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Biblical women of influence: Feminine identities, imbued bodies, and intimacy among conservative evangelicals in the Ozarks

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Declaration of Own Work

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.
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Lay Summary

In the United States, a great deal has been written about ‘Christian fundamentalism’ and the ‘Religious Right’ but there is little consensus about whom exactly these terms refer to, because Christianity varies widely across the country. This thesis is about one particular kind of conservative evangelical Christian community, which can be found throughout the United States. These Christians are known for having large families, homeschooling, and integrating their faith into every aspect of ordinary life. They mostly worship in Baptist churches, and socialise within their churches and other homeschooling families. My research is based in Northwest Arkansas, which is an area of the American Bible Belt in the Ozark Mountains. When I started my fieldwork, I was interested in how young people in this community are prepared to get married and start large families. Through my time in Arkansas, I learned that having babies was central to Christian life, but it was only one aspect of how people lived as Christians. I began to focus my attention on women, and one crucial question that women seemed to grapple with throughout their lives: what is a true Christian woman? This is the question I explore in this thesis.

In this thesis, I aim to show how conservative evangelicals in Arkansas apply the Bible to everyday life, and how they think about differences between men and women. I make three fundamental arguments. First, I argue that the question of what it means to be a woman is very important to homeschooling conservative Christians. Second, I show that women address this question particularly at times in their lives when they transition into a new identity, such as wife or mother. Third, as women come into these new identities, they use different resources, but ultimately determine for themselves, how a Christian thinks and acts. They do not do this alone, but with the guidance of their Christian family, including God. By making everyday ethical decisions, big and small, about what a Christian woman does, women end up having a level of influence. They shape how people date, get married, share sexual intimacy, give birth, and struggle within this Christian community.
Abstract

This thesis is about Christian women. It demonstrates how embodied Christian gender is intrinsically linked to ontological architecture in the ethnographic context of a semi-enclaved, pro-natalist, homeschooling conservative evangelical community in the Baptist-majority region of Northwest Arkansas in the American Ozarks. As a point of departure, it presents the question woven into conservative evangelical orthopraxis and epistemology: What does it mean to be a Christian woman? In so doing, the thesis contributes to a better understanding of a facet of American Christianity that has yet to be fully characterised, often being conflated with other forms of mainline Protestantism. In order to understand the question of womanhood, the thesis explores emic preoccupation with pivotal feminine identities, and processes, or ‘moments’ of embodying those identities. Embodiment takes on special significance for conservative evangelical women, as it encompasses the feminine, sexual, and reproductive body, as well as the aegis of the physically indwelling Holy Spirit. The thesis approaches Christian feminine identities as cumulative rather than schismatic, forming a gestalt view of womanhood that cannot be distinguished from the conceptualisation of personhood. Furthermore, the thesis shows that, through moments of becoming identities, women consciously or unconsciously exert influence on ethical frameworks, thereby creating shifts in the habitus, or even the very ontology, of Christian life.

Moving beyond approaches to everyday piety based on ritual and disciplined action, the thesis offers an interpretive framework for ordinary ethics as it is interplayed with women’s spiritual discernment, intimate negotiation, and desire. Toward that end, the thesis demonstrates the ethical significance of intimate action, such as in the context of romance, sexual intercourse, and giving birth. Christian epistemology for wives and mothers relies on perpetual discourse, in the form of formal pedagogy, quotidian communication, and ‘discipleship literature,’ all of which offer strata over which women apply their own Biblical interpretation and embodied spiritual knowledge. Therefore, the thesis complicates analytical approaches to birthing, aiming to uncouple extant notions of authority from embodied knowledge. Finally, the thesis proposes to integrate the idea of failure into portraits of Christian womanhood, including patterns of ideologically cohesive failure that may be perceived as an additional feminine identity. Overall, the thesis endeavours to stitch together a quilt of identities that women create of and for themselves, ultimately engendering integral transformation.
A note on the use of scripture

In every instance where this thesis cites the Bible, it is to reflect a direct or indirect reference made in conversation, a Sunday message, Bible study and teaching, or a primary text.

Unless otherwise stated, the translation of the Bible I use is the King James Version (KJV). Although not every one of my interlocutors used this version, it was the most popular. Second to the KJV, the Bibles most often used for teaching and personal study were the New International Version (NIV) and the English Standard Version (ESV). While those who did not limit themselves to the KJV nonetheless approved of the translation, those who used the KJV exclusively were adamant that other versions were intellectually inferior at best, and tainted by the Enemy at worst.
Introduction

This thesis is about women. It examines a vital question for evangelical Christians in the United States: What does it mean to be a true Christian woman? The thesis presents three central arguments built around this question, as it pertains to conservative evangelicals in the Ozark region of Northwest Arkansas. The first argument provides justification for the thesis’s point of departure. Put simply, ‘What does it mean to be a Christian woman?’ is a question conservative evangelical women are immersed in throughout their lives. Second, the thesis argues that women embody this question through ‘becoming’ Christian feminine identities. Finally, this thesis proposes that in Christian projects of becoming, women influence the whole of conservative evangelical life and subjectivity.

In conducting research for this thesis, I frequently was reminded of the words of Lila Abu-Lughod in the opening of her book, Writing Women’s Worlds: ‘It is made up of conversations, narratives, arguments, songs, reminiscences, even an essay, that these women shared with each other or with me. I recall them here in a certain order with a very different audience in mind’ (Abu-Lughod 1993: 1). Similarly, much of the ethnographic content this thesis imparts comes from women, shared with me in their private domains, alone or with other women. They are the stories, personal histories, plans, well-meant advice, prayers, and frustrations of women who let me into their world, presented here in a far more formal manner. By addressing the question of womanhood, its relevance, and how it is lived out, my hope is to capture with these stories why everyday feminine worlds are important, not only as an aspect of American Christianity, but as powerful arbiters of identity and generators of change.

1.1 The Ozark Bible Belt

Northwest Arkansas is situated in America’s Ozark Mountains, in the state’s top left corner, bordering Missouri to the north and Oklahoma to the west. The region is officially comprised of three counties – Benton, Washington, and Madison – bisected by Highway 49, a
spine which connects a network of suburban towns running vertically along the map. The southernmost city is Fayetteville, home to the University of Arkansas and the surrounding historic city centre. To the north, a few minutes from the Missouri border, is the city of Bentonville, which boasts the international corporate headquarters of Walmart, Inc. and several Walmart distributors. The presence of Walmart as a major employer has set Northwest Arkansas apart from the rest of Arkansas in terms of economic development and population growth. Employees relocate from across the country, and increasingly from South Asia, shifting demographics considerably from the wider region. Bentonville and the surrounding towns along highway 49 – Rogers, Springdale, Johnson – are scenes of rapid suburbanisation encroaching on wide tracts of pasture land. The result is a collage in contrast: a five-lane road flanked by strip malls and fast food restaurants soon gives way to tree-lined, rolling green cow pastures, punctuated every few miles with a newly-built uniform subdivision, and occasional abandoned farmhouse. These routes amble through the rickety old Main Streets of small towns relatively untouched by Walmart’s development – Cave Springs, Vaughn, Lincoln, Avoca. Roads shift from pavement, to gravel, to dirt, and back to pavement, and one may find the way occasionally impeded by an escaped cow or a group of
vultures making work of an armadillo.

Figure 1: Map of the Ozark Mountain Range, by Jim Coombs, courtesy of the Ozark Story Project

Figure 2: the state of Arkansas
The state of Arkansas is part of the American Bible Belt, a geographic area roughly encompassing the south-eastern United States, known for its political conservatism and large Baptist population. Northwest Arkansas also sits within the Ozark mountain range, an area with its own distinctive history and cultural tradition. Northwest Arkansas’ placement and history gives it a unique character that captures traits of the South and Midwest, leading some residents to argue that it is not ‘really’ the South, or not ‘really’ like Arkansas. In the 1860s, and through the American Civil War, counties in north-western Arkansas supported the Union; however, after 1890, the Ozark region, and several others scattered across the South, began driving out African Americans living there (Loewen 2009: 32). From 1890 into the 1960s, ‘thousands of towns across the United States drove out their black populations or took steps to forbid African Americans from living in them, creating “sundown towns”, so named because many marked their city limits with signs typically reading, “N—, Don’t Let The Sun Go Down On You In ____”’ (ibid. 22). Unsurprisingly, by the mid-20th century, many, if not most towns in Northwest Arkansas had virtually no African American residents (Loewen 2005).

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1 This project is indebted in part to archival research by the Shiloh Museum of the Ozarks, for historical context of the Ozark region and local midwifery.
Today, Northwest Arkansas remains a predominantly white area, with some burgeoning migrant communities. The state of Arkansas is approximately 79% white, according to US census data as of July 2019. Northwest Arkansas Council’s Diversity Report (2018) charts how racial demographics have changed in the region since 1990. At that time, the total population was 95.8% white, with Native Americans being the second largest demographic at 1.5%, and a Hispanic/Latinx population of 1.3%. In 2017, 73.3% of the population was white, and while the Native American population stayed relatively consistent at 1.52%, the Hispanic/Latinx population increased to 16.5%. According to the Pew Research Center (2014), 46% of Arkansans identify as ‘Evangelical Protestant,’ and of those 90% are white. The churches and homeschool collectives included in my research were also predominantly white, and a sizeable percentage of the non-white people in the community were children and young adults adopted by white parents.

That being the case, this project might have looked quite different if it had been conducted in another Christian homeschooling aggregation elsewhere in the south-eastern United States, or even in another part of Arkansas, where racial and ethnic demographics of Baptist churches are more diverse. Ideas of whiteness as an aspect of Christian experience were not part of conservative evangelical discourse that I encountered in Northwest Arkansas, and questions of racial and ethnic minority experience within the community did not come to the fore enough to provide data from which to make many strong ethnographic claims. However, this does not suggest that race, in particular whiteness, was ethnographically irrelevant in this project. As scholars across disciplines have discussed, in many areas of the Global North, including the United States, whiteness ‘is a default standard; the background of the figure-ground analogy from which all other groups of color are compared, contrasted, and made visible’ (Sue 2006: 15). For Christians in this Arkansas community, the ‘default’ of whiteness was taken for granted – a seldom-acknowledged but palpable element of the metaphorical atmosphere we all breathed. It permeated ideas of beauty, modesty, proper behaviour, and family in ways that merit further investigation.

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2 census.gov/quickfacts/AR

3 For further relevant examples, see Bush 2004; Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2013; Nye 2019.
i.2 Scope

This section details the community at the centre of this project, and unpacks the overarching aims of the thesis. One of the challenges of this thesis was how to define its subjects, who on one hand live in an identifiable and locally recognised community, and on the other hand are purposefully difficult to describe.

i.2.1 Conservative evangelical pro-natalist homeschoolers

Here I explain why nomenclature around evangelical Christianity became a methodological challenge and how I arrived at a mutually acceptable collective identifier. Across disciplines, scholarly work on conservative and/or evangelical Christianities in the United States have tended to present phraseology for their subjects without expounding on the ethnographic nuances of local nomenclature (notable exceptions include Harding 1991, 2000; Csordas 2004; Bialecki 2008, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2017; Ingersoll 2015). Julie Ingersoll has observed that ‘studies of conservative Protestantism, evangelicalism, fundamentalism, and the religious right are plagued with difficulties related to language and terminology’ (Ingersoll 2015: xiii). She further asserts that the issue may stem from ‘a tendency to try to define a movement based on some central characteristics without recognizing that boundaries and identifications shift over time’ (ibid.). Ingersoll’s latter point was certainly relevant to conservative evangelicals in Arkansas, where rapidly developing events over the previous five years had created upheaval in how individuals and churches chose to relate themselves to nationally popular figures.

When I began this research, I understood American Christian pro-natalists as collectively identifying under the banner of the ‘Quiverfull Movement’, a term I had encountered in literature and popular media (Joyce 2006, 2009; Harrison and Rowley 2011; BBC News Magazine 2013; Denson 2013; McGowin 2016). Kathryn Joyce’s 2009 book, *Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement*, which aimed to explore a Christian pro-natalist movement across the United States, was one of the first works to inspire this
project. The Duggar family, stars of a well-known reality television programme and supposed ambassadors for the Quiverfull Movement, lived a short drive from where I stayed in Northwest Arkansas. However, by the time I conducted my fieldwork in 2016, several of the identified ‘leaders’ of the movement, as well as the Duggar family, were mired in various scandals. None of the Christians I knew in Arkansas said they considered themselves part of the Quiverfull Movement, or any other movement, and many denied they had ever even heard such a term. The disassociation may have exemplified the recent boundary work the community had been induced to, which is reflected further in the Methodology section of this thesis.

On the other hand, Ingersoll’s explanation that identifiers change according to shifts in cultural circumstance does not take into account conservative evangelicals’ broader antipathy toward terminology. Many of my interlocutors, including pastors of ostensibly denominational churches, preferred to think of and refer to themselves as simply ‘a Christian’ or ‘a follower of Jesus’. To them, these identifiers connote original and exclusive historic authenticity, as opposed to ‘watered-down’ Christian denominations that have developed since Biblical times. Pastor Spencer from Living Water Baptist, referring to an essay by 19th-century Baptist preacher JM Carroll, argued that Baptists should not be seen as Protestants. While Protestantism was ushered into existence in Europe during the Reformation, Baptists, according to Carroll, are the only Christians to trace their roots to the Book of Acts, with no adulteration or addition. Yet for some, even ‘Baptist’ was too restrictive a term to describe their personal faith, which was rooted in ‘personal salvation’ and ‘relationship with Jesus Christ’, despite the fact that most of the Christians I knew attended Baptist churches. In the course of my fieldwork, even the word ‘religion’, which I presumed must be straight-forward, turned out to be weighed down by subtext. This may be unsurprising considering ‘as Derrida insists, as soon as we adopt the word “religion” to designate our interest “we are already speaking Latin”’ (Derrida 1998: 29, quoted in Csordas 2004: 163).

Ultimately, ‘conservative evangelical’ proved to be a mutually acceptable descriptive, alongside ‘homeschooler/homeschooling’ and ‘pro-natalist’ (although people usually preferred the less fussy ‘pro-family’), and of course ‘Christian’. Although it took me
considerable time and negotiation to arrive at the term ‘conservative evangelical’, it is of course not new, and has been used to describe similar groups within academic literature, for example in the United States nationally (Stasson 2014), and in the United Kingdom (Strhan 2015).

i.2.2 Ethnographic and analytical aims

This thesis has several ethnographic aims, each centred around conservative evangelical women’s experiences, decisions, and narratives. The first, and broadest ethnographic aim is to detail the particular American Christian community at the centre of this research, and contribute nuance to the research landscape of the anthropology of Christianity. Following the many scholars of religion and Christianity on whose work this thesis draws, I further aim to present examples of theological interpretive discourse intermixing with everyday life, with particular regard for gender, the family, and the body. The main area in which this will be relevant is in the thesis’s exploration of the relationship between individual women (and occasionally men), Christian guidance or ‘discipleship’ literature, and women’s divinely imbued bodies. Because womanhood and everyday living are so closely tied to marriage, sex, and childbearing, a further aim of the thesis is to foreground Christian women’s sexual and intimate lives, which largely have been overlooked in research on religion, and in that vein to explore some areas that may have been considered ‘too intimate’ for qualitative study. The thesis aims to present these intimate experiences, and ordinary decision-making, or what Veena Das refers to as ‘everyday moral action’ (2012), as forms of orthopraxis that are primarily and necessarily domestic, in that they are simultaneously holy and mundane. Finally, the thesis explores how women engender social reproduction and change within their ontological architecture, first by mapping that architecture, and then identifying areas of women’s lives where foundational ethical formulations are subject to remodelling.

These ethnographic aims support the main structure of this thesis’s arguments around womanhood, identity, embodiment, and influence. Analytically, the thesis employs ethnographic research to challenge, or complicate, extant approaches to a number of ideas
related to gender and religious life. Rather than approaching conservative religious women’s experiences as explorations of agency or resistance, this thesis is concerned with the concept of ordinary influence, i.e. how the mundane decisions women make have a cumulative impact on the social forces that scaffold local Christian ontology. This runs parallel to the most prominent analytical argument of the thesis, which is that conservative evangelicals conceptualise Christian ethics as fundamentally rooted in identity, or, to be more precise, multiple gender-specific identities that proceed from the apex identity of the ‘true’ Christian woman or Christian man. In support of that argument, I present ‘moments of becoming’ identities as temporal processes in which women’s influence can lead to ethical change. Additionally, the thesis takes a different analytical approach to everyday piety, or ordinary moral action, aiming to take into consideration an ethnographic context where actors engage with ritual and tradition, but with a degree of discomfort. Embodiment takes on several layers of significance throughout the thesis, as it is tied to piety, identity, and discernment, foremost through the embodiment of divine presence in the form of the Holy Spirit. In the latter half of the thesis in particular, the thesis utilises theories of embodiment to unpack several aspects of Christian experience, including sex and birth. Furthermore, these later chapters aim to explore the complexity of concepts such as reproductive knowledge, authority, and failure.

i.3 Key themes

Each of the following chapters centres around a fundamental mode of Christian identity and aims to give an ethnographic picture of that identity. Running throughout the chapters are key theoretical themes that weave together these Christian identities.

i.3.1 Identities and moments of becoming

To examine conservative evangelical Christian womanhood in America, this thesis focuses specifically on Christian feminine identities. Furthermore, the thesis is structured around the ‘moments’ through which women come to embody core feminine identities – I refer to these as ‘moments of becoming’. Some moments are marked by life events, e.g.
salvation, a wedding, the first sexual encounter of the honeymoon night; others occur over time, such as learning about Biblical femininity in group study, or building a romantic relationship. Each moment joins others to form a project of becoming, with work done consciously or unconsciously to assume an identity that is essential to being a true Christian woman. I explore the local concept of Christian identities, and becoming identities, by asking the following questions: How is an identity formulated, and how do women in Arkansas understand their own processes of becoming an identity?

Christian subjectivity, or the identity of the Christian, has naturally been a major subject of critical analysis and ethnographic research in the anthropology of Christianity. Throughout this thesis I approach identities from an emic standpoint; that is, I endeavour to analyse identities, and consequently ideas of the Christian self, as my interlocutors saw them: not necessarily as fractures or challenges to self-identity (Sökefeld 1999, 2001; Strhan 2015), but as stages contributing to the fruition of the Christian person, to the extent that that is possible within a person’s lifetime. I begin with the identity of the Christian because, as other scholarly work has shown, becoming a Christian person involves an all-encompassing social and ontological change (Duncan 2003; Robbins 2003, 2012). Although many of the changes Christianity brings are intangible, and in the context of the conservative evangelical community in Arkansas the social changes may not have practical significance, the transformative identity of Christian is understood to be physical, to affect kinship and webs of sociality, and to be determinative of further identities.

The Christian woman, the identity at the centre of this thesis, proceeds from the identity of the Christian, and produces the identities that cascade from it in the life cycle: the wife, the lover, the mother. This is the pattern, the narrative discourse set before girls and young women (as well as young men) in the pedagogy of discipleship (Strhan 2015: 4). Recognising the disconnect between social discourse around ideal processes and the realities of quotidian life, conservative evangelicals also acknowledge the ever-emerging interstitial identity of the failure as an ethically consistent facet of Christianity. Some of the identities illuminated in this thesis are addressed directly in everyday narratives and pedagogies, i.e. the ‘public’ identities of Christian, wife, and mother. Others are spoken about indirectly, but I have
identified them explicitly because their emergence is no less of a preoccupation, and has no less of an impact, for conservative evangelical sociality, i.e. the ‘private’ identities of lover, and failure.

i.3.2 Ordinary ethics and embodiment

During my time in Arkansas I observed the conscientiousness with which women deliberated over right or ‘true Christian’ action in all areas of ordinary life. This was heightened around domestic and intimate areas of life, such as dating and romance, sex, and childbearing. For these reasons this thesis takes a particular interest in ordinary ethics and its relationship to embodiment. As this section will elaborate, the thesis follows Michael Lambek in not distinguishing between ethics and morality, nor does it separate the ethical from everyday practice. The idea of embodiment is not limited to phenomenological encounter, but is fully enmeshed with concepts of ethics, identity, and discernment.

Scholars of religion have proven that ethics is not an abstract subject segregated from practical living (see especially Lambek 2010, 2012; Das 2012, 2020; Mahmood 2012; Strhan 2015). Veena Das, for example, describes the ethical as ‘a dimension of everyday life in which we are not aspiring to escape the ordinary, but rather to descend into it as a way of becoming moral subjects’ (2012: 134). Ultimately this is the theoretical point of departure for this thesis, from which I propose to develop a framework around feminine identities as models for moral action. Das’s work in India describes everyday habit as moral action, and as such, she proposes an approach to characterisations of ‘habitual action’ involving a ‘shift away from considerations of individual agency and intentionality to the place where we see the individual within the flux of collective life’ (ibid. 140). In this thesis, I apply these basic principles – framing ethics as quotidian and collective – to everyday choices made by conservative evangelicals, and how they coalesce, or are ‘woven into’ ethical discourse (ibid. 139). In this way, the thesis presupposes that ethics is not limited to theological discussions of morality, or pastors’ messages, it is also situated in the everyday.
The idea that ethics is not limited to the individual, but is relational and intersubjective, has also been a subject of some debate, as Strhan notes in her ethnography of evangelical Christians living and working in London (2015). While some scholars have criticized approaches to ethics that focuses on subjectivity and intersubjectivity for being too restrictive (Orsi 2006), Strhan argues that such approaches, ‘do not necessarily entail the neglect of practice or broader social contexts’ but rather ‘invite attention to how the subjection of subjects takes place through practices in which forms of power inhere, leading to certain kinds of relationality, shaped by the conditions of human embodiment’ (2015: 75-76). From that point of view, understanding ethics as intersubjective allows for a wider scope for understanding the relationship of ethics to the body, or bodies. Furthermore, as this thesis will show, home and family are areas of life in which everyday ethics take on loftier social significance. The domestic realm is one in which stakes are high, involving intense struggles between good and evil. Therefore, Christian women, as the arbiters of the domestic, weave impactful ethical changes into community life over time. In this context, moments of becoming, including special life events such as weddings and births, are not separate to ‘ordinary modes of living’ (Das 2012: 139).

Scholars interested in ordinary ethics often draw from Foucault’s conceptualisation of ethics to interpret ordinary ethical practice in religious contexts. For Foucault, the production of an ethical subject involves relating the self to the self, with an emphasis on practical actions and what those actions achieve (Foucault 1997; Das 2012: 135; Mahmood 2012: 223). Foucault’s ‘modes of subjectivation’ is a conception of ethics that relates the self to a moral tradition outside of the self, with historically established systems of practices and prohibitions (Butler 1997; Rose 1998; Butler and Connolly 2000; Mahmood 2012; Strhan 2015). As an aspect of ethics, modes of subjectivation are rooted in work done on the self and for the self in order to ‘bring oneself into accord or alignment’ with the moral tradition (Foucault 1990: 29, 1997, 2005; Mahmood 2005; Das 2012: 135). Importantly for studies of piety and moral action, this view of ‘positive ethics’ is not simply concerned with obeying rules and norms, but considers ‘the practices, selves, bodies, and desires that determine (and are codetermined by) ethics’ (Colebrook 1998: 50; Strhan 2015). Therefore, the work of
forming subjectivity is performed through the substance of the body, and, as Foucault notes further, through mutual constitution with others (Foucault 1997: 225; Mahmood 2012: 234).

Mahmood explains that a prominent feature of the Islamic women’s piety movement in Egypt is ‘its focus on the minutiae of religious practices (rituals, liturgies, pious behaviour) as a necessary condition for the acquisition and expression of piety’ (2005; 2012: 227). In this context Egyptian women do not conceive of a separation between pious bodily action and inward belief, or the ‘state of the soul’ (ibid.). Accordingly, Mahmood proposes a practice-based approach to the analysis of ethical subject formation, which recognises ethics as embodied and relational. In order to undertake the question of what it means to be a Christian woman in Arkansas, this thesis proposes an analytical approach to ethics that is similarly inclusive of the body, and which views modes of subjectivation as concerned with action beyond obeying rules. However, as I have outlined, rather than focusing on practice, the thesis takes an approach that incorporates conceptualisations and formulations of identity.

One reason for this identity-based approach to ethics is tied to the complex relationship conservative evangelicals have to the ideas of tradition and ritual, two seemingly integral aspects of everyday positive ethics and pious action. In the United States, the evangelical conceptualisation of tradition is layered, and can have one of three different meanings. First, tradition may refer to basic codes of behaviour (Strhan 2015: 67), Biblical Law such as the Ten Commandments, or practices referenced in scripture that are understood to carry the weight of Biblical authenticity, such as communion and full-submersion adult baptism. Second, tradition is invoked as a catch-all when referring to American cultural practices and modes of sociality that were once normative, especially between the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries. Together, these two meanings incorporate much of the moral action that can be identified as ‘traditionally’ Southern Baptist, or conservative evangelical, including worship, group Bible study, homeschooling, childbearing, and the avoidance of sinful secular behaviour such as consuming drugs and alcohol. Certainly, Christian women perform pious work as part of their everyday lives. In addition to techniques of self-discipline (Fader 2009) around language, media, drugs, and alcohol,
women spend a great deal of their time engaged in pious activity. Like men, women attend worship; pray alone and with others; study the Bible alone, with their families, and in study groups; attend doctrinal teaching within their local church; perform occasional fasting; read [discipleship literature], and find sermons on the radio and podcasts as a form of ‘listening practice’ (Hirschkind 2006: 9).

The third meaning complicates an approach to everyday ethical subjectivation based on the above formulation of tradition, foundational as that formulation may be in conservative evangelical ontological architecture. In the common lexicon of denominational differentiation (Bialecki 2014), tradition takes on a negative connotation, understood as an arbitrary collection of ritual practices adhered to without question, by ‘religious’ actors who lack authentic spirituality. Friends in Northwest Arkansas often reminded me, in explicit terms, that they disliked semiotic and material forms of tradition and ritual. They warned against heavily ritualised and materialised modes of worship (such as the kind found in Catholic and Episcopalian churches) as man-made façades that risk obfuscating the truth of God.

This is relevant to a clearer understanding of conservative evangelical modes of subjectivation, and the idea of aligning with a ‘moral tradition’ because it raises several important questions: How can we speak of moral tradition in a context where tradition and ritual action are treated with suspicion, and sometimes opprobrium? What, then, does the work of subjectivation refer to, and to what are conservative evangelical women being brought into accord? ‘The Bible’ is too nebulous an answer, as scripture is always subject to interpretation, and presents a situational source or guide, rather than a culturally and historically specific model of subjectivity. Similarly, ‘the will of God’ is an insufficient replacement for tradition in this context, as its application is inherently individual and personal, not collectively prescribed. To address this question, therefore, in this thesis I consider a complementary analysis that frames the conceptualisation of the true Christian as the moral ‘artefact’ to which Christian women desire to be aligned. The woman as an ethical subject and the ‘tradition’ of womanhood are mutually conceived and constituted. This will
be fleshed out more in Chapter 2, as the thesis considers the ethical implications of historically prevalent Christian discourse around ‘true’ womanhood.

Throughout this thesis, ordinary ethics and pious action will be discussed in relation to the body, and the theme of embodiment will take on significance in a number of areas of Christian experience. Considering the many ways the body is discussed in anthropology, the thesis uses as a point of departure an approach to embodiment that incorporates an emic model with an analytical approach that draws from several scholars of religion. First, this approach takes from Thomas Csordas the complementary theory that the body is both semiotic and phenomenological, both ‘body as representation’ and ‘body as being-in-the-world’ (2002: 242). Asad, Mahmood, and Strhan have developed embodied theories in religious contexts that consider the body’s pedagogical interaction with the world, as it develops a particular religious habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Asad 1993; Mahmood 2005, 2012; Strhan 2015). In her work on evangelical Christians in Britain Strhan, for example, looks at ‘body pedagogic modes, such as listening to sermons that encourage individuals to experience themselves as simultaneously both a ‘sinful’ inhabitant of the present age and as belonging to the transcendent City of God’ (2015: 80). Strhan argues that this understanding of the body pedagogic is intersubjective, as actors shape and are shaped by others, as well as different types of spaces. In this thesis, one major way the theme of embodiment is presented is through discussions of pious action, or body pedagogy, in the context of everyday domestic and intimate action. As with ordinary ethics, I follow Strhan’s emphasis on intersubjectivity, which will become more evident as the thesis embarks on analysis of dating, sex, and birth in conservative evangelical Arkansas. The idea of intimate intersubjectivity as a form of the Christian body pedagogic will be particularly relevant in Chapter 4, where couples delineate holy action in negotiation with each other’s bodies and sexual desires, as well as pedagogical resources and ‘scripting’ (Simon & Gagnon 2003, 2006).

The other aspect of embodiment that will be relevant in the analytical framework of this thesis is the local conceptualisation and illustration of the Christian body. First and foremost, as Chapters 1 and 2 will detail, Christianity in this context is defined by the human body being imbued by the Holy Spirit, a phenomenon known as ‘indwelling’. The thesis therefore
refers to the Christian person, and the embodied experiences of Christian women, following the local ontological view of tri-part personhood. Pastor Spencer, the pastor of Living Waters Baptist Church in Northwest Arkansas, once showed me a diagram he used to illustrate the component parts of the whole Christian person, which I have reconstructed here:

![Diagram of the Christian self](image)

*Figure 4: Diagram of the Christian self*

I offer this visualisation of the embodied Christian person because it was offered to me, and it draws together some of the popular ordinary discourse about the body that people engage with in Arkansas. But as James Bielo’s (2004) ethnography of group Bible studies in the United States shows, it is not the only way to visualise the same discursive elements. In Bible study spaces, Bielo’s interlocutors often discussed tensions between the sinful and divine aspects of the born-again moral identity:

“The spirit exists in complete opposition to the flesh. It is the self committed to the Trinity of God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost. A life lived in the spirit is one that follows the model set forth by Christ. Just as the flesh is absolutely immoral, the spirit is absolutely moral. Mediating between these two selves is the heart. As the core of moral identity, the heart is the only means to change from being “of the flesh” to being “of the spirit”* (277).
In this context, which is in so many ways similar to the conservative evangelical community in Northwest Arkansas, the embodied self is visualised as divided and mediated by the heart, rather than Pastor Spencer’s nesting configuration with the Holy Spirit at the centre. Despite some semantic differences the two visualisations are not contradictory, as essentially they depict the same embodied ontology in which the Christian person inhabits a body capable of sin, but is imbued with physical divine presence that transforms the subject. This has interesting implications for the study of religion, in particular the notion of transcendence in divine encounters.

In Matthew Engelke’s (2007) work with Friday apostolics in Zimbabwe, he describes the Masowe Church’s relationship to divine presence. Like American conservative evangelicals, Friday apostolics ‘stress on the difference between a “material” and an “immaterial” faith, the latter of which is the only proper faith’ (ibid. 9). This is evidenced as well in the American Baptist ambivalence toward tradition which I described above, as Baptists cast suspicion on ‘traditional’ forms of worship that rely on imagery and materiality. Engelke posits the ‘problem of presence’ as ‘a core paradox of Christian thought’ in which religious subjects come to understand a relationship with God, who is both present and immaterial (ibid.). Scholars have addressed how Christians envisage their relationship with God in a number of ways depending on ethnographic perspective. In her work on charismatic evangelicals in Chicago, Tanya Luhrmann (2004, 2012a, 2012b) explores how her interlocutors form an anthropomorphised conceptualisation of God as a close friend and confidante. Strhan’s (2015) conservative evangelical subjects in London respond to God’s immateriality, and the doubt it can germinate, by cultivating communal transcendent practices that reinforce their faith. For charismatic Catholics, as Csordas (1997) describes, moments of prophecy, glossolalia, and healing exemplify the phenomenological presence of the Holy Spirit. Opas and Haapalainen also take an intersubjective approach to divine relationships, focusing on ‘the more intimate social relationships amidst which Christians live their daily lives’, and asking, ‘How does the presence of and relatedness with equal bodies, fellow-believers, affect the experience of the Christian transcendent?’ (181-182).
For conservative evangelicals in Arkansas, the presence of God in the person of the Holy Spirit was central to self-understanding of the born-again Christian subject. However variably it might be diagrammed, that presence was indisputably physical, although determining its materiality would be a matter of further philosophical and theological debate. Divine presence in its embodied form underwrites what it means to be a Christian person to such an extent that it informs all other aspects of subjectivity, including modes of becoming and everyday ethics. As the following section will elaborate, the embodied nature of the Holy Spirit is articulated by conservative evangelicals in terms of discernment, which in turn infuses ordinary decision-making with authoritative weight, and engenders women’s influence over everyday matters that leads to wider social change.

i.3.3 Discernment, authority, and the ‘paradox’ question

One of the aims of this thesis is to contribute to scholarly work on women’s religious agency that challenges what Avishai has termed the ‘paradox approach’ (2008: 412), a term developed from Bernice Martin’s coining of ‘Pentecostal gender paradox’ (2003). Scholars have often used this approach to wrestle with the question of why women are ‘supportive of religious groups that seem designed to perpetuate their subordination?’ (Chong 2006: 697), and has resulted in work that presumed religious women’s oppression or posits extra-religious rationale. Avishai provides a thorough rundown of what she terms ‘paradox responses’, including arguments that women strategically appropriate religion as ‘a set of schemas and possibilities for action’ (Sewell 1992). Such arguments conclude that women may act within religious schemas in order to resist or advantageously navigate latent patriarchal structures.

