International Version I rely on in this story (a debatable choice in itself) differs dramatically from the original oral renderings of the earliest Christians.

Between translations from oral to written texts and from language to language, Ehrman claims, the differences are dramatic, indeed; he asserts that scholars estimate variations between manuscripts of the Bibles range between 200,000 and 400,000, a huge difference that leads Ehrman to the conclusion: “it is best simply to leave the matter in comparative terms. There are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament” (89-90). Moving from these kinds of translation issues, Ehrman ultimately imagines reading itself as an act of translation: “we all change scripture, every time we read it. For [the scribes], like we, were trying to understand what the authors wrote while also trying to see how the words of the authors’ texts might have significance for them” (218). By attempting to integrate
Scriptural stories into our lives—as critical components of evangelical (gendered) subjectivity—we continually revise Biblical narratives, making meaningful the intersections of our God-stories and God’s own stories. Reading, as I and many literacy scholars before me, insist, is not a matter of discovering meaning embedded within a text but of mediating meaning between text, reader, and discursive context.

Within specifically “emerging” stories, McLaren (appropriately, in *The Story We Find Ourselves In*) dismisses the “dictation theory” of Scripture, “that God dictated words of the Bible to the writers.” Instead, offers McLaren, “it’s clear that [the writers’] own personalities and styles of writing are expressed, not overridden, in their production of the texts that today make up our Bible. In whatever sense the Bible is God’s book, it never stops being a human book either, full of human personality and artistry and culture” (80-81). This theme also arises in McLaren’s text *A Generous Orthodoxy*, where he likens the “dictation theory” of Scripture to an absence of incarnational theology, “as if Jesus were to blink into existence as a full-grown man, with no mother Mary, no belly button, no stepfather Joseph, no Cousin John or Aunt Elizabeth, no second-temple Judaic culture, no context of the Roman Empire in the background with its thrones and swords and crosses” (162). Just as Jesus, through the incarnation, reaches both divinity and humanity by becoming an embodied God, we can understand this “emerging” perspective on Scripture as another mediator between God and humankind; if, then, Jesus-in-human-form faces all the discomfort and brokenness of humanity while possessing the omnipotence of God, then perhaps the Bible mingles with human stories without compromising the integrity of God’s narratives. Yet between God and theology there always exists that leap of faith, and we must remember that theological stories are made possible by particular discourse communities that use texts in certain ways and not others.
At the same time, McLaren warns, accounting for culture in evangelical stories about the Bible and its authority does not mean that humanity takes precedence over divinity. As he writes (also in *A Generous Orthodoxy*), “[a]t other times we have acted as if the personalities of authors, the influences of communities and cultures, the domination of historical forces completely explained the Bible, edging God out of the equation entirely” (163). Incarnational theology emphasizes a productive tension between humanity and divinity embodied in Jesus Christ, but within evangelical stories and understandings of Scripture, the difficulty lies in determining what strands are humanity’s and what strands are God’s—if, indeed, such a separation is possible or desirable. Tomlinson envisions the Holy Spirit as partially responsible for negotiating the tensions within Scripture, asserting:

> [t]he idea that we can simply pick up the Bible and read it, apart from any cultural conditioning is, quite frankly, nonsense. In fact, a great gulf lies between the cultural world of the Bible and our own world. We can (and do) seek to bridge that gulf, with the Spirit’s illuminating help, through biblical scholarship, but the gulf is there all the same. (29)

Once again we see that much of evangelical stories—and, particularly, the “emerging church” stories that challenge standard evangelical beliefs about Scripture—hinge on leaps of faith. Tomlinson’s example requires leaping across the gulf “between the cultural world of the Bible and our own world,” a feat he claims can be achieved through divine assistance that supports the leap but never erases the chasm. The Bible, like Jesus, serves as a liaison between the human and the divine realms, illustrating for evangelical and “emerging” storytellers not dictation but dynamic relationships. Likewise, we, as readers, mediate between the text itself and the cultural contexts that sustain our reading practices, and, so, literacy too contributes to the dynamism of “emerging” storytelling.
Neil Livingstone authors two 2006 articles on the “emerging church” website Emergent Village that similarly express the relational aspects of Scripture. In his article “Facing the Humanity of the Bible,” Livingstone uses quilting and sewing metaphors to demonstrate the ways in which he imagines God stitching stories together with human help:

[The Bible is full of stories, and histories, and songs, and letters. Each one tells a story of God working with some new generation of people. This huge collection of “patches” shows us a God who delights in having people with him. He doesn’t want to avoid contact with humans. The whole huge patchwork quilt of his word shows him constantly working to bring his human children along with him in life. The stories here do not point to a God who would just want to dictate some words to as few messengers as possible. This is a God who loves to have his children gather around him and learn his words. (np)]

Indeed, many stories in both the Old and New Testaments involve human interactions with God and divine interventions into human affairs; throughout the textual stories themselves, the human and the divine are inextricably intertwined, existing always in relationship with each other. Furthering this point in another Emergent Village article entitled “How Can You Trust the Bible?” Livingstone poses “[i]f God had simply dropped a book from heaven into our laps, or used his human creatures as dictation devices, can you see how that would have undermined his whole purpose in speaking to us?” (np). Even before Christ’s words and stories were committed to paper, Jesus engaged people with the oral texts that often involved questions and (cryptic) answers as well as responses to people’s immediate needs of food, physical healing, and spiritual guidance. Livingstone’s provocative question brings into relief the continual nurturance of relationships both within the texts of Scripture and with the texts of Scripture.
Conder’s book *The Church in Transition* agrees that the humanity of the Bible is not something to be feared but something that sets Christian Scripture apart from other texts as special. According to Conder, “we need to recognize that the message and practice of the church has never been—nor will it ever be—culture-free. Thank goodness! The presence of human culture in the gospel makes it unique, liberating, believable” (52). For Conder, perhaps, the intermingling of divinity and humanity in the Scriptures is “liberating” and “believable” because we can see so much of our stories in Biblical stories. To Conder’s descriptors I add dynamic because the Scriptural narratives demonstrate the constant presence of God in human affairs, albeit in different kinds of relationships. Reading itself within postmodern stories becomes a dynamic relationship—as meaning shifts from existing independently within a text to existing in the process of negotiation between text and readers who inevitably carry cultural baggage. Reading Scripture as developing relationship with God bears a long history in evangelical Protestantism, or, as Tomlinson states, “[e]vangelicals also have the acute expression that God will speak to them through Scripture; that it is God’s word for them” (73-73). Yet Tomlinson complicates this conception of the Bible as “God’s word” with the (alarming?) conjecture: “[t]o say Scripture is the word of God is to employ a metaphor. God cannot be thought of as literally speaking words, since they are an entirely human phenomenon that could never prove adequate as a medium for the speech of an infinite God” (113-114). To an extent, Tomlinson and I disagree in that I see no reason why the incarnate divinity Jesus Christ spoke actual human words and no reason why God could not speak human words now (this is God, after all)—many of which are supposedly recorded verbatim (sometimes in red letters) in Scripture. Still, Tomlinson’s point is fair in that we also know Christ as *the word made flesh*—an embodied logos—that disrupts easy equations of what it means for the Bible to be “God’s word.” Perhaps, as Christ becomes the word made flesh through fulfilling
the Scriptures and God’s plan, the Bible becomes the word of God through our reading it and acting upon it as such; but once more, we return not to the stasis of being but to the dynamism of becoming.

Living Language Games

Reading shapes those processes of becoming, so forcefully that Savonarola burns to secure the safety of fifteenth-century Christians and Eco’s abbot guards the secrecy of a library ablaze with sin. As Brother William’s apprentice Adso remarks in The Name of the Rose, “[t]here, I said to myself, are the reasons for the silence and the darkness that surround the library: it is the preserve of learning but can maintain this learning unsullied only if it prevents its reaching anyone at all, even the monks themselves” (185). Libraries and books, suggests the apprentice, require rules and protections, a theme that likewise plays out in Rowling’s 1997 Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone, in which Harry sneaks into the library’s secretive “Restricted Section” (205-207). Harry Potter, meanwhile, survives the fiery killing curse with, appropriately, only a lightning shaped-scar burned into his forehead. And, in the evangelical Christian world, Harry Potter is indeed a hot topic—sparking polemical debate about the virtues and vices of reading about a magical world and a boy wizard. Yet in both Eco’s and Rowling’s texts, there are encouragements to learn (a monastery devoted to scholarship and a wizard’s school) along with restrictions and censorships on what texts are appropriate for which audiences. But Rowling’s texts themselves belong in the “Restricted Section” (or on the banned books list) for many evangelical readers. Even today, while I haven’t heard rumors of burning J.K. Rowling or her readers as heretics, reading factors hugely into Christian subjectivity and, for evangelicals, reading texts that counter the authority of Scripture (especially texts that glorify magic rather than God specifically) is an act of dangerous literacy. Those dangers affect not only the texts themselves but are written on the bodies of gendered evangelical
subjects. Of Savonarola, Brother William, and Harry Potter, not one character escapes his story unscarred.

Christ, too, suffers serious scarring in his story, and ultimately the incarnate deity endures mortal peril because his words counter the authority of His human context. As the word made flesh, Christ forms an inescapable link for evangelicals between text and bodies, and, as such, questions about the authority of Scripture inevitably lead to questions about the ways in which discourses about Scripture imprint themselves on gendered evangelical bodies. In my second chapter, I raise issues of embodiment to demonstrate the ways in which God’s embodiment as the incarnate deity Jesus Christ factors into the stories evangelicals use to understand God. Chapter two marks the move from God’s embodiment to evangelical stories—from body to texts. This chapter moves from Biblical interpretation to embodied and gendered evangelical subjects—from texts to bodies. Working from embodiment to text and from text to embodiment (and, no doubt, back again) helps me to illustrate the reciprocal construction and support of textual interpretations and embodied subjects within evangelical discourses.

Embodiment, once again, surfaces as critical to understanding evangelical and “emerging” subjectivities because God’s words—in the Bible and in Christ incarnate—come to life through the living, human actions of reading and relating to the Bible. Feminist theologians Jones and McClintock Fulkerson emphasize the centrality of embodiment in responding to the deconstruction of textual authority. For Jones (“Bounded Openness”), “faith is a state of trust, a form of embodied knowledge in which one knows that one’s life is held, fully and completely, in the reality of God’s grace.” Such an assertion, Jones claims, stems not from modernist rationality but from embodied experiences of faith and grace—“a truth that does not primarily emerge from the work of critical reason but through the miracle of a pure, unmerited gift” (57). In
agreement, McClintock Fulkerson, in her article “Is There a (Non-Sexist) Bible in This Church?” (a conscious play off of Stanley Fish’s Is There a Text in This Class?), explains “attention to performance or use of scripture in particular contexts is a crucial move against formalism. If a faith is not embodied, it does not exist, no matter how protected and revered its scripture” (230). As both of these writers’ statements illustrate, texts and faith matter to the degree that they are embodied and lived—a compelling argument considering Christ’s position as the purported word made flesh. Whereas Savonarola, the abbot of Eco’s story, and opponents of Harry Potter fear the consequences of what readers will do with certain texts, Jones and McClintock Fulkerson proclaim that texts and faith exist only if and because we readers incorporate them into our life-stories.

As always, transforming evangelical theology means challenging and struggling to change storylines that are central to the formation of gendered evangelical subjectivity. Because the text and the reader gain meaning in the same discursive moment within “emerging” postmodern theologies, new perspectives of the text produce new perspectives of the readers (and vice versa). Take, for example, a nearly ubiquitous Christian conception of God as “Father”—a patriarchal, masculine moniker for God that numerous feminist theorists before me have investigated. Tomlinson, in his “emerging” text, asserts “consider a metaphor like ‘God our father.’ Evangelicals tend to treat such metaphors in too literal a manner. For instance, they assume that saying God our father is a literal statement rather than a metaphor” (98). Just as the “word of God” serves as a Biblical metaphor to facilitate human understanding and relationship with God, so does the metaphor of divine fatherhood indicate more about relationship to God than perhaps actual attributes of God. Metaphors are, of course, extremely important, as are the relations that such analogies explicate, but it would be a mistake to confuse metaphorical association with literal equivalence.
Altson’s compelling text *Stumbling Toward Faith* (part of the EmergentYS line) highlights the seriousness of confusing metaphorical relationships with material realities as she works toward knowing God beyond the abusive tendencies of her earthly father. Speaking specifically about a move away from literally reading the Bible, Altson claims

> in my pursuit of god, i find myself crawling from underneath literalism. at least i am trying. for even as i reach toward something that just might be poetic or symbolic, i feel the fires of hell breathing on my backside; i feel something in me cry “heretic, heretic, burn her!” i feel one misplaced mark of punctuation dooming me to an eternity in torment. (92, lowercase in original)

Altson’s references to the “poetic” and the “symbolic” certainly don’t seem to align with McLaren and Campolo’s critique of the traditional evangelical answer-book Bible, and her response to “one misplaced mark of punctuation” implies the seriousness of shifting from literalism to narrative theology. Still, particularly in light of the context of Altson’s story, the extent to which she escapes literalism seems to correspond to the degree to which she can come into relationship with God because the acts of reading literally touch more upon her experiences of human sin and evil instead of reaching toward God. Literacy acts, I assert, determine and are determined by the embodied and gendered subjects who participate in discursive practices of reading and interpreting both Scripture and Biblical mandates about bodies.

Evangelical theologians Creegan and Pohl take up the issue of textual authority and femaleness in a manner reminiscent of the 1987 *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (collectively authored by Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule) and Carol Gilligan’s 1982 *In a Different Voice*. Discussing the significance of *sola Scriptura* in evangelical theologies, Creegan and Pohl lament that this concept “overlooks the significant role of feelings and of an individual’s understanding of God’s
direction.” In particular, the authors insist, “[f]or a woman, the tension between the propositional nature of evangelical faith and a wellspring of experiential faith becomes more obvious when her call to ministry is dismissed by dogmatic pronouncements and theological arguments that appear to disregard fuller understandings of faith” (57). Here Creegan and Pohl set up a contrast between particular kinds of revelation—textual and experiential—and while some “emerging” theologies recognize reading practices that simultaneously produce both text and reader, and see text and experience as inseparable and interconnected, much of evangelical history of Scriptural interpretation views experience as outside of textual analysis—a major obstacle when two “kinds” of revelation stand in seeming opposition. But the distinctions between types of revelation as gendered perpetuate stereotypical discourses of what it means to be a gendered subject; to pit “masculine” textual analysis against “feminine” embodied experience is to accept discursive practices that make such distinctions possible rather than to challenge these utterances as constructs of specific discourse communities.

Yet, as Creegan and Pohl claim, gender issues take center stage in evangelical theologies of textual authority because gendered subjectivity matters from “[i]n the beginning.” Gendered relationships, these authors write, derive “from the primal theological story of the monotheistic religions” and, as such, “[f]or evangelicals, careful interpretations of the creation of man and woman and of the Fall and its consequences are deeply important for understanding the nature of God, human beings, and gender relationships” (63). Textual interpretations and textual authority mean more to evangelical gendered subjectivity than perhaps any other theological concept because all of these “emerging” stories intertwine with Scripture. Despite these evident tensions, Creegan and Pohl realize that evangelicalism and its traditional assumptions about textual authority are neither wholly oppressive nor wholly liberating. Instead, these authors write “[o]ne woman explained that she was an evangelical because of her
high view of the authority of Scripture and her commitment to ‘living under the Word’” whereas another woman “noted the implicit preference among evangelicals for some parts of Scripture over others, recognizing that she herself did not often use 1 Timothy 2:11-15 as ‘a devotion piece’” (164-165).21 Even a seemingly obviously misogynistic passage like that referenced from 1 Timothy fails to establish clear lines of oppression or liberation; indeed, the counter-text to women’s submission could be read as an overwhelming responsibility (albeit sometimes an abuse of power) for men. Or, as Creegan and Pohl make clear, women who strive to “live under the Word” still grapple with what kind of living and what kind of word in acts of reading.

There exists an overwhelming history of evangelical discourses that discourage women’s speaking—especially in public forums, with 1 Timothy a glowing and oft-cited example of what it means to speak out as an evangelical woman. Women’s speaking and submission are linked to Scriptural interpretation, and a few key passages demonstrate the discursive formation of evangelical femininity that may contribute to a dearth of female voices in the “emerging church.” First, in the post-temptation and fall statement of Genesis 3:16, we read—“[t]o the woman he said, /’I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing;/with pain you will give birth to children./Your desire will be for your husband,/and he will rule over you.’” Second, in the second letter to the Corinthians (11:3), we read, “[b]ut I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.” And, third, as a reminder of the 1 Timothy 2:14 discussion of gendered relations, we read, “[a]nd Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.” Notice how each of these later verses

21 The text of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 reads: “11A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. 13For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. 15But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”
references the Genesis account, showing the circularity and persistence of Eve’s story in establishing gendered relationships; for a woman to speak is to speak in a discursive network that includes texts of women’s gender-specific sinfulness, gullibility, and waywardness.

This realization of inescapable context for Scriptural authority and its imprint on gendered bodies provides perhaps one of the strongest affirmations in defense of postmodernism—not in its radically relativistic forms but in its contextualization of reading processes. In “Bounded Openness,” Jones readily admits that although her usage of feminist and postmodernist theories change her Christian faith, her faith context limits the ways in which she can use such theories. She writes “‘[w]hen I reflect on the offerings these perspectives can bring to an understanding of theology and the church, I reflect as a person whose worldview is normatively Christian” (55); thus, while Jones envisions discourses of feminism, postmodernism, and (for her, Reformed) Christianity overlapping, her primary and bounding discourse derives from her religious community. Jones seems to situate reading practices and textual authority along a continuum: on one end the universal truths to which many evangelicals claim privilege, on the other end the “anything goes” relativity of radical postmodernism, and somewhere in between an acknowledgment that either claim exists because of discursive practices that name and use texts, even the Bible, in ways that support those interpretations.

Lyotard’s postmodern interpretation of Wittgenstein’s language games fits into the ways that Jones, McClintock Fulkerson, and I story Scripture as a text within particular discourse communities. According to Lyotard:

[i]t is useful to make the following three observations about language games. The first is that their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players
(which is not to say that the players invent the rules). The second is that if there are no rules, there is no game, that even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game, that a “move” or utterance that does not satisfy the rules does not belong to the game they define. The third remark is suggested by what has just been said: every utterance should be thought of as a “move” in a game. (10)

In his explanation, Lyotard discusses the mutual reciprocity between discourse communities and the speaking subjects who comprise (and are comprised by) discursive practices. First, subjects and communities agree to hegemonic assumptions; for example, “emerging church” affiliates legitimate and are legitimated by broader evangelical Protestantism to the degree of accepting Scripture as authoritative. Second, subjects whose assumptions fall outside of community hegemony likewise fall outside of the community; a story without the Bible simply does not play according to the rules of evangelicalism’s language games, and is therefore not part of the game. Third, utterances act as moves in the game—just as the “emerging church” makes a bold step in evangelical discourses by questioning (though not disregarding) evangelical rules and strategies. I too make a move within the evangelical game, offering feminist theories and theologies along with specific writing strategies, but if I fail to play by evangelical rules, I will undoubtedly be expelled from the game. All readings and interpretations restrict and are restricted by the larger discursive contexts—Lyotard’s rules—that make utterances meaningful.

The rules of engagement for evangelical women’s speaking determine and are determined by relationships to Scripture and beliefs about Biblical authority. Certainly, Scripture provides specific mandates based on female embodiment—from assumptions of more severe inherent sinfulness based on Eve’s maternal line to discussions about hair length, modest dress, and head coverings. See, for example, 1
Corinthians 11:6 “[i]f a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head”; 1 Corinthians 11:14-15 “[d]oes not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, 15 but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering”; 1 Timothy 2:9 “I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes”; 1 Peter 3:3 “[y]our beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes.” In Speaking My Mind, evangelical theologian and “emerging” contributor Campolo brings verses like these to the forefront of his interrogation of evangelical discourses of Scriptural authority that mark female bodies in potentially oppressive ways. According to Campolo,

I suppose that a literal interpretation of what Paul wrote in these verses would also have to apply to the wearing of wedding rings. I applaud the Amish for their consistency, even if I do not agree with their ordering the abolition of wedding rings from the fingers of their church members. But what perplexes me are those Christians who champion an adherence to a literal interpretation of Scripture when it comes to women preaching and teaching, then ignore what it says in adjoining verses about wearing wedding rings. (37)

Campolo’s comments point to inconsistencies of interpretation that he attributes to the confusion of reading some parts of Scripture “literally” and other parts of Scripture “culturally” that call some verses universally prescriptive and other verses locally descriptive. And, as Campolo’s example demonstrates, the rules of the game and the consequences for embodiment and gendered subjectivity depend upon readings of Biblical texts within evangelical and “emerging” communities. But neither Biblical authority nor hermeneutical strategies are monolithic for evangelical and “emerging”
discourses, and, therefore, it becomes critical to investigate the motivation and interest embedded in the ways that particular texts are used. Campolo suggests that women’s jewelry matters little because it does not restrict men’s professions, whereas Scriptural passages concerning women’s vocations matter significantly and literally because female preachers and teachers would be competitors for male preachers and teachers. I believe that, ultimately, authority in evangelical discourses stems from logos—who controls the interpretation of and dissemination of language and literacy. Biblical passages relating to jewelry and the length of women’s hair can be read as culturally descriptive because such mandates hold little influence over speaking and listening. On the other hand, Scripture defining females as submissive and silent allows males to gain authority as purveyors of the word of God and as speakers justified by the authority of divine logos. Juxtaposing these passages relating to gendered and embodied subjectivity leads away from expectations of what Scripture “says” and toward practices of how we use and practice and read Scripture. The question, then, transitions from “what do these passages mean for gendered subjects?” to “how and why do we read these passages in particular ways in evangelical communities?” My short answer is patriarchy—that males, and, undoubtedly, some females, benefit from a clearly defined, Biblically-based system in which males speak and women listen.

The authority of Scripture gains its legitimation not from qualities inherent within the text itself but in the ways in which that text operates in the embodied lives of discursively positioned subjects. To talk about the Bible and its relationship to women, argues McClintock Fulkerson in “Is There a (Non-Sexist) Bible in This Church,” is to raise questions like “what kind of bible?”, “what kind of church/communities and conventions?”, and “what kind of women?” (225-226). Context matters because context informs gendered subjects of the rules of the game that form our life-stories. But, as McClintock Fulkerson is careful to conclude in her article, “I have tried to
dissuade readers from the view that the biblical texts are *just* sexist or not. In fact, the texts are lots of things, and arguments over what scripture really means are less useful than attention to the communal conventions that constrain that judgment” (240). It might even be fair to conclude that the Bible can only be sexist or not depending on how it is used—returning us once more to the dangerous act of reading. Readings like Campolo’s indicate the inconsistencies of particular evangelical readings of specific Scriptural passages with broader evangelical hermeneutical tendencies—and these readings and counter-readings address issues of evangelical gendered subject formation and embodiment in ways that will, hopefully, help the “emerging church” recognize that the Bible to which evangelicals defer and refer produces and is produced by evangelical discourses and literacy acts.

**Whose Word?**

So, what do a fifteenth-century monk, a fictional detective, and a boy-wizard share in common? Each of them presents not a singular reading but a multiplicity of interpretations; all of these figures embody or inspire contradictory readings and by doing so, disrupt reading practices that value consensus about what counts as an authoritative reading. Savonarola begins by burning books and ends up executed; William of Baskerville sneaks around in libraries with no fear of the textual consequences; Harry Potter elicits deep devotion and serious mistrust from evangelical audiences. As Eco’s Brother William reminds Adso the apprentice, “Books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry. When we consider a book, we mustn’t ask ourselves what it says but what it means” (316). All texts exist in contexts—creating an intertextuality that factors into our literacy acts as efforts to make meaning. The problem with these texts lies not in what they “say” but in the meanings made possible by literacy practices; the problem with these texts and their potential readings lies not in meaning that counters hegemonic authority but in
diversity of interpretation—a slippery slope for evangelical discourses invested in authoritatively discerning God’s word.

The metaphor of “God’s word” carries enormous weight within evangelical traditions and renders the act of reading of central importance to evangelical subjectivity—a topic fraught with debate as these “emerging conversations” about what it means to read Scripture indicate. N.T. Wright (2005), a theologian on whom many “emerging” conversants rely, discusses the issue of reading in The Last Word, where he asserts “the God Christians worship is characterized not least as a God who speaks, who communicates with his human creatures in words....It means that the idea of reading a book to hear and know God is not far-fetched, but cognate with the nature of God himself” (34, emphasis in original). The debate begins, not at the question of whether or not to read—the Scripture-reading process playing a central part in the formation of evangelical subjectivity—but in how to read the Bible and how and where to locate truth from God. “Emerging” conversations and postmodern theology particularly disrupt ideas about truth, with severe consequences for what it means to be evangelical if truth cannot be found within the text itself but only within the negotiation of meaning that constitutes the reading process. Wright explains the Bible as a drama in five acts: “creation, ‘fall,’ Israel, Jesus, and the church” and urges evangelicals to consider the reading context—“where we are within the overall drama and what is appropriate within each act” (121). Even this reading plan, with its literary undertones, differs dramatically from the descriptions and comparisons many “emerging” theologians use to explain the problems with traditional evangelical conceptions of the Bible. Drama, for me, brings to mind living theatre—complete with actors and audience members responding to each other at least to an extent.

Yet while drama draws our attention to performance and emotion—the masks of tragedy and comedy—authors McLaren and Campolo seem to agree with Wright in how
we should view the Bible by comparing that theatrical plan to how evangelicals tend to actually see Scripture, not as drama, but as “encyclopedias (books with answers to everything), blueprints (how-to manuals), scientific formulae (universal laws), constitutions and annotated codes (rule books), and the like” (70). These comparisons, claim McLaren and Campolo, are efforts to value the Bible but are nonetheless inaccurate. Nevertheless, the different expectations for reading processes between Wright’s drama and McLaren and Campolo’s critique of the answer-book Bible are clear. As I often tell my technical writing students, it is socially acceptable for us to read a poem and derive twenty-five different interpretations, but, if we read the same instruction set for building a bookshelf, and complete twenty-five variations on that piece of furniture, diversity likely signals a serious problem for customer and manufacturer alike. Of course, Christian (not exclusively evangelical) history is filled with diverse readings, and many of the denominational distinctions persist today because of different readings of Scripture; there is, it turns out, more than one way to build that bookshelf after all. McLaren and Campolo seem hopeful that “emerging” perspectives can change the evangelical reading process, however: “[i]n the future we’ll present the Bible less like evidence in a court case and more like works of art in an art gallery” (93). Such a transition challenges absolute truths, generating instability instead of certainty, and raises the postmodern problem of what counts as a valid interpretation.