Principally, this thesis does not ask why women are conservative evangelicals. I align with Avishai in her assertion that ‘the emphasis on strategic compliance and extra-religious ends is inconsistent with the experiences of religious subjects; this frame does not acknowledge that women may participate in conservative religions in a quest for religious ends or that "compliance" is not strategic at all, but rather a mode of conduct and being’ (ibid. 412). In
pursuit of the central arguments of this thesis, it is essential to address, and dispute, one particular scholarly response to the paradox question, which Avishai dubs ‘noncompliance’.

‘… as they adapt their religion to the realities of their lives, women subvert and resist official dogma through partial compliance (Pevey et al. 1996) and individual interpretations (Chen 2005; Gallagher 2003, 2004; Griffith 1997; Hartman 2003). For example, Gallagher and Smith (1999) find a disjuncture between evangelical women’s symbolic adherence to doctrines such as male headship, and a pragmatic egalitarianism apparent in their choices about work, family, and child rearing (see also Gallagher 2003)’ (Avishai 2008: 411).

This thesis also elaborates the importance of gender and family life based on Biblical ontology, but turns that focus inward. Academic perspectives that focus on the political impact of conservative Christian discourse around family and womanhood have overlooked the everyday perspective, which better clarifies the fact that women in these communities engage with and live out those discourses for themselves, in ordinary practical terms.

From this point on this thesis will make no special mention of women’s agency in conservative evangelical Arkansas, nor will it frame the social change women help to engender as resistance to systemic authority. Instead, this thesis explores the theme of women’s ordinary influence, through everyday discernment and micro-negotiations. The perspective of ordinary influence partners with ordinary ethics, as I have articulated, and may be considered in the same vein as everyday acts of piety and moral action. This perspective takes into account the blending of the ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ in Arkansas – not only is no distinction made between ‘religious’ and ‘regular’ living, those areas of life that are often philosophically indexed as ‘profane’ – domesticity, dating, the carnal disorder of sexual intercourse and giving birth – form a ‘sacred’ realm of considerable interest to conservative evangelicals. Additionally, presuming women’s agency and influence in this context allows for the examination of significant moments in the ‘sacred domestic’ as particular sites of influence. Rather than emphasising the ritual aspect of piety through sacred rites of passage, and how it reflects Christian self-identity, exploring Christian women’s ordinary influence illuminates local emphasis on the processes through which Christians embody multiple holy
identities. In the case of marriage, for example, in a religious context where the ritual value of the wedding is downplayed, using ordinary influence as a point of departure opens space to explore how a young woman becomes a Christian wife via discernment of romance, negotiation with her groom, and preparation imparted by other Christian wives.

Several scholars of American evangelical life (in particular Sally Gallagher and Anneke Stasson) have presented the notion of authority as bound to gender roles and the ideology of male headship in Christian families. However, as will become evident throughout the thesis, an approach based on men’s authority does not necessarily capture the scope of its implementation in ordinary life. Julie Ingersoll makes note of the conservative evangelical assertion ‘that the question of authority is at the root of every issue, every conflict, and every institution’ (2015:11). This thesis shows that the notion of authority is important to women’s lives and identities, in the form of headship, but also in other iterations, and in conjunction with the equally important task of discernment. James Laidlaw has argued that subjectivation – the curation of the ethical self – is not simply a matter of habituation, but requires agency and deliberation (Laidlaw 2014; Mattingly 2014). I have already made clear that this thesis presupposes conservative evangelical women’s agency, and seeks to explore how modes of subjectivation are subject to critical engagement, of which the question of authority is a part. At crucial ethical moments women must determine whose authority, and over what, takes precedence. Laidlaw has been critiqued for putting too much weight on pedagogical deliberation in everyday ethics (Mattingly 2014: 479), but I contend that his argument is supported in this ethnographic context, where a flattening of the sacred and profane renders mundane matters ‘structurally significant’ (Laidlaw 2014: 5) and deliberation is therefore folded into all aspects of life.

This was made clear to me one afternoon by my friend Missa. As a former beauty stylist, Missa was generous with her talents now that she had transitioned to staying at home

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4 In the churches where my fieldwork was centred, male headship applied to church bodies as well as households, meaning women did not serve in positions of ecclesiastical leadership and did not preach. Exceptions, as will be shown in discussions of feminine spaces, included women-only study groups and events, where women acted as teachers and speakers, and led discussion and prayer.
with her young daughter full time, and ladies from her church often arranged haircuts or
eyebrow waxes with her. On the afternoon I visited Missa she was in typical perfectly put-
together form, even in her casual at-home attire of skinny jeans, a loose button-down top,
and flip flops. I had come to have my hair cut, and take the opportunity to spend more time
getting to know Missa one-on-one. We had arranged the timing to coincide with her
daughter, Faith’s, nap, so that Missa could work and we could talk without distraction. When
the coiffing was done and Faith still had not woken up, Missa took me into her bedroom to
show me the ornaments she had been creating for the local craft fair that autumn.

Missa was known for being earnest and forthright, qualities I had always admired
about her. In her bedroom her tone shifted from breezy to serious as she said to me, ‘There’s
actually something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about, and I hope you don’t mind’. I
knew at that point that our relationship had grown close enough that she was about to
question me quite frankly about my relationship with God and His Word.

‘So, you’re Catholic, so what does that mean about how you believe scripture?’ she
asked. Missa presumed, not unfairly, that Catholics do not have the same view of the Bible as
literal science and history, and do not engage in daily personal study. She was concerned that
I was not listening to the right authoritative voice, and unwittingly putting distance between
myself and the Lord.

‘What happens’, she elaborated, ‘is you listen to the priest’s interpretation of God’s
Word, so you’re relying on man and not God to tell you what’s true. I really want to
encourage you right now to sit down every day with your Bible and read, and listen, so you
really know for yourself from God’s words, not a man’s’. Missa attended church twice a week,
attended Sunday School and participated in Bible studies, but all of that would be
meaningless if she did not do the personal work of discernment that comes from reading the
Bible alone with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

In Arkansas, pedagogy around evangelisation is a key part of quotidian moral
discourse. In order to evangelise effectively, to convey the truth of the Gospel convincingly
and accurately, a Christian must be able to discern scripture and the will of God. Pastors,
preachers, teachers, and husbands (to wives and children) impart correct scriptural
interpretation and rhetorical argument, but this pedagogy comes with the caveat that all matters must be approached through individual prayer, and assessment of God’s answer to that prayer. Through this process the Holy Spirit gives the individual Christian a level of moral authority that increases with time as she grows in ‘maturity’.

These themes explained above – identity, moments of becoming, ordinary ethics, embodiment, discernment, and authority – are all analytical categories that will very much intertwine throughout the thesis. The thesis will also touch on themes, ethnographically or analytically, that have been prevalent in current anthropological literature on Christianities.

i.4 Literature background and contribution

Each chapter within this thesis covers a Christian identity, each with multiple dimensions. Therefore, it was necessary for literature related to these dimensions to cover a range of topics within the social sciences, inclusive of the primary ethnographic aims of the thesis. As I have mentioned, this research was conducted in Arkansas, in the south-eastern United States. It therefore is part of growing anthropological literature on the American South (Heyrman 1998; Blanton 2015; Hayes 2017; Smith 2017; Wilson 2017). Because the project centres so strongly around everyday domestic life, these topics encompassed multiple facets of kinship. In addition to foundational work on contemporary forms of relatedness (Carsten 2000; Franklin & McKinnon 2000; McKinnon et.al. 2013), recent developments in the study of kinship have expanded analytical views of marriage as it relates to religion (Sturm 2002; Amato 2009; Peters & Kamp 2009; Frahm-Arp 2012, Avdela 2020; Novis-Deutch 2020). The study of reproduction has also offered fertile ground for contextualising the politics of pro-natalism and other reproductive strategies (Ginsburg & Rapp 1995; Roberts 1997; Childs & Barkin 2006; Krause & Marchesi 2007; Sargent 2009; Tuttle 2010; Pauli 2012). Within the thesis kinship is diffuse and omnipresent, having been articulated in some form or another in every facet of this project.

This thesis is situated within relatively emergent work on the anthropology of Christianity, particularly in the West. Work on Christianity in the social sciences has
explored a wide variety of ethnographic contexts, and recurrent themes that have influenced the shape of this project. In the fields of politics, history, sociology, and religious studies, authors have looked at the relationship between Christianity and the American political and historical landscape (Hackworth 2012; Nilsson 2012; Schäfer 2013), often noting the political influence conservative evangelical Christians have had on law and policy. The plurality of Christian communities in the United States has been well established, by anthropologists and religious studies scholars investigating forms of evangelicalism such as the Prosperity Gospel (Bowler 2013), Southern Pentecostal (Blanton 2015), liberal evangelicals (Swartz 2012), and the Vinyard in California (Bialecki 2017). More broadly, Bialecki (2014) and Bielo (2004, 2009, 2018) have done valuable work on Christian denominationalism and ideological boundaries.

Further influential themes within the anthropology of Christianity have included manifestations of Christianity within certain types of space, and Christian imaginings of particular spaces, including urban and secularised spaces (Strhan 2012a, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014) and American Christian tourism (Bielo 2018; Kaell 2014). Especially in evangelical traditions, scholars have addressed the complex themes of presence, immateriality and materiality (Engelke 2007; Blanton 2015), as well as visual culture (Meyer 2015). Additionally, noteworthy research has delved into areas such as the role of the Bible in American Christian life (Juzwik 2014; Goff et.al. 2017); the unseen dangers in the American Christian ontology, such as spiritual warfare (Maggi 2014; McCloud 2015); the positive role of the Holy Spirit in everyday life (Haynes 2016); and the everyday social tangles created by religious doubt (Webster 2013; Fader 2020).

Within the anthropology of Christianity scholarship has been devoted to the theme of gender, particularly in the study of global Pentecostalism. This thesis strongly adheres to a claim posed by Klassen and Lofton that ‘Christian identity is inextricable from gender identity’ (Klassen and Lofton 2013: 52). That being said, a great deal of recent work on themes related to gender and religion has been valuable in framing my approach to gender. These include studies of women and femininity in religious traditions (Thomas 2013; Klassen and Lofton 2013; Agadjanian and Yabiku 2015); the difference Christianity makes: to ideas of
reproduction and sexuality (Bochow and van Dijk 2012; Frahm-Arp 2012; Pauli 2012); to
gender relations and identity (Martin 2003; Attanasi 2013; Bonnemère 2016; Eriksen 2016;
Burchardt 2017); and to experiences and agency (van de Kamp 2012; Agadjanian and Yabiku
2015; Kupari 2016). The thesis has also relied on literature that explores masculinity (van
Klinken 2012; Presterudtuen 2015; Thornton 2013, 2016), and specifically the idea of male
homosexuality as anathema to Biblical masculinity (van Klinken 2011).

As part of this project’s interest in everyday religion (Smith 1987; Ammerman 2007; Das
2010; Schielke & Debevec 2012) and intimacy (Gabb 2008; Mayblin 2014; Besnier 2015;
Schlikohlu & Zengin 2015), it uses research on methods and analytic frameworks from work
on sexuality in American Christianity. Research in this area has recently explored Christian
sex advice books (DeRogatis 2015), digital spaces (Burke 2016); and ‘event ethnography’ of
discourse in Christian conferences (Warner-Garcia 2018). Deviating from more public
expressions of experience, the thesis approaches sexuality from an everyday standpoint that
privileges women’s narratives shared in women-only settings.

Of the many examples of ethnographic work that have informed this thesis, a few were
especially influential. Ayala Fader’s Mitzvah Girls (2009), and Saba Mahmood’s Politics of
Piety (2005) examine religious women’s disciplined pious action in two very different
settings. Mitzvah Girls follows women’s and girls’ experiences of learning techniques of self-
discipline around dress, language, ritual, and other techniques of the self in an Ultra-
Orthodox community in Brooklyn, New York. Like conservative evangelical women,
pedagogy for Hasidic Jews often centres around everyday domesticity, such as child-rearing
and supporting one’s husband, and takes on special significance in times of transition such as
getting married. Although Jewish women’s everyday ethics is bound to ritual action, it is also
similar to conservative evangelical ethical living in its conscientiousness. In Politics of Piety,
Mahmood explores the power of women’s quotidian ritual action in the Egyptian piety
movement. Her theoretical approach looks at women’s ordinary piety through Aristotelian
and Foucaultian ethics, showing that the notion of subjectivation entails much more than
following rules, and that techniques of the self can shape community as well as individual
subjectivity.
Anna Strhan’s *Aliens and Strangers* (2015), an ethnography of conservative evangelicals living and working in London, also deals with everyday ethics, and intersubjectivity, as Christians strive to live ethical lives through collective processes, in a secular world. Strhan’s approach has inspired how this thesis explores Christian intersubjectivity, as an important aspect of conservative evangelical womanhood. Finally, James Bielo’s *Words Upon the Word* (2009) is an analysis of Christian Bible Studies in the United States, which this project has used to understand the value of paying close attention to discourse, and how sacred text is worked into the most minute aspects of Christian ethics. Each of these ethnographies has helped to organise the mosaic of data on women’s worlds that this project yielded.

i.5  Project

i.5.1  Method of selection

Identifying interlocutors, i.e. local churches and para-church groups with members and leadership who fit the description of conservative evangelical pro-natalist homeschoolers, was largely a process of self-selection. Initially I contacted and visited churches that advertised as ‘local’, ‘family-centered’, and sometimes Independent Baptist churches, who emphasised belief in the ‘literal Word’. Once introductions had been made I met one-on-one with pastors at their church or in their homes to explain my research, which I described preliminarily as ‘an exploration of homeschooling, pro-family/child Christians, and how they build families’. I stayed/persisted with churches where I built trusting relationships with leadership and made friends with members. In the case of two churches this was straightforward – Hopewell Baptist and Pathway Fellowship were both openly and consistently welcoming at every level of leadership, and I made many close friendships easily. A third church, Living Water Baptist, welcomed me with more reticence. The pastor and several elders were enthusiastic about my work, but others showed little interest, and addressed me only in the presence of my husband. I made a small number of friends, all of whom were well known and active in the church. I was more apt to make mistakes
unwittingly at Living Water, and at least one parishioner made overt efforts to stop me carrying out research.

Other area churches were mixed in their view of me and my work. Early on, I was asked never to return to a church in Fayetteville because of their concern that I had ignoble motivations, and that I posed a threat to some of their members (Duggar children). Early on in my research, rumours circulated in the Christian homeschool community via email and text, warning that I was a tabloid journalist, and a lesbian. Luckily, the email was accompanied by a link to my university online PhD student profile page, which to many people was adequate proof that I was who I said I was. About halfway through my fieldwork a new parishioner at Living Water Baptist, who also worked at a local 'Christian law firm', attempted to extract information from me about my interlocutors in church leadership, including contact information. When I refused, he intimated that he would be galvanising local pastors to put a stop to my research. I do not know to what extent he acted on his threat, and nothing materialised from it that I was aware of. It did however draw me closer to some members at Living Water, who objected to this man’s insistence on addressing me without my husband’s knowledge. It also deepened my friendships with Pastor Rex and his wife Helen of Hopewell Baptist, as it prompted Rex to informally appoint himself my counsel and protector in my husband’s absence. He strongly advised me to stop attending Living Water, with which I ultimately complied.

Mainly, my interaction with area churches was not at all dramatic or eventful. When possible, I used the mutual acquaintance of a friend, with permission, to introduce myself to the pastor of a church, meet with him, and tell him about my research. On other occasions, I attended a single service, introduced myself to the pastor afterward, and left my card. This was done with no further expectation on either side, as my intention was only to make myself known in the local Christian homeschooling community. In one case, I met with a youth

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5 The legal services of self-identified Christian law firms are no different from any other firm. They advertise to potential clients that the lawyers they employ are Christian, and that they take on work from local churches and Christian individuals. This is a more deliberate form of the very common word-of-mouth advertising for other local Christian professionals, such as mechanics, contractors, and private tutors.
pastor and his wife to speak with them specifically about their bold approach to Christian sex education, but otherwise had little interaction with that particular church.

i.5.2 Positionality

At the time of my fieldwork, I was newly married (but away from my husband), in my early 30s, and without children. As a white woman with a Midwestern American accent, living in a foreign country, and having never lived in Arkansas or the South before, people sometimes found me hard to ‘place’. Many of the people I knew did not think I was an American citizen or that I could vote in American elections. Many thought of me as living in a ‘socialist’ country (the UK), and although I tried to keep my politics to myself, people tended to presume I was liberal, perhaps because I did not voice conservative opinions. I would tell people, truthfully, that I supported homeschooling. I was most commonly asked, ‘Are you a Christian?’ and ‘Do you plan to homeschool your children?’ to which I responded that I was Catholic, and that I did not.

In the process of settling into my social sphere, those who did not feel comfortable with my presence (especially men with some form of church authority) were sometimes explicit about their reasoning: I was not saved (in their opinion), and they did not believe I had sincere interest in joining their church community, so I had no business intruding on their exclusive space. Supporting this opinion with scripture, one agitated elder told me, ‘The path is narrow, and very few will actually enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I’m on that path, and as far as I’m concerned, you’re not’. He was referring to a passage from Matthew:

‘Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat. Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it’ (Mt 7:13-14).

Those who chose to befriend me, and welcome me to church (whether they wanted to be involved in the project or not) were disapproving of other churches’ outright rejection of me as an outsider and researcher. These friends also made their reasoning explicit, citing
God’s call to evangelisation: they saw it as their duty to be hospitable, encourage my interest and desire to learn about the Bible and Christian life, and guide my knowledge so that my portrayal of them would be ‘accurate’. Several people told me that ‘no true church should have anything to hide’.

However, it would not be accurate to assume my interlocutors formed relationships with me that were motivated solely by a desire to evangelise. For one thing, although I am Catholic (a religious tradition considered a ‘broken’ form of Christianity), most accepted that I was saved because that is how I identified myself to them. This was helped, I suspect, by the fact that I am a convert and therefore was baptised as an adult. I took communion during worship if the church rules allowed non-members to partake, and I was always understood to be worshipping with the church, rather than observing worship. My friends understood my husband Keith (who describes himself as a non-religious agnostic) as unsaved, and never minced words around him on the topic of salvation, but also recognised that he was there to learn and participate. During teaching sessions and services, Keith pored over the relevant text – whether it was the Bible, a doctrinal guide, or a worksheet on managing finances in a Biblical manner – and took his own notes. My friends reasoned that if they demonstrated Christian life and shared their knowledge with Keith, they were fulfilling their evangelical responsibility toward him. Likewise, if people read my writing about Christian life and family, they might find it encouraging, and that alone could lead people to salvation. To say my interlocutors acted out of a desire to convert me overlooks their other potential motivations, and the friendships we developed.

There was also the issue of my perceived vulnerability, which itself became a motivation for my friends to ensconce me in the community. As an unfamiliar researcher alone I presented to many of them as potentially a dangerous Other, superficially indistinguishable from familiar dangerous actors, i.e. ‘the reporter’. People who saw me that way understandably rejected the idea of participating in any kind of research, and did their best to avoid me. On the other hand, as a foreign woman in a foreign land, married but without my husband present, many saw me as deserving of their hospitality and protection. This was most evident in my relationship with Pastor Rex and Helen. Therefore, I maintained
a complex positionality, between child and adult, being protected and protected against. One could attribute the attitude to a patriarchal mind-set, but it was also re-enforced by allusions to the Bible, especially Deut.10:19: ‘Love ye therefore the stranger, for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt’.

i.5.3 Everyday methodology

For the duration of my fieldwork, I lived in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where I rented rooms in two different houses, both near the University of Arkansas campus. I had my own car, which was essential, and made it known early on that I would not shy away from car journeys to attend church and visit people in their homes. People began to easily recognise my car due to its Illinois license plates, which became a convenient way to start a conversation about my family in Chicago. I made connections with the University of Arkansas Department of Anthropology, and was granted ‘Visiting Researcher’ status – this was an informal title, but helpful in explaining myself to interlocutors. A few of the interlocutor friends I made during fieldwork lived in Fayetteville, as it tended to be a popular place for young couples to rent starter apartments, and a small number of young adult friends lived in student accommodation there, because they attended University of Arkansas. Fayetteville was not the preferred area for a Christian family to live, according to my interlocutors, due to its ‘liberal’ reputation, higher taxes, bars, and an abundance of university student housing. Because of my affiliation with the university, it made sense to my friends that I would live near the university, with another woman, during my stay in Arkansas. However, they would have been concerned for me if I had lived on my own, and likely very uncomfortable if I had lived with a man who was not my husband.

I did not live with a Christian family during my time in Arkansas. Aside from young missionaries, my interlocutors saw the prospect of having a virtual stranger living with them and their children as highly unusual. Families tended to be close and insular, and the protection of children’s safety and educational routine was heavily guarded. The idea of taking a researcher such as myself in as a surrogate ‘daughter’, without prior connection to
her family, was not something they would consider. Once it was established that I had my 
own accommodation, the families I knew saw no reason why I would choose to leave it unless 
I had to for some reason. That said, I did receive several invitations to stay short-term with 
families in the event that I needed somewhere to stay. When I returned for a follow-up visit in 
January 2018, I stayed with one of the families I had grown close to, perhaps because their 
children were older, and homeschool education was more self-directed. During that visit I 
bunked in with the daughters of the family, who were teens and young adults.

My social interaction throughout fieldwork in Arkansas was tied mainly to two 
churches whose members had close social ties to one another – Hopewell Baptist, and 
Pathway Fellowship, as well as Living Water Baptist, whose members occasionally mixed with 
the other two. Most of my interlocutors, but not all, were members of these churches, and 
lived within Benton and Washington Counties. Others were connected to a local area 
Arkansas Christian Homeschool Co-operative (ACHC), where families could bring their 
children a few hours each week to participate in enrichment classes. For one semester of the 
ACHC school year, I taught a weekly chess class, and regularly sat in on a class for teenaged 
students about conservative political thought in America.

The three churches that formed the foundation of this research varied slightly in 
denomination, but fell along what may be referred to as the Baptist spectrum, meaning they 
could all be identified as Baptist, but had different institutional ties, and varying degrees of 
comfort with denominational affiliation in general. They were relatively small, autonomous, 
or ‘local’ churches, meaning authority rested with the male leadership of each individual 
church, including the pastor, although each had ties to wider Baptist organisations such as the 
Southern Baptist Convention for the purposes of supporting evangelical missions. For 
example the pastor of Living Water Baptist, Pastor Spencer, had no qualms about identifying 
the church as ‘Independent Fundamental Baptist’, indicating their affiliation to the 
Independent Fundamental Baptist Mission⁶.

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⁶ https://www.fbm.org/
My time in Arkansas was filled with a rich weekly schedule of church (Sunday mornings and evenings, with fellowship lunch in between, as well as Wednesday evenings), Sunday School, Bible Study, and visiting. I spent a good deal of time driving, most often up and down Highway 49, the perpetual expansion of which made traffic a popular topic of conversation. My social time was split between the ‘mom’ crowd, comprising women between the ages of 20 and 50 who were married and had children, and the ‘young adult’ crowd, made up of single men and women between the ages of 18 and 25. As a married woman without children, and undoubtedly as a self-described outsider, I seemed to fit somewhere in between the two groups. Interestingly, as Chapter 3 will touch on, these social circles were far from siloed, and easily enmeshed for parties and church social events.

Finally, clothing and personal presentation were something I took into particular consideration. At church, I erred on the modest/conservative side. I always wore dresses that ended at least past my knees, covered my shoulders and collar bone, and did not wear heeled shoes. For about the first half of fieldwork, I maintained this style of dress whenever I saw or might see interlocutors. Toward the end of my fieldwork (which happened to be winter), I relaxed my dress a little and sometimes wore feminine slacks to church. I tended to dress more casually and less overtly feminine when in the company of only women, usually in jeans and a t-shirt or leggings and a tunic, which matched my friends’ casual styles at home. My bathing costume consisted of short athletic shorts and t-shirt over a sport vest or two-piece swimsuit.

In general, the rhythm of life in the Northwest Arkansas Christian homeschooling community was set by the metronome of worship, Bible study, caring for children, and visits among women. Friends sometimes joked that I lived ‘like a homeschool mom without the husband and kids’, and in many respects they were right. I aimed to emulate their day-to-day schedules of shopping, cleaning, and cooking, but in the evenings I mostly was left to my own devices, writing up the day’s notes and basking in the menagerie of pets I was blessed enough to live with.
i.5.4 Ethical considerations

This project deals with family life, which is held ‘sacred’ in several definitions of the word. It is God’s beloved domain. It is also private and protected from the outside world.

Some of the stories presented in this thesis are highly personal, intimate, and at some points sexually explicit. I have omitted a good deal of information that my interlocutors trusted me with, because they asked me to never write or speak about it. I had to be very careful about ensuring that friends understood when intimate topics being discussed would be considered information I might use in the thesis. I did this by arranging several sessions in which I invited certain friends to meet at someone’s house to discuss one particular topic, and explained ahead of time that this was explicitly for research purposes and that I would be recording the conversation. When intimate details came up spontaneously in conversation, I jotted notes with all parties’ consent, but then made a future plan to talk on the same subject with the recorder on. This was because, in the flow of organic conversation, a friend would often say with some flippancy, ‘Sure, Alice, you can use whatever I say, I’m an open book so I don’t care’. I felt strongly that to use notes, or to begin spontaneously recording and use the audio, from moments such as these would not have been ethically responsible. It would be all too easy for that friend to share intimate information in the moment, or make an off-the-cuff comment about something highly personal, without fully considering the implications of her words being documented. She might have forgotten she was being recorded, or not fully understood at the time what would happen to the recording once I had captured it. I developed the strategy of using notes from an initial conversation (one-on-one or in a group) to develop questions for a later recorded conversation. I explained my privacy policy for audio recordings when initially making the interview appointment, and then again at the start of the interview.

My privacy policy statement was as follows: ‘You are free to request that I stop and resume the recording at any time; if you say anything in the recording that you wish omitted at any time, I will omit it; the recording will be kept securely on an external hard drive until the completion of the thesis; only I will ever hear this recording, it will never be transcribed
by another person, nor will I use transcription software; I will use written transcription of the recording when quoting or paraphrasing any portion for the thesis; the recording is only for my use and will never be used in another person’s work.’

In addition to ensuring informed consent for the contents of these particular conversations, the sessions offered a reminder to my friends of the boundaries and obligations involved in my role as a researcher. In the case of church services, I obtained permission from the church pastors to record messages, and in most cases messages were already being officially recorded by church staff for posterity (e.g. for a podcast, or to be posted on the church website or Facebook page). I did not ever record full teaching sessions, such as Sunday School and Bible Study, but did obtain permission to take notes and use information from those sessions. In rare cases, I requested and was allowed to record specific bits of audio, for example to capture a very particularly worded explanation of scripture. In other cases, such as when a pastor wished to encourage session participants to share very personal information, I was asked to suspend note-taking, apart from filling in any worksheets that were part of the class. In most casual social situations, i.e. those that did not centre around worship or teaching, I did not take notes, except to take down names and contact details of new acquaintances. Instead, I wrote up significant interactions at the end of each day, and kept a detailed daily diary as a supplement to my regular notes. Some studies, as I mentioned, included worksheet or workbook material, to be completed during sessions or at home. I kept my diary, and a notebook, on my person at all times. Full notebooks were kept in my room in Fayetteville, which no interlocutor ever visited. I never hid what I was writing in the moment, and sometimes encouraged friends to jot or draw something in the notebook themselves, but virtually everyone I encountered treated the notebook as my private property. This may have been due in part to the fact that I was observed using it most often during church activities; it was common practice for people to take notes during messages and studies, and those notes were generally considered personal and private.

To assure anonymity, all names of individuals, churches, and local homeschooling associations have been changed. I did this even in cases where individuals were happy to, or even preferred to, have their real identities used, because I believed a consistent approach
would better protect the identities of those individuals’ friends and family. In much of the ethnographic description within this thesis, I have changed details about individuals and events for added privacy – for example an event that took place at one church may be described as taking place at a different church. Most notably, some people are amalgamations of two or more individuals, and in some cases the narratives of one individual are presented as those of two separate people.

I never saw the text message that circulated warning that I was a tabloid journalist, and that people should avoid speaking to me. One friend, a church elder who jovially dismissed the message, told me ‘They think you’re going to write about vaccines and spanking’. The day I first visited Didi, who would become a very close interlocutor and friend, on her farm, she mused out loud: ‘Hmm, can I spank my kids in front of an anthropologist?’ Conservative evangelicals have identified, probably rightly, that these are two of the most controversial topics the mainstream American public have identified with their community. There are no available statistics outlining childhood vaccine uptake amongst Christian homeschooling families, and I did not conduct survey data on the subject. Many of the people who did share that information with me said they either did not have their children vaccinated, or (more frequently) chose an alternative childhood vaccine schedule. When meeting new people and explaining my project, it became my habit to assure them that I respected their authority as parents, and that my research interests did not include vaccinations or corporal punishment. When it came to anything medical, I emphasised my interest in Christian midwifery, and Biblical approaches to family health.

In this thesis I explicitly discuss a range of topics that could be considered sensitive, including people’s sexual lives and stories. Methodologically, it was not difficult to spark conversations about sex. One of the ethnographic points this thesis highlights is that, within the parameters of heterosexual marriage, sexual intercourse is common, acceptable, and even encouraged as a topic of conversation amongst conservative evangelical women. As with all personal topics, individual women’s levels of comfort with discussing sex (in a group or one-

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7 For information on childhood vaccine uptake in Arkansas in recent years, see [https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/Immunize/state/AR](https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/Immunize/state/AR)
on-one with me) varied, depending on a number of factors. Interestingly, I found that young newlyweds were apt to want to share, learn, and compare experiences about sex. Women with teenaged and young adult daughters were also more likely to talk about sex, as they had become accustomed to passing along wisdom to their children as they entered adulthood and prepared for marriage. And some women simply enjoyed talking about sex.

Overall, my ethical approach was designed to maximise accountability on my part, a goal which required a degree of collaboration with a few interlocutors, both during fieldwork and afterward. I would not consider this thesis a ‘collaborative work’ per se, however, the nature of my field site meant that people were interested in accessing and giving input to my writing, and friends would often ask to read my work. This did not apply to notes, but any finished academic material, such as conference papers. In October 2016, near to the end of my fieldwork, I gave a lecture at the University of Arkansas, which eventually formed a portion of this Introduction. Several friends asked to read the presentation, or granted my request to read it, and one church elder did me the honour of attending. In another instance, a few interlocutors asked to read and discuss a conference paper I wrote on salvation, which helped to inform part of Chapter 1.

After fieldwork formally ended, I continued for a brief period to participate in one Bible study via Skype, and stayed connected through social media, but eventually tried to stop toward the end of the writing process. My initial aim was to ensure certain interlocutors were comfortable with their portrayal, if their narratives were based on anything they told me that they had not told other members of the community. The most collaborative example of this was Chapter 6, which includes some events that occurred after my departure from Arkansas, and before my return visit in January 2018. Lastly, my images are a mix between my own photographs, graphics I have procured from blogs (mostly the blogs of women I knew), and photographs taken by my interlocutors (including a social media post). Obtaining permission to use interlocutors’ images opened avenues for collaboration as well, as we discussed what images would be informative and why. In every case where interlocutors read my work, it did not induce me to make significant changes, nor did I censor my thoughts and conclusions. However, this level of sharing, communication, and collaboration fit well into my ethical
approach, as I strove to manage the expectations of a very engaged and critical informant group.

i.6 Thesis outline

Because of the wide breadth and variety of ethnography featured in this thesis, the chapters have been designed to follow a simple trajectory. Each chapter encompasses a Christian identity, aims to give a picture of that identity and situate it within conservative evangelical ontological architecture, and explore how processes or ‘moments’ of becoming that identity involve enacting ideas of embodied ethics, and quotidian discernment that shapes Christian subjectivity. The first two chapters deal with the most fundamental two identities, the Christian and the woman, which are inherently intertwined. In both of these chapters, the community as a whole is addressed, and the question of gender relations is foregrounded in order to establish the importance of relationality, and to give the clearest overview of the American conservative evangelical worldview. Chapters 3-5 cover Christian identities that proceed from and shore up the Christian woman, bringing her into fuller fruition and subjectivation with a moral imaginary rather than creating identity fractures. The final chapter proposes failure as forming an interstitial identity, but a singular identity nonetheless. These are some of the most vital identities that evangelical women contend with, embrace, uphold, or interrogate in their everyday lives. Taken together the chapters do not presume to answer the question of what a true Christian woman is in a concrete sense, but to examine the ubiquitous and permeating discourse and ethical work women engage with in the journey of answering this question for themselves.

Chapter 1, The Christian, gives an overview of the worldview of conservative evangelical pro-natalist homeschoolers. I discuss how my interlocutors form a self-defined community within the American Ozark region, and within American evangelical Christianity. To introduce the thesis’s primary analytical locus, Christian womanhood, this chapter demonstrates how women in this community first and foremost define themselves as Christian, an identity standard by which all other feminine identities are measured. The
chapter’s emphasis on boundary-making and ontology sets up the importance of everyday work women do to manage their portion of the Christian world, and keep evil influences at bay. The chapter explores conservative evangelical ontological architecture, and boundary work generated by polemics and counternarratives. It begins unpacking how salvation and divine kinship are translated into domestic pious praxis, through homeschooling and other forms of everyday piety. Finally, the chapter shows how ontology and piety are inextricably linked to the ideological identity of the ‘true Christian.’