Context and community are two keys for assessing the validity of Scriptural interpretations, and this valorization is necessary at least to some degree because neither evangelical nor “emerging” discourses can sustain an absolute God along with absolute relativism. McLaren, in a 2005 text called *The Last Word and the Word After That* (seemingly bringing Wright into the “emerging” conversations) explains how modern propositions and dissections miss the point of engaging with God in reading-
relationships. As McLaren criticizes, “we break the Bible down into testaments, and
testaments into books, and books into chapters, and chapters into verses, sentences,
clauses, phrases, words, roots, prefixes, and suffixes” (44). Through such analysis, we
gain important understandings about how Biblical language functions and possibly
even how it fits together in its context, much as we learn of the biological processes of a
frog through dissection. There’s only one catch: we dissect dead frogs. Even the
language within Scripture, McLaren’s commentary suggests, works not in isolated
fragments but in relationships. Much as the components of the Bible inspire meaning
interactively (with each other and with readers), readers generate meanings in
communion with each other; to be an evangelical or an “emerging” evangelical means
to agree upon certain assumptions about the Bible (along with many other theological
elements) because to interpret otherwise is to step outside of these evangelical
discourses.

Yet criticism of discourses necessarily comes from outside of the discourses. An
evangelical friend once informed me that he had never learned doctrine at church, but
was simply told to read the Bible. I responded that this instruction is doctrine—the
doctrine at the very heart of evangelical discourse. In Adventures in Missing the Point,
McLaren and Campolo call into question this doctrinal mandate, citing rampant
individual reading practices as one of the key problems for modern theology.
Specifically, these authors disrupt the typical evangelical emphasis on the printing
press and mass production of the Bible—the foundations of sola Scriptura—as
unquestionably good news. Instead, McLaren and Campolo articulate:

[t]hanks to technologies from the printing press to the Internet, you can find a
copy of the Bible or hear Christian preaching just about anywhere, anytime
now. Our mass production had benefits, of course—yet its ubiquity only
reinforced the idea that the Bible is cheap and common. Furthermore, the
Bible’s ubiquity also fueled the perception that any individual may arrive at interpretations that are not only valid, but authoritative. This individualism transformed the Bible from the sacred text that gathers the community of faith into the ubiquitous text that divides through a multiplicity of divergent interpretations. (71)

For me, these pronouncements are somewhat shocking; so much of the evangelical story that I know centers on reading the Bible, memorizing Scripture, and through it all sustaining suspicion for the institutions and hierarchies that motivated the Protestant Reformation’s *sola Scriptura* banner. On one hand, I worry that such statements tend toward totalization in ways that disrespect difference in diverse readings that may be equally valid, but the final stress on communities (I render this plural rather than singular with respect to the many Christian traditions that still read differently) suggests that readers and texts alike are part of larger contexts of meaning.

For evangelical and “emerging” stories, those larger contexts of meanings necessarily include the Holy Spirit, who assists in making leaps of faith across the gulfs between human and divine conditions. The Spirit’s inclusion in acts of reading Scripture means that evangelical and “emerging” discourse communities are (re)created through faithful reading processes. As Grenz and Frank express, “the Spirit creates a community of persons who live out in the present the paradigmatic narrative of the Bible, that is, who view all of life through the interpretive framework the text discloses” (83). In this particular quote, the authors focus on the ways in which the Spirit generates the community of believers, but we can also see the ways in which the body of believers (as, literally embodied beings) simultaneously (re)generate Scripture by living it. Later in their text, Grenz and Franke further articulate the mutual construction of both text and readers, stating, “culture and text do not comprise two different moments of communication; rather, they are but one speaking. And
consequently we engage not in two different ‘listennings,’ but one. We listen for the voice of the Spirit who speaks the Word through the word within the particularity of the hearers’ context, and who thereby can speak in all things” (163). Such a statement holds radical implications for evangelical and “emerging” understandings of truth—where truth no longer pre-exists the reading of the text but instead the truth, the text, and the reading subject are all produced in the same discursive moment.

For many “emerging” theologians, the truth, the text, and the reading subject within “emerging” stories find more room for plurality and difference than in traditional evangelical stories. These same theologians highlight not the unity of the Biblical text but its diversity (sometimes even in telling the same story), reminding us of the patchwork quilt metaphor Livingstone employs: fragments of fabric stitched together to form non-linear, albeit still beautiful, patterns. Postmodern theologians Middleton and Walsh boldly proclaim “[i]t is our contention that the Bible, as the normative, canonical, founding Christian story, works ultimately against totalization.” Supporting their point, the authors cite the Bible’s “radical sensitivity to suffering that pervades the biblical narrative from the exodus to the cross” and “the rooting of the story in God’s overarching creational intent” as dismissing “any narrow, partisan use of the story” (87, emphasis in original). Again we return to the concept of a metanarrative that belongs, not to humans, but to God; throughout the text according to Middleton and Walsh, humans enter into and exit from the story, contributing patches to the great quilt—God’s big story of which we see only a few stitches. But, of course, even if a divine metanarrative exists, we who might live within the story simply cannot see the storyboard and, instead, rely on leaps of faith in all our literacy acts.

McLaren supports this perspective in his essay “The Method, the Message, and the Ongoing Story” (2003), where he writes “[t]he story we tell comes to us not in one authorized version (apologies to King James!) but in many. Matthew gives us a
version, as do Mark, Luke, and John, and in the book of Acts, we get to hear Peter’s and Stephen’s versions of the story along with Paul’s” (199). Even within the Bible, different books tell the “same” story from multiple perspectives, incorporating new details and strands of the story while abandoning others. When we consider the many viewpoints McLaren lists along with the diverse communities of faith that enter into relationship with Scripture, we begin to fathom the complexity of this text and its authority. Sweet, perhaps most poignantly in *Postmodern Pilgrims*, recognizes where truth resides even in postmodern narrative theology. According to Sweet, “Jesus is the Truth. Truth resides in relationships, not documents or principles. The Gospels don’t teach us about Jesus as principle but Jesus as person” (131). The story of the incarnation indicates that the Christian God saw fit to send Jesus—the human-embodied deity—into the world to make meaningful the divine story by living within so many human stories. God’s truth, in these stories, is relational—but, undoubtedly, such truths are much harder to pinpoint than propositions.

One “emerging” example of emphasizing multiple meanings and readings rather than absolutisms appears in McLaren’s *A Generous Orthodoxy* when he introduces the “Seven Jesuses” he knows. Stressing the many different readings of Jesus incorporated by various confessions of Christianity, McLaren describes

1. the evangelical Jesus (who saves humanity through dying on the cross)
2. the Pentecostal/Charismatic Jesus (who saves through the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit)
3. the Roman Catholic Jesus (who saves through the resurrection from the dead)
4. the Eastern Orthodox Jesus (who saves by being born among humans)
5. the liberal Protestant Jesus (who serves primarily as teacher)
6. the Anabaptist Jesus (who works to build communities of disciples)
7. the liberation theology Jesus (who works as activist particularly for the poor)
Each of these “Seven Jesuses” (45-63) draws our attention to a unique facet of the personhood and ministry of Jesus, and each example finds foundation in Scripture, though different discourse communities highlight particular texts to support their readings. Even after his description of these “Seven Jesuses,” McLaren leaves open the reality that there are more Jesuses he has yet to meet—and his layered reading of Jesus suggests that postmodern reading practices do not so much vanquish truth as bring into relief the discursive practices that make our readings possible. In this sense, neither discourses nor readers nor texts determine meaning, but these three factors, working together, enable discursive strategies that pose some questions and post some boundaries—not as universally but as contextually negotiated.

Dangerous literacies come into the field of textual play when counter-texts challenge the authority of hegemonic readings—and, in the case of evangelical interpretations of the Bible, any suggestion that multiple readings are possible or desirable threatens the stability of Scriptural authority. The question, then, for the “emerging church” becomes not what happens to Truth in postmodernism, but what happens to faith in postmodernism when we realize that our truth-claims hinge not on absolute and unshakable authority but on faith that facilitates a leap from an unknowable God (at least in any sense of entirety) to theological stories. Without the certainty of fixed meanings issued directly from the mouth of God, evangelical and “emerging” stories need to be a little more hesitant, standing not on truth, but on faith—in all that we hope for and all that we cannot see. Destabilizing the unity of Scriptural interpretation likewise means that gendered evangelical subjectivity becomes less fixed, less categorical, and more open to the kinds of multiple readings that make Savonarola, William of Baskerville, Harry Potter, and me and my “emerging” stories so dangerous. To question Scriptural authority within evangelical discourses is to question the foundations of evangelical subjectivity and its clear lines bounding the
“feminine” and the “masculine”—and to throw into disarray the ordered communities evangelicals employ to sustain their readings. The “emerging church” and I illustrate the large extent to which discursive frameworks make such readings possible, and while I prepare for Jesus number eight—the feminist theology Jesus—I ask once more, who is master of this narrative? But that burning question, within evangelical discourses invested in knowing The Master Narrative direct from the Master’s mouth, is dangerous, indeed.
“Emerging” Evangelism: Changing the Subject of Witnessing

Witness and Testimony

Author Renée Altson’s name is no coincidence. She chooses her first name because it means “reborn,” and that story of rebirth—twisted amidst abuse—unfolds in her personal narrative Stumbling Toward Faith (7). Zondervan’s EmergentYS line markets Altson’s text as a postmodern conversion narrative of sorts and as a means of evangelism in which the author relates a history of torture at the hands of her self-proclaimed Christian father but, ultimately returns to the Christian fold; by using this story of tremendous pain, so the back cover of the text suggests, Zondervan hopes to reach out “to those who feel disenfranchised from the traditional Christian church” (back of book). Altson’s text stands as testimony of the suffering that she and her faith overcome, and she provides her readers with compelling evidence: “i mean that my father raped me while reciting the lord’s prayer. i mean that my father molested me while singing christian hymns. i mean that there was one way, that i was (literally) ‘under god,’ and that i could never escape my sinfulness. never” (11, lowercase in original). Writing and publishing this story with Zondervan—one of the largest Christian publishers in the United States—illustrates that Altson overcomes (at least to some extent) her aversion to Christianity, and Zondervan strategically situates her text as witness to the regenerative power of Christ, even for people who may have endured extensive abuse like Altson. Altson emerges not as victim but as victor—with a story that testifies the restorative goodness of the Christian God as she becomes Renée.

22 The Lord’s Prayer is taken from Matthew 6:9-13—“ Our Father in heaven,/hallowed be your name,/10your kingdom come,/your will be done/on earth as it is in heaven./11Give us today our daily bread./ 12Forgive us our debts,/as we also have forgiven our debtors./13And lead us not into temptation,/but deliver us from the evil one.” Some later versions add to verse 13: “for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” This text is often considered a direct mandate from Christ on how to pray.
“Were you there...when they crucified my Lord?”

Her soprano song—clear and questioning—rises up like incense in the otherwise silent sanctuary: each syllable slow, purposeful. The question floats and spirals, heaven-bound, as my head bows and my eyelids fall. A candle suffocates in the darkness, infusing my shadowy meditation with smoke and sulfur and incense that stick in my nostrils.

“Were you there...” she keeps on asking, and my heart beats so that my ears echo with the sound: thump...thump...thump. “Were you there”—clear and accusing she questions me and in an instant, I realize: I should have worn black like everyone else. I suppose I'll never erase the traces of incense from these clothes; its scent seeps into the fabric and slides along the threads. I smell like church.

Evangelism, by definition, requires public professions of religious faith, and the alternative term used—witnessing—bears resemblance to the courtroom metaphor of providing testimony and evidence for or against a particular cause. Throughout this chapter, I pair excerpts from Altson’s narrative and my own imaginative writing to complicate evangelism; the “emerging church” transitions away from propositional statements (Subject A + Sin B + Refusal of Evangelical Discourses = eternal damnation) towards narratives like Altson’s, showing increasing willingness to situate spiritual experiences in discursive networks of institutionalized religion, familial life, and embodied gender. Throughout this document, I layer feminist theories and theologies with “emerging church” texts to demonstrate the intertextuality of all our interpretive acts, and, here, I continue to exemplify the overlapping discourses that situate evangelism as fractured storytelling by inserting fragments of Altson’s story and my story into the “emerging” stories. Derived from the same root as “evangelicalism,”
“evangelism” too refers Biblically to the “good news” of salvation through Christ, as Webber explains in *The Younger Evangelicals* (14). From this Biblical etymology, evangelism could be interpreted as sharing the Gospel stories with others, yet oftentimes evangelical discourses pair evangelism with the “Great Commission” of Matthew 28:19: “[t]herefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Generally speaking, evangelism works to secure a public presence of Christianity, but practically, in conjunction with typical evangelical interpretations of Mathew 28:19, the exigency of evangelism stems from actively converting non-Christians into evangelical Christians. Altson’s text works as a publisher-proclaimed postmodern evangelistic text, and, indeed, her strategy of revealing God’s work through proclaiming her own struggles, doubts, and trials stands in sharp relief to the more-visible efforts of street witnesses and televangelists who strive to bring non-believers to Christ through expounding others’ sinfulness and the perils of hell. Instead, Altson tells a story that reveals the extent of her abuse and the depth of her faith, showing her audience that she sees Christians—individually and collectively—as sinful and imperfect but that she finds meaning in Christ nonetheless.

As a rhetorical tactic, I see seeking to persuade others through pronouncing one’s own righteousness as ineffective (if not hopeless), but this positioning of evangelist-as-speaker and potential convert-as-audience fits within evangelical discourses that envision evangelical subjects as possessors of universal truths. My work in the previous chapters demonstrates my desire to deconstruct that kind of (gendered) evangelical subject, and this deconstructive move is especially pertinent to establishing effective evangelism that humbly shares Scriptural stories but also acknowledges that difference and diversity permeate and transcend Biblical stories. In my prior chapters, I work toward a transition that positions gendered evangelicals not
as subjects who own the truth but as subjects who live by faith. My previous chapters examine the ways in which evangelical and “emerging” discourses form and are formed by affiliates of those particular communities, but this chapter moves out into the world to address the ways in which evangelical and “emerging” subjects interact with members of other discourse communities. By using feminist theories and theologies, I cast suspicion on the possibility of fully knowing absolute truths and I explain the ways in which literacy acts both sustain and disrupt discursive formations of evangelical subjects who abide by truth or by faith. I cite Altson’s narrative because her text indicates an “emerging” shift in thinking about evangelism as situated storytelling rather than proclaiming universal propositions (i.e., “Here’s what I see God doing in my life”, as opposed to “Jesus died for you, so convert”). Altson’s story suggests a step toward appreciating difference, and, with feminist frameworks, I work to further the project of ethically evangelizing without assimilating others into values that are always-already culturally and discursively contingent. This project is particularly pertinent to evangelical discourses, which tend to use rigid theological stories to separate insiders from outsiders, and, as a result, to assume that evangelical insiders possess more accurate and authoritative truths about (and from) God than other communities.

Although evangelicalism resists the kinds of hierarchical institutionalization that characterize a movement like, for instance, Roman Catholicism, evangelicals—through evangelism and formations of gendered subjectivity—strive to maintain a stance of being set apart from mainstream cultures. According to Sally K. Gallagher, in her 2004 article “The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism,” U.S. evangelicalism is “supported by a loosely connected network of writers, teachers, publishing houses, Christian colleges, para-church organizations, summer camps, and more.” These ties, Gallagher asserts, contribute to evangelicalism’s ability to sustain a subculture in
opposition to the “world” (218). Gallagher also sees gender roles as critical to supporting this posture of uniqueness, asserting: “[a]bandoning the ideal of husbands’ headship would remove one of the primary ways, if not the primary way, in which evangelicals can identify themselves as a religious subculture” (231, emphasis in original). The “emerging church” demonstrates a willingness to at least engage with destabilized gender roles even if the term feminism raises red flags for conversants, but shifting methods of evangelism—though not explicitly tied to gendered subjectivity—challenge evangelical understandings of gender. By altering the ways in which evangelicals come into contact with members of other discourse communities, postmodern evangelism calls into question the rigid boundaries that separate subjects based on identity constructs: evangelical, non-evangelical, male, female. Evangelism, as public profession of faith, links to evangelical ideas about who holds the authority to speak and to make truth-claims—a practice tied to gendered expectations of subjects; although in much of this chapter, I do not express gender in obvious ways, the implications are indeed gendered because revising evangelism to incorporate differences in being and knowing opens opportunities for females to speak with authority and be heard.

The dominant mode of evangelism—public exhortations to embrace conservative theologies and to enter discourses like evangelicalism—prevails in U.S. manifestations of Christianity, at least in its mainstream visibility. Such speech acts gain protection under the First Amendment right to free speech, but in our current political climate, some theorists wonder if evangelism is so prominent in the United States that it interferes with democracy. Of note, Phillips’s 2006 text American Theocracy explains, “[f]or the first time, the United States has a political party that represents—some say overrepresents—true-believing frequent churchgoers” (172). Under the banner of George W. Bush (who attributes his conversion to famed evangelical evangelist Billy
Graham), Phillips claims, “the Republican party in the United States was on the road to a new incarnation as an ecumenical religious party, claiming loyalties from hard-shell Baptists and Mormons, as well as Eastern Rite Catholics and Hasidic Jews. Secular liberalism was becoming the common enemy” (182-183). With these emphases on religion in political spheres, it takes no great leap of faith to envision Bush’s politics as evangelism (and, indeed, his dualistic speeches on good and evil support this claim). But, in his analysis of United States demographics, Phillips admits that while one-quarter of voters “are now affiliated with a church from this network of conservative Protestant churches (that is, fundamentalist, evangelical, holiness, or Pentecostal\(^{23}\)),” a younger group of Christians, “the so-called third wave may be misplaced in the conservative category” (119). Certainly, conservative theologies and the voters who adhere to such God-stories influence the polls, yet Phillips recognizes that Bush’s religious party represents theological diversity and posits the possibility that a “third wave” generation of voters may chafe against the boundaries binding conservative theology to conservative politics.

The “emerging church” may epitomize that “third wave” and its efforts to deconstruct the conservative theological foundations of evangelicalism—even, and maybe especially—in terms of relating to members of other discourse communities through evangelism. Witnessing typically marks an evangelical subject’s movement out into wide open spaces, beyond insulated faith communities and into non-evangelical territory where major plot elements of evangelical stories (like the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ and the subject’s own conversion) can no longer be taken for granted. Whereas traditional evangelical witnessing looks much like a

\(^{23}\) The primary differences between these movements—all under the general rubric of conservative Christian theology—are differences of focus; I have already explained fundamentalism and evangelicalism. Holiness movements emphasize the achievement of sanctification or Christian perfection on earth, and Pentecostal groups prioritize speaking in spiritual tongues as a marker of salvation.
subject, set apart and striving to impart knowledge on the crowd in populated spaces, the “emerging church” shifts its emphasis into building (perhaps through its published texts) relationships between evangelicals and non-evangelicals. By employing feminist theories and theologies to disrupt the easy distinctions between evangelical and non-evangelical, in addition to the fixedness of evangelical subjectivity (as in previous chapters), I maintain that shifting paradigms of evangelism signal the potential for more ethical and equitable formations of gendered evangelical subjects. Attending to difference instead of dogma provides the “emerging church” with the outward reach of traditional evangelical evangelism but also a more reflective turning inward to interrogate the foundations of evangelical subjectivity in ways that render postmodern witnesses eager to tell more humble stories.

In her own story of witnessing, Altson explicitly refers to gender and to her experiences of growing up as a gendered subject within Christian discourses that value maleness. Altson writes: “I grew up a woman in a world that doesn’t really value women. We were nothing more than accessories, depositories for aggression, childraisers and potluck chefs and housekeepers. Our primary purpose in life, as Christians, was to ‘glorify God.’ Our primary purpose in life, as women, was to ‘glorify God by serving men’” (38, lowercase in original). Here, Altson speaks not only of the horrors of abuse, rape, and incest, but also of the destructiveness of gender roles that persistently devalue females. Through this passage, Alston suggests that female Christians in such discourses cannot serve God directly, but instead must relate to God through male mediators—a hierarchy sustained by discursive positionings of gendered subjects that compare Christ as head of the church to males as heads of the households. This kind of hierarchical expectation that some humans are closer to God than others—namely, that evangelical and male subjectivities reach God more than non-evangelical or female subjectivities—sustains evangelism that determines who has
the authority to speak about and for God. Altson, by exposing the grievous sins of her earthly father and the cruelty of church communities, challenges the inflexible rankings that pervade evangelical discourses and determine who speaks on God’s behalf. Her acts of speaking out and sharing her stories works toward acceptance of the reality that God works in mysterious ways and in multiple human mediums, and her stories overlap generations of patriarchy that seek to erase her as a witnessing (gendered) subject.

Modern Missions

Early on in her story, Altson portrays her familial relations by providing her audience with dialogue from one of her father’s typical prayers:

heavenly father, make my daughter a better person. let her be good enough for her mother to come back. let her prove to her mother that she is a good girl. we know that her mother left because she was a bad girl. help her to be good enough. make her a better person. take away her sin. forgive her in spite of how awful she is. let your blood cover all her sin. help her to stop being so bad.

(15, lowercase in original)

This prayer’s language disturbs me, in part because the formatting and discursive conventions (appeal to the “heavenly father,” confession of sin, emphasis on God’s ability to change and redeem humans) fit evangelical discourses and, also in part, because the content reveals glimpses of the pain Altson’s father inflicted on her. Through this supplication, Altson’s father seeks divine intervention to fix the brokenness of his family and, specifically, the sins he attributes to his daughter. In its extreme form, this paternal prayer parallels evangelism’s ugliest attributes. Instead of sharing the good news that resides—etymologically and theologically—at the heart of evangelism and evangelicalism, Altson’s father abuses his power in order to shift blame onto his child. Further, in terms of gender, this prayer oppresses one female (the
daughter) and laments the loss of another female (the mother), paralleling evangelical discourses in which male authority to speak erases and excludes females as witnesses; without public expressions like Altson’s story, the only testimony on behalf of Altson and her mother might be her father’s deranged supplication. By writing as a gendered evangelical evangelist, Altson changes the subject of witnessing, layering her version of her story above her father’s version that discursively and physically oppressed her and her narrative. Public evangelists sometimes use strategies similar to Altson’s father—exhorting the audience for its sinfulness (whether the evangelist actually knows the listeners or not)—and the message becomes one that deepens the divide between the speaker’s self-proclaimed righteousness and the audience’s external condemnation. The example Altson provides is complicated by the specifics of her family and community situations, and is, no doubt, extreme, but her anger at this kind of treatment suggests a (need for a) shift in thinking about evangelism. Not only is condemning an audience likely to be rhetorically ineffective, but it also seems theologically inconsistent with evangelism’s roots of sharing the good news. By this I do not mean that all beliefs are equal, but that all humans are equal, and that ethical evangelism rests on recognizing and respecting difference within an imago Dei that humans might never fully access.

* * * * *

“Were you there...when they nailed Him to a tree?”

She warbles this question, her trembling voice lifting toward the rafters as the smoke from the second candle drifts in the draft. This service is systematic: a spotlighted singer, a candle snuffed with each question, an overhead light dimmed to darken the nave. Shadows and accusations—“were you there?”—creep into the congregation as each stanza asks us again and again.
“Were you there?” she persists, her voice lilting. I shiver and sense goose-flesh streaking across my skin. I shiver and wonder: am I caught in the draft of an old sanctuary preserving its heating costs or am I caught up in the mysterious movements of the Holy Spirit? I shiver and inhale a trickle of incense that tickles my tongue and chokes me up—a liturgical mishap or a sacred sign?

I shiver and cough and stink of church.

* * * * *

Many “emerging” theologians begin their stories of evangelism and its possible postmodern transformations with a critique of modern missional theology, and, it seems to me that many fears (personal and political—though I doubt the terms are separable) of witnessing stem from the exclusionary tactics of modern missions. Part of the project of evangelical subject formation insists upon subjects set apart (by speech acts designed to convert non-believers), as evidenced by the genre of conversion narratives that solidify an initiate’s rite of passage into the discourse community. Evangelical discourse practices, like all discursive acts, bind and limit the kinds of subjects that count as part of the community, and witnessing seems a central requirement of differentiating between evangelical and non-evangelical by designating who needs to speak Christ’s saving message from who needs to hear it. The act of witnessing depends upon these kinds of classification. But Davies works to transcend rigid categorization (using examples of gender, sex, and sexuality unrelated to religious discourses) in A Body of Writing, admitting “classification can be a way of controlling, or reducing, of slotting someone into that which is already known” (38). Despite her admission of the usefulness of categories, Davies sees labels as reductive—and her theories can inform discourses (like evangelicalism, to which she does not refer) that inflexibly define members in opposition to nonmembers. One danger for evangelical and “emerging” subjects consists of denying the full distribution of imago Dei and
asserting human cultural values over divine valuing of all people. We need more complex stories to discern the inextricability of layered narratives and the intertextuality that catches us in and between so many stories.

Traditional evangelical stories neglect acts of witnessing as founded in and contingent upon discursive networks that build up subjects-set-apart through discourse practices of incorporating Christ’s story, entering into community through conversion, and reading Scripture in particular ways—all of which I set up in my previous chapters as the “contingent foundations” (Judith Butler’s phrase) that facilitate evangelism in the first place. By separating mission and evangelism from other facets of evangelical subjectivity and theology, McLaren asserts in A New Kind of Christian, the church becomes not the body (or embodiment) of Christ but a business venture seeking to fill a niche-market’s spiritual needs (156). Altson makes a similar claim in her description of a Christian bookstore, where she found: “christian candy and ‘bars of judah’ (fancy god-labeled granola stuff) and fortune cookies with scripture verses inside. veggie tales action figures and puzzles and games and christian coffee and dumb bumper stickers and key chains and row upon row of inane kids’ stuff.” Summarizing her response to the blatant commercialism and the efforts to create Christian community through consumerism, Altson reports: “it was sickening” (162). Both McLaren and Altson criticize evangelical communities’ attempts to commercialize church by turning “Christianity” into a brand name that seeks to fill consumer’s desires and needs; the “emerging church” as a reformation movement works to restore evangelicalism: with subjects who serve the world rather than with subjects who seek the church’s goods and services. Such reformation requires evangelicals not to retreat into brand-named enclaves of evangelical subculture but to engage with other communities in spite of and because of worldly differences.
Evangelism, by asking evangelical subjects to interact with individuals and communities who identify (or are identified by evangelicals) as not-evangelical, requires discerning between cultural differences and faith differences, as well as appreciating the human diversity through which God tells stories. Nearly two decades ago, theologian Lesslie Newbigin in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989) proclaimed “[a]n arresting phrase, ‘Africa a Christian continent.’ It rings strange to Western ears” (36) to remind his audience that the centers of Christianity are moving eastward and southward into the “Third World”—an even more gripping truth today. This shifting of Christian centers undoubtedly relates to histories of colonialism and Western missionaries’ efforts to convert—culturally and theologically—individuals and communities in the “Third World.” But Newbigin recognizes that Christianity looks different in different cultures, and that even if Christian communities spring up on other continents, those groups may bear little resemblance to the “West.” By practicing postmodern narrative theology, the “emerging church” theologians and I do not cast all of God’s stories into relativity, but we do highlight the inextricability and contingency of culture and theology. With Newbigin’s text, we can recall that what we see of a culture may be more representation than reality—a factor that might help those of us who feel called to witness to tell stories of faith rather than pitch sales-schemes of cultural assimilation. Just as feminism supports enormous diversity in its understanding of “woman” and “womanhood” without denying the claim that gender matters, evangelicalism and the “emerging church” can sustain “disciples” and “discipleship” as diverse constructs of particular discourse communities without disregarding faith. That faith, however, relies not on universal truths or absolute knowledge but on situated stories of gendered and embodied subjects.