Chapter 2, The Woman, asks what constitutes a Christian man or woman, and expounds on the importance of gender difference for conservative evangelicals in America. In the chapter, I aim to explain what is at stake for conservative evangelicals in the conflict between God’s design for sexuality and marriage, and Satan’s desire to destroy it. Toward that end, I lay out two congruous functional models of gender as described by my interlocutors: the ideal of Biblical femininity/masculinity, and the embodied interpretive model of gendered ‘wiring’. Acceptable articulations of how to enact gender are framed in contrast to ‘counterfeit’ gender: the ‘false’ mode of being male/female, which is anathema to the Christian person. While embodiment of the Holy Spirit is expressed as the key to successful femininity, I show how anti-feminist counternarratives are vital in creating the figure of the counterfeit woman.

In Chapter 3, The Wife, I begin to explore the idea of becoming certain types of Christian feminine identities. As young women and men enter new life stages and take on new identities, they encounter processes of transition that reinforce or challenge conservative evangelical regimes of truth around gender, sex, and the body. This chapter mainly follows one couple, Elizabeth and Chris, as they navigate through courtship, engagement, and marriage. It further develops how Christians critically engage with popular discourse, and other available pedagogical resources. In this way the chapter examines Christian romance, and the figure of the wife.

In Chapter 4, The Lover, I argue that quotidian sexual practice is connected to ideas of morality and wellbeing, particularly when contextualised in an ethnographic framework of gendered ethical self-making. For evangelical Christian pro-natalists, who are deeply
concerned with living out a reproductive ethic according to the Bible, sex is a topic of eminent importance. Although fecundity is socially and spiritually valued, sex is considered to be holy and important outside of procreation. I explore how women in Northwest Arkansas manage their sexual lives and how negotiations of sexual practice shape their conceptions and experiences of marriage, reproduction, worship, health, and the body. This chapter explores the practicalities of sex, and the image of the ‘Christian marriage bed’. Seen from the perspective of the every-day, ‘good sex’ (i.e. pleasurable and Biblical sex) is shown to be essential to Christian marriage, and openly encouraged. Within the boundaries of community standards, Christian sex is created and negotiated using Biblical ethical interpretation, but without oversight, leaving much decision-making up to women and their embodied knowledge.

Chapter 5, The Mother, examines birth and becoming-motherhood as embodied Christian processes. Childbirth, and the figure of the mother, put into new light common struggles over embodied knowledge and medical authority. The chapter delves into the fraught relationship between conservative evangelical women and established medical structures. I show how the mother is the arbiter of health in the family, making her the barrier between them and the unchristian medical world, particularly when it comes to pregnancy and birth. The chapter explores the development of homebirth and Christian midwifery, focusing on the negotiation of authoritative knowledge. Although women are the holders of expert knowledge when it comes to reproduction, the figure of the Christian mother and the physical act of giving birth are tied to the act of submission to God’s superseding authority.

Chapter 6, The Failure, asks how conservative evangelicals ‘fail’ in ways that either integrate them or make them marginal. Christian ethical boundaries, built around models of family life, are situated and perpetually resituated based on formulaic auto-critique. Within these boundaries, forms of acceptable failure can be discussed and publicly performed, while other forms of failure are circumstantial, and are made less public, or public in different ways. Finally, there are those failures which are never acceptable, and mark an individual as beyond the margins of community. These most blatantly include gender non-conformity, and the rejection of conservative political ideology.
CHAPTER 1: The Christian

1.1 Introduction: A Sunday in Arkansas

May 2016: On a Sunday morning, I turn my small grey sedan down a hilly, tree-lined residential lane. Nestled between a large private yard and a small woodland is the single-story pole barn style building of Pathway Fellowship Church. I am dressed in a blue maxi skirt, floral cotton T-shirt, and white cardigan. After parking in the shade of two people carriers, I enter the church’s foyer, which is crowded with about fifty people. To one side of the room, donuts from a local shop, carafes of coffee, and non-dairy creamers are laid out for everyone to enjoy before worship starts. It is hard to make out individual conversations over the teens and young people boisterously joking and teasing each other. In a corner near the missionary notice board, a group of men speculate about the latest round of layoffs at Walmart, and discuss their support for independent conservative candidates following the disappointing presidential primary election. A group of women, most in their 30s and 40s, chat about plans for the homeschool co-op’s spring formal (jokingly dubbed ‘homeschool prom’), this month’s fellowship pot luck themes, as they lay out tickets for the upcoming Christian ballet school recital. As the clock reaches 10:30am, we migrate to the worship hall, beckoned in by Pastor Brent’s oldest son and his wife leading music ministry from the stage. The duo play a rendition of ‘You’re a Good, Good Father’ on acoustic guitar and keyboard, as the lyrics are projected onto a screen above their heads. I sit in my usual spot next to my friend Jane, the witty, sardonic Boston native and mother of ten. One of her older daughters, 20-year-old Elizabeth, is worshiping a few miles away at Hopewell Baptist, where her boyfriend Chris’s father is pastor. In the row behind Jane and her family sit Molly and her four older daughters. Her two younger boys are with their father, Molly’s husband Art, who is conspicuously absent.

Beginning the Sunday message, Pastor Brent, a slim, bearded man in his 40s, wearing a button-down shirt tucked into jeans, holds up three baby bottles. One bottle contains a translucent milk that has been visibly watered down; the second contains milk littered with
bits of dirt and small stones; the third was filled with unadulterated milk. ‘There are three kinds of churches’, Brent explains. The watery milk represents the kind of church where the message of Jesus and the Word of God is taught, but ‘watered down by liberalism’, i.e. not in its full truth. Pastors of such churches are ‘too concerned with offending people, so they give you the pleasant parts of the Bible without the difficult realities of sin and Hell’. The dirty milk represents churches where the Word of God is taught, but with ‘legalism’: emphasis on rules and actions extraneous to Jesus’s promise of salvation through grace. These are the churches that demanded everyday dress codes, or association to para-church organisations. Knowing Pastor Brent, this is also a subtle reference to home-churches, and organisations that have been brought down by scandal in recent years, such as Vision Forum (Ingersoll 2015; Ohlheiser 2013) and the Institute of Basic Life Principles (Bailey 2016). The pure milk is the church that focuses on delivering the true word of God, unapologetically, and knows that we are saved by grace alone.

When worship at Pathway Fellowship finishes, I say my goodbyes as the ladies disappear into the fellowship hall kitchen to set up lunch. I drive the 11 minutes to Hopewell Baptist, a large but nondescript barn-like building, situated beside a Walmart, a small tech company, and open fields. I stop at the Walmart to pick up a vegetable platter and ranch dipping sauce, my usual contribution to the fellowship lunch. I’m welcomed by Helen, Pastor Rex’s wife, with her usual sincere smile. Worship has just ended, and the atmosphere is still formal as Pastor Rex, sporting his dark grey suit, greets visitors and catches up with church members. In the fellowship hall, which doubles as a basketball court, the lunch is being set up. Most of the women are busy in the kitchen, laying out the paper plates, crock pots, and two-litre bottles of fizzy drinks. They talk as they work, sharing which parts of the Bible they’re reading at home with their children, planning a baby shower, and discussing the homeschool co-op’s plans to increase operation to three days per week. The younger women with infants retreat to the nursery to feed and change their babies, and have more private conversations. Because of the church’s proximity to a Salvation Army refuge, worship services and lunch are

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8 In this context, ‘Word’ refers to both the Bible and the Holy Spirit.
always attended by a handful of people experiencing homelessness. Hopewell’s male
leadership welcome them with hearty handshakes and conversation, but the visitors mostly
mill about awkwardly near the coffee station, waiting for the food. When the buffet is set up,
Pastor Rex calls everyone around to pray in thanksgiving for the food, then invites
newcomers to help themselves first. After lunch, Hopewell holds an afternoon teaching and
discussion session, focused on particular books of the Bible. Today’s session covers Matthew
Chapter 7, the wedding at Canaan, and the question of who will be granted entry into the
Kingdom of Heaven. Pastor Rex teaches in his usual style, pacing slowly in front of the altar,
hand poised in front of his chest to gesture in emphasis, making eye contact with his
audience.

‘You see, in Canaan everybody in the land was invited to the wedding. But here’s the
rub: if you showed up without the proper attire on, you are killed. Not everybody who says
“Lord, Lord”9 will enter the kingdom of heaven’, Rex warns, ‘but only those who do the will
of the Father. You can’t earn10 your way into heaven, you have to have an invite! And you
have to wear what He tells you to wear’.

Around 3:00pm everyone heads back to their respective homes to spend the
remainder of the afternoon napping and enjoying family time. Some of us drive the 40
minutes back to Fayetteville. After a few hours’ rest, it is time to get back in the car for the 30-
minute drive to Living Water Baptist’s 6:00pm worship service. Like most of my days in
Arkansas, this Sunday is marked out by time spent in the car, either on Highway 49, the
expansive main boulevards, or the serpentine outer roads. Before heading into Living Water,
I throw on a light pastel scarf to cover the small bit of collar bone my t-shirt leaves bare. The
worship hall is typically packed and warm for a spring evening, despite the effort made by the
ceiling fans. I greet the effusive Elder Spencer, Pastor Spencer’s self-described ‘southern
gentleman’ father. I then feel my usual moments of unease in the crowd before my hand is
grasped by Christine, her eyes glinting behind her glasses and a shock of curly dark hair. She
leads me back to her husband, Buck, and two children, where she has been saving me a seat. I

9 Mt. 7:21
10 This is a reference to Baptists’ rejection of the idea of ‘good works’ as a means of earning salvation.
watch the elder men congregate in the front in their suits, talk enthusiastically and clap each other on the back. The women discuss the special guest speaker for their upcoming ladies’ tea party morning and teacup exchange. Christine tells me about the kids’ recent illness, and her worries that they are getting behind in their homeschool curriculum. Just before the piano heralds the beginning of worship service, Elder Spencer approaches with a book in his hands, one of several books he has gifted me to help with my Christian education. This book is a homeschool textbook on American History, *America: Land that I Love* (Grussendorf n.d.), which Elder Spencer explains is an excellent resource for understanding the Christian worldview, and how important the United States is to God, in a digestible format.

The message that evening is given by Bro. Bernard, a visiting preacher from Branson, Missouri, who runs a marriage and family ministry. Unsurprisingly, his message is all about the nuclear family: ‘The day you got saved, all of the Holy Spirit entered you. And that was the most important day for your marriage. That’s the most important thing you need for your marriage. God has given you a manual for the marriage, and the home, he intends for you. To get that end product, you need to go through a process. And for that process, you need the Word’. Bernard made it clear that God is invested in marriage, and for anyone to have a successful marriage – the model God planned – one first has to embody the Holy Spirit. In other words, one has to be a true Christian.

On any given Sunday, or Wednesday evening, preaching elucidates the myriad, subtly shifting, boundaries that define the conservative evangelical community in America. In the typical Sunday described above, each church’s message aimed to teach its listeners how to be a true Christian – and assured them that *this* church, *this* community, is a true one. This chapter discusses the conservative evangelical woman as a Christian person, and a member of a particular American Christian community. The chapter follows boundaries – around kin, community, and ontology – that are perpetually produced and reproduced in Christian America. It asks how conservative evangelicals in Arkansas use mutable lines of demarcation to set themselves apart, whilst also cautiously engaging with the wider world. The chapter examines the question of boundaries from an everyday ontological standpoint, asking what
‘world’ conservative evangelicals set themselves against, what manner of ordinary ethics separate them from that world, and what ontological architecture does separation support? By answering these questions, I aim to clarify how conservative evangelicals in Arkansas conceptualise the cosmos, thus setting the stage for discussion of Christian women’s conceptualisations of themselves.

The vignette with which the chapter began gives three examples of messages of alterity. First, Pastor Brent’s baby bottle lesson demonstrates that not every kind of Christianity is legitimate, and Christianities are always subject to critique. Second, Pastor Rex’s analysis of the wedding at Canaan reveals that not everyone is a member of the Christian kingdom, even those who might assume they are. Third, Living Water’s guest preacher drove home that the most critical site for affirming legitimacy and membership into God’s kingdom is the Christian nuclear family. These messages summarise the boundaries this chapter unpacks: membership and legitimacy, provided by divine embodiment, expressed through the family. Themes of boundary work reflect the characteristics of true Christianity, which must be understood if one hopes to grasp what it means to be a Christian woman in Arkansas.

Pursuant to the task of mapping the borders of true Christianity in conservative evangelical Arkansas, this chapter begins by summarising the literalist Biblical worldview. One purpose of this chapter is to contextualise the ethnography that follows in the rest of the thesis, by providing a clear picture of the ontological schema in which my interlocutors live; however, the details of that schema will emerge over the course of the thesis. I present salvation as the event that creates the Christian, a moment where a person becomes truly alive by divine imbuing. Relying on Mahmood’s (2003, 2005, 2012) interpretation of ‘everyday piety’, and Das’s (2010, 2012) ‘moral action’, I introduce a discussion of ordinary ethics and Christian femininity.

Boundary work in religious contexts is, of course, underwritten by alterity. The boundary work at the heart of this chapter is in many ways discursive work, and reflects the importance of discourse in forming the Christian person. Bielo describes this as evangelical ‘antimony of the self-other: the opposition of well-formed ideas about collective belonging
with abstract and concrete descriptions of out-group representatives’ (2009: 137). The chapter explores two examples of out-group representatives, atheists and liberals, to illustrate the power of counternarratives beyond the cosmological and historical aspects of Biblical ontology. The chapter shows homeschooling, and integrated Christian alternatives to school, to be one of the most pragmatic and visible boundaries drawn by the community.

Having described antimony, the chapter explores inclusion and social continuity brought on by salvation. The chapter describes relatedness through divine blood, and the multi-faceted impact that has on relationships and notions of family. I submit the argument that family is the cornerstone of conservative evangelical theology and lived-out Christianity, and in so doing lay groundwork for analysis of domesticity and femininity.

1.2 Ontological Architecture

The scholarly focus on ontologies, or ‘the ontological turn’ in anthropology has sparked rich analysis and debate, particularly in the areas of religion and human-nonhuman relations (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Put simply, anthropology understands ontology as ‘the comparative, ethnographically-grounded transcendental deduction of Being (the oxymoron is deliberate) as that which differs from itself (ditto)—being-as-other as immanent to being-as-such’ (Holbraad, et.al. 2014). As a topic of theoretical exploration, ontology is outside the scope of this thesis, however American conservative evangelical ontology will be of considerable ethnographic significance throughout. Therefore, to address its relevance, I refer to ontology in this context through its particular structural expression (or impact, depending on one’s perspective).

I borrow the term ‘ontology architecture’ from the fields of communications and information technology (Lee, et.al. 2006). I employ a modified version of it here not as a new framework by any means, but as a broad, simple theoretical metaphor to encapsulate the social and material structures that support conservative evangelical ontology. Whereas ontology refers to ‘deduction of being’, ontological architecture in this thesis refers to ‘being-in-the-world’ in light of ontology. As an example, conservative evangelicals have an
ontological understanding of the world’s creation history according to a literal interpretation of Genesis; in light of these facts, conservative evangelical parents teach their children world history according to creationist pedagogy and learning materials, which form a part of their ontological architecture. By addressing the question of womanhood, the thesis examines how my interlocutors in Northwest Arkansas maintain ontological architecture in light of ontological truths around gender, marriage, family, and sex, in order to acknowledge the influence women’s everyday decisions have on the social structures around them.

Authors, and Christians, have given the shorthand ‘Biblical worldview’ to describe conservative evangelical ontology as it is situated within a wider social world that does not share the same understanding of being. The following sections provide a brief overview of the Biblical worldview, before discussing the Baptist understanding of salvation, and approaches to children’s salvation, which form the foundation for community integration.

1.2.1 Biblical worldview

Several studies of conservative evangelical Christianity in America provide historical context for the ‘Biblical worldview,’ and how it has shaped a community that is largely withdrawn from the rest of American culture (Stasson 2014; Ingersoll 2015; Bielo 2018). Bielo provides a brief but comprehensive overview of Biblical creationism, a central aspect of the Biblical worldview, as a lived system extending beyond faith or doctrine (2018: 5-9). Julie Ingersoll notes that many of the points at which conservative Christians engage with politics and governance in the United States, including ‘the character and structure of families, free-market economics, the legal status of religion, the critique of public education … and more have their roots in the work of R. J. Rushdoony’ (2015: 3), a figure with whom (along with Charles Spurgeon and Dwight Moody) my friends in Arkansas were very familiar and sometimes quoted. Ingersoll further describes the ‘integrated worldview’ of American conservative evangelicals with this succinct summation:

‘America is a Christian nation; that there is no separation of church and state implied in the Constitution; that authoritarian patriarchy is the God-ordained structure for families; that the functions of civil government are limited to providing for national
defense and punishing crimes outlined in the Bible; that the Bible speaks to every aspect of life; and that we are all obligated to live under the law contained therein, law that is anchored in the literal six-day creation described in Genesis (ibid. 8).’

It is evident from these descriptions that American conservative evangelicalism is concerned with present-day local and national issues while at the same time anchoring in Biblical and American histories, including the history of Baptist public theology in the United States over the last 150 years. This in turn is reflected in the particular ways Christian homeschoolers, and other conservative religious communities, participate in the modern secular world in America.

Christianity’s simultaneous critique of and engagement with the secular has been framed as indicative of conservative religious groups’ tense relationship with modernity (Harding 2000; Moore 2003; Keane 2006; Nilsson 2012). In Arkansas, anxiety or antagonism toward the modern world did not define the conservative evangelical collective mind-set; instead, Christians in Arkansas had an alternative view of modernity and an alternate history of the modern world they occupied (Fader 2009: 213). For conservative evangelicals in Arkansas ontology is fundamentally Biblical, and therefore the Bible determines history and science, including creation of the world, the historical event of the Flood, and the development and fall of human civilisations. Conservative evangelicals live in a modern world, but maintain an alternative view of modernity in which they are engaged in reproducing aspects of a period in American history that are perceived as ‘more Godly’. This harkens back to an imagined period in American history when people were unhindered by school regulations, or doctors’ rules about childbearing. As Pastor Spencer of Living Water Baptist once argued, there was a time when ‘even unsaved people had character’.

Furthermore, Christians’ fervent interest in an imagined past cannot accurately be explained as a collective struggle to maintain traditionalism and keep the ‘modern’ world at bay. In Baptist churches, tradition for the sake of tradition is heavily critiqued, although ‘traditional’ praxis exists in some notable forms in church services. Conservative evangelicals accepted the modern world while aiming to maintain those forms of living that were once standard (or perceived to be standard) in the United States, in a time when the country was
blessed by God\textsuperscript{11}. Mainly, practical examples of alternative modernity in Arkansas are domestic, including pro-natalism and homeschooling, both of which were considered to be standard for all American families in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Conservative evangelical parents attributed the shift away from these ‘godly’ modes of raising families not to modernisation, but to the prevalence of sin. McKinnon et al. have noted social theory’s presupposition ‘that within modern state-based societies, kinship has been relegated to the domestic domain, has lost its economic and political functions, has retained no organising force in modern political and economic structures and processes, and has become secularized and rationalized’ (2013: 3-4).

To the contrary, for conservative evangelical families, kinship is domestic and spiritual, as well as highly political and modern.

In summary, conservative evangelical America is a modern sphere determined by a politically engaged Biblical worldview, in which Christian actors have aimed to influence the secular world whilst also withdrawing from it, in order to facilitate a way of life that recognises God’s truth of being. Furthermore, conservative evangelicals maintain an alternative modernity that aligns with an imagined American past that gives primacy to the domestic realm. Most importantly, as the next section will show, everything within this sphere is delineated by sophisticated boundary work that all begins with the notion of salvation.

1.2.2 Salvation

Before the service begins at Living Water, the elders push aside two wall panels behind the altar stage to reveal an elevated full-emersion baptismal bath. Pastor Spencer, who has removed his tailored suit jacket and donned waterproof coveralls, leads a six-year-old boy up a small set of steps and into the water. Standing to one side of the bath, the boy’s mother, a perfectly coiffed blonde woman in her early 30s, beams at the pair. Spencer wears a headset

\textsuperscript{11} One can trace the picture of divine American exceptionalism to John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon to the soon-to-be Massachusetts Bay colony, in which he illustrated his dream that the new settlement would become a ‘city on a hill’.
microphone, but speaks softly to the boy as he kneels beside him in the font: ‘Now you know, don’t you, that getting baptised doesn’t mean you get to go to Heaven? You know that it’s being saved that gets you to Heaven?’ The boy smiles but does not respond, casting his eyes nervously out to the crowd. ‘Are you shy?’ Spencer asks tenderly, and the boy nods. Spencer turns to the congregation with the assurance that ‘He understands. I know because we had a long talk earlier.’ As the boy holds his nose, Spencer quickly dunks him under the water saying, ‘Brother, I baptise you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And there you go!’ Everyone bursts into cheers and applause as the boy climbs out and runs to his mother, who wraps him in a Spiderman towel and ushers him off to change his clothes.

On a spring afternoon in a small residential development on reclaimed farmland, I sit on the living room rug in my friend Christine’s house. Her six-year-old son, Jacob, shows me a new toy set his grandmother has just given him. It is a box of a dozen colourful plastic Easter eggs, each containing a small artefact corresponding to the stations of the cross – a plastic crown of thorns, three tiny plastic nails, a scrap of white fabric signifying the shroud Jesus was wrapped in. Using the accompanying picture book as a guide, Jacob gingerly cracks open each egg in order, revealing the next key artefact in the crucifixion story. Jacob relishes in demonstrating his knowledge about Jesus, which soon sparks an argument with his mother. ‘I got saved,’ he insists to me. ‘I got saved twice, and I got baptized.’ Christine smiles and responds patiently: ‘You didn’t get baptized, son, you were just at a pool.’ She turned to me and said, ‘I think we went to a pool party and someone dunked him under the water. But we’re still talking about salvation, and I think he nearly understands. He’s getting there.’

Christine was far from ambivalent about Jacob’s salvation – she very much wanted her young son to be saved and eventually baptized by their pastor at Living Water Baptist. At the same time, she knew not to encourage Jacob when he claimed he was saved, because she recognised that he did not comprehend salvation well enough to have experienced it. Christine, and her husband Buck, both come from deep Arkansan Baptist roots, but they understood that growing up in a Christian household is not an assurance of salvation.
In evangelical Christian doctrine, inclusion is determined by salvation, a transformational moment in which an individual makes the conscious decision to formally acknowledge Jesus as God, and to live as a Christian thenceforward. Scholarship over the last decade has delved into the question of the ‘difference Christianity makes’, in its spectrum of contexts, particularly when it comes to evangelism and conversion (Haynes 2014 gives a particularly thorough overview of this literature). In a context like Arkansas, an area steeped in southern American Baptist tradition for many generations, the unsaved member of a conservative evangelical household, e.g. a child, is not afforded the ‘difference’ of salvation. The differences (including boundaries) Christianity generates grow out of the rupture of conversion, or salvation (Robbins 2003, 2014). Conservative evangelicals sometimes speak of ‘conversion’, or ‘saving souls’, but for the decisive other. For those born into the wider social framework of Christian America salvation represents continuity across generations whilst simultaneously altering relationships. Essentially, salvation salvages the self by vanquishing liminality and bringing relationships, including the relationship to one’s body, into appropriate alignment.

1.2.3 Paving the way, or the continuity salvation brings

For Baptists in Arkansas, the first major public sign of salvation is baptism by submersion, in which a pastor entirely submerges his charge in a body of water. First, the person must have made an informed decision to accept salvation, without coercion. The moment that decision is made, the Holy Spirit enters the body, changing the person from ‘spiritually dead’ to ‘spiritually alive’ or ‘born again’. Some refer to this moment as the Holy Spirit entering the heart, or as a ‘circumcision of the heart’. The embodiment of the Holy Spirit is invisible and intangible, but nonetheless literal. From that point forward, the person, now a Christian person, begins to slough off a precognitive self as the Holy Spirit guides her thoughts, actions, and heart. It is the Holy Spirit that makes certain behaviour appealing to the Christian, and other behaviour detestable, according to God’s will for the human ethic.
The indwelling and guidance of the Holy Spirit will be relevant throughout the rest of this thesis, as it is at the heart of every Christian feminine identity.

Christians in Arkansas often used the Biblical shorthand saying, ‘You’ll know by the fruit,’ meaning one could best identify a fellow Christian by her behaviour. In the body of a Christian person, the Holy Spirit develops the skill of discernment; ‘true’ feeling or emotions; and sanctification, the incremental, lifelong work of becoming holy over time. As my friend Martha’s husband, Steve, once defined it, sanctification means ‘to be set apart for the Lord, and to continually be made more like the Lord as we grow in our faith.’ Pastor Brent, of Pathway Fellowship, expanded on this theme in a sermon series. ‘You are a royal people,’ he told the congregation, ‘so you walk in light, and desire to live a certain way. Who you are determines where you walk, where you walk determines what you want, and what you want determines what you do’. Sanctification allows the saved person to discern the Bible accurately, and begin to understand God’s will. The divinely bestowed ability of discernment was often referenced as a reason non-Christians disagree with portions of the Bible – it is only after salvation that the Holy Spirit opens a person’s comprehension to God’s Word, enabling her to read the true interpretation of the text and apply it to her life. Likewise, after salvation, a person can embody ‘true’ versions of positive human attributes such as love, selflessness, and compassion. Here the adjective ‘true’ encompasses two meanings: the first being factually correct (i.e. ‘the true interpretation of scripture’); and the second being valid, authentic, and properly originated.

For parents in Arkansas, the fact that salvation is neither inherited nor assured for their children is a point of stress. Mothers bear a special burden, because they spend the most time with their young children, and are largely responsible for their early religious education. For conservative evangelical women, the audience for Christian ethics and apologetics is limited, the main site being the home and family (Haynes 2014). At some point, neuro-

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12 Mt. 12:33; Lk. 6:44
typical children reach the ‘age of accountability’, a loosely defined age (roughly somewhere around ten years old) at which they are aware enough to understand Christian salvation and make the decision to get saved. It is so called because if any person can comprehend salvation without accepting it, she will be held accountable for her decision after death. Unsaved children exist in a state of cultural and spiritual liminality, especially once they have reached an age of accountability, and baptism is considered insufficient without a self-determined moment of salvation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that families begin investing in the salvation of a baby as soon as it is conceived, and in more figurative terms, often well before. When a couple are married, knowing they intend to have children, they might pray that those future children will someday ‘accept Jesus into their hearts’ and become saved. Once a baby is conceived, prayer becomes more focused on the individual child. All babies, no matter the circumstance of their birth, are considered ‘depraved’. But they are not held accountable for inevitable, inherited deprivation until they reach an age at which they can fully comprehend sin and salvation. Until that point, parents must walk a fine line: keeping their child on a path to salvation while understanding that they have no real power in the child’s decision, and that coercion is anathema to the process. A child must ask Jesus to save her, and for the Holy Spirit to enter into her heart, entirely of her own free will; if she is coerced or does so without understanding what she is asking for, the transformation from ‘lost’ to ‘saved’ will be inauthentic, and her soul will remain in jeopardy despite outward appearances.

Importantly, according to Baptist interpretation of scripture (particularly from Eph. 4-5) a saved person can never lose their salvation. Therefore, in the event that a person is baptized, but later denounces her faith or otherwise acts in a manner prohibitively inconsistent with salvation, that person is not seen as ‘no longer saved’, but rather retroactively never saved in the first place. It is not uncommon for a Baptist to be ostensibly saved and baptized as a young child, only to determine as a teenager or young adult that she

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13 Not all people are considered cognitively capable of being held ‘accountable’ for understanding salvation. Small children and people with disabilities are understood to go to Heaven when they die, whether or not they ever expressed a wish to be saved.
did not fully comprehend the meaning of salvation at the time of her baptism. In such a case, she would repent of her sins, once again ask Jesus for salvation, and be baptized again, this time with an expectation of authenticity. This will become relevant in later discussions of marriage and ‘failure’ as Christian women contend with realising they, or their husbands, do not meet the measure of salvation.

Aside from prayer, parents, extended families, and local church communities, employers and local church communities endeavour to find ways to normalise Christian living and encourage children’s full inclusion through salvation. Once a year, usually in the spring, local Baptist churches in Arkansas held Baby Dedication ceremonies for new babies. A Baby Dedication differs from baptism in significant ways – the babies are too young to decide to be dedicated, whereas autonomous decision-making is essential to the Baptist doctrine of baptism; and the Dedication has no bearing on a child’s salvation. Every baby dedication I attended followed the same basic programme. Both parents brought their baby to the front of the congregation, and the pastor asked each set of parents to promise to guide their child in the way of the Christian faith. The church was then asked to assist and support the parents in leading their children to choose salvation. This ended with the presentation of a gift from the pastor and church leadership to the parents – usually a hand-made certificate or an ornamental Bible. The purpose of a Dedication is considered to the ultimate benefit of children, but primarily for the children’s parents, and the wider church family. Even before the children are able to make the decision to include themselves in vital Christian boundary work, they are publicly claimed as within bounds through the Baby Dedication shortly after birth.
The spiritual status of unsaved children will be addressed further in Chapter 5’s discussion of Christian motherhood. What is relevant here is that the American Baptist conceptualisation of salvation is the line drawn between community and Other in Northwest Arkansas. In questions of Christian identities, all formulations of subjectivity, for women and men, draw back to salvation and the existential identity marker of being born again. It underwrites all other processes of becoming-identity that the remainder of this thesis will explore. The fact that salvation is not inheritable does not negate the importance of maintaining inter-generational continuity within the community, as is evidenced by Baby Deductions, and the early age at which children begin to learn the social and spiritual topography around them, beginning with the difference between Christians and the rest of the world.

1.3 Christians vs. the world

These sections take up the theme of what constitutes a true Christian by introducing popular conservative evangelical discourse around alterity. Anna Strhan discusses ways in which conservative evangelicals in Britain frame themselves by preparing to respond to
addresses by others in secular spaces (2015). In London, where much of Strhan’s eth­nographic work is based, this is a more present part of life for evangelicals than in an Arkansas community where church attendance is high and children do not attend public school. The sections that follow unpack Christian counternarratives, popular subjects of alterity (Others), and how both are employed in homeschooling, the most visible form of conservative evangelical separation from the world.

1.3.1 Counternarratives

Conservative evangelicals manage their ethical projects and modes of sociality within a worldview that is predicated on alterity, and reliant on ‘antimony of the self-other’ (Bielo 2009: 137). In Attack on ‘Christendom’ Kierkegaard argues that ‘the concept of Christian is a polemical concept, and one can only be Christian in contrast or contrastedly’ (1944[1884]: 127). Christians exist as droplets of oil in water, in a constant state of being repelled by the world around them, and coalescing with one another. Counternarratives about the world emphasise opposition to the Word and authority of God, and the persistent influence of Satan. These are everyday stories that build and rebuild the architecture of the other, or the world, and they are an essential part of discourse that informs conservative evangelicals of the distinctions between true Christians and the rest.

Some boundaries, such as salvation and divine kinship, are inherent and ontological: they reflect the ‘natural’ division of the world into lost and saved, containing or wanting the Holy Spirit, born again or spiritually dead. Other boundaries, including the practice of homeschooling, involve conscious pragmatic methods of separation seen as necessary in light of those ‘natural’ differentiations. Whether innate or constructed, all of these boundaries serve the same purpose: to set apart the Christian from the world. For the American conservative evangelical, the world is a complex metonym (Poewe 1989), ostensibly referring to the entirety of humanity, and particularly those who are not saved. In practical terms the world usually is synonymous with contemporary American culture, including popular media, politics, and behavioural trends in broad strokes. Doctrinally, the world is one of two
domains that encompass the cosmos. The other is the Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God, which is the true home of every saved person, living or dead. The world is the domain of Satan, otherwise known as the Devil or the Enemy. He is the enemy of God, and all born-again Christians, and his influence permeates every aspect of human culture. Satan’s particular interest in Christian women and families will be the subject of Chapter 2. In order to effectively thwart Satan, Christians, under the direction of scripture and the Holy Spirit, identify their distinction from the world, and protect themselves and their children from the world.

For this reason, pedagogy is often centred around reiterating, maintaining, and sometimes slightly shifting the parameters of counternarratives. Not a great deal of scholarly research has been dedicated to counternarratives\(^\text{14}\), but the little that exists describes them as representations – through stories, rhetoric, visual and other media – that create identity or explain the world as contra to ‘official’ narratives or stereotypes (Giroux 1996; Lal 2011; Dunn 2018). Counternarratives can constitute world-defining events from Biblical history, such as the mass-extinction event of the Great Flood, which render the past. Additionally, self-other narratives render the present, including numerous examples of counternarrative explanations as to why people choose to reject Christianity in America, why atheists exist, and what criticisms lost people have of Christians.