This transition from assimilation to storytelling calls for the transformation of evangelism and evangelists alike, suggesting that both we and the stories we live
change as our relationships with culture and other communities change. Burke and Pepper, in their text *Making Sense of Church*, agree with McLaren and me concerning the need for new kinds of witnessing and new kinds of witnesses. These authors characterize modern evangelism “as an aggressive business venture. The product we’re pushing? Jesus. The fact is, if our metaphor changes away from the warrior/aggressive salesman, virtually all our tools and tactics will need to change” (151). All of these writers recognize the problematic association of missions with marketing, and all of them convey disdain for evangelism strategies that position witnessing as an aggressive sales pitch and Jesus as a product we evangelicals peddle. This commodification of Christ and church derives from evangelical discourses that separate subjects based on salvation status—saved or unsaved—and that very status depends upon specific discursive formations of integrating Christ’s stories into personal stories, “being”/becoming converted, and interpreting Scripture (all the subjects of my previous chapters). “Being” saved, in traditional evangelicalism, means being the same—because truth is seen as both singular and universal in that discourse. Feminist theorist Scott’s 1988 text “Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference,” addresses this kind of tension where, she explains “[w]hen equality and difference are paired dichotomously, they structure an impossible choice. If one opts for equality, one is forced to accept the notion that difference is antithetical to it. If one opts for difference, one admits that equality is unattainable” (43). Applying this thinking to evangelical evangelism, we see the same paradox at work—that equality of salvation discursively opposes difference of theology or spiritual practice, and that embracing difference in theology or spiritual practice signifies unequal status of souls. In her analysis of gender, Scott refutes this dichotomous relationship between equality and difference, calling instead for “differences as the condition of individual and collective identities” and “differences as the constant challenge to the fixing of those
identities” (46). Such a stance, utilized in evangelical and “emerging” theologies, shakes up the certainty of salvation and, therefore, the meaning and purpose of evangelism. Whereas traditional evangelical evangelism relies on binaries of evangelical/non-evangelical, saved/lost, speaker/listener, espousing differences as both internal and external to individuals and to communities defies the clear-cut distinctions between the “saved” and the “lost.” Without such distinctions, as I assert through different examples and applications throughout this document, the faces of witnessing and the subjects of evangelical stories change—and instead of linear propositions of truth, a fluid story of faiths “emerges.”

Once more, the question of who masters the narrative engages the “emerging church,” as authors like McLaren, Burke, and Pepper interrogate the evangelical tendency to turn faith and Christ into products of our churches. In their collective text, Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer explain that while “[m]odern evangelism was dominated by the notion that we brought Jesus to people through ‘show-and-tell’ strategies and spiritual laws,” in postmodern contexts, “it seems arrogant to think that we are the ones bringing Jesus to anyone. (Isn’t Jesus already there?) We must trust that Jesus has intersected with people’s lives long before we ever did” (115). Just as deconstructing narrative, conversion, and textual authority lead me to the conclusion that all of our life-stories find their foundations not in objective truth but in leaps of faith, so I assert here that strategies of publicly professing faith can become radically more ethical, doing justice to human difference and human fallibility, if we claim possession not of objective truth but of faith. My distinction does not mean that truth does not exist; I, in fact, believe that God exists as Truth but that our limited human faculties and our fallen state prevent us from ever seeing and perceiving Truth in the ways that God does. By staking a claim to faith instead of truth (or, at least Truth), the possibility for truth statements through divine revelation—Scriptural or otherwise—
remains, alongside the humility that we are mere mortals whose foundations of faith are bound by the limitations of our kind. Faith cannot be measured or quantified because faith is, by definition, subjective—unlike the objective truths that modern scientists and theologians claim to possess. Wrapped up in faith is truth and desire and hope, and even these foundations are contingent upon the stories God chooses to reveal to people of faith who believe that God reveals divine glimpses. Perhaps the most heretical statement I make here is that evangelicals don’t need to possess a truth (a truth that never was ours anyway) in order to tell God’s stories well.

But Carson, one critic of the “emerging church,” objects to the perceptions behind postmodern evangelism as undermining the exclusivity of Christian truth. Carson, in *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* sees evangelism as “often viewed in the broad culture as intrinsically obnoxious, because no matter how gently it is done, it cannot avoid giving the impression that Christians think they have something superior.” Continuing, Carson claims, “[i]f Christianity is presented as something superior—or something true!—it is necessarily saying that what it proposes to displace is inferior.” He fears that the “emerging church” approach leads to relativity and equality of all belief-systems in postmodernism, in which case witnessing holds little relevance (101-102). To witness, in modern or postmodern terms, still means to stand up and provide evidence (of some sort) for what the witness believes to be true, but the subject-position of evangelist becomes increasingly complicated in the context Carson fairly questions; is any claim to truth or any effort to persuade coercive? Perhaps the “intrinsically obnoxious” element of evangelism that Carson satirically proposes is not the claim to a superior truth but rather the claim to the *only* superior truth—even when the evangelist knows little to nothing about the audience. Postmodernism and poststructuralism lead not to absolute relativity but to ultimate contingency, a factor that modern missions easily miss in efforts to mass produce
evangelical converts and Christian paraphernalia. Addressing the issue of poststructuralist relativity in gendered inquiry, Davies (A Body of Writing) claims: “poststructuralism need not offer the death of the subject/author, but rather the first recognition of the means by which [female subjects] have been subjected, made object, deprived of agency, and inscribed with patterns of desire that hold all of this in place” (47-48). Bringing these ideas into the realm of “emerging” evangelicalism, I maintain that postmodern theologies do not signal the death of truth or the demise of authorship; instead, through juxtaposing my own story and “emerging stories” along with feminist theories and theologies, I highlight the gaps in theological stories that claim access to universal Truth and divine Author(ship/ity) in spite of the unbridgeable gap we leap in linking God and God-stories. That leap works not through truth but through faith—an epistemology founded in hope for what cannot be seen perfectly or known fully in earthly states of human becomings. Even in evangelical discourses, only Christ completely knows divine truth, and His Biblical disciples follow not because they know (and, indeed, are often reprimanded for not understanding) but because they believe. Only Jesus, as the divine-human medium, walks the world without sin—meaning that all human statements in evangelical discourses wrestle with the tension of the Holy Spirit’s revelations and the legacy of the Fall—and throughout His ministry as recorded in Scripture, He speaks parables more often than laws.

Yet evangelism builds upon the Scriptural text known as the “Great Commission,” in which Jesus, during a rare post-resurrection appearance, commands the disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” This passage, excerpted from Matthew 28:19-20, explains one role of a disciple that certainly seems to involve truth-claims and persuasive efforts. Evangelical subjectivity (even in “emerging” conversations) depends upon discursive
frameworks that situate faithful subjects as witnesses, yet while evangelism remains taken-for-granted as necessary for evangelical and “emerging” subjects, I see no reason why the story needs to be the aggressive sales pitch typical of modern missions. The “emerging” writers assume a place for missions in postmodern evangelical stories but challenge the ways in which stories of modern evangelism unfold; the question, then, when taking Carson’s critique in mind, seems to be: in what ways can evangelical and “emerging” subjects witness stories of faith as mandated by the “Great Commission” while still taking into account the diversity and complexity of God’s stories at work in all humanity?

The answer (that I have unfolded in chapters leading up to this one) is to use complex stories of discipleship as a means of exemplifying the overlapping texts that produce and are produced by gendered evangelical subjects; to use simplistic stories and reductive propositions requires simplifying and reducing the palimpsest of Christ’s stories inscribed in evangelical discourses through Scripture and the faithfully-lived stories of generations of different disciples. In Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred, feminist theorist M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) claims the necessity of attending to spiritual work and rendering the sacred more visible in secular contexts. According to Alexander (who in this text works outside of Christian traditions), “[i]n the realm of the Sacred, however, the invisible constitutes its presence by a provocation of sorts, by provoking our attention. We see its effects, which enable us to know that it must be there. By perceiving what it does, we recognize its being and by what it does we learn what it is” (307). This tension between visibility and invisibility carries into the “emerging” conversations about evangelism. Witnessing draws attention to the sacred as discursively interpreted through the medium of Jesus Christ, but, as the Theresa of Avila poem I cite earlier so poignantly states, Christ-visible today is the body of Christian believers. Ways of
witnessing, then, make visible the kind of sacred communities at work through the actions of evangelists. Just as Christ, in evangelical discourses, stands in as surrogate for humanity on the cross, the church as the body of Christ provides a visible form for a deity who is invisible save for the actions (and the effects of those actions) of disciples. Within evangelical understandings of the Bible, Christ fulfills prophetic expectations set up in the Old Testament, and His stories as recorded in Scripture create a layer of narratives. As evangelical disciples incorporate Christ’s stories into personal and communal life stories, new layers overlap older layers—story upon story connected through leaps of faith and selected narratival threads. What we people of faith do and how we witness reflects the kind of God we imagine; through my exemplification of the palimpsest, I strive to make visible a storyteller-God who embodies difference, contradiction, mystery, humanity, and divinity: earth-bound and heaven-minded, heaven-bound and earth-minded.

What we need are more mediums—stories that mediate those leaps of faith between God and theology. According to Altson, language that positions God as exclusively male alienates female seekers; on dealing with sexual abuse in a spiritual context, Altson writes: “i protested quietly, in my own heart: but he was not a woman. he had no idea what it was like to be female in a male world” (40, lowercase in original). I think God does understand, because Christ incarnate is not only male or human but more than the body that we read. Yet Altson’s point is powerful (and one enumerated by many feminist theologians, perhaps most notably Mary Daly)—that the language we use to describe God unfailingly limits or opens up possibilities for the kind of God we can imagine. We don’t need a propositional God who provides more rules but a storyteller-God who works as a medium between stories of joy and suffering that we struggle to make meaningful by leaps of faith.

Christ and Culture
Throughout my document, I employ the palimpsest metaphor by layering story upon story and text upon text as a means of demonstrating that while evangelical discourses prize the text of the Bible, neither that text nor its interpretive apparatuses works independently. Each layer contributes to complex and contradictory literacy practices—and everything counts as text as we read gendered, embodied, evangelical subjects into becoming. Altson also implicitly references the palimpsest, telling her audience,

there are many layers to my story,

to all of these words,

this lostness.

i tell as much as i can,

with the words that i have,

and still i feel the fracture of the partial,

still i feel the emptiness of the untold (27, lowercase in original).

Using her poetic form, Altson draws attention to her narrative experiences of postmodernism—including the incompleteness and limitations of language, the layering of story upon story and words upon words, and the fragmentation of all utterances. Through her descriptions of language as textured amidst tensions of spoken and unspoken, Altson demonstrates the insufficiency of words and the brokenness of stories—fitting concepts for an “emerging” church that espouses postmodernism alongside an Edenic narrative of human fallenness. In spite of our telling stories—spoken, written, and embodied in intersecting threads of texts—there always exists “the emptiness of the untold,” and the only way to bridge that chasm is to leap by faith. Narratives like mine, Altson’s, and the “emerging church’s” help to establish relationships within and between discourses not through lectures on laws and rules but through stories that weave their way through complicated and
contradictory networks of meaning. Telling stories by faith and of faith challenges the
dichotomous relationships typical of traditional evangelical evangelism and creates
room for differences if discourses acknowledge that all (gendered) subjects live stories
that reflect imago Dei.

* * * * *

“Were you there...when they laid Him in the tomb?”

She trills, persisting in that sweet soprano dissonant with her incriminating
questions. I shift in my seat, shuffling toward the aisle, aware that this manufactured
grief—all smoke and mirrors, shadows and light-switches—affects my senses. Perhaps
I suffer an allergy to incense, a complaint particularly provoked by Good Friday
services.

“Were you there...there...there” echoes that shrill voice, filled with anger, filled
with eloquence. I stretch and suppress a yawn, scanning the sanctuary for a subtle
escape route. Are you there, God, lurking in this shadowy space? Are you there, God,
inhaling incense and exhaling rings of ceremonial smoke? Are you there, God,
catching in my throat and clogging my nasal passages with this smoldering, sacred
song?

Are you there, God, aware that I reek of church?

* * * * *

Modern and postmodern evangelism rely on building particular relations
between witnesses and audiences like the salesperson/consumer model implied by
many modern missions. “Emerging” conversations about evangelism examine the
kinds of relationships implicit in modern evangelical stories, but “emergents” are by no
means the first to understand the multiplicity of positions available for negotiating
public professions of faith in cultures viewed as “other.” For example, Webber asserts
that the youngest generations of evangelicals (also those most likely to affiliate with the
“emerging church”) seek new ways of evangelizing, such as postmodern efforts of "returning to tradition—the church visible, with an emphasis on worship, community, and witness training” (220, emphasis in original). Making the church more visible through community-building signals the “emerging church’s” outward reach—not a shying away from culture but an invitation to at least notice the church at work. Webber cites this kind of witnessing as distinct from previous evangelical strategies; he claims the “traditional evangelicals” use tracts and spiritual propositions to entice converts, the “pragmatic evangelicals” provide educational services to impart the importance of Scripture, and the “younger evangelicals” (whose leader he names as McLaren) serve “as caring community [that] receives people who eventually come to faith” (224-225). As Webber’s phases of evangelicalism suggest, evangelism shifts from witnesses explaining religious beliefs to disciples offering care and community; in this “emerging” model, creating communities precedes “correct” doctrine. Also, care and community imply that all members bring stories and gifts to contribute, while “correctness” insinuates insiders and outsiders, pitting those who practice education and evangelism against those who “need” them.

While the “emerging church” represents a minority movement within evangelicalism and incorporates diversity within its multiple conversations, this reformation signals deconstruction and revision for evangelistic discourses that define saved and unsaved as distinctly different, and moves toward understanding salvation as only part of the subjects and stories. Alexander, though she does not work with Christian manifestations of faith, situates this kind of binary between sacred and secular (a parallel to saved/unsaved that positions subjects as either/or) within feminist conversations about the public and the private. Advocating “the personal as spiritual,” Alexander explains “the designation of the personal as spiritual need not be taken to mean that the social has been evacuated for a domain that is ineluctably
private” (295). Applied to “emerging” evangelism, Alexander’s words serve as a reminder—especially for evangelical discourses—that spiritual forces transcend human boundaries of public and private, masculine and feminine. For evangelical discourses, acknowledging the personal and social nature of the spiritual requires conceding that non-evangelicals (can) foster meaningful spiritual stories and that evangelicals and non-evangelicals of both genders live and tell spiritual stories that might reflect the mysterious movements of God.

Whereas previous models of evangelical subjectivity place orthodox belief before belonging, the openness of the “emerging” conversations maintains a willingness to engage with culture (rather than separate from it or disregard its ability to express God’s stories) as a theological medium. Just as “emerging” discussions of incarnational theology acknowledge the simultaneous divinity and humanity of Jesus, so too must “emerging” models of evangelism perform spiritual work that is bounded by human cultures but always part of God’s transcendent stories. Cultural mediums matter, as the incarnate, embodied Christ reminds us. In His own ministry, Jesus did not interrogate disciples about their beliefs before asking them to join Him but invited them along as a motley crew to form the basis of his missional community. Kimball, in The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations, uses these kinds of relationship-building strategies to differentiate between modern and “emerging” church evangelism; in the former, he writes “[e]vangelism is an event that you invite people to” while in the latter, “[e]vangelism is a process that occurs through relationship, trust, and example.” Additionally, he explains, modern witnessing “is a message” and postmodern witnessing “is a conversation” (281). These are subtle shifts, more about emphasis than about content, but the implications for evangelical subjectivity are telling: the modern evangelical subject talks quite a bit; the postmodern evangelical subject listens and recognizes that even non-evangelicals share life-stories that shine
with God’s light. Evangelicals’ ability or inability to concede that God—even the incarnate Jesus formative of and formed by evangelical discourses—transcends discursive boundaries depends upon shifting affirmations of speaking subjects. Discussing gendered and sexualized speaking and authority in her 2004 feminist text *Undoing Gender*, Butler argues “[o]ne aspect of the speech act that becomes especially important in this context is the fact that speaking is a bodily act” (172). Butler’s comment calls to mind my anecdotal experiences of seeing male and female evangelists in different roles on my campus; typically, the males shout—preaching loudly and publicly, while the females hold signs and conduct one-on-one conversations with passerby. Such distinctions may relate to physical differences in vocal-projection ability, but, in conjunction with Butler’s remarks about speech—“[w]hatever is said not only passes through the body but constitutes a certain presentation of the body” (172)—it seems to me that volume and visibility coordinate with authorization and validation of publicly-speaking subjects. Transforming evangelism to consider relationships within and beyond evangelical communities means changing the faces of witnesses and granting that females and non-evangelicals have God-stories worth hearing.

Much of this shift from positioning evangelical witnesses as speakers to positioning “emerging” evangelists as conversants, as Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer agree in their co-authored text, calls upon evangelical subjects to be more respectful of differences. As I argue here, respecting another’s humanity as an image-bearer of God does not necessitate theological stories that posit all statements as equally valid or healthy, but it also does not follow that any one discourse community is likely to obtain a monopoly on divine revelation. According to Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, such respect should follow from the discursive understanding of Jesus as the Savior of all humanity; instead of selling the theological propositions that derive
from that belief, these authors assert, “[u]nless we value and appreciate all sorts of people and enter into relationships with them, we are treating them as objects, not as subjects whom Jesus loves and died for” (115). “Emerging” writers’ emphasis on evangelism-as-relational parallels a criticism of gender stereotypes (particularly those projected onto “Third World” women by “westerners”) that Nussbaum makes in *Sex and Social Justice*; in her list of types of objectification, Nussbaum writes, “[t]he objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type and/or (b) with objects of other types” (218). For evangelical witnesses, Nussbaum’s critique translates into assumptions of male authority to speak on behalf of God as well as presumptions of non-evangelicals’ need to learn about God from evangelicals—as if God (even the God produced by and producing evangelical discourses) works only or predominantly through male, evangelical mediums. Witnessing as dialogue or conversation pushes the church away from its insular communities and expects evangelical (or maybe “post-evangelical” or “emerging”) subjects to engage in worldly relationships—just as Jesus does throughout His stories of dining with tax collectors and distributing bread to hungry peasants and laying hands upon lepers. Christ’s ministry shocks His contemporaries precisely because of His willing participation in culture, and without the cultural evaluation of certain subjects as pariahs (because of profession, gender, or health), Jesus’s embodied care-work loses its radical message.

That message, assert many prominent voices in the “emerging” conversations, highlights not exclusivity but inclusivity. Or, as McLaren defines missional faith in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, “Jesus came to preach the good news of the kingdom of God to everyone, especially the poor. He came to seek and save the lost. He came on behalf of the sick. He came to save the world. His gospel, and therefore the Christian message, is Good News for the whole world” (110). Unfortunately, what counts as good news for those of us who align ourselves with discourses of evangelicalism sometimes seems
less good to alternative discourse communities, and much of that evaluation appears to pertain to strategies of evangelical subject-formation that set apart saved and unsaved, as well as those who practice evangelism and those who (supposedly) need it. The deconstructive work that I undertake in my previous chapters ultimately raises questions of authority—the authority to speak and to interpret texts—and I consider evangelism last in order to scaffold this thrust into other discourse communities with repeated assurances that faith depends not upon orthodoxy but upon layers of stories that believers connect through leaps of faith.

Feminist theorists like Scott assist us in seeing the ways in which our formative experiences (like conversion for evangelicals) do not exist outside of discourses but rather, depend upon discursive stories that make subjects (and that subjects make) meaningful. Experiences of salvation matter significantly to evangelical subjects, but we must remember that certain discursive conditions frame our understandings of salvation and its importance. As Scott, discussing gender without relation to religious discourses, says in “The Evidence of Experience” (1991), “[i]t is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (779). Or, as I apply such concepts to the “emerging church” throughout my document, the experience of salvation and the identification as evangelical produce each other in the same discursive moment. That such experiential subjects constitute and are constituted by discourses suggests that alternative discourses value and validate different experiences and different kinds of subjects. Though Scott refers here to social and political activism, the claim holds true for evangelicals serving as witnesses; if evangelical discourses recognize only one kind of salvation story, then how many other versions of God’s divine work in human subjects and cultures go unnoticed because certain discourses privilege narrow narratives? Placed in the context of my theological story (along with the “emerging” stories), Scott’s work implies that even non-
evangelicals might experience God, albeit perhaps not in the terms esteemed by evangelical discourse communities.

Too often, however, the distinction between evangelizers and evangelized relies at least as much on cultural values as on theological stories. “Emerging” author Tomlinson clarifies his position that missions, throughout history, package cultural and theological conversion as inextricably intertwined: “[i]n the past foreign missionaries often sought more than a change of heart from the indigenous peoples to whom they proclaimed the gospel; they imposed a change of culture on them as well” (45). Of course, Tomlinson’s point that colonialism and Christian (of many confessions) conversion often coincide in damaging ways is no secret today. However, Tomlinson also remarks upon the conflation of “Christianity with middle-class values” as detrimental to missional work. As Tomlinson asserts, “people who don’t identify with that [middle-class] culture reject the church and, in many cases, the gospel, too. And this doesn’t simply affect African or working class people; it also affects a whole stratum of people—especially younger people—who do not identify with the status quo of the establishment at all” (47). Tomlinson’s solution consists of relinquishing “religious taboos based on middleclass ‘family’ values” and instead committing “to that which is absolutely necessary and then leave the rest for people to decide for themselves” (55). As admirable as this statement is, it is difficult to achieve because faith works through cultural mediums, and, to disentangle cultural legalism from Scriptural mandates requires rethinking the relationship between Christ and culture as well as between Scriptural texts and the readers who make those texts meaningful.

Yet, as few writers in the “emerging” conversations explicitly admit, the “family values” rhetoric and conflation of evangelical theologies with middle-class culture that Tomlinson critiques carry significant consequences for United States politics. Theology
and culture intersect, as Philips easily identifies in his *American Theocracy* text, where he writes:

> [w]hat slowly became clear about the 1994-2004 decade was that different denominations, theologies, intensities of faith, and secularisms bred disparate viewpoints on issues such as abortion, family roles, prayer, the definition of marriage, and gay rights. Banners of the so-called culture wars for a quarter century, the salience of these concerns to fast-growing conservative Christian denominations, in particular, helped to make religiosity, biblical fundamentalism, and theology increasingly vital keys to U.S. electoral behavior.

(194)

Particularly for subjects whose discourses dictate complete deference to Scriptural authority and obedience to Christ, it is nearly impossible to extract religious faith from cultural values, and, as Philips here explains, such discursive viewpoints influence U.S. constituents. Further, Philips points out what he calls “five symptoms of fundamentalism”—a distressing and disrespectful label that assumes one type of religious faith is a disease in need of diagnosis and cure—that he defines as “a predilection to impose God’s will—the one true faith—on other peoples, an intolerance of dissent, and a central reliance on inerrant scripture for ideology and authority.” Calling these “symptoms” descriptive of Bush’s presidency after September 11 (205), Philips takes a clear stance that public professions of faith infiltrate culture in ways that are potentially destructive to democracy; in Philips’s estimation, it would seem, there is little room for this kind of relationship between Christ and culture in a democratic state.

In spite of the fair points that Philips levels against Bush, however, the author makes little effort to identify his use of the word “fundamentalism” or to recognize that his “symptoms” fail to apply to all “conservative Christian denominations” (another
undefined term). I argue that the “emerging church” serves as a primary space where people of faith ask deconstructive questions that mirror Philips’s critique and, throughout this text, I work to extend the “emerging church” as a site of possibility for equitable relationships between genders as well as evangelicals and non-evangelicals. Kaplan, in her text *With God on Their Side*, views Bush’s presidency as “an embrace of right-wing Christian fundamentalism” (4), without, once more, actually indicating what she means by any of these supposedly descriptive terms. Political coalitions—even those organized around a single candidate—require shifting alliances based not solely on identity-markers but also on collective desires, and many diverse groups within and beyond Christianity campaign and vote under the assumedly monolithic banner of the “Christian Right.” Authors like Philips and Kaplan provide important secular insights into the (sometimes frightening) religious rhetoric of U.S. political contexts, yet the kinds of theological stories with which they take issue are not the only theological stories available. The “emerging church” conversation turns critical eyes to the very foundations that form evangelical (gendered) subjectivity, asking those of us who take our faith seriously to also take seriously the tasks of deconstructing what it means to negotiate devotion to Christ with evangelical discourses and human cultures whose stories may differ dramatically. Although I have not yet seen any references to Bush in “emerging” literature, it certainly seems like the “emerging” conversations challenge the discursive certainties with which Bush builds his political base of faithful subjects.

Feminist theorist Nussbaum, in the 1999 text *Sex and Social Justice*, also provides helpful insight concerning religious rhetoric and its masked plurality. According to Nussbaum, we must remember “that the loudest voices in a religious tradition do not define the totality of its possibilities; that political actors use religious appeals as a vehicle for their own power, not always as legitimate attempts to capture the essence of the tradition in question; that all religions are plural and contain
argument and dissent” (115). Instead of disregarding religious discourses because of their faithful foundations, Nussbaum asks us to critically consider the motivations and multiplicity that pervade all discourses—including those of faith. Even religious discourses of fundamentalism and evangelicalism, which harbor great unity in central theological tenets, differ in both theology and politics, and, as Nussbaum so carefully reminds us, religious discourses and religious leaders alike are enmeshed in political contexts that may have little to do with the daily practice of faithful people whose voices simply go unheard. Just as Nussbaum destabilizes religious discourses by highlighting the uses to which religious discourse are often put, I ask critics of evangelicalism and evangelicals to embrace—or at the very least acknowledge—the internal diversity of religious movements. Neither I nor any other writer studying the “emerging church” can elucidate the totality of “emerging” theologies, but we can, as I do here, contribute new layers to complicate conversations that include overlapping stories of evangelical and “emerging” subjects.

Narayan, another feminist theorist who works outside of “Western” traditions, builds a similar argument in her claim that Hinduism, just as I argue for evangelicalism, is no monolith. Referring to “Western” criticisms of Hindu theologies, Narayan asserts, “[r]eligion’ appears in such analyses as a relatively unchanging body of beliefs and practices shared by all its adherents, rather than as a cluster of beliefs, practices, and institutions, historically constituted, traversed by change, and affected by interpretive and political conflicts about its values and commitments” (52). Narayan’s statement provides a useful approach for both critics and proponents of evangelical theologies; just as evangelical theologians struggle to define the core principles of evangelicalism because the movement consists of shifting coalitions and developing storylines, so too must its detractors keep in mind that even clearly defined confessions of Christianity contain (r)evolving traditions and multiple voices. We who
affiliate with the “emerging church” contribute to the din of cacophonous evangelical voices, but as in all theological stories, no single character embodies the whole tale—and, as McLaren admits in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, there are at least seven possible Jesuses, and, at the conclusion of my last chapter, I propose an eighth.