1.3.2 Atheists and liberals

Conservative evangelicals reason that members of the Kingdom of God are in perpetual public conversation with the world. Unbelievers are always observing believers, listening to their take on the world and assessing their behaviour, so the cultivation of an ethical life must take this into account. The unity\(^\text{15}\) conservative evangelicals manifest by

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\(^\text{14}\) One notable exception is the general prevalence of conspiracy theories in the United States (Ramsey 2001), which I believe constitutes a very different discussion to the one being laid out here.

\(^\text{15}\) The idea of conservative evangelicals being ‘unified’ must be taken critically, even in their polemical relationship to the world. In matters of theology, ethics, even elements of ontology, even members of a small church family may differ from one another, and church leadership.
collective alterity to the world denotes the prominence of what Haynes, following from Webb Keane (2007), refers to as ‘audience’ (Haynes 2014). Put simply, audiences are ‘shared, contested spaces’ in which Christians encounter opportunities to evangelise (ibid. S358). For conservative evangelicals perhaps the most urgent audience, and most present contrasting other, is the atheist. Any opposition to the Christian understanding of the world, such as atheism, is viewed as opposition to, or rebellion against, God. As Pastor Rex indicated in the beginning of this chapter, not everyone who is invited to God’s kingdom wants to ‘wear what God wants’, the implication being that those who reject God’s will fully realise what ‘attire’ is expected of them. In my fieldwork, conversations about atheists often pointed to the subtextual argument that atheists do not really exist, but are lost souls being influenced by Satan’s anger with God.

Hopewell Baptist’s leadership illustrated this argument through a Wednesday evening series in which they screened Ray Comfort and Ken Ham’s film The Atheist Delusion, which debuted in 2016. Atheists, according to Comfort and Ham, are people who fundamentally understand that God must exist, because the logic of that existence is indisputable. They cannot admit the fact they know to be true, because if they did, they would have to also accept everything written in the Bible, which would compel them to repent of their sinful lifestyles in order to avoid damnation. The enormity of accepting the Hell that awaits them, or repenting of their sins, creates a dissonance, which they resolve by insisting there is no God. Instead, the film reasons, self-professed atheists are angry with God, and find perverse satisfaction in denying His existence. The Atheist Delusion encapsulates a counternarrative about the world, and particular others within it, with which the members of Hopewell Baptist were already familiar. It represented one of several foundational counternarratives that constitute ontological boundaries for conservative evangelicals.

As James Bielo has pointed out, boundary work formulated around othering, based for example on political ideology, is by no means limited to faith-based communities. ‘By framing notions of identity as a problem of self-other’, writes Bielo, ‘Evangelicals are utilizing a logic that is visible cross-culturally, and is perhaps a fundamentally human process. Many would argue that this relational dichotomy is a necessary foundation for intersubjectivity and
the formation of individual consciousness’ (2009: 138). As Bielo suggests, in the study of
American Christianity it is a worthwhile ethnographic project to examine the key players in
the world of ‘others’ in which evangelicals live. In the current political climate in America,
this project can be overwhelmed by the cacophony of othering political argument, as
incompatible ontologies crash into one another in the public sphere. But even in the arena of
politics, it is worth understanding the characters who occupy the world of others for
conservative evangelicals. If the true Christian woman is first and foremost a true Christian,
she must also be conservative; and establishing what it means to be a conservative means
having a clear picture of the anti-conservative, i.e. the liberal.

Pastor Rex and his wife Helen made one thing abundantly clear: it is impossible for a
person to be a true Christian without also being conservative. By this they meant that a
Christian would support American conservative politics. This came abundantly to the fore
during the 2016 Presidential election campaign. One day during an afternoon Sunday service,
Rex led everyone at Hopewell Baptist through a list of ballot initiatives that had been printed
as a special newspaper circular. Rex insisted he was not telling anyone how to vote, but
explaining how a Christian would vote on each of the initiatives. The explanation was not
that, as Christians, they were mandated to support a certain kind of politics to uphold a
Christian ethic, but that any Christian would automatically be moved by the Holy Spirit to
understand the difference between right and wrong, and to choose their politics accordingly.
My interlocutors in Arkansas did not associate all Christian conservatism to Republican party
platforms. In fact, prior to Donald Trump becoming the Republican nominee for president in
2016, virtually no one I knew supported him, finding him grossly anathema to the Christian
ethic. Instead, a large portion of people firmly supported Ted Cruz, and continued to
advocate for third-party conservative candidates up until the election in November.

In the Arkansas Christian Homeschool Co-op (ACHC), Helen taught a class to teens
called Modern Conservatism in America, where students were taught the conservative (and
therefore Christian) perspective on current political issues. These included questions such as
‘Should America raise the minimum wage?’ (it should not), ‘Is Capitalism moral?’ (it is), ‘Is
America racist?’ (it is not), ‘Should there be a federal ban on abortion at 6 weeks?’ (there
should), and ‘Is marijuana use acceptable for medicinal purposes?’ (it is not). Lessons about conservatism always provided a pedagogical Other – the Liberal. The imagined position or opinion of the liberal commonly presented an anthropomorphised version of the world – an unsaved, or even anti-Christian monolith with which the true Christian was responsible for sparring with on an ideological battlefield.

Liberals are characterised as perpetually outraged and aggressive, offended by God and the Bible, wanting to upend American traditions, and devaluing family to the point of actively advocating for abortion. Whether in pedagogical spaces, or casual conversations, liberals provide a clear antinomy to the Christian self. In fact, the topic of self-other antinomy is a popular one in social settings, as was evidenced by the following example at a casual dinner party with some of the younger parents: Sitting in Kyle and Haley’s living room in Fayetteville, the adults watched toddlers Emma and Caleb interact with one another. The parents light-heartedly blew off steam by poking fun at their children’s occasional whining and infantile antics.

‘You’ll have to do better than that if you want attention,’ they quipped, and, ‘Enjoy pulling his hair now, but soon he’ll be bigger than you.’

At some point Martha, Caleb’s mother, commented to the other adults, ‘We’re such cruel parents.’

Kevin (Amanda’s husband) quickly retorted, ‘At least we’re not liberals. They’re not even parents – they kill all their children!’

The women laughed but also recoiled, chiding, ‘That’s terrible!’

After a moment’s pause Kyle, Kevin’s brother, shook his head and said decisively, ‘It’s true though.’

Helen and Rex were known in the community for being especially vocal about their political views, in and out of church environments, but the example above shows those views were not atypical. The insistence that a true Christian in America is conservative illustrates an interweaving of the internal/spiritual and collective/political in boundary work. On one hand, Christian living is individuated, protean, and not subject to ‘legalistic’ regulation. On the other hand, portraits of self-other antinomy cannot easily be upended without infringing on
vital ethics. Pastors have the forums of Sunday messages and weekly teaching to reinforce conservative political thinking, appealing to the authority of the Bible, God's plan, and the Holy Spirit. Mothers do the same with their own primary audiences – children, and each other – through homeschooling and, as we will see in the next chapter, women's Bible studies.

1.3.3 Homeschooling

Christian homeschooling is, along with pro-natalism, one of the most important and visible boundaries conservative evangelicals in Arkansas create for themselves. As much, or even more so than church life, homeschooling in Arkansas defines the boundaries of what has come to be a discrete community of Christians. Of course, a desire to give children a Christian education is not the only reason parents choose to homeschool in the United States. The US Department of Education conducted a homeschooling survey in 2012 which asked parents to rank their reasons for homeschooling. Although several of the provided reasons in the survey could apply to Christian homeschooling parents, 64% ranked 'A desire to provide religious instruction' first (Wang et.al. 2019: 36). The survey does not explicitly mention racial factors for homeschooling, but sociological research has indicated that a growing number of Black parents, and parents raising Black children, choose to homeschool in order to mitigate racial inequalities in mainstream schools (Levy 2009; Mazama and Lundy 2012; Morrison 2014). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the United States in 2016, 3.3% of the total school-aged population (1.69 million students) was homeschooled (Wang et.al. 2019: 32-36). In Arkansas, in the 2016-2017 school year, 3.9% of students were registered for homeschooling (AR Department of Education 2017). In Northwest Arkansas the mix of suburban and rural populations by county is reflected in homeschooling numbers: while in Benton County 5.3% of students are homeschooled, and in Washington County 3.3%, more rural Madison County has a homeschooling rate of 8.1%

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16 For example, 77% of respondents chose 'A desire to provide moral instruction', and 91% chose 'A concern about environment of other schools'.
(making the average 5.6%, which comprises 4,050 students across those three counties) (ibid.).

On 23 July, 2016, Hopewell Baptist Church hosted a day-long workshop titled ‘The Christian Response to Public Education’. The main purpose of the workshop was to convince local families interested in homeschooling that it was the best, and indeed only, option for true Christians concerned about the wellbeing and education of their children. The church’s worship space was arranged much as it would have been for a Wednesday evening service, with the lights dimmed and the projector screen pulled down. Hopewell’s Pastor Rex was joined by Pastor Brent and several other families from Pathway Fellowship, which was less than five miles away. The other notable difference was a card table set up at the entrance to the worship hall, brimming with workshop programmes, informational print-outs about homeschooling regulations in Arkansas, and a wide variety of pamphlets. One of the larger and glossier pamphlets, titled ‘Salt & Light: The Great Commission and Who’s Responsible for Educating Your Children’, read:

‘Christian parents are commanded to place their children under godly and Christian teaching, not neo-pagan or humanistic instruction. Whether we acknowledge it or not, only two choices remain – obedience or disobedience to God’s commands. (See Col. 2:8; 2 Cor. 10:3-5; Deut. 6:1-9; Mal 4:6; 2 Cor. 6:14-19 along with Luke 6:40. Matt. 22:37-38 and Eph. 6:4)’ (Moore).

The guest of honour and keynote speaker for the day-long workshop was Ray Moore, founder of the national parachurch organisation Exodus Mandate, who was introduced as one of the fathers of the American Christian homeschooling movement. Homeschooling as an organised movement across Christian denominations gained popularity beginning in the late 1970s (Gaither 2008a, 2008b). Over the course of the day-long workshop, we heard presentations by Ray Moore and the pastors, and watched a portion of a film titled *Indoctrination* (2011), produced in affiliation with Exodus Mandate. Each speaker, the dozens of pamphlets, and the film, all presented the same fundamental argument: Public, or ‘government’ education in America has been morally compromised, and Christians are not welcome in public schools. While Christians are being marginalised and ostracised, schools
are instead promoting other forms of living (Islam, liberalism) that degrade morality and American values.

Some mainstream evangelicals have called for Christians to keep their children in schools, Moore said, to be ‘salt and light’ to non-Christian students – they wish for public education to be a mission field. Christian homeschool advocates, including my interlocutors, argue that children are vulnerable, and should not be expected to stand up to the kind of anti-Christian onslaught that public schools subject them to. Instead, Christian parents are responsible for keeping their children sheltered from immoral influences, and institutions that sneer at them. They must ensure their children are trained in the faith before those children are expected to evangelize. The more children are protected and nurtured, the more likely they are to be saved. In Northwest Arkansas, there is a well-respected local Christian school attached to one of the larger mainstream Baptist churches. Some independent churches, including Living Water Baptist, ran their own schools with church members acting as teachers. These are considered acceptable options when homeschooling becomes too difficult for mothers for a period. Christine, Jacob’s mother, sent her two children to their church school when her health and supporting the family business overwhelmed her. But Christian schools, particularly those affiliated with larger mainstream evangelical churches, could also be considered a danger, because Christian parents sending children to such a school would have far less control over worldly influences their children might be exposed to through their peers.

As an alternative, local homeschool cooperatives were seen as a good way to supplement homeschooling, and allowed kids to socialise regularly. At the ACHC families would bring their children of all ages, and mothers (and sometimes fathers) taught classes or worked in the nursery on a volunteer basis. Anyone interacting with children, whether a parent or not, was subject to vetting via an application process in which prospective volunteers were asked to describe their salvation story. ACHC also ran teen programs and organised field trips. The co-op was also actively inclusive of children with disabilities, many of whom were not independently mobile. ACHC met at a church and operated around the
typical public school schedule, with breaks for Christmas holidays and summer, although many families chose to ‘do school’ throughout the calendar year.

A variety of homeschool curriculum options existed in Arkansas for homeschooling families, each catering to different educational styles, and often parents mixed and matched curricula. Some options, such as Classical Conversations\(^{17}\), favoured a more disciplined approach. Some parents, on the other hand, preferred an ‘unschooling’ approach, in which they built their children’s fundamental skills and then allowed them to follow their own interests. Whatever their approach, and whether or not they ‘did school’ year-round, families tracked children’s development through year grades, with each child ostensibly beginning a new grade each autumn. Because of the nature of individualised teaching, a child may often

![Figure 6: Children lined up for the first day of the school year](image)

be ahead of the standard grade level in some subject areas, and ‘behind’ in others. Children with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, or more generalised special needs, get specialised

\(^{17}\)https://www.classicalconversations.com/
attention from their mothers, who go to great lengths to research teaching strategies and apply them to their child’s circumstances.

Homeschooling in America varies as much as the families that choose it, and has been known to offer cover for child abuse\textsuperscript{18}. If any such abuse was taking place in this community, I was never aware of it. The families I knew integrated themselves into the community one way or another, through church, the co-op, or extracurricular activities such as ballet. Mothers often consulted one another on how to best keep up with Arkansas homeschool guidelines. On one hand, parents I spoke to about criticisms for homeschooling acknowledged the potential for abuse when children are educated outside regulated environments; on the other hand, they contended that ‘government oversight’ ultimately would only restrict their religious freedom, which would be harmful to every child in the community.

The vital everyday boundary work of homeschooling was managed almost exclusively by women\textsuperscript{19} (Lois 2010). Mothers gain some assistance with ‘littles’ (young children and babies) once older children (usually girls) reach an age of responsibility. Young adult women, upon finishing high school, usually have the choice to leave home to attend a Christian college (or take college classes while living at home), seek employment in a service job (women I knew worked at coffee shops, ice cream parlours, or in some capacity for a local church), or spend their days at home with the family, pursuing hobbies.

As I mentioned above, the decision to keep children out of schools is driven by the motivation to protect them from vulnerabilities to Satan. This was elaborated at my interlocutors’ homeschool workshop in a number of ways, including through reference to the Biblical mandate for Christians to not be ‘unequally yoked’ to non-Christians, or ‘unbelievers’. As one verbose pamphlet put it:

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{18}] Formal research on this topic is very sparse and provides no substantial data on the relationship between homeschooling and child abuse. Ray (2013) offers a thorough overview on current debates around homeschooling in the United States.
\item[\textsuperscript{19}] I knew of one exception: a widower who managed the education of his two children, through enormous workplace flexibility, until he remarried.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
‘In carefully applying 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, we would say that an unequal yoke exists whenever a believer binds himself to an unbeliever, as in marriage, business partnerships, labor organizations, membership in unScriptural [sic] churches, or join hands with unbelievers in accomplishing God’s will. … Why then should we not consider it an unequal yoke to allow the state school to have a large share in the formal education of our children, when it very crucially affects their spiritual welfare and when the Bible clearly lays upon us, the parents, this duty?’ (Horst 6-7).

Homeschooling parents in Arkansas often argued that it was irresponsible to send Christian children to public school to be taught information that was anathema to Biblical truth. Public school students are taught evolution instead of scientific creationism, which generates a host of problems for conservative evangelical students and parents across a range of subjects. Consider, for example, this passage from Christian homeschool American History textbook America: Land I Love, summarising how humans first arrived in North America: ‘Over four thousand years ago, after the great Flood of Noah’s day, God caused the people of the world to speak many different languages and scattered them from the tower of Babel “upon the face of all the earth” (Gen. 11:9). The ancestors of the native Americans left the tower of Babel to begin a great migration that eventually led to the area of the earth that we call the Western Hemisphere, or the New World’ (Grussendorf et.al., n.d.: 5).

As Pastor Rex’s wife Helen would say, ‘There is no such thing as amoral education’. By this she meant that in every form of education, teachers cannot help but imbue moral directives. Teaching about the world without the presupposition of the literal inerrancy of the Bible is an act of radical moralisation. To say the Bible is not historically or scientifically accurate, and that other forms of knowledge are more authoritative, is seen as a form of rebellion against God on a par with atheism. Teachers, as figures of authority, present a rebellion against God as factually correct. For this reason, to subject children to such a worldview contrary to scripture in public schools was considered counter-productive at best, and child abuse at worst.

Parents utilised the physical and philosophical boundaries provided by homeschooling in the name of protecting the family. Like homeschooling, the examples of
boundary work this chapter has presented thus far have dealt with forms of kinship well known in the West, namely heterosexual nuclear families. Therefore, to give a clearer picture of how Christians in Arkansas differentiated family ontologically, the final sections in this chapter give a more detailed picture of conservative evangelical kinship.

1.4 Kinship

This thesis argues that the question of Christian womanhood is rooted in identities and modes of everyday moral action that are intersubjective. Naturally, considering conservative evangelicals’ focus on family life, that intersubjectivity is built around kinship. Kinship in some way rests at the centre of every feminine identity in this thesis, as Chapter 2 will elaborate. But what distinguishes conservative evangelical kinship, how is it part of the architecture of living out the Biblical worldview and making boundaries around the homeschooling community? These sections outline areas that do this, and that will be of ethnographic and theoretical significance throughout the thesis.

1.4.1 Divine kinship

Virtually all Christian traditions articulate an understanding of God as Father, as in the Father of all creation. But in the view of conservative Baptists in America, not everyone is a child of God. All people are individually created by God, from the moment of conception, but the fact of free will gives each person the option to accept or reject Him. Through salvation that one becomes God’s child, and an heir to God’s Kingdom, along with Jesus and all other saved people. Becoming saved shifts one’s lineage and kinship categories, both in life and after death. Additionally, conservative evangelicals cultivate relatedness based on models from the Bible. In one respect, this is a theological conceptualisation of personhood that comes to fruition after death. But this process of redefining personhood – of transmuting a strictly human lineage into a kinship with God and other believers – directs not only how people understand themselves, but how their sociality is structured. The Christian identity is synonymous with being God’s child and comes with a robust emotional conception of the
character of God the Father and His relationship to His human kin. Rather than symbolic or allegorical, it is a close, intimate relationship, characterised as in many ways the same as the relationship between a human parent and his or her children.

Embodying Christianity also reframes lineage and inheritance. All people who get saved and become believing Christians begin life as unsaved, or ‘lost.’ Lost people have kin ties to their natal family, and understand their parents as parents, their siblings as siblings, grandparents as grandparents, and so on. These ties are maintained in life, but, according to Evangelical conceptions of kinship, are broken after death. The aspect of salvation that transforms extant kinship structure is God’s adoption of the saved person into His royal family. Again, rather than a symbolic understanding of relatedness to God, this is articulated as a literal adoption into a very real royal family, which rules over the Kingdom of Heaven. After death, the Kingdom of God will be the dwelling place of all God’s children. At this moment, the Kingdom of God exists in Heaven, but at any moment, Jesus could return, bringing about the end times and the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. At some point in the establishment of that kingdom, all those who are unsaved will be cast into hell, while the others will be made into eternal kin.

A saved person thus retains their old kin, but gains kinship with everyone who is saved, both living and dead. And although hierarchical modes of relating to kin within your natal family carry on, the new structure of divine kinship becomes overlaid onto that conceptualisation of family, and shifts certain boundaries.
Figure 7 illustrates how, after salvation, certain boundaries within the natal family collapse, and other boundaries form.

In the diagram on the left we see ego in her natal family. She has a sister and a brother, her parents, and her maternal grandparents. She owes deference to the authority of her parents, and is socially equal to her brother and sister. Some of her family members are saved and some are not, but that has no practical impact on her relationship to them from her perspective.

The diagram on the right shows how these relationships shift once ego experiences salvation. Superficially, the generational hierarchy is still in place. But with God in the place of divine father, an ultimate patriarch, the salvation of her other family members becomes important. Her brother, mother, and maternal grandparents are saved, which makes them her ‘brothers and sisters in Christ,’ thereby flattening generation in the spiritual sense. Her father may be her elder and patriarch, but there is now a paternal authority superseding him, to whom she owes ultimate submission. Once everyone in the family has died, presuming her father and sister are not saved before death, they will be in hell, and never be seen again,
whereas the saved family members will enjoy eternal, egalitarian siblinghood in the Kingdom of Heaven.

All of this is made possible by blood – not blood symbolically shared through biological relatedness, but by blood shared, or more particularly shed, by Jesus, and symbolically utilised to mark members of the royal family. Blood in Arkansas is literal but immaterial, superficially benign but a potent metaphysical catalyst. Scholarship on Christianity has touched on the multiple significances and metaphorical meanings of Christ’s blood. It has been discussed as an eternal material (Bynum 2007), housing the soul and bearing miraculous properties (Bildhauer 2006), and a symbol of sacrifice and hard work (Mayblin 2013).

Fenella Cannell (2013) discusses the interplays between blood, lineage, and scripture in her work with the LDS Church in America. She provides an interesting example of how idioms of divine kinship involve substance. In the LDS Church, blood and lineage are traced through figures in scripture, and conversion to Mormonism involves a change of blood:

‘[L.]Lineage ascriptions refer to the claim made in Mormon Scripture that the inhabitants of America are in fact descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel. … Most converts would be of the “blood of Abraham” by physical descent, but there might also be righteous gentiles. Gentile converts, however, would experience their blood being physically changed by the Sacrament of Mormon baptism, so that after the ritual, the blood of Abraham would indeed flow in their veins’ (2013: S85).

Similarly, conservative evangelicals in Arkansas were interested in the lineage leading back to the first humans, Adam and Eve. But the substance transmitted through that lineage is not blood but sin. At the point of salvation, the person, and her kin relationships, are created anew through blood, but it is Christ’s blood that performs the action, and the substance of sin that is acted upon. My friend Molly described the importance of blood in forming divine kinship this way:

‘It is my understanding that the blood [of Jesus] is symbolic of the cleansing of our sins to make us pure and presentable to God, which gives us a joint inheritance with Jesus and allows us to be adopted into God’s family’.
With this cosmological kinship framework, it is clear to see why parents and churches are motivated to shepherd their children on a path to salvation. Conservative evangelicals did not always discuss the theology around divine kinship in day-to-day life, but the architecture around this important aspect of ontology strongly influenced the everyday, in interactions with the world, in church, and at home.

1.4.2 The Kingdom in the home

To understand how this new formation of kinship has a practical impact on womanhood, it is useful to unpack what it means to be of the lineage of Adam. In the Biblical narrative, Adam was created first, and Eve was created to be his companion and helpmeet. They were the first couple, and their love was perfect, unmarred by sin. God gave the directive against eating fruit from a certain tree to Adam, not to Eve, and it was Adam’s responsibility to uphold the promise to obey God in that directive. When Eve ate the fruit, gave some to Adam, and he ate it as well, evangelicals understand that Eve was tricked by Satan, but that Adam knowingly disobeyed God. Adam was supposed to be Eve’s guide and protector, as per God’s plan for their union, and through his failure, sin entered the world, including his physical being, and was transferred to all humans born thereafter.

But the Biblical human lineage also gives conservative evangelicals a clear description of how things were supposed to be, according to God’s will, before Adam brought about sin. A woman was created to submit to her husband as her spiritual authority, and a man’s responsibility was to his wife’s protection and wellbeing. The proper way to enact and embody manhood and womanhood is thought to be spelled out as clear instructions throughout the Bible, but it all begins here, with this relationship.

Sociologist of domestic life Tony Chapman has argued that, in the Western everyday, kinship and domesticity constitute a separate sphere to religion and community, and ‘the home is conceptualised with reference to secular rather than spiritual criteria’ (Chapman 2004: 22). Contrary to that assessment, conservative evangelical domestic life is structured around the spiritual, as emulating modern models of Christian family life is paramount to
community integration. The nuclear family is intentionally patriarchal, meaning it is based on a conscious system whereby the husband/father is the head or leader, the wife/mother is also in a position of authority but submits to him, and the children submit to both (Gallagher 2003). The model of father and child in the divine relationship is considered in some practical ways to be analogous to the human parent/child relationship. In some ways this is also conceptualised quite literally, as God bestows blessings and chastisement to saved people the way a parent would to a child. In Evangelical theological explanations of suffering, while hardship is considered to have many origins, one explanation of a difficulty may be that God’s admonishment for disobedience. The analogy is also circular – because God chastises his children, so too should parents discipline their children.

![Figure 8: 'Umbrella of Protection' diagram from the Institute in Basic Life Principles](image)

The model for marriage and family is based on protection, authority, and obedience. Some of my informants compare it to an umbrella. The message depicted is this: Those under God’s authority have his protection from Satan and the evil trappings of this world – this idea is often supported by Psalm 91: ‘He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall
abide under the shadow of the Almighty’. But God bestows this protective authority to men, who must be responsible for shielding their wives and children. A woman is under the protective authority of her husband as long as she submits to him, and ultimately submits to God. Were she to step outside of her husband’s authority, she would de facto step outside of God’s, and be subject to grave spiritual danger.

1.4.3 Pro-natalism

This section unpacks the ideology and practice of conservative evangelical Christian pro-natalism. As a previous section described, Christian pro-natalism has been characterised under the imperfect moniker of the Quiverfull\(^\text{20}\) Movement, wherein married couples uniformly eschew contraceptive methods. Aside from the terminological challenge, another issue with that characterisation, from an ethnographic perspective, is that Christian pro-natalist communities do exist, but the realities of ‘pro-natalism’ are much more complex than the way they have been presented. Within the community in Arkansas, as elsewhere in the U.S., there are those who fully adhere to the ‘quiverfull’ approach to family planning, i.e. those who never prevent pregnancies, citing the strong spiritual conviction to allow God, and only God, to control their reproduction. One example was Didi and her husband, who several years after their second child discerned that God was telling them not to curb their family’s growth. As Didi described it, this was not a simple or entirely happy revelation:

‘Here we had decided that if the Lord says that [children are] good and the Lord is asking us to open our hearts, then we’re not just going to, like, try for one more and then go back on birth control. So it was a complete surrendering of the entire rest of my fertile years. And I was scared to death. I was. I was kind of cool with having one more, but I was scared to death. I was going to have ten, you know, but I surrendered to it.’

\(^{20}\) Christian pro-natalism is of course not limited to conservative evangelical communities. Pro-natalism on the basis of Christian faith is promoted and practiced within several major denominations, including Catholicism and Mormonism. Discussion of pro-natalism in these contexts is beyond the scope of this thesis, as comparative analysis of reproductive theology in any one of these traditions would be a lengthy undertaking. It is interesting to note, however, that at least one large Catholic family participated in the Arkansas Christian Homeschool Cooperative.
However, couples like Didi and her husband cannot be separated from the conservative evangelicals within that same Northwest Arkansas community who embrace pro-natalism but take more nuanced, pragmatic approaches to reproduction and family-building. Christian pro-natalist couples have complex and often mutable relationships to family planning that confront compelling reasons to space pregnancies, stop having babies altogether, or undo permanent contraceptive measures. To better contextualise those decisions, I first explain what makes American Christian pro-natalism unique compared to other ethnographic contexts in which pro-natalism is socio-politically significant.

Because my interlocutors tended to balk at the idea that they belonged to a ‘Quiverfull Movement’, I often asked what they would call their counter-cultural decision to create large families. Some referred to their church’s ‘family integrated’ structure, which actively incorporates children into teaching and worship spaces. More commonly, however, I had my question reflected back to me: Considering the history of America, and the Bible, and the whole of humanity for that matter, was it really counter-cultural to have a large family? Was it not more accurate to say their ‘pro-child’ approach was ‘normal’, while the World’s embrace of contraceptives was oppositional? In light of this position, which subtly defies the idea that conservative evangelicals are active and political in their reproductive choices, it is unsurprising that American Christian pro-natalism, unlike other examples of pro-natalism, is not directly linked to ethnic or national ‘fertility politics’ (Krause and Marchesi 2007). In her cross-cultural analysis of Israel and Japan, Tsipi Irvy argues that pro-natalism is strongly linked to ideal notions of demography21 and ‘governments’ attitudes toward supporting fertility’ (Irvy 2010: 21).

However, this does not mean that Christian pro-natalism is unconcerned with demography – quite the contrary. Christian pro-natalists promote large families for Christians because they are most likely to be fit parents who will raise their children to love God, thus making those children more likely to increase the population of the Kingdom of God. The view of family-building as potentially world-changing and Kingdom-building

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evinces what has been called the dominionist or reconstructionist mind-set, aiming to align the world with the Biblical worldview (Ingersoll 2015:140). As an explicit point of discourse, dominionism as it pertains to family-building reached a peak in popularity in the early 2010s, but with the dissolution of Vision Forum, the subsequent discursive shift within conservative evangelical communities attenuated dominionist rhetoric. Still, the threat of Christianity dwindling in the world remained potent, and parents did express concern aligning with Colin Campbell’s piece in the Christian pro-natalist publication Above Rubies Magazine.

‘We are told that within the next 40-50 years, much of Europe will cease to be the Europe we have known. It will instead be an Islamic Europe. Most of Europe is beyond the hope of reversing the huge demographic and cultural change that is already taking place’ (Campbell 2013).

What is evidenced here, as the homeschooling conference also showed, is a pointed warning about an imminent demographic upending of historically white, Christian-majority countries, occurring in opposition to Euro-American missionary work.

In summary, conservative evangelical kinship is concerned not just with building family, but building Christian family in a world besieged by anti-Christian and anti-family influences. Living out Christianity in America is therefore delineated by kinship-based cosmology, as well as continual work on the part of Christian families to uphold the social architecture around that cosmology, and be conscious of their place in the world. Chapter 5 will further elaborate on American Christian pro-natalism, with an exploration of how couples live out ideological family building in practical terms.

1.5 Conclusion

These are the fundamental boundaries that distinguish the American Christian woman from the world around her, and how she represents herself in dialogue with that world: She is saved and undergoing sanctification; she is part of a transcendent kin group; she protects and educates her children; she is conservative. By reviewing these boundaries this chapter has begun the work of unpacking conservative evangelical ethics and ontology. In a
more fundamental sense, this chapter provides a look at the world and cosmos from a conservative evangelical vantage point, to the purpose of offering a frame of reference for the discussions of quotidian life that will dominate the remainder of the thesis.

With that in mind, this chapter has contributed to a better understanding of the variety in American Christianities, even amongst evangelicals. I have aimed to introduce a discussion of how conservative evangelicals in Arkansas manage ontological truth amidst many antithetical views of existence via boundaries that range from conceptual and theological, to eminently mundane. The chapter has approached the subject of boundaries mainly from the latter of these standpoints, proposing a focus on everyday counternarratives and self-other antimony in order to foreground the social structuring that conservative evangelicals maintain.

The referential foundation this chapter has laid will be useful to ethnographic and analytical understanding in all of the remaining chapters. It is a central argument of this thesis that the question of womanhood can be understood through an analytical approach based on identity, and no other feminine identity can be construed without first understanding the identity of the Christian. In the next chapter, I take the same approach to womanhood itself, or more specifically to conservative evangelical considerations of gender difference, femininity, relationality, and the centrality of these in living a true Christian life.
CHAPTER 2: The Woman

2.1 Introduction: The realness

Figure 9: A social media post from Above Rubies Ministries

Open any social media page belonging to a conservative evangelical woman, women’s ministry, or family-orientated blog, and you are bound to come across a post like the one above. The memes are playful, sometimes self-effacing, and (as is so often the case with memes), revelatory epistemological objects\(^\text{22}\) (Bellar, et.al. 2013; Aguilar et.al. 2017). This meme, from the Christian women’s ministry Above Rubies, ostensibly is about men – real

\(^{22}\) An entire essay could be written about the role of social media, and internet memes, in the production of community and knowledge in American Christianity. Although an exploration of Christian life in the digital world is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that, throughout my fieldwork, much of what interlocutors taught me about living as a Christian woman was reflected regularly in their social media posts. Posts containing internet memes were also very often political – unsurprising in a presidential election year, and considering the interweaving of Christianity and conservative politics mentioned in Chapter 1. For more on internet memes and American conservatism, see Ross and Rivers 2017; and Riemensperger 2018.
men – but reveals a great deal about how Christian women perceive themselves as well. The author is indicating that she is free to make her own decisions when it comes to married life, and will not be influenced by pressure from worldly sources (e.g., the ‘lib’s petition’). Importantly, the author is demonstrating that she understands God’s purpose and plan for men and women, and that by choosing a real man, she has chosen God. The poem reflects a familiar image of the American Christian family, in which a ‘helper’ wife submits to the authority of her husband as the provider. However, memes such as this do much more than reiterate the gold standard of gender roles within a Christian marriage, they give glimpses of a conflict that is at the core of conservative evangelical ontology. As my friends in Arkansas so often explained, God’s plan for humans, from the beginning of time, was that men and women should possess certain personal attributes in order to complement each other in marriage. What’s more, that plan is in perpetual jeopardy, owing to Satan’s interference and humans’ tendency to sin. Failure to realise God’s plan is a looming possibility, and that failure turns men into ungodly mice, and women into shrews.