This sense of certainty that Nussbaum and Narayan critique, and that I work against throughout this document in urging evangelical discourses to displace universal truths with stories of gendered and embodied faith, links to desire for clear categories and hierarchies of meaning. Assuming that all religious discourse operates coherently allows for discarding the sacred in favor of the secular; I refuse such distinctions in preference of sacred and secular stories intermingling in complex stories of discourses that are always-already public, private, personal, collective, social, political, sacred, and secular. My emphasis on the intersections of these threads means that there is room for doubt and contradiction—within, beyond, and about religious discourses. This point relates to Altson’s discussion of knowing subjects in *Stumbling Toward Faith*, where she writes:

> slowly i began to see that their problem wasn’t with me or with my questions as much as it was with the inevitable (but never verbalized) answer: “i don’t know.” it was imperative that they ‘know’—even if that meant age-old platitudes grown hollow and insignificant through years of recitation. it was important that they ease concern and fears, that they comfort troubled hearts, that they clutch tightly to their faith, and the best way to accomplish that was to shut down all wondering insecurities, to shut down all doubts and disbelieving thoughts, including their own. (59, lowercase in original)

Speaking here about the imperative to know—or at least to perform as a subject who knows—within evangelical discourses, Altson offers two critical points: first, that doubt and uncertainty are authentic emotions in many stories of faith (and, indeed, the
Bible shows numerous instances of disciples’ disbelief and uncertainty; second, that disciples who refuse to admit not knowing work as ineffective witnesses who gloss over difficult theological debates with simple responses and who seem insincere in efforts to hide the gaps in stories that can only be told through leaps of faith. But, ignoring the chasm between God and theology does not make it go away, and, I maintain that a more effective witnessing strategy needs to account for the holes and contradictions, all the story elements where we whisper: I don’t know.

From Evangelist to Storyteller

No matter how many stories we tell or how much our stories overlap in telling patterns, faith—embodied and incorporated into narratives—always fills the gaps between what we hope for, what we know, and what we cannot fathom. Between God and theologies, there is so much we don’t know. Stories, told through mediums of human bodies and human languages, demonstrate the diversity and the inexpressibility of imago Dei. In her text, Altson describes the incompleteness of theological stories—a partialness she realizes as she reads her first gender-inclusive Bible. Through her literacy act of reading the gender-sensitive text, Altson forms this evaluation of her other Scriptural reading experiences: “the words were full of men and father, and the examples were always of men and fathers—but i hadn’t even noticed on any conscious level how the bible itself had excluded me. it was such a part of my life, of my memorization, of everything i was, i didn’t even notice” (155, emphasis and lowercase in original). Without new reading practices facilitated by the gender-inclusive Bible, Altson may not have realized the extent to which the image of an authoritative, speaking subject-as-male pervaded her positioning in evangelical discourses. Altson embraces this move of challenging discourses not only by including the gender-revised Bible in her story, but by writing and publishing her own narrative—thereby asserting herself as a gendered, embodied subject of faith with
telling stories. Once again, as I demonstrate throughout this document, an effective means of challenging discourses founded in texts relies on countertexts—and I layer story upon story to illustrate the contingencies and dissonances of evangelical discourses. Literacy acts are not necessarily emancipatory, but analyses and practices of reading, writing, and interpreting texts provide me with texts that disrupt discourses that exclude both females and non-evangelicals from speaking out as (faithful) subjects. Let Altson’s text, my text, and the “emerging church” texts stand as witnesses that testify the inability of discourses to delimit a God who transcends the human and the impossibility of human stories to move from God to theological stories without leaping through faith.

* * * * *

“Were you there…when they crucified…my Lord?”

Her voice, failing, lifts up the final faltering syllables as the fourth candle fades. Each trembling syllable hangs, heavy, like smoke hovering above a flame that won’t flicker and die. Her question smolders and singes my fingertips as I squeeze the wick and extinguish the fire for good.

“Were you there?” whispers the congregation, unaware that I slipped from my seat and forced this final darkness; I couldn’t take the flickering flame, the trembling voice, the incessant questions: were you there…were you there…were you there?

Can’t you smell where I am? I stink of incense.

* * * * *

Donald Miller’s 2003 *Blue Like Jazz* powerfully transitions from evangelist to storyteller, as he challenges what it means to be a witness for Christ. One of the central episodes in D. Miller’s narrative occurs at Reed College, an educational institution renowned for its affiliates’ liberal drug usage and promiscuity, where D. Miller and his associates set up confession booths. In the booths, D. Miller and
company agree to confess their own sins to listeners, asking the non-Christian seekers to listen to Christian confessions rather than the typically anticipated reversal of this scenario. D. Miller admits that these interactions change him and his faith—not because he asserts unassailable truths but because he took a leap of faith that positioned him as vulnerable but honest (125). D. Miller takes an unexpected approach that unsettles his audience (both listener in the confession booth and reader of his text) by disrupting the expected relationship between evangelical and non-evangelical, and while this strategy probably does not inspire instant recitations of the sinner’s prayer or dramatic lifestyle changes, it certainly plants a memorable seed of faith and love. D. Miller’s actions and D. Miller’s text work to change the subject of witnessing by telling different kinds of God-stories—stories that revise relationships between evangelicals and non-evangelicals by positioning both as seekers and storytellers. This text and this move surprise audiences precisely because they are so uncommon, yet D. Miller’s tactics seem to me not only more rhetorically effective (by not condemning the audience) but also more socially and theologically responsible by acknowledging that—at least from the perspective of evangelical discourses—humanity is always-already sinful. Rather than telling his audiences how to behave and what to believe, D. Miller invites listeners into dialogue and relationship that account for difference in the kinds of stories we tell and the kinds of storytellers we discursively validate.

Telling different kinds of God-stories is precisely the move Altson urges in her EmergentYS line text Stumbling Toward Faith, where she advises principles of revision to help evangelicalism “emerge” in postmodern contexts of faith. Altson advocates, “we must redefine what we mean by ‘evangelism.’ we must redefine what we mean by ‘believer.’ we must consider connection, storytelling, engagement, and reflection as necessary for our spirituality. we must become more human, more aware of who we
are, of who god is, of all that lingers within us, hiding underneath our unholy rags” (73, lowercase in original). In numerous “emerging church” conversations, writers return to the point Altson makes here—that we need to witness telling stories of God’s work, knowing that God’s work and our stories both contain the power to disrupt lives and catalyze radical transformations. Indeed, Altson’s statement falls into line with feminist theorist Davies’s stance on storytelling, where, in *A Body of Writing* (a text that does not deal with religious discourses), urges us to use narrative “to see freshly the images and metaphors and storylines we have become and to learn to read them against the grain.” Despite this exhortation, however, Davies realizes “the old storylines, through which old discourses are lived out, inevitably compete for our attention” (85). Both Altson and Davies, although they emerge from radically different discourse communities and theoretical positions, believe in the power of storytelling to sustain the status quo and (perhaps at the same time) to revise our life-stories in telling ways. Neither author offers certainty, but both offer hope, and if we invested in the “emerging church” shift our perceptions from evangelizing to storytelling—perhaps that transformation will be our most potent witness. According to Davies, we *become* storylines, and we need to read the stories we compose and that compose us against the grain in order to *emerge* from old discursive patterns; those old patterns, in evangelicalism, slot subjects into categories of “saved” and “unsaved” without regard for the complex network of narratives that sustain such distinctions.

Ultimately, I imagine revision as an act of witnessing. Through revision, I draw together storytellers, like Altson and Davies, whose texts testify the power of stories in holding together gendered and embodied subjects. Through revision, I offer testimony that new relationships between subjects and God, between gendered embodied subjects, and between evangelicals and non-evangelicals are possible—as both Altson’s and D. Miller’s texts affirm. Through revision, I return us to a sense of God’s mystery.
Through revision, I challenge hegemonic texts that inflexibly categorize gendered, embodied subjects of faith, and my text and I stand as witnesses that new stories—even if always mired in interpretations of and investments in old stories—can emerge.
Feminisms, Stories, Faiths: (Un)Tying Knots and “Emerging” Questions

The Rise of Religious Rhetoric

In the midst of preparing my syllabus for a thematic rhetoric and composition class entitled “Christian Rhetorics of Gender and Sexuality,” I learned of the Human Rights Campaign’s (HRC) efforts to thwart the proposed Federal Marriage Amendment Act (FMA). According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the potential amendment’s text reads: “[m]arriage in the United States shall consist only of the union of a man and a woman. Neither this Constitution, nor the constitution of any State, shall be construed to require that marriage or the legal incidents thereof be conferred upon any union other than the union of a man and a woman” (“Marriage Amendment”). Although this amendment’s text contains no explicit reference to any form of religious discourse (perhaps as a result of debates concerning the interpretation of the First Amendment), religious rhetoric pervades President George W. Bush’s administration; his consecutive elections and recent voting patterns indicate that faith practices influence—perhaps significantly—our current political climate.

In fact, Phillips (American Theocracy) describes Bush’s administration as “peculiar” in terms of “his salute from several religious-right leaders in 2001 as the national head of their movement and his seeming self-image as someone who spoke for God” (234). Additionally, although findings from the PEW Research Center gauge attitudes toward homosexuality as growing more accepting in 2006, with fifty-one percent of respondents opposing gay marriage—in contrast to the sixty-three percent opposition that peaked in the 2004 election season; the PEW survey claims that white evangelicals comprise the only demographic where the majority of voters reject gay marriage (“Less Opposition”). Despite the overall decline in opposition toward gay marriage recorded by the PEW survey, both Phillips’s text and the PEW results suggest
a unique relationship between religious rhetoric and politics based on the President’s self-proclaimed faithfulness and voting trends surrounding social issues that intersect with religious tenets and feminist concerns regarding gender and sexuality.

At least in these initial stages, the HRC successfully (undoubtedly, among other organizations) defeated the FMA, but this sequence of events heightened my awareness of the exigency of grappling with religious discourses and feminist perspectives through textual mediums. The HRC initiative, not surprisingly, focused on writing to legislators as a means of disrupting this amendment’s passage, and this fundamental assumption of writing’s potency correlates with my argument throughout this document: that literacy acts work as a means of performing and transforming discursive scripts, and that layering evangelical and feminist texts helps new stories for, of, and by gendered subjects *emerge*. Layering evangelical and feminist texts allows me to illustrate the intertextuality that composes subjects. And, I evangelical discourses to attend to embodiment and gender as important (but not determining) and asking feminist discourses to account for epistemologies of faith that make life meaningful for many (gendered) subjects. My assertion’s (and, subsequently, my document’s) uniqueness derives not from the theories I use but from the juxtaposition and application of theories that span disciplines and generate new conversations about the intertextuality of gender and faith across disciplinary lines.

There exists very little scholarship that draws upon the same three discourses in which I work: feminisms, literacy studies, theological studies, but I believe that overlapping these seemingly disparate conversations provides new insights for each discipline. The FMA uses text to compose and legitimate the kinds of relationships available for gendered and embodied subjects, and it seems likely that this initiative derives from a sociopolitical climate of religiosity that finds its foundations in conservative Christian theologies. By bringing together these three discourses through
an example like the FMA, I demonstrate the necessity of deconstructing and revising texts that (ab)use faith stories in order to deny human rights based on superimposing a rigid theological story onto embodied and gendered subjects who live different life-stories. My primary contribution is to feminisms, where I contribute a renewed interest in sacred stories and methods for attending to religious subjects—often disproportionately female—who practice gendered inquiry but lack, resist, or decline the label “feminists.” In addition, feminisms, so carefully attuned to differences, need to account for faith, spirituality, and participation in religious discourses as meaningful and (trans)formative for females all over the world. I provide a framework that takes seriously epistemologies of faith while still performing rigorous scholarship that locates gender as a critical component of subjectivity. To literacy studies, I build on decades of scholarship that links reading and writing with subject formation (and the reciprocal); I offer a perspective on how to revise discourses and discursive subjects by layering (seemingly) dissonant stories in order to expose the contingencies of all our stories as well as to pursue ethical stories of faith. I indicate that subjects—through literacy acts—can be both deconstructed and revised, and that when applied to rigid discourses like evangelicalism, literacy provides a means of oppressing and/or emancipating gendered, embodied subjects. To theological studies, I join the “emerging” conversations and seek to push the boundaries of this evangelical Protestant phenomenon to question the foundations and futures of its gendered subjects; I urge the “emerging church” to listen closely to my message of deconstructing gendered subjectivity because I both uphold faith and critique interpretive practices that deny the gendered diversity of imago Dei. In my final sections, I extrapolate these points, (un)tying knots and raising questions that stem from my work here.

Feminisms: Accounting for Faith
Within feminisms, my scholarship fits into the subfield of feminist theologies, and, even within that subfield, my scholarship remains on the margins because I work within discourses that rigidly define both gendered subjects and the nature of the spiritual. Evangelicals’ overt attempts to fix such definitions through Biblical interpretations and through prescribed gender roles relating to preaching, teaching, marriage, and parenting, (and, in evangelism, to impose these definitions on non-evangelicals) indicate that there is little room to maneuver in evangelical discourses. However, the “emerging church” functions as a site of possibility for engaging with feminism—though many writers refuse that name—and texts like those authored by Altson, Badley, Mathewes-Green, Campolo, and McLaren (in addition to numerous bloggers who address gendered issues) illustrate the emergence of a site of hope for gendered inquiry in evangelicalism. Throughout this document, I urge the “emerging church” to keep pursuing gendered lines of interrogation in order to develop subjectivities that account for the mystery and diversity of an imago Dei sustained by faith.