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Having examined the Christian aspect of Christian womanhood, let us now turn to the ‘Christianisation’ of gender in conservative evangelical America. Subsequent chapters will focus on feminine identities in moments of transition, i.e. how women learn to embody, or become, those core identities. In this chapter, the multitudinous identity of ‘woman’ takes the forefront. I propose, here and throughout the thesis, that the ethical project of the Christian woman is subsumed in the venture of femininity – women are profoundly concerned with how to appropriately be feminine. Therefore, the main questions I address are: how does one be a Christian woman, and what relevance does enacting femininity have to everyday life? Furthermore, what is at stake, in an ontological framework in which God has laid His entire plan for humanity on the foundation of a heterosexual gender binary? Addressing these questions will once again require examination of the Bible-based ontological architecture of conservative evangelical Christianity, as well as a bit of the history of debates around femininity in the United States.
First and foremost, this chapter demonstrates the preoccupation with how to be a Christian woman in Arkansas. It shows that a conservative evangelical cannot ‘opt out’ of gender, meaning one cannot be a Christian person without being masculine or feminine in specific ways. In this context gender is not one lens through which to examine Christianity, it is inextricable from Christian subjectivity. Second, the chapter shows the ways in which everyday piety is an undeniable aspect of being a Christian woman, and Biblical womanhood is framed by pious action. That said, because Christianity and gender are inextricable, Christian womanhood must be considered beyond the perspective of piety and moral action. Womanhood is lived out and taught as a mode of being, encompassing desires, personality traits, and pitfalls. To explore this claim more thoroughly, the chapter discusses femininity as embodied rather than interior or exterior, and relational rather than individualised. This is important because embodied ethics should also be viewed as enacted in collaboration with others, and because a Christian woman is defined in relation to her husband and children, and her desire for marriage and motherhood. Therefore, this chapter introduces the idea of Christian womanhood as a form of ‘moral tradition’ into which women are brought into accord, and proposes a mode of subjectivation based on identity.

To illustrate the conservative evangelical conceptualisation of gender I lay out two tessellating functional models as described by my interlocutors: Biblical femininity and masculinity, and ‘wiring’. Biblical femininity/masculinity an ideal model, toward which individuals are guided by the Holy Spirit. It is, as one might expect, based on depictions of holy men and women, and their relationships, in the Bible, and a pedagogical structure that favours exemplary passages. ‘Wiring’ is a concept popular throughout the United States, used to typify the ‘natural’ order of gender difference, including positive strengths and sinful weaknesses. Together, the coupled concepts of Biblical gender and wiring delineate the appropriate ways to be, and strive to be, female or male. In contrast to the Biblical and naturally wired person, I discuss the opposing facet of gender in conservative evangelical America: the ‘counterfeit’ woman and man. This describes the false, corrupted, way of being female or male, which is anathema to the Christian person. Like the lost person, the figure of the counterfeit woman and man are valuable polemics in the Christian life. Therefore, the
chapter demonstrates how anti-feminist counternarratives help produce those figures. In the American Bible Belt, Conservative evangelical gender identity and true Christianity are construed as mutually constitutive, such that ‘real’ femininity or masculinity is synonymous with Christian personhood. As Biblical gender connotes true salvation and inclusion, ‘counterfeit’ gender connotes de facto exclusion, thus, to be appropriately male or female is to be a true person, in the same way being a saved Christian makes one a true person.

Additionally, this chapter shows that Christian womanhood is not individualised, but is necessarily relational and social. In Arkansas, gendered social structure is not merely upheld as natural and logical, but purposefully designed, and ignored at great peril. This examination of gender will begin to delve into Christian approaches to marriage and the nuclear family, two of the most integral areas of life for conservative evangelicals. Gender, and specifically difference between the genders, forms the functional groundwork of Christian marriage. For this reason, I aim to explain the conflict between God’s design for sexuality and marriage, Satan’s desire to destroy that design, and what is at stake for women as players in the struggle.

In an effort to create an ethnographic picture of gender in conservative evangelical Arkansas, I rely on a mosaic of social and pedagogical interactions from throughout my fieldwork. Naturally the most common teaching spaces were church services and Sunday School, which were formally dedicated, in part, to imparting doctrine. But the chapter also dips in and out of ladies’ Bible studies, home groups, and ordinary social gatherings and conversations, which together can be considered a domestic landscape of orthopraxy discourse. Gender, its implications for marriage, and the modern dangers posed to both, infused this landscape.

As I will demonstrate, my interlocutors experience a besieged existence: one that sees Christian heterosexual marriage as constantly under attack. This premise demands action, and protecting a marriage depends on understanding, acknowledging, and working within the frameworks of gender difference. Therefore, a huge amount is risked if gender difference is not upheld. It is not surprising, then, that during my time in Arkansas, Bible passages relating to how to be a man or woman, especially in marriage, were the most common subjects of messages, Bible studies, Sunday School teaching, and everyday conversation. People presented
these readings, and the truths they imparted, with a grave urgency that reflected a real sense of danger. In the sections that follow, I unpack the source of that danger, and how my interlocutors sought to mitigate it.

It is important to note that the spectrum between the Biblical and the counterfeit applies as much to men as to women, albeit with different gender-specific standards (van Klinken 2011, 2012; Presterudstuen 2015; Thornton 2016; Burchard 2017). This chapter, as with the thesis as a whole, focuses mainly on the experiences of women, but the subject of how to be a Biblical, or ‘real’, man occasionally came to the fore in conversation and messages. At times, it seemed as though a man’s explanation of masculinity became a performance of masculinity in itself. ‘Men are simple!’ Pastor Rex once asserted, ‘All we need is food, sex, and respect’. This is not to say that men were never reflexive about their own masculinity in private spaces. Pastors, who demonstrated public vulnerability often in front of their church families, periodically would reflect on their experiences of manhood in the context of their roles as husbands and fathers. All three of the pastors whom I came to know dedicated time in messages or small group sessions to explaining how they felt they had failed as men, i.e. in ways that men fail, and called on the men present to emotionally support one another.

2.2 Christianity and womanhood

Conservative evangelicals trace the nature of gender difference to the Bible and the start of creation, but American manifestations of discourse about gender, and its implications for the social order, are of course much newer. The following sections examine some of the relevant ways womanhood has been approached in the context of Christianity, beginning with American historical antecedents to current gender delineations. To frame contemporary ideas of womanhood, I discuss how scholars of American evangelical Christianity have traced the emergence of male headship and women’s domestic roles as prominent avenues of discourse and debate. I then unpack key ways anthropologists have looked at the relationship between womanhood and Christianity globally, and the body’s position as a means through which women live out Christianity. Furthermore, this discussion of women’s particular experience
draws out questions about how women are conceptualised as persons, in a wider theoretical apprehension of personhood in the anthropology of Christianity.

2.2.1 The Cult of True Womanhood and male headship

This section offers an historical view of how correct femininity emerged as a leading motif in popular Christian discourse in America, and how gender difference came to dominate public evangelical discourse in the 20th century. It shows how language about womanhood, including descriptions of good and bad womanly behaviour, has maintained a degree of consistency since the Georgian era. Additionally, moral concern about the social implications of unacceptable femininity has remained a topic of discourse for Christian writers.

It goes without saying that southern conservative evangelicals are not singular in their ideas about what women are or should be; in fact, popular discourse on ‘True Womanhood’ in America is two centuries old. Barbara Welter’s 1966 essay is a comprehensive study of nineteenth-century literature on True Womanhood, which appeared in the form of behavioural guides and morality tales for young women from 1820-1860. In essence, ‘The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman’ (Welter 1966:152). Looking through Welter’s analysis, it is easy to see reflections of True Womanhood literature in modern conservative evangelical gender models, which will become clear later in this chapter. Most apparently, the primary expectations of a woman’s domestic role are virtually the same (although no mention is made of 19th-century mothers homeschooling their children). Welter also shows that compared to men, 19th-century True Women are more tender, more spiritual, and less sexual – themes that resonate with the 21st-century conservative evangelical understanding of gender difference as well.

As Howard and DeBerg have made clear, the 19th-century picture of True Womanhood was not universal, but the privilege of middle- and upper-class white women
(Howard 1996; DeBerg 1990: 126-27). As an example, the domestic division of labour, in which a wife who looked after the home and children while her husband worked outside the home, was impossible for enslaved people, and a struggle for most Black couples to manage post-emancipation, when Victorian romantic ideals still relied on ideals of True Womanhood. For Black women in America, achieving ‘respectable’ femininity was an exercise in emulating whiteness, or subverting the white model and thus carving out a new kind of American femininity that served Black communities (Howard 1996). In 21\textsuperscript{st}-century Northwest Arkansas, whiteness is still the default benchmark in representations of true Christian femininity.

Alongside middle-class whiteness, the Cult of True Womanhood was most concerned with femininity as an expression of Christian morality. According to Welter, one crucial purpose for 19th-century True Womanhood literature was to shore up appropriate, Christian femininity in the face of dangerous social change (1966: 157-8). Liberal ideologies, new women’s fashions, increasing uptake in women’s higher education, and the suffrage movement were each written about as ‘tantamount to an attack on women’s virtue, if only it was correctly understood’ (ibid. 157; DeBerg 1990:127; Stasson 2014:101). Into the 1930s, Christian leaders supported a ‘separate spheres ideology’ in which the Christian home, run by the Christian wife and mother in service of a working husband, was upheld as the antidote to immorality for women and men alike (DeBerg 1990:126).

By the 1980s, the American evangelical ideal of a nuclear family headed by a husband had reached an apex in the mainstream political zeitgeist. Stasson (2014) provides an account of how evangelical leaders (including Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, Tim and Beverley LaHaye) pushed back against the ‘moral decay’ of the time in media, but also increasingly in the public square, using much the same language as their predecessors. In particular, Stasson notes that, as conservative evangelical public messaging became clearer and more unified, gender was cemented into the framework that drew boundaries between Christians and the world (2014: 104). Biblical interpretation around gender difference, gender roles, wifely submission, and male headship, became virtually paradigmatic with scriptural inerrancy (ibid. 113, Bendroth 1993; Gallagher 2004). The creation of the ‘separate sphere’ ideology, and a unification of
orthopraxis discourse that determined public representation and local church teaching, relied on the organisation of gender difference, and ideas of Christian womanhood in particular. Consequently, the conservative evangelical ontological architecture – the actuality of the Christian world as well as its representation – depended, and still depends, on women efficaciously behaving as Christian women.

The background presented above demonstrates just one area of American evangelical Christianity in which womanhood is a crucial concern. Within this historical and political view, it would seem the efficaciousness of womanhood would be determined by gendered pious action, through which a woman fulfils her ‘role’ as stay-at-home wife and mother. The following sections will show that this view is incomplete, as it does not consider the embodied nature of femininity and piety, nor does it examine the rich interplay of piety and identity that is glossed over by the term ‘role’ in Christian women’s lives.

### 2.2.2 Anthropology and Christian femininity

Within anthropology, gender has been treated as a valuable avenue of exploration in the wider realm of research on Christianity, and Christian conversion. Anthropologists such as Diane Austin-Broos, Maya Mayblin, Joel Robbins, and Annelin Eriksen have created a fertile field of analysis on the topic of Christianity and the shaping of femininity and masculinity. Studies of gender, which Robbins has argued is a topic requiring deeper investigation, have looked at shifts in patriarchal hierarchies, brought on by conversion to Christianity, that enable women to garner social authority through the institution of the church (Austin-Broos 1987, 1997; Cucchiari 1990; Brusco 1995, Martin 2003). In a similar vein, Annelin Eriksen, whose work is based in Pentecostal churches in Vanuatu, has unfolded some of the intricacies of gendered experience and practices in communities ostensibly committed to egalitarianism, including different ways men and women in Vanuatu receive the Holy Spirit that mirror an ambivalence toward egalitarianism (2014: S268-S269). Maya Mayblin’s work in north eastern Brazil takes a different approach to gender, which integrates Catholic conceptualisations of divine figures. By examining discourse over clerical and
monastic celibacy, and the anthropomorphism of angels and saints, Mayblin unpacks the complex ways that thinking about gender shapes how Catholics in Brazil see sacred figures as both close to and separate from humanity.

Much of the existing work points to the importance of the body in ideological and phenomenological expressions of gender and the sacred in Christianities. For Pentecostal Christians in Jamaica, for example, the body is the site of gender-specific forms of exuberance and healing in worship as well as physical expressions of piety (Austin-Broos 1997). Eriksen (2014) describes how Christianity alters the physical expression, and therefore the inherent nature, of femininity in Vanuatu. Women who moved to the town of Port Vila from rural Ambrym had to adjust to a new Pentecostal iteration of femininity, in which women primarily stayed inside the house and were expected to wear dresses that fully cover their bodies, as opposed to dress in Ambrym, where women often leave their breasts uncovered when breastfeeding. Through these shifts, Eriksen notes the ways Christianity moralised a contained rather than exteriorised femininity. As Eriksen describes it, in the shift to a Christianised way of living, ‘[f]emininity has become a stable essence, on the inside of the body. Clothing, and management of the surface of the body, becomes a way of masking, or concealing this essence’ (ibid. 268).

For Christian women in Arkansas, femininity and Christianity are tied to the body. It would be incomplete to explain femininity as either displayed representationally (Strathern 2013), or an interiorised essence, without acknowledging the defining element of the Christian female body as imbued with the Holy Spirit, who forges new femininity in the form of the Christian woman. As the thesis has made clear, the indwelling Holy Spirit sanctifies the Christian, or makes her holy, by aligning her desires to God’s will. In essence, her life as a Christian is a project of becoming a Christian woman, with implications for the qualities her femininity must possess. This idea that the presence of divinity catalyses the development of womanhood shifts away from gendered approaches to divine encounters, as presented by
Eriksen and other scholars interested in Christian embodiment23, to a view in which God’s indwelling generates a new identity that is actualised over time.

Judith Butler, drawing from de Beauvoir, illuminates an interesting starting point from which to look at the concept of womanhood as a process, and the correlation between womanhood and embodiment. Conservative evangelical ontology does not allow for differentiation between gender and sex – ethnographically speaking, when this thesis refers to gender, it can be taken as interchangeable with sex – so discussions of gender as ‘project’ and ‘construct’ hold no ontological relevance, except to identify non-Christian intellectualism. However, in the context of sanctification, and considering the centrality of family and sexual life, it is evident that Christian womanhood/gender is delineated beyond what one is born with. From that perspective, conservative evangelicals may agree with Butler (and de Beauvoir) that ‘to become a woman is a purposive and appropriate set of acts, the acquisition of a skill … to assume a certain corporeal style and significance’ (Butler 1986: 36, emphasis in original). I argue that this view of gender applies to Christian womanhood, with the caveat that the tri-part model of the self must be taken into account, insofar as it incorporates the Holy Spirit as an embodied, purposeful actor. Such an approach to the feminine Christian self additionally raises questions pertaining to recent discussions in the anthropology of Christianity around the nature of the person.

Anthropological debates on the self in Christianity have made claims about in/dividualism, partiability, and relationality, and whether and to what extent the differences between these modes of personhood matter (Mosko 2015; Robbins 2002; Bialecki 2011; Bialecki and Deswani 2015; Keane 2007, Chua 2012; Handman 2011). This debate is relevant to any framing of Christian womanhood in contexts such as conservative evangelical America, where womanhood is so central to ideas of the ethical subject that it carries subtle implications for conceptualisations of personhood and ontological boundary work. As Bialecki and Daswani aptly put it:

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23 See especially Opas & Haapalainen 2017, for a summary of work specifically by anthropologists of Christianity.
‘The individual/dividual nexus provides a good analogy for the different – but connected – ways that people have been described as related or relatable, and potentially provides a cultural and ethical foundation for how people think about and take on positions of connection and separation’ (Bialecki and Daswani 2015: 272).

Discussions of personhood as relational, or ‘a logic of relations’ (Hamberger 2013: 306) has everything to do with formulations of kinship, which traditionally have been framed in terms of affinity and consanguinity (Bialecki and Daswani 2015: 275). That said, the idea of relationality as it relates to womanhood for conservative evangelicals is less connected to theoretical framing of the person than it is to intersubjectivity. Ultimately the two bleed into one another, but whilst personhood deals with existential self-understanding, intersubjectivity is better described as a mode of self-actualisation. With that in mind, I propose a view of the true Christian woman as relational, meaning the actualisation of that identity cannot be extricated from properly enacted kinship ties.

To give an example of the difference in these approaches, I turn to Joel Robbins’s work on relationality and individualism in Melanesia. In contrast to other explorations of Christianity based on ideas of individualised faith or belief, American conservative evangelicals exemplify a paradigm in which Christianity is determined by mutual social dependence. Robbins, reading from Dumont, describes Christianity among the Urapmin in Melanesia as introducing a social shift from relationalism to individualism. Relationalism, a marker of traditional Urapmin society, ‘sees the creation of successful relationships, rather than successful individuals, as the primary goal toward which life should be organized (Robbins 2012: 117)’. For the Urapmin, Christianity brought about a shift to individualism, which Robbins defines as ‘a sole focus on the individual as the unit of salvation’ (ibid. 119). Salvation is, as Robbins shows, an individual experience: faith cannot be transferred from one person to another. Women converting to Christianity in highly ‘relational’ social contexts become individualised, or ‘unit[s] of salvation’, and it is that shift that facilitates emerging ways of being feminine (ibid.).

Conservative evangelicals support the notion of individual salvation, but equally emphasise the importance of demonstrating salvation in the everyday. As Pastor Rex would
occasionally quip, ‘You wouldn’t plant an apple tree and expect cherries to grow. An apple tree makes apples, just like a Christian produces Christian fruit’. For women, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit must be outwardly observable (the fruits) in the form of congruous feminine behaviour. Again, appropriate femininity is considered not only in practice but motivation, and that motivation is fundamentally relational, i.e. one must desire marriage, and children. For conservative evangelical men as well, true Christian manhood is inextricable from the relational. In several Sunday messages, Pastor Spencer urged the men and boys to remember that ‘no man is an island, and no real man can live his life just for himself!’ To the same extent as women, the fruit of men’s salvation is exhibited in their desire to marry, have children, and model Biblical manhood for other men and boys. The difference, implied by Pastor Spencer’s preaching, is that the nature of men is to live unfettered and independently, whereas women are naturally drawn to relationships with others.

Pastor Rex, and his wife Helen, would often say: ‘We can sum up the Ten Commandments, and really the whole Bible, in one word: relationships. It’s all about relationships. The first three commandments are about our relationship with God, and the rest are about our relationships with one another’. For my interlocutors, relationships, especially romantic relationships, form the active expression of the Christian life, and model the lived-out salvation of early Christians, going back to the book of Acts. Perhaps nowhere is Christian relationalism more emphasized than in the context of marriage and nuclear family, as marriage is the earthly representation of the relationship between Christ and the Church. This means the relational nature of salvation itself, i.e. humanity’s relationship to Jesus, is exemplified in the marriage between a man and a woman. Later sections will therefore discuss womanhood in the context of marriage. First, the following section will delve into Arkansan expressions of true Christian womanhood, as well as its antithesis.

24 Gal. 5:22-23 ‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.’; Eph. 5:9 ‘For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth.’ See also Mt. 12:33; Lk. 6:44.
25 In the New Testament, Acts describes the lives and struggles of the first followers of Jesus immediately after His resurrection and ascension into Heaven.
2.3 The good, the bad, and the ugly

Conservative evangelicals in Arkansas work with two congruous functional models of gender. The first is what is most commonly referred to as ‘Biblical femininity’ and ‘Biblical masculinity’; the second is an emic elaboration of what comprises ‘natural’ characteristics of women and men. Each proffer a formulation of gender difference, as well as frameworks for how men and women are, and how they should be, according to scripture. Together they form a discursive representation of what it means to be a ‘real’ male or female, and by extension, a real Christian. The section that follows presents the non-Christian counterpoint, the ‘counterfeit’ male or female, which essentially is viewed as a non-person.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biblical Man</th>
<th>Man’s Wiring</th>
<th>Counterfeit Man</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Spiritual leader</td>
<td>• Requires respect</td>
<td>• Feminized/effeminate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hard-working</td>
<td>• Prone to anger and pride</td>
<td>• Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provider</td>
<td>• Sexually aggressive</td>
<td>• Lazy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mentors younger men</td>
<td>• Insensitive</td>
<td>• Does not want to be married or have children, rather wants to do ‘as he pleases’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Loves his wife as his own body</td>
<td>• Prefers dogs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biblical Woman</th>
<th>Woman’s Wiring</th>
<th>Counterfeit Woman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Entrepreneurial</td>
<td>• Requires love</td>
<td>• Feminist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Respects her husband</td>
<td>• Prone to worry and nagging</td>
<td>• Aggressive, brash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Represents her husband well</td>
<td>• Sexually passive</td>
<td>• Lazy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Loves her children</td>
<td>• Sensitive, tender</td>
<td>• Does not want to be married or have children, rather wants to do ‘as she pleases’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sober, discreet, chaste, does not gossip</td>
<td>• Nurturing</td>
<td>• Hypersexual, immodest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teaches younger women how to behave</td>
<td>• Prefers cats</td>
<td>• Concerned with appearance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3.1 Prized above rubies

The idea of Biblical gender is seen to follow from God’s overarching plan for humanity, and is supported, proved, by passages from scripture outlining how men and women are to behave (as individuals and toward one another in marriage) in order to be
pleasing to God. As a child of God, it is understood that, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, a Christian would naturally be inclined, or ‘have the heart’, toward gendered Biblical habitus. In areas of teaching in Arkansas, parameters for a Biblical woman were drawn primarily from a selection of chapters in the New Testament, and the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Of the many passages in scripture that shed light on femininity, and gender prescriptions more generally, two of the most often-referenced pieces I encountered in Arkansas were from Titus 2, and Proverbs 31. (A third, from Ephesians 5, will be relevant later in the chapter.) When teachers, preachers, and study leaders spoke about being a Biblical woman, they did so with the subtext that not all women live up to the Biblical model, and no women live up to it entirely. Rather than an accolade one could achieve, Biblical womanhood was analogous to sanctification.

Piecing together Biblical gender involved interpretation of more explicit passages that explain how men and women ought to behave, as well as implicit interpretation. The latter was drawn from further teaching around aspects of God’s nature: what pleases Him and displeases Him, how He relates to His children, and how His gender is expressed. Helen, speaking to the ladies’ Bible study on the subject of how to be a Biblical woman, summed up the implicit nature of God’s gender this way: ‘It’s interesting, and kind of hard for us as women – men can look to the Heavenly Father as the perfect example of how to be a man, a husband, a father… but women, we mostly have sinful women in the Bible and don’t have a lot else to turn to.’

God the Father, and the Son, possess the capacity for a woman’s tender, selfless love, but God is not a genderless being: He is male. As Helen intimated, this fact bears a number of implications for acceptable behaviour for Christian men. The Biblical man may not position himself as God, but he is expected to be a leader. As discussed in Chapter 1, fathers are encouraged, with regard to their children, to consider the relationship between God the Father and Christ the Son; and in marriage, they are to emulate the role of Christ in relation to his bride, the Church. Therefore, they carry a weight of spiritual responsibility that women do not, which the women I knew often cited as the primary reason they would not wish to be (or act like) men.
However, the Biblical Woman carries responsibility for proper Christian behaviour as well, as is evidenced by the popularity of Titus 2 and Proverbs 31. Titus 2, part of the letter (Epistle) from Paul the Apostle to another first-century Christian, Titus, lays out ideal Christian behaviour for both women and men. Whole ministries (e.g. the aptly named Titus2 Ministries\textsuperscript{26}) are devoted to carrying out the directives in this relatively short bit of scripture. At Living Water Baptist, it was the subject of a month-long Sunday sermon series that unpacked the meaning of each word in each verse:

1But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine:
2That the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience.
3The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things;
4That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children,
5To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed. (Titus 2:1-5)

Pastor Spencer found Titus 2 vital enough to dedicate an entire sermon series to it, meticulously unpacking each verse to illuminate how they governed Biblical femininity and masculinity. The passage is addressed to older men and women, urging both sexes to display austerity, dignity, and kindness. Directions exclusively for older women, which form the bulk of the passage, highlight a number of important pious actions: avoiding alcohol, teaching, maintaining their homes. However, it is interesting to note that the instruction ‘be in behaviour as becometh holiness’ was not only linked to self-discipline, but underscored the importance of behaving as a good wife and mother, including loving one’s husband and children. In short, true Christian women ‘approach the home with a zest, a zeal, and a passion’ that make Christian men proud to be married to them. Furthermore, Pastor Spencer put special emphasis on the last few words of this passage, ‘that the word of God be not blasphemed’, to illustrate in strong terms that women could do harm to God’s work, and the whole Christian project, by not behaving properly as women.

\textsuperscript{26}Titus2.com
No discussion of Biblical womanhood would be complete without Proverbs 31, which has also inspired multiple women’s ministries, including the Christian pro-natalist Above Rubies Ministry\(^{27}\). Men often praised their wives by comparing them to the Proverbs 31 woman (who is not given a name), and it became a particularly popular passage around Mother’s Day:

10Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.  
11The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil.  
12She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.  
13She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands.  
14She is like the merchants’ ships; she bringeth her food from afar.  
15She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens.  
16She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard.  
17She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms.  
18She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night.  
19She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff.  
20She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.  
21She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her household are clothed with scarlet.  
22She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple.  
23Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land.  
24She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and delivereth girdles unto the merchant.  
25Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come.  
26She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.  
27She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.  
28Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. (Proverbs 31:10-28)

Hopewell’s Ladies’ Bible study group held a study with the theme of how to be a Biblical woman, in which Helen described the Proverbs 31 woman as ‘the one we love to hate’, because she is too perfect, able to achieve too much, and makes normal Christian women ‘look bad’. She is, as Helen explained, not an accurate portrayal of a woman at one point in her life, even an ideal woman, because no woman could be expected to be the master of so many aspects of life at once. Rather, Proverbs 31 is meant to capture a complete picture

\(^{27}\) Aboverubies.org
of a woman’s life in all its ‘seasons’. As a picture of womanhood, however, this Proverb, like Titus 2, demonstrates the inextricable relationship of relational gender to Christianity. The ‘virtuous woman’ is described in relation to what she does for her husband and household foremost: she works for her husband, is trustworthy and does him good, represents him well to assure his good reputation, and ensures his dependents are clothed and fed. The Proverbs 31 woman will be important in Chapter 3 as well, as she represents the entrepreneurial spirit a Christian woman should bring into marriage. Although she may be the ideal, the ‘average’ Christian woman still matches a standard of commonly accepted natural delineations.

2.3.2 ‘Just wired that way’

Alongside Biblical womanhood and manhood, the second conservative evangelical functional model of gender takes into account the realities of the Fall: that all humans, even God’s children, are imperfect and prone to error. Christians in Arkansas explained gender difference using the Biblical science of ‘design’, which holds that God created men and women to be different, to have different strengths and weaknesses, in order to best love and complement one another. Natural weaknesses are differentiated from sinful gender-specific imperfections. For example, a woman may be more prone to become emotional and cry than a man, but this reflects the fact that God designed women to be sensitive and emotive. However, a woman is likewise more prone to worry about the future than a man, but this natural inclination is sinful, because it is a manifestation of lack of trust in God. This model, describing the positive and negative aspects of gender characteristics, is referred to as ‘wiring’. In any conversation about gender in Arkansas, one is very likely to hear: ‘Men/women do X; they’re just wired that way’. It is a basic statement of fact that can be framed positively (‘Men want to work and provide; they’re just wired that way.’) or negatively: (‘Men are visually aroused, so they lust after immodestly dressed women; they’re just wired that way.’) My fieldwork was awash in conversations that illuminated the many varied and detailed ways women and men understood themselves to be naturally and differently wired (See Table 1). Some examples were Biblical, inferring negative attributes from passages that extoll virtuous
ones, i.e. if a Biblical woman is discreet, it means every woman is more likely to be tempted to gossip. Some came from current pop psychology, including a popular marriage guide which compares men’s brains to waffles and women’s brains to spaghetti (Farrel and Farrel 2001). Many attributes could be found in common American gendered tropes about men being tough and emotionless, and women being fragile and emotionally mature. Pastor Spencer facetiously urged wives not to forget that their husbands ‘have emotion’, noting that ‘anger is an emotion’!

Understanding how God designed men and women to function allows conservative evangelicals to better understand how to fit the Biblical model (which plays on their strengths) and how to guard themselves against the inevitable attacks from Satan (who preys on their propensity to sin). Satan uses gender-specific attacks on individuals in order to undermine God’s plan for gender, sexuality, and marriage. Moreover, Christians weaken the validity of God’s plan for the sexes when they stray from or do not take seriously their gender characterization, which usually comes in the form of some kind of gender role reversal. In the case of conservative evangelicals in Arkansas, one example people found worrying was the inversion caused by a mother working outside the home in a way that exposed her unduly to the world, and/or interfered with her ability to homeschool her children.

In addition to helping Christians withstand troubles in their marriage, and with their personal sexuality, understanding gendered wiring is used to explain differences in how people approach salvation. Women are, by nature, more willing to submit, whereas men are more likely to struggle with pride that will get in the way of the prerequisite of submission to God. As Associate Pastor Bobby once put it: ‘Women are going to submit to something, whether it be Jesus or the Enemy or whatever, but they will be led. For a man, the whole world might be falling down around him and he still won’t do it’. As with most wired characteristics, a woman’s inclination to submit, ‘to be led’, can manifest for good or ill. Women are more naturally spiritual, more likely to get saved at a young age, pray and ask for God’s help more easily, and listen more when God speaks to them. But being led can also mean being tricked or manipulated, and submitting to a false notion of what it is to be female.
2.3.3 Counterfeit Gender

If Biblical femininity and masculinity represent the Christian ideal, and gender wiring encompasses the natural attributes that cause Christian women and men to struggle or falter, a third mode of being male or female represents a rejection of Christianity. In both women and men, counterfeit behaviour is associated with being amoral, weak, and politically liberal or progressive, as these are not characteristics of a true Christian. But, as I have attempted to demonstrate, the Christian self is gendered: one cannot define a Christian person apart from techniques of being male or female. In many ways, for Conservative evangelicals, the parameters of ‘real’ gender determine personhood. Therefore, the counterfeit woman/man can simultaneously be construed as a non-woman/man and a non-Christian.

Briefly, a counterfeit man looks like this: He displays behaviour that is feminised or effeminate – somewhat nebulous characteristics that take pragmatic shape in discussions of marital roles, but also incorporate any attribute associated with female wiring; he is not a leader in the home, and allows his wife or children to make decisions without his input; he does not treat his wife well; he is not a hard worker and provider, will not work, or spends money on himself; he is not interested in having sexual intercourse with his wife, or waits for her to initiate sex; and finally, he has no desire to marry or have children, and wants to ‘do as he pleases’, rather than what the Bible tells him or what his responsibilities dictate. The portrait of the counterfeit woman is similar, albeit inverted: Like the counterfeit man, she has no interest in marrying or having children, and prefers to ‘do as she pleases’ rather than read and wholly follow the Bible; if she is married, she is not submissive to the authority of her husband, and wishes to make decisions without him; she does not work hard to keep up her home and provide for the needs of her family, including educating her children; and she is overly concerned with appearance, overtly sexual, ‘brash’, and behaves in a provocative manner.

The attributes of a counterfeit woman can, and often are, captured under the semantic net of ‘feminism’. Chapter 1 discussed the polemical relationship between conservative evangelicals and others, namely how maintaining a ‘set apart’ ideological community requires
narrativizing its identified antitheses – in other words, creating counternarratives. When it comes to Christian femininity, feminism is the subject of the most invaluable counternarrative. Along with homosexuality, feminism is identified as the most dangerous antithesis to God’s design for gender. Like homosexuality, feminism is seen as a tool of the Enemy to dismantle Christian ideals of marriage and sexuality. The conservative evangelical history of feminism begins with Margaret Sanger, whom they consider an infamous eugenicist. From the time of Sanger’s work, feminism in the eyes of conservative evangelicals has been synonymous with the evils that cause women to reject the goodness of femininity and, ultimately, of human nature. Feminism is an elaborate system of lies that seduces women into being dissatisfied with being female, while encouraging them to shame men for their masculinity (DeMoss 2001). It tells women that they should work outside the home, serve men who are not their husbands (their bosses), allow their children to be corrupted by public schooling (if they have children at all), and look down on the way of living God authored. Most dangerously, feminism posits the idea that women can be their own independent authority, and therefore have no need for God. It is impossible, then, for a woman to consider herself a feminist and be anything other than a lost resident of the world.

The consequence for counterfeit womanhood is an inability to live, and love, as a true Christian. Missa summed up this rationale clearly with this matter-of-fact opinion: ‘Women in the world think they love their families, but they don’t’. Non-Christian women, Missa pointed out, are different. The Bible describes women in the End Times (the epoch in which many conservative evangelicals believe we now exist) as having ‘no natural affection’; similarly, the counterfeit woman has no natural human capacity for affection for her children. The clearest example of this lacking, for the ladies in the Bible study, was the existence of abortion. ‘A woman in the world’, said Helen, adding to Missa’s comment, ‘if she gets pregnant, won’t even sacrifice her body for nine months to bring that child to life’. Of course, in spite of comments like these, my interlocutors acknowledged that people in the world, non-Christians of every variety, do carry pregnancies to term. However, they reasoned that even those women in the world who do give birth do not truly love their children the way Christian mothers do, for how could a mother love a child and do nothing to save that child
from eternal damnation? A non-Christian parent will do nothing to raise children according
to scripture, and will not introduce their children to Jesus. Furthermore, while a non-
Christian woman may decide to have one or two children, she will consider any more than
that to be burdensome. Without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit shaping her fundamental
attitudes and desires, she will not see babies as blessings and wish to have more. To not
genuinely love as a mother loves is to be something anathema to female, and non-Christian
women cannot enact genuine maternal love, therefore the foundation of their femaleness is
undermined.

Keeping in mind the relational quality of Christianity, and the process of coming into
accord with Christian womanhood, this chapter has argued that for conservative evangelicals,
conceptualisations of gender are intertwined with the context of marriage (even for those who
are not married). The final sections deal directly with Christian ontological architecture
around gender and marriage, both in the realm of local discourse, and the lived experience of
women as they navigate gender models.
2.4 Love is a Battlefield

Missa usually cried at Bible study. Sitting cross-legged on the floor in a circle of women, her sisters in Christ from Hopewell Baptist Church, she was free to pour out her thoughts. The monthly Ladies’ Bible study was always held in a church members’ home (the women rotated) on a Friday while the husbands were at work. Ladies brought pot-luck dishes, baked goods, and snacks to add to the lunchtime spread provided by the hostess. Babies and toddlers dominated the space, squabbling over toys and vying for their mothers’ attention, sometimes creating a din so loud it was hard to hear Helen, the pastor’s wife, as she led the study. The ladies ranged in age, from Helen’s teenaged daughter to Miss Violet, a widow in her 80s. Missa was 29, the mother of an adopted four-year-old girl, and a former hair stylist, whose blonde hair was always styled into a perfect bob.

Of the group, Missa was most apt to share reflections on her own private scripture study, sermons she had heard on the radio, or memorable quotes from 19th-century preacher Charles Spurgeon. Invariably, her reflections turned to the hardships she had faced the last few years, particularly the challenges around her daughter’s special needs, and the turmoil in
her relationship with her husband, Brad. For several years, Brad had ‘stopped walking with the Lord’, meaning he no longer attended church or led Bible study with his family. Over time, the more he avoided these pious actions, the more the assurance of his salvation was morphing into a question mark. Brad’s spiritual detachment was Missa’s most dire struggle, and what she prayed over most. Speaking about it in ladies’ Bible study, she would let tears flow, but looked resolute and defiant, saying: ‘No matter what, I’m going to keep praying, and keep fighting for my family. We [married Christians] all have to fight. Because what the Enemy wants is for us to give up, and I refuse to give up and let him win.’

Missa, and the other women present, understood that she and Brad were under siege, being attacked by Satan, and Missa was on the front line of the battle to protect them. Missa’s predicament is indicative of something vital to conservative evangelical conceptualisations of gender: When it comes to marriage, gender, and sexuality, Christians face a constant danger, one which they see the world around them being overtaken by. God designed gender and marriage for humanity, and therefore it is Satan’s greatest desire to destroy humanity by dismantling God’s design.

The first chapter of the Bible includes the following verse, which sets the scene for God’s most fundamental plan for humans: ‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them’ (Gen. 1:27). For conservative evangelicals, this is God’s first word on gender, marriage, and sexuality. In the very beginning of creation, God intended for humans to be male or female, come together in lifelong heterosexual unions, and have pleasurable sex, resulting in procreation. Early on in humanity’s story, Satan entered the picture, and with human complicity brought sin into the world, forever damaging God’s original design. Satan, or the Devil, also is called ‘the Enemy’ because his only concern is with the destruction of humanity, and what better aspects of humanity to target than marriage and sexuality, God’s first relational framework? Ever since the moment human sin came into existence, Satan has been locked in an invisible battle (McCloud 2015) on earth with people who follow Jesus (born-again Christians) as they endeavour to live God’s original design. Living as a Christian is dangerous, and marrying as a Christian makes one especially vulnerable.

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As I have explained, because a person cannot become unsaved, once they have been saved, Satan has no chance of gaining them back. Nonetheless, it is in his best interest to make Christians suffer because, as God’s elect children, they are meant to model the joy that living ‘God’s way’ brings. Satan aims to destroy that effort, by causing Christian couples to divorce, or otherwise ‘stumble’, thereby undermining the credibility of God’s plan in the eyes of the world, and opening inroads for alternatives to the Biblical ethos. To conservative evangelicals, such alternatives are easily recognisable, increasingly common, and ever-evolving. They include cohabitation prior to marriage, or without ever intending to marry; having sexual intercourse before marriage, or with someone other than one’s spouse; marrying someone who is not a true Christian; agreeing on a domestic arrangement in which the wife works outside the home, while the husband takes care of the children; conceiving children out of wedlock; divorcing and remarrying; engaging in a string of short-term relationships; engaging in a homosexual relationship; and classifying one’s self with a gender identity other than the one assigned at birth. Normalisation of alternative relationality and gender is made possible by sin, which Satan enthusiastically takes advantage of.

It is interesting to note that local debate persists over whether homosexuality can be understood as a biological or learned characteristic; but no matter its cause, homosexual attraction is viewed similarly to alcoholism, insofar as it is considered a sinful affliction that can be overcome. Transgender identification is not understood the same way. Conservative evangelicals may speak of homosexuality with the presumption that same-sex attraction exists as a disordered state of being, but they do not extend that presumption to trans identity, i.e. that a person may experience a genuine lifelong feeling of inhabiting the wrong sex. Trans people are most often described as sexually depraved or predatory men.

With Satan offering alternatives, the Christian heterosexual couple view themselves on the side of God’s design, demonstrating the strength and goodness of marriage, knowing that the lost souls of the world are observing them. If they succeed, the couple glorify God by showcasing the fulfilment of being in relationship the way He intended. If they falter in their responsibility, they risk misrepresenting God’s ideal for marriage, opening avenues for damnation. Satan will therefore try any method, big or small, to bring discord to a Christian
marriage, and attacks by playing on the natural weaknesses of men and women – e.g. inducing women to the sin of worry, and men with the sin of lust (often, as Chapter 4 will show, through pornography). This context is partly what inspired Missa to fight so hard to keep her marriage together, and bring Brad back to God. She felt the weight of this responsibility, and pronounced her determination to combat sin with prayer and trust in God to heal their relationship. Protecting a Christian marriage, or battling to fix it, requires the parties involved to understand how they each will be attacked, as gendered individuals.

2.5 Marriage Guidance

In a Sunday evening service at Living Water Baptist, the church’s most prominent elder (Pastor Spencer’s father) was eager, after ‘many weeks of hard study’ to deliver the simple, yet invaluable, message he had discovered. With gravitas, and an eloquent introduction, he held his Bible open to Ephesians, and proclaimed his discovery: ‘Women… need to be loved! And men… need to be respected!’ I stifled a smile, and turned to Christine seated next to me. She grinned back, and whispered, ‘I guess Brother Spencer just read Love and Respect.’

The 2004 book Love and Respect: The Love She Most Desires, The Respect He Desperately Needs28, written by former pastor and Christian therapist Dr Emerson Eggerichs, is one of the most popular and best-selling Christian marriage guides in the United States. Virtually every married person I spoke with in Arkansas was familiar with the book, and after that evening’s message, Pastor Spencer gifted me my own copy. The wisdom it contained was considered so invaluable for married and unmarried people alike, that it was made the subject of a Sunday School series at Living Water Baptist, along with the even more popular book The Five Love Languages (Chapman 1992). As I noted early in the chapter, its central message was widely known, and repeated often in conversations about femininity or masculinity.

28 Eggerichs was not the first to set out the same Ephesians-based assertion into popular American Christian discourse. As early as 1982, one of James Dobson’s marriage guides argued that ‘Men derive self-esteem by being respected; women feel worthy when they are loved’ (67).
In the first pages of the book, Eggerichs writes that after years of counselling Christian couples whose marriages were on the brink of falling apart, he noticed a pattern of destructive behaviour which he concluded could be countered with the right application of scripture. Wives would come to him with the question: ‘How can I get my husband to love me as much as I love him?’ He found his solution in the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians: ‘In Ephesians 5:33, Paul writes, “Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband” (NIV)’ (15). Eggerichs claims that the gendered insights in this passage, which he ‘confirmed from reading scientific research’, explain how Christians can maintain happy marriages (by adhering to these commands), and how patterns of destructive behaviour arise (when the commands are ignored). What is important in this passage is not only the instruction, but the insight into the nature of femininity it provides. Eggerichs explains:

‘Chapter 5 of Ephesians is considered by many to be the most significant treatise on marriage in the New Testament. Paul concludes these statements on marriage by getting gender specific in verse 33. He reveals commands from the very heart of God as he tells the husband he must love (agape) his wife unconditionally and the wife must respect her husband, whether or not her husband comes across as loving.

‘Note, however, that this verse gives no command to a wife to agape-love her husband. As I studied this verse over the years, I began to ask, “Why is there no command for a wife to agape her husband?” And then it struck me. The Lord has created a woman to love. Her whole approach to nurture, her sensitivity, love, and compassion are all part of her very nature. In short, God designed the woman to love. He’s not going to command her to agape her husband when He created her to do that in the first place’ (Eggerichs 2004:35-36, emphasis in original).

Eggerichs does not argue that men are naturally disinclined to love their wives, or that women are inherently disrespectful toward their husbands, but that each gender requires a degree of love or respect that the other does not. Understanding this Biblical insight allows each party in a marriage to suit the other’s emotional needs, thus achieving nuptial harmony. Marriage advice would be incomplete, even useless, without illumination of gender and gender difference. This applies outside the Love and Respect framework, for example (as
Chapter 5 will discuss further) in the project of creating a fulfilling and holy sex life. Individuals endeavour to nurture the positive aspects of their gendered nature, aided by the maintenance of a domestic framework.

That framework, the Biblical gender and kin hierarchy explained in Chapter 1, was the subject of a Pathway Fellowship home group discussion one Thursday evening. That previous Sunday, Pastor Brent had given a message about wifely submission, a topic which always seemed to unsettle preachers slightly, as though they anticipated resistance (which was never forthcoming). I was not a regular attendee at the Pathway home groups, but I decided to sit in on this Fall evening in part because of my interest in the subject, and in part to support my friend Molly, who also did not normally participate. Like Missa, Molly struggled with her husband’s recent disengagement with his faith, and she wondered if the evening’s chat might give her some insight into how to manage the change.

Apart from myself and Molly, the group was made up of couples in their forties, including Pastor Brent and his wife. They had all brought along some of their younger children, about ten of them in total, who sat in an adjacent room munching snacks provided by the hosts. After the usual business of eating and prayer, the conversation dove into a critique of the ‘feminising’ influence of the world:

‘Today you see it everywhere’, said one mother, ‘even in some churches, especially big churches’. Things are becoming feminine, it’s a push toward being feminized, telling the men it’s wrong to act like men or masculine. It’s the world pushing it, but in big churches, you see it. They say, “You can’t be a man, that’s wrong, you should be ashamed.”’

‘Feminisation’ – and by extension feminism – pushes against Christian domestic structure, including Biblical femininity/masculinity, in which women submit to the authority of their husbands. It is considered evidence of a common observation conservative evangelicals make about people of the world, that they ‘call evil good, and good evil’ (Isaiah 5:20). God has set his standards about gender, so the world will try to invert that standard and call it evil, to oppose God. A frequently cited example was the idea that God told his children

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29 This refers to mainstream evangelical mega-churches.
to go forth and multiply, and that children are a blessing, so the world calls children a
nuisance and insists the planet is overpopulated. Another, more pertinent to the evening’s
discussion, was the world’s insistence that God’s design for wifely submission is oppressive.

What the world does not understand, the room agrees, is the heavy burden Biblical
gender roles put on the shoulders of married men. If a woman takes over the spiritual
leadership of the home, reads the Bible with the children on her own without their father,
leaves the children to public schooling so that she can pursue her own career, becomes the
ostensible helpmeet of a man in a workplace, rather than her husband – the responsibility for
this state of affairs lies squarely on the husband. God appointed men to be the heads of their
families, and to be a Biblical man, they must be the spiritual leader and teacher, and the final
voice of authority on practical domestic matters. They have the responsibility of leading Bible
study and prayer within the home; they are meant to be the primary financial providers, and
the ones to work outside the home. A Christian wife can only take on these roles and
responsibilities if the husband allows her to, either by permission or neglect. A woman will
have no choice but to be the authority on scripture and prayer for her children if her husband
will not do it. The situation can only be remedied by the husband repenting of his negligence
or laziness, and reclaiming his responsibility as leader.

This again is structured around a domestic division of labour, but hinges on the
internal essence of Christian femininity and masculinity. One can enact the roles, but the
indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which allows for gender actualisation within the Christian
subject, is a binary. True womanhood, Christian womanhood, must include the desire to be a
helpmeet, just as true manhood must include the desire to be a spiritual leader. Unfortunately
for Molly, this assessment left little recourse for her predicament. After listening patiently, she
put up her hand, and pointed out, ‘I lead Bible study with my kids because otherwise it won’t
get done. I take my kids to church by myself because that’s the only option, my husband
won’t come with us. If that’s his responsibility, what can I do about it?’ One thing she knew
she must not do was nag or pester her husband, because that would accomplish nothing but
further undermine his authority and create strife in their marriage. Ultimately, said the
gathered couples, the best thing Molly could do was pray that her husband turn his heart back to God, which is the only thing that would make him want to be a man again.

2.6 Conclusion

Because the question ‘what is a Christian woman?’ is at the nucleus of this thesis, this chapter has given a précis on ideas of womanhood, and gender more broadly, that have relevance to conservative evangelical America. Gender, as the chapter has demonstrated, is not merely one aspect of Christianity in this context, but is a cornerstone of theology, discourse, pedagogy, and practice. To understand Christian gender and the ontological architecture around it one must consider God’s design of men and women, how it has been tainted by sin, and the Biblical models God has provided for true Christians. As complex as the subject of gender is, its complexity and significance are further heightened by its relational nature, exemplified by its entanglement with marriage, which exposes the dangers posed to Christian actors.

By shifting away from a perspective on Christian femininity that focuses mainly on gender roles and male headship, this chapter has suggested and presented several different approaches to the question of Christian womanhood. I have taken an ethnographic approach that looks holistically at the discourse about gender with which women engage on a daily basis from a very young age, from Biblical interpretation to the most minute casual discourse about gendered pet preference. This everyday messaging is a worthwhile lens through which to examine womanhood on its own, but it should be taken along with a consideration of what is understood to be the defining feature of Christian identity: the embodiment of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the chapter has shown that womanhood cannot be understood in a silo, as the Christian woman is defined by her kin relationships. Therefore, the chapter has additionally contributed to discussions of Christian relationality, again shifting perspective slightly from the feminine person to the feminine identity.

The next chapter continues with the theme of femininity and marriage by exploring the journey women make in the process of becoming a true Christian wife. In this way, the
chapter will widen the scope of discussion around conservative evangelical feminine identities. It is the first in a series of chapters focused on how women, especially young women, emerge into vital Christian identities that cascade from the Christian woman. Returning to the image of the man vs. the mouse at the start of this chapter, the discussion of Christian romance that follows examines how young women and men choose whom to marry, the mutable forms of moral action they must navigate, and the gender-specific expectations they carry into marriage.
CHAPTER 3: The Wife

3.1 Introduction: The wedding of the year

Saturday, 29 October, 2016, 1:00pm – It has been a tense few months in Arkansas, tinted by a vicious and protracted presidential election season. In just ten days, Donald Trump will be the new President Elect, marking the beginning of a new era for American democracy, and quietly carving a divide between the ambivalent and the horrified in this conservative evangelical community. But today the stress of an uncertain political future seems a million miles away, as I make my way to Elizabeth and Chris’s wedding. A wooded hilltop pathway opens to a spectacular glass chapel, and it is immediately clear why this is one of the most sought-after wedding venues in the area. As I choose my seat in a pew, I notice Chris taking his place at the altar, bathed in natural light streaming through the treetops, to wait for his bride. He stands between his father, Pastor Rex, who will lead the ceremony, and his best man, his closest friend from childhood. For the first time in the months that I have known him, I see that my laid-back friend is nervous, trying not to fidget as he waits for the music to start and the ceremony to begin. The precession of the bridal party is finely choreographed and stage-managed by two of the couple’s friends. The five-year-old flower girl, Faith, smiles and coos as her mother, Missa, pushes her beautifully adorned wheelchair up the aisle. The bridesmaids – two of Elizabeth’s friends, her older sister, and sister-in-law – wear floor-length burgundy chiffon dresses with cap sleeves. As an instrumental version of ‘I Surrender All’ echoes off the rafters, Pastor Rex asks the guests to ‘Please stand’, the church doors open, and the bride makes her entrance. Elizabeth’s copper-red hair is done up in a dramatic plume, accentuating the daring off-the-shoulder line of her embellished white lace gown. She and her bridesmaids carry bouquets of sunflowers, lovingly hand-made by friends in Helen’s kitchen. In the pews are a mix of close family and friends, many from Pathway Fellowship and Hopewell Baptist, and the tightly knit local Christian homeschooling community. The chapel is too small to fit everyone who was invited, so many more watch a live feed of the ceremony.
from the Hopewell Baptist worship hall, where the reception is set and awaiting the newlyweds.

The ceremony itself is brief – only ten minutes from the precession of the flower girl to ‘You may now kiss the bride’. Pastor Rex radiates pride as he stands before his eldest son and his bride, prompting them to recite vows to love, honour, and obey one another. To symbolise the unity of their marriage, Elizabeth and Chris each pour a vial of coloured sand into a vase, allowing the two colours to swirl together. This takes the place of the more common ‘unity candle’, which couples light synchronously to signify joining their lives together. When the ceremony is done the bridal party are immediately swept away for over an hour of photographs in the idyllic Ozark landscape. The rest of the guests, myself included, make the short drive to Hopewell Baptist Church to start the celebration.

It is extraordinary to see what a modest group of volunteers have managed to do to transform the fellowship hall, not the most attractive of spaces when unadorned, into a charming autumnal wedding reception venue. Rather than a full meal, the couple have arranged stations of snacks, treats, hot cider and cocoa, around the perimeter of the hall. There is even a s’mores station with tea lights in a bed of stones for roasting marshmallows. The bride and groom hold court at a ‘head table’ with a backdrop decorated in fairy lights and letters spelling out ‘MR & MRS’. Aside from a few scattered places for guests to sit, and a table dedicated to gifts and the ‘money tree’ (inviting guests to clip bills to bare branches), the floor is cleared for dancing. One family, who do not dance or allow their children to dance, slip out early before that portion of the afternoon kicks off. Others sit out, but most, including the couple’s parents and grandparents, take a turn on the dance floor. In addition to slow, romantic tunes, group dance songs bring a crowd to the floor, including Silentó’s ‘Watch Me (Whip/Nae Nae)’ and Family Force 5’s ‘Chainsaw’. At the table, an older couple from Pathway Fellowship muse with wry smiles: ‘I wonder how long they’re actually going to stay [at the reception]. They must be eager to get outa here and start their honeymoon!’ By 5:00pm, Elizabeth and Chris have changed into traveling clothes, run through an archway of sparklers to bid them goodbye, and loaded into their SUV, ‘JUST MARRIED’ scrawled in white paint on their back window.
This chapter primarily follows one couple, Elizabeth and Chris, through their journey of dating, engagement, and getting married. Because the two met within the Christian homeschooling community in Northwest Arkansas, their relationship brought together a number of people who became my friends and interlocutors, and their wedding was one of the most joyfully anticipated social events of 2016. Through their story, the chapter examines the project of becoming a wife, and what that project reveals about cultural reproduction, community, and ordinary piety in conservative evangelical Arkansas. Having established the importance of Christian womanhood to the understanding of personhood, in this chapter I introduce the first of the emanating identities that will be the subject of the remainder of the thesis: the Christian wife.

The process of becoming a Christian wife begins long before marriage, when girls are introduced to local approaches to romance. Therefore, this chapter provides an overview of courtship in Arkansas, beginning with the epistemological aspects of preparing for the romantic journey to marriage. Challenging notions of uniform purity based on sexual abstinence, the chapter unpacks how knowledge about Christian romance is created, the social critique it is subjected to, and how individual women and couples intermesh it with personal piety. Toward that end, as in previous chapters, I devote attention to Christian discourse in the form of discipleship literature. In the litany of available discipleship literature on the topic of romance, I touch on a few that had the most direct epistemological impact on the everyday practice of young conservative evangelicals in Arkansas.

The chapter then seeks to explore moments of becoming a wife, from the period of dating, through the preparations and pedagogy that take place during engagement, to the event of the wedding itself. Throughout these moments I return to the theme of ordinary piety rooted in identity, and modes of subjectivation (Strhan 2015). Building on the notion of Christian womanhood and manhood as forms of ‘moral tradition’ to which born-again women and men align themselves, this chapter shows how dating/courting brings about a shift into adulthood for young Christians, along with new forms of gendered moral action. Moreover, through the topic of romance the chapter introduces the idea of ‘ordinary
influence’, a facet of Christian ethics that will become more relevant in future chapters. Ordinary influence refers to the individual and intersubjective choices Christians make when enacting everyday action, and therefore is a mode of subjectivation that takes into account the pious practice of discernment. Finally, examining a becoming-project that ostensibly reaches an apex in the event of a wedding (conventionally a heavily ritualised rite of passage) brings to the fore conservative evangelicals’ deep-seated discomfort with ritual. With that in mind, the chapter analyses ‘mundane’, rather than ritual moments, that take on the significance of pious action, and in effect transform into orthopraxis, in the paradigm of becoming a wife.

3.2 Before marriage

The Christian purity movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s critically addressed changes in American dating culture initially catalysed by the sexual revolution of the ‘60s and ‘70s (Swartz 2012; Schäfer 2013). It was an inter-denominational effort to coalesce, through discourse and public performance, an organised ‘traditional Christian’ alternative to the landscape of modern romance and sexuality. Scholarly research on evangelical Christian purity has primarily addressed the question of efficacy – asking whether purity culture ‘worked’, e.g. if it prevented teen pregnancy, and created psychologically healthy young Americans (Gardener 2011; Moslener 2015).

The more quantitative sociological approach within extant literature on Christian purity has not given attention to how young Christians, specifically conservative evangelicals, enact the idea of purity, and how that idea has fluctuated in the last 10-20 years. In this project’s ethnographic approach, it was important to keep in mind that conservative evangelicals differentiate themselves from mainstream evangelicalism in several relevant ways that affect romantic life. First, conservative evangelical teenagers do not attend school, and therefore do not contend with abstinence education, or sex institutional education of any kind. As Ray Moore argued at the Christian Homeschool Workshop, sex education, whether it advocates for abstinence or not, is just one of the countless reasons school is no place for true Christians. Second, one popular tenant of the purity movement was the promise that
saving intimacy until marriage will lead to a happy wedded life, including great sex. In Chapter 2, my married friends showed that a true Christian does not get married in order to secure happiness, and even happy, fulfilling marriages are wrought with danger and hardship. Third, conservative evangelicals do not put the same social emphasis on adolescence as the majority of Americans, including mainstream evangelicals. Molsener points out that Christian abstinence campaigns offered a passage through adolescence, considered a discreet, sexually dangerous period in a Christian person’s life (2015: 5–7). Gardner, too, addresses the perils of adolescence, arguing that the purity movement and abstinence campaigns ‘function … to control the liminality of teenagers’ (2011: 24, emphasis mine). In contrast, conservative evangelical parents, such as my friend Sylvia, avidly rejected the idea that teenagers belong to a separate, perilous developmental category.

Events centred around teen chastity, while a staple of the purity movement of the ‘90s and ‘00s, were virtually non-existent among my interlocutors in Arkansas. Teens and young adults, both girls and boys, often wore purity rings, as they were a popular gift from parents, but public fanfare around purity was not in style. Instead, purity before marriage was, according to my young friends, a part of romantic life as taken for granted as marriage itself. From the perspective of conservative evangelical parents, if teens have to be taught the value of abstinence and convinced to save sexual intercourse for their future spouse, something has already gone very wrong with their training from childhood. More to the point, something would have to significantly be amiss with their salvation. Although a true Christian is imbued with the desire to maintain purity within a relationship, young people are expected to struggle with the sin of lust. Bielo has described conservative Christians across denominations classifying ‘the flesh’ as the metaphorical (and oftentimes physical) aspect of the Christian self that is still grounded in the world through the nature of sin. Whatever the differences in how the imbued Christian body is visually articulated, the flesh ‘refers to a fundamentally immoral self, one that is at odds with the will of God … equated with sin as the norm of unredeemed humanity, not the isolated submission to temptation’ (Bielo 2004: 276). That being said, it is one thing to experience lust, but quite another, according to my friends in Arkansas, to require convincing through public enterprise that premarital sexual abstinence is necessary.
3.2.1 Purity literature

In the late 1990s, discipleship literature, targeted at young people on the cusp of dating, entered the American evangelical zeitgeist. This section will discuss three examples of such guides to Christian romance, which maintained relevance for young people, and their parents, in Arkansas. As the ethnography that follows will show, although discourse analysis is undoubtedly valuable\(^{30}\), looking at Christian literature alone reveals very little about how young people feel about public talking points, and how literature influences local discourses and private action. These books, and the genre of discipleship literature for dating, may have influenced the ‘techniques’ of dating when they were introduced, but the young people I knew tended to approach them critically. Even so, the literature offered the closest thing to an ‘official’ pedagogical narrative around Christian romance, and reflect important ontological truths about conservative evangelical Arkansas.

Although girls strongly relied on maternal advice about romance and intimacy, fathers still played a pivotal role. When I told Pastor Rex that I was interested in following Elizabeth and Chris’s relationship in order to learn about Christian dating and marriage, he gave me a book he thought captured the parents’ perspective of the process. *What He Must Be… If He Wants to Marry My Daughter* (2009), by popular preacher and public personality Voddie Baucham, emphasises the importance of patriarchal gatekeeping in the dating process. Early on in the book, Baucham pointedly introduces the definition of the word ‘patriarch’, as written in the 1828 edition of Webster’s Dictionary\(^{31}\):

‘Patriarch: The father and ruler of a family; one who governs by paternal right. It is usually applied to the progenitors of the Israelites, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the sons

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\(^{30}\) This thesis challenges the scholarly trend of utilising Christian literature and public discourse, including online blogs, as an analytic means of illuminating the everyday lives of American Christians. However, Christian literary discourse has been subject to exemplary analysis, which has contributed to holistic scholarship on American Christian history, politics, and representation. See especially Stasson 2014, DeRogatis 2015.

\(^{31}\) The 1828 edition of Webster’s was the most trusted and often-cited resource for my interlocutors outside the King James Bible. Its information was regarded as timeless, and unadulterated by more worldly modern-day influences, in part because it referred to the historical accuracy of Biblical events.
of Jacob, or to the heads of families before the flood; as the antediluvian patriarchs’ (2009: 47).

Baucham’s mandatory qualifications for a man who would marry the daughter of a Christian father include: being a follower of Christ, being prepared to lead like Christ, and being committed to Children (2009). The book is a glimpse at the connection between romance and adulthood, something Pastor Rex and Helen, with the elder son in a relationship and a 16-year-old daughter, had ample opportunity to consider. Although the book is ostensibly written for men – fathers and the young men who would court their daughters – it reveals a salient aspect of identity for young women like Elizabeth. Before a Christian woman can become a wife, she is first a daughter. This is in contrast to the child-adolescent-adult transition of mainstream American young people. Although it has been looked at as a transfer of patriarchal power that obfuscates women’s identities (Molsener 78-79) it is also a construct that firmly defines Christian feminine identity. As this thesis has previously demonstrated, this adult model returns emphasis to the relational person, and thus to a relation-centred view of salvation, identity, and piety.

At the zenith of the purity movement in America, Josh Harris, son of a prominent Baptist pastor, became a poster child for purity-focused Christian dating, which he rebranded as ‘courtship’. In Harris’s first book, I Kissed Dating Goodbye (1997), he introduced a roadmap for young Christians that would separate them from the world, and ensure their purity in mind and body as they navigate the road to marriage. In addition to eschewing physical intimacy before marriage, he advocated against ‘recreational dating’, insisting that Christians should only become romantically involved when they are ready to marry (ibid.). The ethical turn he promoted installed reinvigorated boundaries between true Christianity and the world, including well-meaning mainstream evangelicals who were not conducting their romantic lives in accordance with God’s plan (Bielo 2004). He followed his first foray into discipleship literature with two more books: Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship (2000), and Not Even a Hint: Guarding Your Heart Against Lust (2003). Each of these reinforced the idea of true Christian techniques of romance, by introducing more concrete guidance, and focusing on emotional and mental purity, as much as physical purity.
In 2016, in the midst of my fieldwork, Josh Harris came under fire from adults who said his one-size-fits-all courtship method, which folded in stringent techniques of the self and guilt-based critique to control lustful thoughts, caused them psychological harm and twisted their sexual development. Asked how she felt about the book as a woman in a relationship, Elizabeth said: ‘I don’t understand what their problem with [Harris’s method] is. All it’s saying is stay pure until marriage, which if you read and believe the Bible, is what the Bible says too’. Where those other Christians went wrong, according to the other ladies present, was a matter of individual discernment. In 2018 Harris, having divorced his wife, released the documentary ‘I Survived “I Kissed Dating Goodbye,”’ in which he spoke to Christians about the impact his books, and the movement they represented, had on their lives.

In 2006, Sarah Mally provided a specifically feminine-orientated approach to Harris’s Christian courtship. Her book *Before You Meet Prince Charming: A Guide to Radiant Purity*, and accompanying workbook, combined typical discipleship literature with illustrated fairytale allegory. The book was hugely popular, and the subject of study for groups of Christian girls all over the country. Mally encourages girls to dedicate time to preparing for romance well before meeting a potential marriage partner, outlining how young Christian women should enter a relationship, and emphasising the importance of separating oneself from worldly people and influences.
Two of Molly’s daughters, Deirdre and Davina, participated in a study of *Before You Meet Prince Charming* as teens at Pathway Fellowship, using the book’s accompanying workbook. The sisters had mixed reactions to the study. On one hand, Mally’s approach was hardly groundbreaking: Deirdre, the older of the two sisters, recalled, ‘[The book] was mostly about girls waiting. You wait for the right boy God has picked, you don’t approach the boy, you wait for the boy to ask your father to date you and marry you, you wait [to have intercourse] until you’re married. We heard that for the most part in church, so we already knew that.’

Davina, who was only 13 years old when she participated in the study, was struck by how isolating Mally’s advise was to her: ‘If you’re more introverted, like me, it’s already hard
to talk to people, and here this book is saying “The whole time you’re single, don’t approach boys, or anybody not a real Christian, because, remember you’re set apart by God”, almost like you’re better than everybody’. Ultimately the sisters determined the book taught them nothing useful, apart from reinforcing the basic lessons about romance they already knew, and it was not an authoritative text on how to date as a Christian. Instead, like their peers, they looked to their parents, especially their mother, for guidance on romantic matters. Ultimately, Molly said, parents had to encourage their children to ‘listen to the Spirit’ or ‘follow God’s voice, not a book’ when looking, or waiting, for their divinely chosen partner.

3.2.2 Romantic piety

Elizabeth met Chris through ACHC, which operated out of Hopewell Baptists Church, where Chris’s father was the pastor. The two were thrown together in ACHC’s teen group, and soon started hanging out in the same social circle, which carried on after they both graduated from high school at age 18. Chris was tall, athletic, and sported a robust beard. His sense of humour was somehow dry as well as goofy, making it difficult to tell if he was ever being serious. Unlike some of his more awkward male peers, Chris seemed at ease in any social setting, and could chat to anyone, hence he was one of only a few young men I knew in Arkansas to feel comfortable initiating casual conversation and a joking relationship with me. Elizabeth was more soft-spoken, but nonetheless effortlessly charming, knowing her own mind and wearing her heart on her sleeve. She told me that when her friendship with Chris developed into romantic feelings, she tried to keep those feelings to herself, but the deception made her physically ill. When the two did decide to turn their friendship into a romantic relationship, they were confronted with a multitude of questions, big and small, about this new stage in their lives. They already had determined they were on a path to marriage, and that the point of their romantic relationship was to discern if they should, in fact, marry. But were they ‘dating’ or ‘courting’, and was there a difference? How would they act as a ‘pure’ couple? Aside from not having sexual intercourse, what did purity look like, and was purity all that mattered? Elizabeth and Chris’s relationship, and the relationships of
their friends and siblings, illustrated the fact that even in this relatively small homeschooling community, purity is not a uniform praxis.

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Sofi’s was without a doubt the hippest space for young Christians in the city of Fayetteville, Arkansas. Past its unassuming brick exterior, the inside was light and open, decked out in industrial chic with vintage and reclaimed barn-wood vibes. Fair Trade artisan handicrafts in support of overseas missions were displayed for sale alongside futuristic-looking coffee brewing apparatuses. In the midst of bored-looking uber-coiffed college students behind laptop screens, one could always hear the earnest tones of a small group Bible study, or a friend just letting another friend know about Jesus. One night a month the coffee shop hosted a swing dance class – the perfect venue for a date. One half of the spacious shop was cleared of tables and chairs to make room for dancers, while the other half was kept for patrons to maintain their energy with coffee drinks. As late as 10:00pm, it was common for my friends, women especially, to drink coffee sweetened with flavoured syrups and creamers. Elizabeth and Chris might never have imagined that their date nights would be the subject of study, but they were certainly used to having company on them. When they were not having dinner or hanging out at one of their family homes, they were usually out with a group of friends at a movie. Socialising often involved a blending of family and friends, and aimed to include younger siblings in games and watching TV and films. When the two went out for dinner together, they would most often take at least one sibling with them, sometimes to that sibling’s bemusement. On swing dance night, the couple and I were joined by two friends: 20-year-old Billie, whom Elizabeth knew from her part-time job at an ice cream shop, and her 17-year-old brother Oliver.