Feminisms, particularly feminist theologies, benefit from my efforts to merge evangelical and feminist discourses as well. Alexander asserts the need for feminisms to address spirituality:

the critiques of patriarchal religions and fundamentalisms have, in some instances, kept us away from the search for Spirit. We have conceded, albeit indirectly so, far too much ground for fundamentalists to appropriate the terrain. And yet, the Sacred or the spiritual cannot be deployed as the ace in the political hole, that is, deployed only as a critique of fundamentalism. (325)

With this passage, Alexander, though she also does not define “fundamentalisms,” develops an argument for feminisms considering the Spirit not only because more closed discursive communities take up too much of sacred ground (making it seem as
though feminisms and the sacred are incompatible, which they are clearly not), but also because the Spirit matters—not just politically but personally and socially—in human lives. As Alexander asserts a few pages later, “Taking the Sacred seriously would propel us to take the lives of primarily working-class women and men seriously” (328). Just as I articulate throughout this document that we need to respectfully engage with subjects and discourses of faith because faith serves as a (trans)formative epistemology, Alexander understands that dismissing spiritual movements too often means dismissing spiritual subjects as unworthy of attention or inquiry. By taking up questions of the sacred, my scholarship contributes to recent feminist efforts to wrestle with tensions, contradictions, and possibilities within religious discourses that effect gender and sexuality at the individual, collective, social, and political levels.

Wrestling with the sacred and taking the Spirit seriously in no way mean that feminisms can, will, or even should resolve the contradictions gendered inquiry highlights within religious discourses. Rather, feminisms need to acknowledge the multiplicity of interpretations not only of “woman” and “women” but also of “disciple” and “discipleship,” as I continually assert throughout this document. Strands of religions, just like strands of feminisms, are not monolithic but multiple, and my efforts to map the complex terrain of the “emerging church” and its perspectives on and implications for gendered subjects demonstrates that even within the seemingly inflexible discourses of evangelicalism, differences exist. My comments here coincide with what DelRosso concludes from her study of Catholicism and gender; according to DelRosso, “[c]ontemporary women writers acknowledge and challenge the limited rights and roles for women offered within Catholicism, their feminist literature crying out like a voice in the wilderness, calling for a dramatic change in our understandings of the power of both the Catholic girl and the Catholic woman today” (173). In her text, DelRosso troubles gendered subjectivity in Catholic discourses and calls for a
continuum instead of a dichotomous pitting of Eve’s sinfulness and Mary’s idealized virginity. But, as this quote from DelRosso illustrates, she sees power for female Catholic subjects, too, and as I continually assert here, feminisms need to recognize that religions—in theologies and practices—allow females to take up and be taken up by the Spirit in many ways. In one sense, Christian theologies provide a hopeful perspective for feminisms’ engagements with mainstream culture through understandings of the Fall and of redemption—two ideas that generate tension between the supposedly inherent brokenness of all human endeavors and the simultaneous faith in the Spirit’s transformative power. Females of faith live this story daily, and it holds telling implications for feminisms as well in exhibiting the possibilities of interrupting patriarchies.

Similarly, Susan Frank Parsons relates this tension between brokenness and restoration to questions of God and ethics in her essay “Redeeming Ethics,” published in 2002. As Parsons explains,

[t]he question of God is raised here too, for feminist ethics has sought to ground itself now almost entirely in the reality of a profound underlying network of relationships, manifest in women’s ways of knowing and doing, but revealing the divine intention for all things. That such relationships might be broken or restored, damaged or healed, is the guiding impulse of ethical behaviour. (218)

Parsons’s text appears in a volume (that she edits) entitled *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, and her pairing of feminist theologies and ethics parallels much of the work that I undertake in my document of establishing equitable gender relationships within evangelical discourses as well as respectful relationships between evangelicals and non-evangelicals. I argue, both overtly and subtly, for feminisms to consider and explore faith as an epistemology, and, within the lens of Christian theologies that position humanity as both inherently damaged and divinely redeemed
through Jesus’s incarnation, faith can become a site for feminist ethics. Throughout my document, I encourage feminisms to appreciate the meaningful and (trans)formative roles faith plays in females’ life stories, and, in order for feminisms to nurture relationships, feminisms need to account for females’ spiritual relationships within, between, and beyond official religious discourses.

Gendered subjects of faith and feminisms grapple with many of the same questions: what kinds of work are recognized and validated within patriarchal societies, or, for evangelicals, what kinds of vocations are available and appreciated within church communities? Whose voices—always embodied—garner (respectful) audiences and thus who gains and uses authority as a gendered speaking subject? What kinds of relationships—particularly familial, marital, and parental—achieve visibility and legitimacy, an especially compelling question considering our contemporary sociopolitical climate? While I do not always deal directly with the material conditions of gender within my text, the theories and theologies that I unpack influence real women in terms of these questions and concomitant issues of preaching, teaching, speaking with (divine) authority, heterosexual and homosexual marriages, parenting roles and responsibilities. All of these concerns intersect with both theologies and with feminisms, and for feminisms to respond adequately to the needs, concerns, and work of females of faith, feminisms must—as I demonstrate throughout this piece—respectfully engage with religious discourses as neither fully oppressive nor fully liberating but always deeply meaningful for gendered subjects of faith. I see the FMA (though it was only in its nascent stages as I began this project) as a critical site for my scholarship because it suggests an imbalance in discourses of feminisms and faiths that carries serious consequences for human rights and life-quality for subjects whose life-stories fall outside the validation of this legislation. The FMA does not explicitly mention faithful discourses, but its public appearance during George W.
Bush’s reign arouses my suspicion about its connections to evangelical assumptions about inherent gender and prescribed relationship roles; legislating faith and/or gender shows gross oversights that can be remedied by my assertions of the contingency of the discourses and the need to respect both faithful and feminist subjects (indeed, the two sometimes intersect) without coercion.

**Literacy Studies: Telling Sacred Stories**

As I indicate at the beginning of this chapter, I learned of the HRC initiative to defeat the FMA while contemplating how to negotiate issues of faith, gender, and sexuality in an advanced, first-year writing course I named “Christian Rhetorics of Gender and Sexuality.” The course takes a rhetorical perspective, and focuses primarily on contemporary conversations within religious discourses and does so through a feminist lens. I see the HRC initiative and the FMA as examples of the tension between democracy and religion in our current socio-political climate that can be, if not resolved, at least understood more clearly, through a feminist theological framework that seriously attends to faith, gender, sexuality, and the texts we compose to understand these overlapping discourses. I expect students in the course to bring divergent perspectives on all of the topics we discuss—religions, gender, sexuality, and feminism—and I assert the ethical imperative of taking seriously our students’ and our own (faithful) convictions in the composition classroom as a means of engaging in productive and provocative discussions that inevitably shape and are shaped by the U.S. climate of religiosity and burgeoning awareness of feminist concerns based on gender and sexuality.

A recent article in *College English* demonstrates that I am by no means alone in asserting the necessity of grappling with religious discourses in composition classrooms. I build on this body of scholarship and, in turn, contribute a feminist theological perspective to specifically inform the multiple intersections of composing
gender, sexuality, and theology—as the FMA aptly shows. These facets of subjectivity interact with personal and political stories in telling ways, as Anne Ruggles Gere illustrates in a collaborative (coauthored with Deborah Brandt, Ellen Cushman, And Anne Herrington) 2001 article entitled “The Politics of the Personal: Storying Our Lives Against the Grain.” Ruggles Gere discusses the difficulty of negotiating theological questions in academic contexts where secularism secures the status quo, asserting:

[coming out as a Christian or an observant member of any faith can be as dangerous as making public one’s sexual orientation because the academy has so completely conflated the disestablishment of religion (which opened the way for Jews, Catholics, and agnostics) with secularizing (banishing religion altogether) higher education. Those who wish to write about religion not only lack the highly complex and compelling language of, say, queer theory, but they confront an implacable secularism. (47)]

My experiences and scholarship suggest that Ruggles Gere’s point is both accurate and contingent; in my own speaking and writing as a person of faith, I meet resistance and accolades from students and professors alike, and, like Ruggles Gere, I work in a secular academic context where faith feels marginally present at best. At the same time, given our current socio-political climate and the seeming conflation of faith-practices (particularly conservative Christian faith practices) with right-wing extremism, it comes as no surprise that professions of faith meet suspicion in higher education. The same climate that provokes such suspicion within academia may render it easier, in some ways, to claim faith outside of academic environments—but this possible disjuncture between academic and non-academic cultures heightens the importance of dealing with religious discourses in the composition classroom.

Throughout my document, I intentionally use disruptive literacy acts along with a feminist theological framework to support the pursuit of ethical examination of
religious discourses that influence the way we live as gendered and sexual beings. I account for the intertextuality of faiths and feminisms—the ways in which these discourses intersect and compete for subjects—in order to address the complicated discursive networks that compose and are composed by subjects’ telling stories. In other words, the newness of my scholarship comes less from the individual ideas that I present than from my juxtaposition of disciplines that do not—yet need to—speak to each other. For instance, the FMA from an evangelical perspective propagates the Biblical narrative of marriage that begins in the Garden of Eden with one man and one woman. From a feminist perspective, the FMA limits human relationships and human rights based on rigid categories of bodies and genders. Ultimately, like all texts, the FMA relies on selections from and interpretations of other texts (like Christian Scripture). My advantage in pulling all of these texts together is to show the contexts in which such texts operate—as prescriptions and possibilities—in human lives.

Faith—within composition classrooms and beyond—remains a difficult facet of subjectivity to define, describe, and discuss, but the fact remains that faithful discourses contribute to subject-formation of students, teachers, and voters alike; to ignore issues of religion and spirituality elides the reality that we shape and are shaped by such discourses. My work moves beyond these texts in two key ways: first, that I employ literacy practices to deconstruct, revise, and disrupt hegemonic literacy practices by using creative writing as well as theoretical fields that, in conjunction, create dissonances to highlight each one’s contingencies; second, that my methodology mirrors the intertextuality of subjectivity with layers of stories and theoretical frameworks that contradict and compete for dominance, and in doing so, I respect and challenge both faiths and feminisms.

My contributions to literacy studies relate not to literacy acquisition (a major issue in the field) but to literacy practices. Moving forward from Freire, I assert that
reading the Word (in my example, the presumed Word of God) and reading the world reciprocally constitute subjects—who both read and are read by—the world. My exemplification of writing practices as interruptive and as crucial (along with reading and interpreting) to revising unethical scripts for gendered subjects demonstrates the importance of literacy acts for movements like the “emerging church,” where so much of subjectivity finds its foundations in texts and textual practices. And, my analysis of faith-filled texts and literacy practices speaks to the recent volume of scholarship on composition and religion, showing that faith influences literacy and requires investigation by teachers, scholars, and students alike. In particular, I present texts and counter-texts in a palimpsest that regards everything as text and all text as layered and situated within contexts of literacy acts that compose us (and are composed by us) as contingent storytellers. Building on the work of feminist literacy theorist Davies, whose work I use throughout this document, I incorporate faiths and feminisms as subjects necessary to reading, interpreting, and (re)writing texts like the FMA (and the discourses that spawn it) that limit human rights and human relationships based in particular reading practices.

Theological Studies: Composing Faith

Few authors in the “emerging” conversations openly address politics, yet the FMA likely derives from evangelical influences in U.S. politics (recall that George W. Bush attributes his conversion to famed evangelical evangelist Billy Graham). If nothing else, the FMA, like rigid traditional evangelical discourses, seeks to categorize gendered, embodied subjects and determine what kinds of relationships are acceptable—and to push those discursive formulations onto subjects whose life-stories operate in different discourses. But, in their co-authored text *Beyond Foundationalism*, Grenz and Franke seek to move beyond the foundations of the modern period, and, as these authors insist, “[t]he shaking of the philosophical foundations of the modern
period means not only that the rules have changed but also that the time is ripe to ask new questions about how theology ought to be pursued” (29). The “emerging church” conversations stem from this kind of thinking—that theological rules are changing and new theological questions are arising. “Emerging” from its evangelical Protestant background, this postmodern reformation movement is unlikely to completely depart from its discursive beginnings, but, as I demonstrate throughout this text, the “emerging church” does two important things for theology: first, “emerging” conversations indicate that variety exists even within seemingly unified and coherent movements like evangelicalism; second, “emerging” questions suggest possibility for reformation and revision of theological stories that oppress and exclude faithful subjects.

Thus far, authors who affiliate with the “emerging church” focus more on theologies than on politics, and my work destabilizing the fixedness of evangelical subjectivity and detailing the gendered implications of deconstruction moves outward into political spheres. There exists a story (probably many layers of stories) underneath the text of the FMA, and somewhere in the layers underneath the legal language, I believe, are the words “In the beginning.” I lay the foundations for going back to those beginnings and examining how texts from evangelical and feminist discourses alike intersect with gendered and embodied subjects. Future scholarship in the “emerging church” conversations need to address the sociopolitical implications of discourses that produce texts like the FMA—a text that addresses issues fundamental to evangelical and “emerging” gendered subjectivity by determining what kinds of human relationships are validated.

Back to (In the) Beginning
This is a story about God. It is also, because my words are the medium for this God-story, a story about me. What you see of God and what you see of me in this story will, of course, depend on what you’re looking for, but we’re here all the same.

Some people attend church seeking God and some people abandon church seeking God, but just as theology and faith are not equivalent to God, neither is church—not even the “emerging church.” All of these words work together, gaining meaning through relationship to and distinction from one another. God, faith, theology, and church all play a role in this story, but it is difficult—if not impossible—to extract these terms from the faithful context in which I tell this tale or to isolate one word from another because, well, we rely on each other for meaning.

My story relies on “emerging” stories and invests hope in the “emerging church” as a site of possibility for telling new stories and retelling old, old stories. Both my story and the “emerging” stories work together in frameworks of faith that imagine theology as always-incomplete and as always-contingent, and by placing my story in the context of the “emerging church,” I hope to gain an audience who takes seriously the gendered implications of leaping through faith: whose voices, whose vocations, whose relationships, whose stories reap discursive visibility and value?

I never wanted to be a preacher. I want to be a prophet. So, turn your chairs back around and listen to a prophet whose subjects are verbs—becoming fluid and oozing into the gaps and cracks in the stories we tell. This story is still an emerging story.
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