The five of us sat at a table with our voguish hot drinks, when Chris pulled out a small box and gave it to Elizabeth. Inside were a pair of earrings, a gift to commemorate seven months of dating. Turning to me, Chris explained, ‘Whenever I was younger, I treated women terribly, so I just decided when I got older that I would always try to spoil my girlfriend.’
Later in the evening, our group stood along the wall, taking in the 1950s jive music. Over the din, even as we shouted to hear each other, the conversation turned to the definition of Christian dating:

Alice: So, y’all dance?

Elizabeth: Oh, yeah. I know not everyone does who’s Christian but we do. I personally don’t see a problem with it. As long as it’s not, like, booty dancing, or inappropriate.

That’s why swing dancing is great! It’s classic.

Chris: You asked me earlier what the difference is between ‘dating’ and ‘courting’ and I told you Liz and I are dating, I think. That’s another reason I don’t like to say ‘courting’ because around here ‘courting’ means no touching.

For Chris, ‘courtship’, seemed to be a term preferred by more ‘legalistic’ couples, who went to the greatest lengths to maintain what they thought of as purity. Elizabeth and Chris knew couples who referred to their relationships as ‘courting’, but each of those couples employed different individual ‘rules’ that met their definition of purity. Some did not touch, some did not ride in a car alone, and some made an effort to avoid eye contact. Some did have ‘alone time’, but it amounted to Bible study in a room in the young woman’s family home, with the door left open for any curious sibling to walk through. Other couples took a more relaxed approach to things like physical contact. Ultimately, Elizabeth and Chris decided, the terminology one used was irrelevant. The object of purity in a romantic relationship was not determined by an agreed-upon standard, but an array of micro-techniques collectively decided by the couple and (in most cases) their parents. Importantly, abstinence was considered only one component of Christian purity, and purity in turn was only one component of dating life, the real purpose of which was preparing for marriage.

In church, especially after their engagement, Elizabeth and Chris cuddled up next to each other with arms linked, whispering and giggling before services. They were sometimes poked fun at, but never received so much as a disapproving glance from the other church members, including Chris’s parents. The same was true for young married couples in the church, who were sometimes jokingly accused of ‘making out’ in church offices or groping each other during services. While Elizabeth and Chris did not make out, their decision to
have some non-sexual intimate contact was reasoned and intentional. They felt that having contact during their engagement – hugging, cuddling, and occasional kissing – was a valuable step in preparing for their sexual lives together as a married couple. After their honeymoon, they cited that premarital physical contact as one of the things that allowed them to relax and ‘enjoy each other’ (per ubiquitous advice), rather than approaching their first sexual encounter with anxiety or fear. In discussing their choices around intimate contact and purity, Elizabeth and Chris walked a fine line between describing what they had discerned was ‘God’s best’, while not disparaging the different choices of their peers. For example, they saw no issue with driving alone together from point A to B, and nor did their parents, but they never spoke ill of peers who thought that crossed a line.

This balancing act illustrates the extent to which young Christians grapple with embodied ethics beyond the practice of sexual abstinence. In each of these seemingly small decisions, incorporated into the couple’s everyday lives, represented their engagement with romantic piety. As they discerned whether God intended them to marry, simultaneously they discerned their own individual conduct as they ventured into a new realm of adult moral action. Within this framework, hugging, driving, and holding hands become forms of orthopraxis, which in turn have an impact on the romantic pious praxis of other young Christians. The question of how a born-again Christian performs dating, i.e. physically enacts pre-marital romance, is answered (with the Holy Spirit) in every choice, and challenged (by the flesh) in every lustful thought or action. Therefore, here is one of the first major examples of conservative evangelical ordinary ethics being embodied beyond the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, collaborative, and in service of the project of becoming a new identity. The collaborative nature of romantic habitus should also be considered in light of Elizabeth and Chris’s individual subjectivation to true Christian womanhood and manhood. This is important first because, as I have shown, the couple are not necessarily looking to a scriptural tradition of courtship, but to a more broadly constituted conservative evangelical understanding gendered subjectivity, for authoritative measure of romantic practice. Moreover, Chris argued that ‘gentlemanly’ treatment of a girlfriend or wife (a concept that will be significant again in the next chapter) is paramount to the true Christian man,
therefore it was right and natural for Elizabeth to captain the course of their physical intimacy prior to marriage.

Elizabeth and Chris were ‘typical’ in that they both lived at home, and their social lives centred around their families much of the time. However, not all couples lived at home as they embarked on romance. In the summer of 2016, Elizabeth’s younger brother, Nicholas, began a relationship with her friend Krissy. Shortly thereafter, the two each transitioned from living at home to life in the dorms at the University of Arkansas, where Krissy studied mathematics and Nicholas studied engineering. In the homeschooling community, several young men I knew attended or had graduated from the University of Arkansas College of Engineering (which had a reputation for a high percentage of Christian students and faculty), but Krissy was the only young woman I knew who took up tertiary education outside of a Bible college. Krissy’s choice was justified by the fact that she intended to study mathematics (a subject not prone to worldly corruption) in order to be a teacher (a fairly common profession for single or married women without children). Living with relative independence from their families a 30-minute drive away in Fayetteville, Nicholas and Krissy had to employ their own strategies for maintaining purity in their relationship, taking into account that they did not plan to marry until after they had graduated from university. To address the challenge, they spent most of their free time and weekends staying with their families, and hanging out with siblings. In many ways they looked to Elizabeth and Chris as models for behaviour around dating, e.g. driving and dining together.

Of course, not every young person in the Northwest Arkansas homeschooling community was in a romantic relationship. Several of the women I knew in their early 20s were unattached, including Billie, who cheerfully told me, ‘I’m not dating anyone! The truth is, my dad is the best, and I just haven’t found anyone as good as my dad’. Conservative evangelicals accept that not everyone is destined to marry, and it is not considered sinful for a man or woman to remain single their entire lives. That singleness is not stigmatised outright (though the experience of ‘stigma’ around marriage and reproduction is complex, as Chapter 6 will investigate) reflects the idea that all things in a Christian’s life are directed by God. Married people attested that God knew who their perfect spouse would be as soon as they
were conceived; likewise, the true believer who does not marry is meant to understand that their singleness is God’s will as well. That said, debate persisted as to how an unmarried woman should best spend her time before marrying, and such debates were underwritten by the presumption that a single young woman is in fact in a state of ‘waiting’ for the fruition of godly romantic love (Frahm-Arp 2012). As I outlined in Chapter 2, the fruition of true Christian manhood or womanhood is not marriage, but the desire to be married, and raise a large family.

3.3 Becoming a wife

On the night of their swing dance date at Sofi’s, Chris emphasised that, from the moment they began their romantic relationship, he and Elizabeth saw marriage on the horizon. At one point during our chats that night Chris turned to Elizabeth and said matter-of-factly, ‘See, when I propose to you it’s not really going to be a surprise because we’ve already been planning it.’

A few short months later, as spring bloomed across the Ozarks, Chris took Elizabeth on a scenic hike to Devil’s Cove, Missouri. Under flowering trees, he knelt down and presented her with a diamond and rose gold engagement ring. Elizabeth’s response was not what Chris was expecting. Recalling the proposal to me later, she said, ‘I thought he was joking at first so I said no! He said “I’m serious!” but I still didn’t believe it, so I said no again. I kept saying “No, this isn’t funny!” But finally he convinced me he was serious, so I said yes.’

With that exchange Elizabeth and Chris were engaged and immediately could begin a new phase in their preparation for marriage. In the following two sections I discuss their process as a study in rethinking approaches to ordinary piety, shifting away from a focus on ritual and toward modes of alignment with the identity of the Christian wife. While the first half of this chapter looked at the couple’s collaborative conceptualisation of and decisive moral action around true Christian romance, this section deals more with gendered ethical modelling presented by close members of the community, mainly to the benefit of Elizabeth.
3.3.1 Ritual discomfort

In the five months between accepting Chris’s proposal and the wedding day, Elizabeth was busy with a whirlwind of preparatory activities: she had an engagement party, a bridal shower, a lingerie party, a Premiere Jewellery shower, and a rehearsal dinner party. Dress fittings and shopping excursions became events in themselves, inclusive days out for any bridal party member (or anthropologist) who wished to join. The night before the wedding, Chris spent the night at his best man’s family home for his ‘bachelor party’, and Elizabeth had a bridesmaid’s ‘bachelorette party’ sleepover at Chris’s family home, which would also be the setting for all the women in the bridal party to get ready the next morning. Most of these events are commonplace in American wedding celebrations, and Elizabeth and Chris’s families approached them as inferential aspects of a wedding.

A wedding is a ritual event, or collection of events, that produce married people, and a great deal has been written on the ritual aspects of weddings in North America (Leeds-Hurwitz 2002;). In the course of Elizabeth and Chris’s wedding planning, I came to question the extent to which conservative evangelicals actually depend on ritual in the project of becoming married. I found it striking that, during nearly every stage of planning, inevitably someone would raise the question, ‘How is this part of the wedding supposed to go?’ and a smartphone would be presented to look up an answer on the internet. This section argues, therefore, that ritual and semiology were largely incidental to conservative evangelical moments of becoming, meaning ritual wedding practices are given value, but not necessarily in the construction of the new married subject. Put another way, ritual is not a cornerstone of the ontological architecture that supports the ethical subjectivity of Christian married people.

This perspective on conservative evangelical weddings does not negate the rich semiotics and structural implications present in the wedding ceremony and adjacent events, nor do I intend to imply that local ambivalence toward marriage ritual demonstrates an absence of ritual or its constitutive elements of meaning-making. Martin Lindhart (2011) and Coleman (2011) have observed that, in Pentecostal/charismatic traditions “ritual” seems to be a kind of a dirty word’ associated with ‘what they consider to be the prescribed, formal,
and spiritually empty liturgy of mainline churches’ (Lindhart 2011: 2). In spite of this, scholars have illuminated the forms and meanings of charismatic ritual by reconsidering ritual as something other than ‘formal, prescribed, and essentially public behavior with little scope for spontaneous emotional expression’ (ibid.). Such approaches have allowed for deeper understanding of Christian conceptions of authenticity (Pfeil 2011; Coleman 2011), divine encounter (Csordas 1990, 1994, 1997, 2002) and the personal nature of relationships with God (Luhrmann 2004, 2012a, 2012b). With these approaches in mind, I endeavour to look at marriage, in this chapter and the next, not by looking at ritual differently, but by looking at commonplace moral action outside the boundaries of ritual action. Therefore, this thesis does not put ritual to one side simply because conservative evangelicals express discomfort with it, but because that discomfort prompts the consideration that an alternative lens may be more useful in exploring the specific questions this thesis asks. As I have previously explained, one of the arguments of this thesis is that for conservative evangelicals ordinary ethics is tied mainly to identity – in particular the model of Christian womanhood and the identities that proceed from it – rather than ritual.

In Northwest Arkansas, the wedding, and its preparations, were an interesting example of the balance conservative evangelicals strike between engaging with and withdrawing from the world. Superficially, in most respects, Elizabeth and Chris’s wedding looked like the thousands of nominally Christian weddings that take place in the United States every year. Throughout their engagement period, everyone involved in planning and the wedding approached preparations with the same attitude: ‘We choose to enact these “traditions”, they are enjoyable and show care, but they are not necessary’. It is not canonical for a Southern Christian bride, or any American bride, to be thrown a ‘jewellery party’ in the lead up to her wedding, but none of Elizabeth’s family or friends commented on its peculiarity. Whether traditional or not, the party held the same ritual value as any of the other events thrown around that time. This was illustrated shortly after Elizabeth and Chris’s wedding when, a few days before Christmas, one of Elizabeth’s brothers proposed to his girlfriend. Their wedding was held at Pathway Fellowship just a few weeks later, without the same engagement events held for Elizabeth and Chris.
3.3.2 Marriage preparation

To illustrate how the Northwest Arkansas Christian homeschooling community helped Elizabeth align with the model of womanhood in the process of becoming a wife, I offer three examples of pre-wedding activities. The first two were parties held for Elizabeth, one a typical American bridal shower, and the other a far less typical ‘jewellery party’. The third activity involved Chris, and ultimately the whole Hopewell Baptists church family: a weekly teaching series on Biblically orientated financial literacy. The lessons featured were subsumed into each event’s primary aim – the parties were a reason for women to get together socially and give Elizabeth gifts for her new married life, and the home finance course was part of Hopewell’s regular Wednesday evening prayer and teaching. Nonetheless, the events highlighted for Elizabeth a Christian wife’s habitus and, significantly, forms of moral action.

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I stood in the lounge-wear section of TJ Maxx for twenty minutes trying to decide which piece of lingerie I should bring to Elizabeth’s bridal shower. Traditionally the women-only American bridal shower, or ‘boudoir shower’ is marked by the giving of gifts specifically for use in a bride’s new sexual life, and I knew this shower would not be different (Montemurro 1985: 33). Elizabeth’s mother, Jane, future mother-in-law, Helen, and a group of women from church would be attending the party along with her younger friends, and the last thing I wanted was to embarrass Elizabeth or myself. As I flipped through hanger after hanger of satin and frills, I imagined with dread the look of amused shock on her face if, after opening the other women’s gifts of modest sleepwear, she unwrapped a slinky negligee from me. Finally, I selected a short jersey slip and matching dressing gown – sexy, but practical. At the shower my gift did stand out, as the least revealing lingerie Elizabeth received that day. My jaw dropped as Elizabeth held up a seductive black mesh negligee, and a bubblegum pink push-up babydoll, given by Helen and Chris’s teenaged sister, Clarissa. She blushed, but also
beamed at the lingerie. Noticing my surprise, Helen reassured me with a teasing glint in her
eye: ‘Don’t worry, your gift will be real comfy to *sleep* in!’

As Chapter 4 will elaborate, within the parameters of heterosexual marriage,
conservative evangelicals celebrate sexual intercourse as a God-given bulwark for the bond
between husband and wife. While women in Northwest Arkansas were directed in modesty,
sobriety, and discretion in public life, the intimate sphere of the marriage bed was defined
openly (and scripturally) as sensuous, and celebrating the nude form. Receiving sexy lingerie
reinforced for Elizabeth that a Christian wife embodies this duality, and gave a material facet
to her becoming-wife process.

Elizabeth’s Premiere Jewellery shower was hosted, like her engagement party and
bachelorette slumber party, at the home of her future parents-in-law, Pastor Rex and Helen.
Helen and Clarissa had laid out snack platters of chips, vegetables, ranch and queso dip, and
pigs in blankets. They had even gone so far as to pick up a sheet cake from Walmart with a
special message piped onto it: ‘Bling On the Bride’. The Premiere representative was a
friendly, charismatic friend from Pathway Fellowship, whose children all attended ACHC.

![Figure 12: Cake celebrating Elizabeth’s jewellery party](image)

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Chapter 2 introduced the importance of entrepreneurship for Christian women, as outlined in Proverbs 31, which describes a woman who, among her many positive qualities, is business-savvy. Newly wedded women in Arkansas often worked (Elizabeth, for example, worked at a coffee shop after her marriage), with the assumption that they would wish to centre their lives around the home once their first child arrived. Women did not have romantic ideas about rearing small children – the messy, chaotic reality of being the primary caregiver at home was hardly hidden or softened – but children get older and those pressures ease, women explore entrepreneurial options that can be undertaken from home. Some, like Helen, wrote books about marriage and homeschooling, or devotionals for women. Some had lifestyle blogs that chronicle family life, and share domestic and spiritual tips (Denson 2013: 16-17). One of the most popular forms of entrepreneurship for women is Christian multi-level marketing; these include Young Living Essential Oils, Premiere Jewellery, Lu La Roe (a women’s clothing company), Trades of Hope (which markets jewellry made by women in the Global South with considerable mark-up). At her ‘Premiere Shower’ the wisdom imparted to Elizabeth, and her unmarried girlfriends, was that the Christian wife cultivates a modest-but-fashionable feminine aesthetic, uses beauty to support Christian enterprise, is entrepreneurial and materially contributes to the household, and supports other Christian women to do the same.

The responsibility to earn money still primarily rested on the shoulders of men, but the management of a family’s money was equally a wife’s responsibility, and learning to understand money was part of any young woman’s training to become a wife. Girls are taught from a very young age that work and capitalism are inherently moral, and therefore Christian. In addition to learning domestic skills from their mothers and older sisters, girls learn the value of thriftiness, even in circumstances in which their fathers earn a comfortable living. Learning to manage money in a Christian manner is an essential part of becoming an adult, and learning to manage family finances with another person is essential to becoming a Christian spouse.

With this in mind, once Elizabeth and Chris were engaged, Pastor Rex and Helen decided to devote Wednesday evenings at Hopewell to a financial management video series
by Dave Ramsey, *Financial Peace University*. Ramsey is known for developing what he calls ‘Biblical finance’, a method of personal money management that avoids all forms of debt, including credit cards and car payments, drawing mainly from the book of Proverbs. Dave Ramsey’s use and interpretation of Biblical financial advice is convincing to conservative evangelicals in part because it is considered timeless, exemplifying how conservative evangelicals create a ‘parallel modernity’ that coexists in a wider Western cosmopolitan landscape (Fader 2009: 213). The series came with worksheets for couples to map their spending and create a plan to get out of debt or save for a large purchase. Finances in a marriage are meant to be a joint responsibility, so Elizabeth and Chris were urged to determine their financial personalities – one could either be a ‘spender’ or a ‘saver’ – and reflect on the role gendered wiring would play in how they managed their money together. Ramsey asserted that arguments and marital strife could be avoided through sound, Biblical financial management; in effect, Satan could be stopped from using money to destroy a Christian marriage.

What, then, do these points in the process of preparing for marriage reveal about the identity of the Christian wife, and everyday moral action? This thesis has argued that conservative evangelical women’s interest in Christian womanhood is expressed through ordinary piety, not only in the more ritualised practices of worship and daily Bible study (or, for that matter, weddings), but in the mundane actions that bring her into subjectivation with the scripturally supported model of the woman. Taking this approach to religious ethics, the moments described above can be seen as instances of learning ordinary piety that will be enacted by Elizabeth as a new Christian wife. Wearing sexy lingerie, buying or selling Premiere jewellery, and practicing Dave Ramsey’s tips on saving money, are all actions that integrate Elizabeth into her community, because they are understood as Christian actions that support the foundational identity of a Christian wife. In other words, they are pieces of an ontological architecture that upholds and expresses Christian womanhood.
3.4 The newlyweds

Once Elizabeth and Chris were engaged and Chris had saved enough for a deposit, he moved into a two-bedroom apartment 20 minutes from his family home, ensuring that he and Elizabeth would have their own place to live as soon as they were married. Although Elizabeth never slept in the apartment during their engagement, she took pride in hosting their parents for dinner, or friends and siblings for movie and game nights. Elizabeth was eager to demonstrate to her mother-in-law that she was a capable cook and cleaner, even before she took her place as Chris’s wife, boasting that she always thoroughly cleaned the dishes before putting them in the dishwasher, to ensure they would be ‘fully sanitized’. Once when I visited their apartment before the wedding, Elizabeth pointed out a large bedding set, including a comforter, still folded tightly in its plastic wrapping. Chris told me he did not plan to unwrap it and dress the bed until just before the wedding. ‘This is our bedding’, Elizabeth added, ‘so I don’t want to put it on until we’re sleeping in this bed together.’

In these final ethnographic sections, the couple stand poised at a critical moment in their marriage and Christian lives and identities. I look at Elizabeth’s new identity as a wife living in her marital home, and the important ways in which her process of becoming-wife was not made complete by the wedding. This examination will be a preamble to Chapters 4 and 5, as Chris and Elizabeth reflect on sexuality and parenthood.

3.4.1 Home from the honeymoon

In important ways, Elizabeth and Chris’s lives changed dramatically from the day they married. They lived independently from their parents for the first time, bore the sole responsibility for their livelihoods, and integrated sexual intercourse into their everyday lives. They were no longer expected to spend holidays with their respective families, as the sovereignty of their nuclear family unit was immediately established. Equally, on the other hand, their marriage fostered social reproduction and community continuity. Elizabeth had officially become a wife, rooting her more deeply in her community and thrusting her into a new mode of being. In the months following their wedding, Elizabeth in particular grappled
with the reality of her married life compared to the vision of marriage she had come to anticipate.

Unlike the other young married women at Hopewell Baptist, who had met their husbands at a Bible college and moved to Arkansas from other states immediately after being wed, Elizabeth did not have to adjust to new community life when she married Chris. She left her local church, Pathway Fellowship, to attend the membership course at Hopewell, but she stayed closely connected to Pathway through family and friends. Shortly after the couple returned from their honeymoon to Branson, Missouri, a popular Christian holiday destination known for its wide offering of family-friendly stage shows (Ketchell 2007), the ladies of Hopewell Baptist staged a **pounding** at their apartment. **Pounding** is a Southern American tradition in which friends and neighbours surprise a newlywed couple at their home, bearing gifts of home essentials, traditionally including pounds of flour, butter, etc., and cleaning products. The gesture cemented Elizabeth as part of the Hopewell local church body, to whom she and Chris should turn in times of dire material, as well as spiritual, need.

Their marriage additionally created new social opportunities for their siblings and peers. Because Elizabeth and Chris were one of the first couples in their circle of young homeschooled friends to marry, their house became a focal point of social activity. Their younger siblings were permitted to hang out on the weekends to watch movies, play games, and occasionally spend the night in the couple’s second bedroom. Chris’s 16-year-old sister was allowed to go out, even to late-night shopping on Black Friday (the night of Thanksgiving), as long as Elizabeth was with her. The couple’s new status as man and wife did nothing to dampen the exuberance of their youth – they collected superhero memorabilia, bought a pet hamster, and delighted in putting on caricatured adult onesies.

A few weeks after Elizabeth and Chris got engaged, the three of us met up at a Chick-fil-A to talk about what they expected married life to be like, based on what their parents,

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32 Most, but not all, Baptist churches recommend official membership. When changing churches, members sometimes bring a letter of good standing from their former church to fulfil membership requirements; some churches, including Hopewell, ask that members complete a one-time membership course and/or sign a covenant in order to have voting rights and take communion.
church, and Christian authors like Josh Harris had taught them. The two waxed romantic about how much they looked forward to sleeping in the same bed and waking up together; Elizabeth reiterated the usual phrasing about being a helpmeet often reiterated in church, that she looked forward to ‘helping and encouraging Chris in everything he does’. When it came to sex, Elizabeth said she was ready and not at all nervous. Her mother had always been open to discussing sexuality with her, and she knew she could use her as a source of information without much embarrassment. The only issue related to sex she anticipated going into marriage was an imbalance of desire. Elizabeth had taken for granted that Chris would want to have sex more than she would, and that she would have to navigate his expectations from the very beginning. Months later, we sat in the living room of their apartment, watching the hamster amble around in its plastic ball, and I asked how the two were enjoying the intimate side of married life.

‘Well,’ said Elizabeth, ‘I thought he would want it more than me, but that wasn’t a problem actually.’

Chris added, ‘No, on honeymoon, definitely there were times when she was more frisky than me! She would initiate, for sure.’

The fact that Elizabeth had as much, if not more, desire for sex compared to Chris did not make her question common gendered characterisation per se, but rather integrate her own experience as a nuance within a previously flat trope. The next chapter will delve more deeply into how Christian women compared experience to popular pedagogy to create sexual knowledge and integrate it into a Christian sexual ethic.

3.4.2 A heart issue

Elizabeth came from a family of 10 children, all birthed by her mother. As one of the older siblings, and one of only three girls in the family, much of the work of helping with littles fell to her. Even as her youngest sibling approached middle school age, Elizabeth still felt resentment for the time she spent caring for babies, and had little interest in taking on those responsibilities again by starting her own family. Her parents determined early in their
marriage that they would leave the size of their family 'up to God', and never employed any kind of contraceptive measures. Elizabeth’s mother, Jane, told me she never regretted her decision, and was distraught when, in her mid-30s, after the birth of her youngest, she found she could no longer get pregnant. Despite this, Elizabeth saw her mother struggle with her weight and body image, and felt nervous at the prospect of fighting the same battles. While many couples I knew looked forward to falling pregnant soon after their marriage, and eagerly hoped for a 'honeymoon baby', in the lead-up to their wedding, Elizabeth was adamant that starting a family would be on hold, perhaps indefinitely.

This was surprising to me to say the least, considering Elizabeth’s pro-natalist upbringing, Chris’s desire to have a large homeschooling family, and the moral tradition of true Christian womanhood. If Elizabeth had rejected the idea that becoming a wife meant wanting and trying to have children, ideally many children, this would have been a significant roadblock to her marriage to Chris, and could have prevented the marriage going forward altogether. The fact that her mother, future mother-in-law, and Chris all knew of and were sympathetic to Elizabeth’s reservations demonstrated their belief that God would ‘work on her heart’ before the wedding. To become a Christian wife, Elizabeth did not have to necessarily bear children in the future, but she had to be on a trajectory to bear them.

In our first long chat after the wedding and honeymoon, I was eager to know how Elizabeth felt about the prospect of having children.

Chris: ‘It was kind of a problem, or, something I was concerned about, but I didn’t think she really didn’t want [to have children]. It was a heart thing. And we talked a lot about it and prayed, and now Liz sees it differently, don’t you?’

Elizabeth: ‘It was a heart issue that I had to work out. I had this attitude about it, and it was hardening my heart, because I was mad about having to take care of babies whenever I was growing up. So, I needed God to work on me with it. And He did.’

Elizabeth stipulated, however, that she was still not certain how many children they would have, and she did think they would use some form of family planning moving forward. As Chapter 5 will show, pro-natalist Christians, even those who desire ten or more children, are likely to employ methods of contraception at some point in their marriage for a variety of
community-sanctioned reasons. One such reason is the desire to adopt babies and children, which is a highly valued method of family-building for pro-natalist Christians. Elizabeth and Chris told me that no matter how many kids God ultimately gives them through birth, they hoped to adopt one day, and had particular interest in adopting a baby from an African country. If that hope does come to fruition, it will have to wait, as the couple is currently expecting their first biological child:

![Image of a couple holding baby shoes]

*Figure 13: Chris and Elizabeth’s social media post announcing their first pregnancy*

3.5 Conclusion

To become a Christian wife, a woman must first enter the realm of Christian romance. Despite the efforts of the Christian purity movement to cement a culture of ‘pure’ dating in the United States, dating for conservative evangelicals in 2016 was nebulous, giving couples and future daters little in the way of external structural models for how to be in a pre-marriage relationship. This chapter has explored how my interlocutors in Northwest
Arkansas managed this terrain, shaping the practicalities of purity by taking into account popular discourse, parental direction, and their own discernment. Following Elizabeth and Chris on their path into marriage, the chapter showed how marriage preparation, and the wedding itself, reflect a local discomfort with notions of ritual, as well as the liminal identity of the teenager. Instead, this period is marked by an emphasis on emerging adult identity, especially the identity of the married Christian.

The chapter has therefore contributed further to an approach to religious ethics with a focus on identities, and ordinary moral action as engendering identities. It has proposed that local ambivalence toward ritual may present an opportunity to explore other ethical means by which Christian subjectivity is transformed. Methodologically, the chapter has additionally contributed to ethnographic study of religious notions of sexual purity that de-emphasises public discourse and foregrounds Christians’ interactions with and critiques of such discourse. By examining how women prepare to become a wife from an early age, through their wedding and honeymoon, the chapter advances the overarching question of what it means to be a Christian woman in conservative evangelical America.

Because of the previous chapter’s emphasis on the inextricability of conceptualisations of womanhood from marriage and family life, this chapter has been a natural continuation of that discussion. The following two chapters follow along that same trajectory, each dealing with a Christian feminine identity that cascades from the identity of the Christian wife. In the case of the identity of the lover (and sometimes the mother) women come to embody these identities very quickly after marriage.
CHAPTER 4: The Lover

STOP!
This material is intended for mature audiences. Don’t read this book unless you are married, have definite plans to be married in the next few weeks, or you are an older teenager whose parents have first read it and approve of you doing so.

* * *

4.1 Introduction: Talking about sex

Didi had not attended Elizabeth and Chris’s wedding, but sometime after, I fill in the details while visiting her farm just over the Missouri border. ‘This’ll sound weird’, Didi said, already laughing at herself, ‘but I love at weddings getting to watch the couple ready to go on their honeymoon and thinking “Aww, they get to have sex!” I get so excited for them.’

This chapter explores the idea of ‘holy’ sex. Because womanhood, marriage, and family are so fundamental, sex is a central locus for embodied conservative evangelical life. When women marry, they expect to enter into the new identities of Christian wife, and then Christian mother. Naturally coexisting with these identities is one other, the Christian Lover, which is due no less spiritual attention. Therefore, the private shared experience of lovemaking requires a particular kind of knowledge, discernment, and guidance. Through this chapter I situate sexual intercourse in the realm of Christian ethical identity-making by examining how wives experience ‘ordinary’ sex through their narratives, and the work they do to make sex Christian. Autobiography and local narratives have an important part to play in identity construction, according to current sociolinguistic understanding (Bruner 2001; Coates 1996, 2003), and this chapter makes methodological use of sexual narratives to draw ethnographic conclusions about the feminine identity of the Christian lover. Significantly, Jennifer Coates (1996, 2003) suggests that women and men ‘do’ sexuality and gender through
storytelling and conversation, making narratives one facet of enacting this identity as well as formulating it (Allegranti 2011:17).

In the vast wealth of literature on sex and sexuality, religion has not often been a focal consideration, however social scientists have recognised that religious sexuality involves more than proscription and procreation (Burke 2016). For the purposes of discussing how women purposefully cultivate Christian sexual identity, this chapter applies Middleton’s interdisciplinary model of human sexuality to the American conservative evangelical context. With this model as a point of departure, the chapter explores the interplay between Christian subjectivity, sexual epistemology, and embodied experience, in the creation of a holy sex life.

For conservative evangelical pro-natalists, sex is woven together with pregnancy and birth in the ethical project of true Christian living. However, while conservative evangicals highly value procreation, they consider lovemaking within marriage purposeful and holy for other, equally important, reasons. To examine this, the chapter unpacks the Christian epistemology of sex, and sexual discipleship literature, a vital but often overlooked aspect of conservative evangelical pedagogy. Ethnographically, the chapter uses women’s personal narratives of sexual intimacy, beginning with a sexual ‘moment of becoming’ in the form of the honeymoon. Women’s sexual narratives reveal how they maintain balance between myriad aspects of sexual intimacy: their own sexual desire, their husbands’ desire, the limitations of their bodies, the expectation of availability, and the spectre of sexual sin. Negotiations around sexual intimacy are far from static, and are informed and recalibrated as marriages and bodies change. Just as dating couples must determine pre-marital romantic piety, it is up to the married couple, with all the influences they take in, to discern what manner of sex is holy through collaborative effort. But it is women, as both sexual subjects and bearers of children, who are most often the gatekeepers and decision-makers about lovemaking. The spiritual and physical fruits of sex are borne out of the Christian woman’s body, and women must contend not only with questions about what Christian sex looks like, but also notions of how Christian women have sex.

This chapter unpacks how couples work together to turn sexual intimacy into pious action, assuring that their marriage bed is ‘undefiled’. The chapter then expands the concept
of ‘ordinary influence’ by showing how women guide decision-making based on their spiritual discernment and personal sexual pleasure. This in turn allows for exploration of the indispensable role of the body in directing ordinary ethics. Lastly, the chapter examines gender difference, in local discourse and experience, in the realm of sexual desire and sin.

4.1.1 Women’s intimate conversational spaces

Christine and I made our space in her bedroom, on days when she was home from the shop with the kids. Her average day-to-day was in the Manic Mechanic, the family engine shop, with her kind-natured, precocious husband Buck. Their interest in snakes, membership in a national Christian biker club, and home side business breeding rats made Christine and Buck a little unusual in their church family of Living Water Baptist, and the Christian homeschooling community, as well as fun company. Nothing about the Manic Mechanic was feminine, apart from a few scattered weather-worn dolls, and a smattering of glittery sticker books. Christine and Buck’s home, on the other hand, was a pristine three-bedroom ranch house in a sub-division surrounded by field land. Because Christine and the kids were so often at the shop, making use of the designated school area in the break room, our time visiting in the house was rare, and never sedentary. Christine was always cleaning, doing laundry, cooking a meal, helping one of the kids with school work, or running an errand. On a few occasions, she attempted to sequester the two of us in her bedroom while the children were meant to be studying dutifully at the kitchen table. Here, in between regular interruptions, she showed me her scrap books, including her wedding book and the kids’ baby books, and reminisced. This was our space to talk about sex.

Ernestine Friedl sums up the challenge of researching an ethnography of sex: ‘Ordinary, run-of-the-mill, everyday sex relations in virtually all human societies are hidden, conducted away from the gaze of all but the participants’ (Friedl 1994: 833). Sex and sexuality research is known for its methodological reliance on self-reporting via survey and interview. In the case of any self-reporting, but especially when communicating with actors in faith-based communities, a researcher may run into the tendency of interlocutors to ‘substitute the
cultural ideal for what they actually do in their private and intimate sexual encounters’ (Herdt 1999: 18-19). Fortunately, the nature of participant observation allows for close relationships in the field, which in turn oblige autobiographical sharing. Relating ‘sexual stories’ (Plummer 1995: 4), be they everyday anecdotes, or significant moments such as honeymoon stories, is often part of the tableau of conversation for anthropologists, and the Christian homeschooling community was no exception.

In Arkansas, sex as a topic of conversation was not taboo among conservative evangelicals per se. During worship and teaching, where groups were mixed and almost always included children, sexual intercourse was brought up in vague terms, often with a wink or the caveat, ‘I ain’t tryin’ to be ugly’. In more private, sex-segregated spaces, it was not unusual for women to speak comfortably with one another on the topic of sexuality, especially when prompted by a fellow married woman (even if that woman is an anthropologist, rather than a member of the church). It was in these spaces – in living rooms, bedrooms and church nurseries, where children were out of earshot or considered too little to understand – that women shared these aspects of their lives with me. As in other parts of this research, men were not absent from my investigation of Christian sexuality, in fact they were often present as voices of sexual authority; but it is the experience of women, expressed to me and each other in the small spaces, that this thesis seeks to foreground.

Women’s intimate conversational spaces were predicated on the absence of men. This was not true of all women-centred activities or spaces, where a man’s presence could alter the direction or timbre of conversation but not derail it. I discovered the difference between these two kinds of feminine spaces, separated by degrees of intimacy, by occasionally attempting to include my husband in them. Some events, such as a party for demonstrating and selling one of the popular Christian direct marketing products (e.g. Premier Jewellery, and Young Living Essential Oils) were the de facto domain of women. Men were not barred, but their absence was assumed, first because the parties took place during the day when men were at work, and second because the products involved were not considered of interest to men. Here a man could be present without creating disruption, but with the understanding that, given the choice, he would rather be elsewhere. Ladies’ Bible studies and ladies’ fellowships, on the
other hand, were women’s spaces exclusively. Although often held during men’s normal work hours, even when they were not, a man’s presence would have been prohibitively disruptive. The more structural explanation for this is that these studies are led by women, and doctrine dictates women should not teach or lead men in spiritual matters. Were a man to sit in, the study leader would feel uncomfortable directing the study and leading prayer while he sat mum. Furthermore, if the man in question were the husband of one of the ladies, his inaction would be tantamount to a dereliction of duty as a spiritual leader. An equally salient reasoning for the women involved was not a matter of doctrine: in the absence of men, they expressed more comfort with speaking openly about their personal lives. In the female space of the Bible study, struggles were aired, tears flowed, and advice was tempered with a level of gentleness not expected from men.

Finally, in the scenario of a private visit, which formed the bulk of my conversations with women about their sexual lives, a man’s presence would completely alter the intimate nature of the space (Meneley 1996). I learned about women’s sex lives in these private conversations, one-on-one and in small groups. Some of my most extensive conversations about sex took place after the topic came up organically one day in the Hopewell Baptist church nursery between services. Three young women – Martha, Haley, and Amanda – all new mothers in their first two years of marriage, began asking one another questions about sexual intercourse, and how to manage sex and their changing bodies after giving birth. Lacking the time to carry on a lengthy conversation, I asked if we could arrange to visit with one another at home, where we could chat at length with my recorder running. In the end, we had two such visits, and brought the topic up again periodically in the following months. Additionally, one close interlocutor and friend spoke to me about her sex life, among other things, while giving me a haircut one afternoon while her daughter napped. Others opened up about sexuality after conversations about fertility and their reproductive lives. In some cases, especially when a woman was a mother of many children and homeschooling dominated her days, no space private enough could be carved out for the topic of sex, and visits were sometimes followed by exchanges over messaging apps.
Men also created intimate spaces and relationships amongst themselves, but they are less overtly curated. Within church families, men were encouraged to disciple one another, and discipleship efforts often furnished personal intimacy between brothers in Christ. For example, Pathway Fellowship organized a weekly men’s prayer group, which met at a donut shop in the early morning before regular work hours. There were many reasons it would have been inappropriate for me to insert myself into men’s spaces, or seek out close friendships with men. However, I did speak to some men about sexuality, and learned indirectly about some aspects of men’s sexual knowledge and experiences through their wives. Pastor Rex and Associate Pastor Bobby both endeavoured to teach me the Biblical perspective on sexuality. Bobby in particular had fascinating theories on some of the finer theological points regarding ova and spermatozoa. Chris and Elizabeth were the only pair to speak to me about sex together; throughout fieldwork I became close with both of them, and gained an invaluable perspective from Chris, but the intimacy of the spaces in which we talked about relationships and sexuality was also made different by his presence.

4.2 Anthropology and sex

Interest in sexual practice has been a part of the discipline of social anthropology almost from its outset. Margaret Mead (1961) went so far as to argue that sexual relations define local perceptions of normal human nature. Academic literature more broadly is rich in theory about sexuality and human sexual behaviour, yet room remains for more contributions from an ethnographic perspective. From about the 1970s and into the 1990s, anthropologists and other scholars developed theoretical models to explain human sexuality, from biological, psychological, or social/political perspectives (some of the most well-known examples being Kinsey et.al. 1948; Masters & Johnson 1966; Simon & Gagnon 2009[1973]; Foucault 1978). Within social anthropology, Suzanne Frayser called for an approach to sexuality that would capture ‘the integration of its social, biological, cultural, and psychological attributes’ (Frayser 1999: 3). Since then, theorists have adopted a holistic view of sex that recognises its multitudes, as embodied and social, regulated and relational.
To begin to theorise Christian sex in America, I wish to highlight two theoretical points that have come out of this body of work on holistic human sexuality, which are conveniently summarised in Jackson and Scott’s *Theorizing Sexuality* (2010). First, and most self-evidently, sex is not pre-social and cannot be reduced to the biological (Jackson and Scott 2010:149-150). Like so much of the phenomena anthropologists study, sex is an embodied practice with biological function that is also fundamentally social. The embodiedness of sex, beyond the mechanically biological, encompasses the ways individual bodies experience and are experienced: a sexual body is objectified, sensory, and sensate (ibid. 146-149). Second, the sexual self is mediated through epistemological sources, and conversations with oneself and one’s partner – what Gagnon calls ‘scripting’ (ibid. 131). These points of sexual theory support the position that sex is not merely a matter of practice – the dos and don’ts of sexual relations – but is produced out of an array of social and phenomenological influences.

In the last few decades, the study of sexuality has come to comprise just about every part of the social world sex touches, including areas of public life. Feminist scholars Hunt and Jung reason that, ‘although sex is very personal … it should not be interpreted as purely private, because it has so many far-reaching consequences both for those directly involved and for others’ (2009: 158). Social theorists such as Simon (1996) have put it another way, arguing that all discourses about sexuality are inherently discourses about something else. While this chapter disputes the suggestion that ordinary sex cannot be treated as its own subject of discourse, it is important to recognise that sex is culturally contextual, and powerfully entangled with so many other areas of study. To provide a concise view of conservative evangelical sexuality, therefore this chapter sets aside quite a few potential intersecting areas of investigation, about women’s health, marginality, politics, and power.

4.2.1 Modelling Christian sexuality

This chapter does not attempt to explain the whole of human sexuality, or assess the merits of a holistic, interdisciplinary approach. As I suggested above, in the last 15-20 years, many texts have implicitly employed a holistic model, and sexuality is a subject that is given
interdisciplinary treatment as a matter of course. To answer Frayser’s call for a holistic approach to human sexuality, Middleton created the Interactive Model of Sexuality (2002: 23). For my purposes, Middleton’s model is the most useful theoretical tool for illustrating how conservative evangelical women cultivate and manage true Christian sex, as it encompasses the key theoretical points this thesis addresses. Therefore, it provides a handy visual perspective of how women embody the new identity of lover after marriage.

In this simple diagram, Middleton affirms the interconnectedness of culture (or the social), biology (or the body), and the self (or psychology), but without elaborating much on how the facets interact in the performance of everyday sex. However, he does add the unifying element of change, which Frayser had not considered: ‘Clearly, both sexual ideals and sexual behaviour vary somewhat across cultures, but they also change through history within a single culture, as they have in North American culture’ (Middleton 2002: 23). It is my view, and the purpose of this chapter to show, that ethnography can provide the linkages between the model’s aspects, and where they blend.

Several key themes within conservative evangelical life fit into the Middleton model with very little modification. Historically, the biological aspect of sexuality has referred to the biological imperative, health and disease, and mechanical practices (Mead 1961; Weeks 1985; Horrocks 1997; Hastings and Magowan 2010). More recently, the relationship between sex and biology has come to include phenomenological embodiment, because sex ‘is self-evidently embodied: “having sex” obviously entails socially located bodies in interaction’ (Jackson and Scott 2010: 139). Moreover, it is worthwhile for discussions of embodiment to include ‘fleshy experience’ as well as more philosophical analysis of phenomenology (ibid.). Throughout the thesis thus far, I have discussed the body’s connection to identities, action,
and authority via the physical indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In this chapter, the ‘fleshy experience’ takes on greater significance, as the thesis begins to illuminate the body’s role in inter-subjectivity (Allegranti 2011; Opas and Haapalainen 2017), and inquire how women’s bodies in particular become the ‘developmental means’ (Asad 1993) for articulating influence and limitations within married sexual intercourse.

‘Culture’, or the social, is again a broad category in the study of sexuality. In the context of conservative evangelical Arkansas, this chapter narrows Middleton’s facet of ‘culture’ to local epistemology, i.e. how knowledge about Christian sex is created and used. This may include sexual narratives, Christian discipleship literature, and advice from friends and family. Jackson and Scott refer to these avenues of knowledge as ‘resources for sexual self-making’, which are essentially ‘the cultural resources available to us, which help shape what is thinkable and possible’ (Jackson and Scott 2010: 131). The chapter considers such outside resources alongside the authoritative knowledge generated by intimate inter-subjectivity, in the marriage bed and in conjunction with the Holy Spirit.

Jackson and Scott further argue, following Simon and Gagnon’s theory of the ‘sexual script’ (2003), that the interplay between resources and individual lives ‘is by no means direct: it is mediated through interpersonal scripting and through the reflexive “conversations with oneself” of intrapsychic scripting, both of which are affected by our social location and individual biographies’ (ibid.). This chapter utilises Middleton’s sexual aspect of the self, and Jackson and Scott’s theory of relating the self to internal and external notions of sexuality, to deepen the thesis’s ongoing exploration of identity, and processes of becoming. For a Christian woman, the process of becoming a lover is worked into her other experiences of becoming identities, all supported by the ontological architecture around her. Producing a sexual self in her marriage over time entails integrating private sexual thoughts and experiences with more public collective orthopraxis and modes ethics. Therefore, the chapter looks at sexual actions as everyday moral actions, projected onto the Biblical picture of the ‘marriage bed’.

In these three aspects – embodiment, epistemology, and identity – what may be missing from Middleton’s model is the inter-subjectivity, or relationality of sex. Sex (at least in the
case of a conservative evangelical marriage) involves two people, and an individual’s experiential sexuality is formed alongside that of another person. The reproductive and sexual body is a body shared with another, and authoritative knowledge must also be negotiated through one’s spouse. The marriage is where tensions between embodied realities, e.g. disparity in libido, and one person’s pleasure causing the other’s pain, are identified and negotiated. Another absent element in constructing this puzzle is gender: the paradigm of sexuality, even if it can be described sufficiently by the proposed model, is encountered differently for men and for women. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, conservative Christian epistemology produces the normative statements about the male and female sexual bodies and selves, and the difference between the sexualities of men and women are perpetually emphasized.

4.3 Sexual epistemology

How is knowledge about sex created and legitimised? This section considers the resources available to Christian lovers, or those about to become lovers. Unsurprisingly, sexual knowledge, and specifically what makes sex Christian, is derived from the Bible, and integrated into gendered pedagogy around marriage. The genre of discipleship literature includes swaths of titles on purity and marriage that touch on themes of sex, but an entire strand of discipleship books, as well as online resources, is dedicated to the subject of having a healthy Christian sex life. In light of Middleton’s model of human sexuality, ‘culture’ appears a vague and insufficient category, implying a level of unconscious habitus, when confronted with the highly conscious ethics revealed in the cultivation of conservative evangelical sexual epistemology.

4.3.1 Why did God create sex?

For the true Christian, all answers to life’s questions can be found in the Bible, therefore, to understand sexuality and sexual intimacy, the most useful question to ask is, what is the purpose of sex, as designed by God? According to Helen, sex, as God designed it,
has several integral and complementary purposes, which she explained as part of Hopewell Baptist’s ladies’ Bible study series on marriage and motherhood. In preparation for the study, Helen compiled a selection of Bible passages alluding to marriage and sexuality, capturing the architecture of what sex is, and its interdependency with marriage and the divine. First, sex is analogous with marriage, and as such it is a picture of God’s love for His people:

‘Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest mine’ (Ezekiel 16:8).

This passage, for example, gives a picture of God’s love that is tender, loyal, and protective, as a husband should be with his wife. Christians are to confront the worldly version of sexuality with the godly picture of committed, marital sex, as a matter of evangelism.

Second, sex is the manner by which children are conceived, and children are a gift from God, therefore sex is meant to be procreative. No discussion of procreation in Christian pro-natalist Arkansas would be complete without the foremost ‘quiverfull’ passage from scripture:

‘Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate’ (Psalm 127: 3-5).

Helen pointed out that these first two aspects of sex were essential, but emphasised one more that she said often did not get enough attention. Sex is meant to strengthen a marriage by forging a strong physical and emotional bond, and toward that end, sex was made to be pleasurable for both parties:

‘Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth. Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love’ (Prov. 5: 18-19).
Helen capped off the study with a warning about ‘Intimacy Killers’. In the study guide she put together for the group, she posed the discussion question: ‘Because marital sex is a gift from God and for His glory the Enemy seeks to destroy it. In what ways can he do this?’ Marriage, as Chapter 2 explained, is a dangerous undertaking for Christians, and marital sex is an ideal target for Satan. For this reason, I propose that, alongside its holy purposes, sex is precarious. Helen’s guide suggested examples of roadblocks and snares the Enemy could throw in the path of a married couple to ruin their sex life, including selfishness, busyness, and ‘child-centered marriage’. This last point of risk initially struck me as counterintuitive in light of my friends’ demonstrable commitment to their children, but it was a topic dropped in frequently in conversations about marriage and motherhood, the concern being that a family will not be stable if a husband and wife do not dedicate time to being alone (and having sex) with regularity.

4.3.2 Authoritative Sources

It is no surprise that, in a Bible study about sex, Helen, a pastor’s wife with a high level of Biblical literacy, was heeded as a voice of authority. Yet Helen insisted at the start of this study, and every study the Hopewell ladies’ group did, that she was ‘not in charge’ of the discussion, and not the default source of knowledge. Most of the women in the study group were married, some much longer than Helen and Rex, and all of the participating church members were Christian women who understood discernment, both of scripture and within everyday action.

This section is concerned with what my interlocutors know about sex. It asks, in the process of becoming a Christian lover, what sources of sexual knowledge are authoritative? Whenever I asked my married friends, ‘What makes sex Christian?’ the most common answer I received involved quoting or paraphrasing of a verse from Hebrews: ‘Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled’ (Heb. 13:4).

‘But’, they invariably would add, ‘that doesn’t mean anything goes’. The same verse ends, ‘but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge’ (ibid.).
Amongst conservative evangelicals, what young women, and men, learn about sex varies widely from person to person. Sexual knowledge is closely woven together with what actors understand about femininity and masculinity, but sexual regimes of truth are also generated within the authoritative knowledge site of the marriage bed. Prior to marriage, some forms of formal pedagogy exist alongside informal (usually intra-generational) knowledge-sharing, and pre-marital or extra-marital sexual contact, including (by emic definition) pornography. When it comes to the peculiar details of sexual intercourse, an attitude that the newly married couple are on their own prevails. But for the married couple, information on how to have a good Christian sex life abounds in forms of discipleship literature, such as books and online blogs.

Sex manuals are sanctioned sources of authoritative knowledge, but they are not universally utilized, and the information they provide leaves certain gaps. For example, authors of Christian sex manuals express concern that the content they produce be in no way pornographic, an issue they attempt to circumvent with simple anatomical drawings of sexual anatomy and positioning (DeRogatis 2015: 11). Some books forego inclusion of mechanical knowledge, and present the reader instead with advice on emotional and spiritual considerations related to married sexual activity. The expectation is that these gaps will be filled by the couple as they navigate the mechanical details of sexual intercourse. Sexual knowledge is therefore overtly generated by authoritative sources, and inadvertently manifested through deductive reasoning.

DeRogatis’s book Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism (2015) is dedicated entirely to the phenomenon of the evangelical Christian sex manual. DeRogatis’s comprehensive overview maps the discursive terrain of sexuality as it is viewed by American evangelical communities. Important topics covered by Christian sex manuals include the inherent holiness of God’s design for sex within marriage; the spiritual value of mutual pleasure; the importance of open, ‘cheerful’ or ‘joyful’ sexual availability, especially on the part of the wife; and the inextricable relationship between sexual intercourse and reproduction. Although a number of guides are written by men, many voices of authoritative
knowledge in the sphere of Christian sex are women, especially stay-at-home homeschooling mothers, who author books targeted toward a conservative evangelical female readership.

One author, Jennifer³³, became a friend and interlocutor after I contacted her through her online blog. Her book, titled *Love Your Husband, Love Yourself: Embracing God’s Purpose for Passion in Marriage* (Flanders 2010), gives insight into how conservative evangelical women frame the undertaking of sexual availability for one another. A pivotal argument of the book, that wives should have frequent, enthusiastic sex with their husbands, centres around the premise that husbands desire sexual intercourse often, and wives, juggling infant care and lower overall sexual desire, find themselves rebuffing their husbands’ advances (ibid. 136-138). Rather than solely argue that wives have a duty to be sexually available, Jennifer describes the abundant emotional, physiological, and psychological benefits married sexual intercourse provides to women. In addition to forging the holy bond between a Christian husband and wife, vaginal sex without the use of a condom is proposed to help with weight control, strengthen bones, and reduce the risk of cancer and stomach ulcers. (See Appendix 1.)

The argument presented by Jennifer, and other authoritative voices like hers, privileges the presentation of ‘scientific’ knowledge, which makes explicit the biological component of sexual intercourse as a means of extolling the holiness of marital sex. Therefore, although Jennifer was a conservative evangelical mother of 10, her claims about sex and health would not carry the same weight if she were not married to a Christian medical doctor, who also wrote the forward to *Love Your Husband, Love Yourself*. As with fertility knowledge, this utilisation of medicalised forms of discourse has in recent years come to coexist with scriptural truths about sex and the body in conservative evangelical pedagogy. A woman may point to the Bible for evidence that God created sex to be pleasurable and healthy, while also arguing that God achieves this in part by elevating oxytocin levels during intercourse³⁴.

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³³ Jennifer did not live in Northwest Arkansas, but Northeast Texas, about 5 hours away by car. Although she was not explicitly part of the Christian homeschooling community at the centre of this research, it is reasonable to situate her in that community, both ideologically and geographically, as a conservative evangelical homeschooling pro-natalist mother in the American Bible Belt.

³⁴ Christian arguments about positive health benefits do not apply to sexual intercourse outside of marriage.
Likewise, she may cite a Biblical passage prohibiting the ‘spilling of seed’ (Gen. 38: 8-10), but also talk about the health benefits of semen\textsuperscript{35} when it is absorbed through the walls of the vagina.

Helpful pastors’ wives, Christian guides to marital sex, and the burgeoning local discursive interest in Biblically affirmed sexual science were all examples of authoritative resources that might be available to young adult Christians and women preparing to marry. The moment of becoming a Christian lover, however, was an embodied process that could only be enacted by a woman and her new husband. The section that follows will present a narrative of a honeymoon, as well as a further ethnographic look at women’s narrative spaces.

4.4 Becoming a lover

How do women learn to be lovers, and how do they establish what is and is not Christian sex? This section unpacks how decisions about sexual practice are made, and how those decisions are informed by, or challenge, extant sexual regimes of truth. This includes questions of access and agency, when and how often to engage in sexual intercourse, management of reproductive decisions, and what acts constitute ‘holy’ sex. In the model of Christian sexuality, this section deals with how epistemology, the body, and the self, merge in everyday lovelmaking. I begin with the honeymoon story, a type of ‘first sexual experience story’ (described by Plummer 1995), to show whence loose strands of sexual knowledge come, and how they are woven into women’s experiences of sex as a new Christian lover.

It is important to note that, despite the evident ideal of sexual purity, a woman does not necessarily have to be virginal to become a true Christian lover. Sexual contact before marriage, with one’s spouse or other person(s), while not common, was also not unheard of. Among my interlocutors, women who came of age during the 1980s and 1990s, were more likely to have had sexual experiences prior to marriage. Didi got pregnant with her first child as a teenager, before she became a Christian, and got saved during her pregnancy. Jane and

\textsuperscript{35} Semen is discussed as part of a plan for weight control and healthy living in the ‘Trim Healthy Mama’ diet regime.
her husband had sex before they married, but got saved together after marriage. In the younger generation this was far less common, but Haley pointed out, ‘we all tend to make some kind of mistake and push things a little’ before marriage, during engagement especially, with heavy petting or pressing bodies together. In these instances, repentance is always possible, and what matters is the cultivation of Christian sex between married partners. That said, sexual experience before, or outside of marriage, generates a certain kind of knowledge, often viewed as negative or dangerous, which must be managed throughout a marriage.

4.4.1 The honeymooners

To illustrate the trajectory of epistemologies of Christian sexuality – how different forms of sexual knowledge are generated and engaged with – I offer the example of Haley, and the rapid development of her sexual awareness on her honeymoon.

Haley’s story emerged from one of the informal conversations I had with her and two other friends, Martha and Amanda. Haley and Amanda were new mothers in their early twenties, married to a pair of brothers, Kyle and Kevin. They lived within five minutes of one another by car, each in a cookie-cutter style apartment complex, common starter homes for young newlyweds. While Amanda’s husband, Kevin, was away at his job in a machine shop, their two-bedroom apartment was the exclusive domain of women and babies. On a simmering day in August, two months after the birth of Amanda’s first baby, Noah, Haley and I invited ourselves over, bringing cookies and sparkling apple juice. Summer afternoons in Arkansas were always spent visiting in this way, when homeschooling schedules eased or paused entirely. In Amanda’s living room old episodes of ‘I Love Lucy’ played on a loop in the background of our chat. Emma, Haley’s 10-month-old daughter, energetically scuttled between her mother, auntie, and me, while Noah dozed in Amanda’s arms. As conversation flowed, Haley and Amanda periodically pulled out makeshift nursing shawls made from knotted receiving blankets, and draped them over themselves to breast feed.

Haley met her husband Kyle, an Arkansas native, at a Christian college in Florida. Prior to marrying at age 18, Haley had one or two books, and an older married sister to provide her
with sexual knowledge, but she discovered some of the most basic facts about sex on the day of her wedding. Like most couples their age, Haley and Kyle left for their honeymoon immediately following their two-hour wedding reception. Before their departure, they changed out of their wedding clothes at Kyle’s parents’ house. Haley described her emotions at that point in the day, as she contemplated their first sexual experience together:

“The sad thing is, I wasn’t even excited about the first night. I was horrified leading up to it. Like months before, I was like, “He’s gonna see me naked!” I can’t handle my nerves, like my anxiety, and I was just so scared cuz I had no idea what I was gonna be doing and I was like “I hope he knows.” But the thing is, I knew he wouldn’t know either. And I knew he had, like, expectations and I was so nervous. I was trying to like avoid it as much as I could, like we were driving home and I was like, “Let’s go home and change real fast. We can change in separate rooms and get in the car and drive to the hotel.” And Kyle’s like “We’re not changing in separate rooms!” [laughs] … Cuz then he wanted, after we changed in front of each other, he wanted to have sex at his parents’ house. And I’m like, “They could be home any minute!” I was trying to avoid it.’

Although she presented the narrative as a humorous back-and-forth in which she was trying to delay her first sexual encounter with Kyle, Haley conveyed a visceral fear of the unknown, compounded by the awareness that her new husband was equally unknowledgeable about how the night would unfold for them both.

Amanda put out on the coffee table a plate of chocolate chip cookies her mother-in-law had brought over. I asked the women what it was like being naked with their husbands for the first time. After a beat, Haley replied:

‘I told you guys I didn’t know it looked like that, right?’ She was referring to the anatomy of male genitalia. Once we had all finished giggling, Haley explained: ‘I was always told when I was little, people always joked that [penises] looked like hot dogs. So I was expecting a hot dog.’

Half teasing and half incredulous, Amanda asked her, ‘Did you never change a baby boy’s diaper?’

Haley said that she had, but she did not imagine that an infant’s genitals would look like a grown man’s, because she ‘figured maybe it just hasn’t grown into itself yet’. Haley did not
conceive of a difference between a flaccid and erect penis, and explained, ‘I knew guys had balls but I just didn’t know if they were visible, like if they’re inside. Like girls, you know, everything’s inside. But I just never saw a naked person.’

Amanda and Martha, who married within a year of Haley, had come to different conclusions about male anatomy prior to their first sexual encounters with their husbands. Amanda had presumed, from changing little boys’ diapers, that male genitals must look similar enough those of babies. Martha explained that, while growing up, one of her cousins, whom she described as not a very good influence, had shown her a book containing anatomically correct drawings of male genitals. Neither women described any sense of surprise when they first viewed their husbands naked. But while Haley’s assumptions and subsequent shock may not be universal, or even common, they are understandable. As a newlywed her family had given her books that discussed the emotional and spiritual components of the Christian marriage bed, but not the mechanics of what happens there. Haley had no memory of her mother even uttering the word ‘sex’ in her life. Based on Kyle’s ‘cluelessness’ on the night of their wedding, she presumed his parents had not given him much practical instruction either.

Haley went on to describe her thoughts on the prospect of sexual intercourse on her honeymoon, having adjusted to a new knowledge of male genitalia:

‘I was like, I stood there, we stood there for like 20 minutes before we got in the shower, and I’m like “There’s no way that is going inside me.” I said, “That’s impossible! [My vagina’s] not that big!” He said, “If a baby can go through there, this can go through there.”’

Since giving birth to her first child, Haley understood first-hand how different the processes of sexual intercourse and birth are, anatomically speaking. She maintained, however, the belief in a fundamental similarity: just as a woman’s body, including her vagina, is designed by God to give birth, so too is it designed to engage in sexual intercourse. Despite Kyle’s confidence in the compatibility of their anatomy, on the night of their wedding, they found penetration was prohibitively painful for Haley. At some point amid their attempts,
Haley said that Kyle decided to stop and phone his mother for advice. Through peals of laughter, she told the story of that phone call:

‘He was like, “Are you alone? Is anyone around? Do you have time to talk?” And she’s like “Uh, yeah, aren’t you guys on your honeymoon?” And he’s like “Yeah, we’re having some problems.” And she’s like “Oh no! What’s going on?”’

At this point Amanda, who is married to Kyle’s brother, interjected to express her complete lack of surprise at his mother’s supportive response. By the standards of the Christian homeschooling community in Northwest Arkansas, Kyle and Kevin’s family were ‘strict’ in how they dressed, consumed media, and practiced what Fader describes as ‘self-discipline’. Nonetheless, their mother had no qualms about speaking to her married son about sex.

‘It’s funny how open she’s willing to be about it!’ said Haley. ‘Like, I’m used to my mom who won’t even say the word sex. And [Kyle’s mom] is like, “Oh yeah, we’ll talk about it, what do you need to know?” And he’s like “How do I make Haley not be in pain? How do I help her to calm down and relax?” And she’s like trying to give us tips [laughing]. It’s so weird to me, like my mom would not be having this conversation with me.’

‘Did she have good tips?’ I asked.

‘Yeah? I mean she said, “Maybe you guys should go and take a bath and, you know, relax, and just don’t have that on your mind all the time, don’t think oh we have to have sex, we have to have sex. Just relax and get to know each other, and spend some time together, and then when you both feel comfortable and ready, then try to have sex.” And she said, “Just stop forcing it. Cuz it’s not going to work if you force it.”’

Once Haley and Kyle were married, they suddenly were able to tap into resources of authoritative knowledge once closed to them, such as advice from a mother who had not previously disclosed sexual knowledge. The advice they received – to relax, get to know one another, and enjoy each other – was also given to Elizabeth in the lead-up to her marriage to Chris. On the night before and the morning of the wedding, I asked the friends and family members gathered at Rex and Helen’s house what words of wisdom they would like to give Elizabeth for her wedding night. The advice was virtually all the same, from long-married
parents to unmarried bridesmaids: ‘Don’t worry, just enjoy one another’. The advice echoed the attitude of Kyle’s mother, that a woman should feel comfortable during her first sexual encounter with her husband, and that comfort should take priority over consummation. Many of the women I knew did report having vaginal intercourse on their wedding night, but stipulated that doing so was not considered mandatory, or even preferable.

By the end of their wedding night, Haley and Kyle decided to put intercourse on hold. The next day, Haley’s menstrual period began, adding another complication to their honeymoon plans. Menstruation did not deter them from attempting to consummate their marriage, but it did prove an insurmountable obstacle:

‘Well, my cycle lasts like 7-10 days, so it lasted for the whole honeymoon.

Unfortunately. Because we were only gone for like a week … We just tried every night, but it just wouldn’t go, and I—there was only so much pain I could handle, and I was like “I can’t do it anymore!” and I felt so bad, because I was like trying as hard as I could to handle it. But finally the last night I was like, “We’re gonna make this work, I don’t care how painful it is.”’

In retrospect, Haley identified a significant gap in her sexual knowledge, which had led to the pain she experienced on her honeymoon: neither she nor Kyle had any awareness of foreplay, and the importance of vaginal lubrication to facilitate comfortable penetration. Even though they had both been taught, as a part of their preparation for marriage, that sexual intercourse is meant to be pleasurable, they did not know how this was to be achieved until nearly a year into their marriage. After the honeymoon, when the couple was settled in NWA, Kyle’s mother had offered to talk through sexual questions with them, but Haley was uncomfortable with that idea. Instead, Kyle turned to his co-workers at the machine shop, many of whom were not conservative evangelicals but did enjoy talking about their sex lives. As sources of authoritative knowledge, Haley and Kyle considered the co-workers unhelpful, as the advice they gave came ‘not from a Christian perspective, [but] from a very dirty, perverted perspective’.

Haley, on the other hand, said one turning point for her was her pregnancy. Her Christian midwife, Peggy, was not likely to give explicit sexual advice, however midwifery
appointments, and the pregnancy itself, gave Haley insight into her reproductive body. As will become clear, women’s embodied knowledge – knowledge about their bodies and enacted through their bodies – yields a measure of authority that facilitates their influence over ordinary piety, in the intersubjective process of curating a true Christian ‘marriage bed’.

4.4.2 The undefiled marriage bed

The Christian lover is not an identity separate to the wife, and not one a woman or man overtly would use to index themselves. On the other hand, I argue that the lover is a Christian feminine identity that proceeds from the wife, is embodied through its own moments of becoming, and requires its own pious cultivation. A woman cannot be a Christian lover without being a Christian wife, and God’s purpose for the identities is to be intertwined, but a woman still may continue to be a wife after she ceases being a lover, e.g. through old age or illness. Evidence for the unique cultivation of the lover identity can be found in Christian couples’ approach to making sexual intercourse holy via the metaphorical site of ordinary piety, the ‘marriage bed’.

In her book, Jennifer extolls the benefits of couples praying together before having sex (Flanders 2010: 46), a practice she learned from another Christian sex guide, Sacred Sex (Gardner 2002). Gardner offers this advice to Christian husbands:

‘If you want to do something that your wife will find sexy and sensual, try this simple act of foreplay: Pray with her … And praise God for giving you the privilege of sharing in His beautiful gift of sexual intimacy with her’ (ibid. 52-53).

Prayer before sex, according to the women I knew who practiced it with their husbands, reminded them of the sacredness of their lovemaking, giving it an exciting gravitas. It also helped to orientate their minds and hearts toward enthusiastic participation, or at least a joyful surrender. Amanda recalled in instance when her husband incorporated sex into their usual nightly prayer:

‘Kevin and I have this little routine, every evening we read a chapter of the Bible and we pray through it and we go to sleep. And I was listening to him pray, and at the end of his prayer he says “And dear Lord, please be with us through this time when we have sex,
and help us to enjoy each other and everything.” And I was thinking, “Wait, we’re gonna have sex?”

What precisely constitutes ‘ordinary’, or standardised sex, even within a cultural context, can often vary (Peterson 2007). Vaginal copulation ending in male orgasm was, according to Christian literature and my interlocutors, the standard definition of sexual intercourse, and the default mode of engagement defining sexual access. Outside of vaginal intercourse, couples had to discern which sex acts they would engage in, and which they would avoid, based on a few decisive factors. Some decisions were based on reproduction – e.g., some women who were committed to ‘full quiver’ family planning said they and their husbands were diligent about not ‘spilling seed’ (Gen. 38: 8-10).

Other decisions about sexual acts, oral sex for example, ostensibly had less to do with a Biblical sexual morality, and more to do with ideas of hygiene. One young wife I knew would not consider engaging in any form of oral sex with her husband, because she believed it put them both at risk for genital herpes. Another friend described herself as ‘a bit of a germaphobe,’ and said she eschewed oral sex because it was ‘gross’. Yet another said she thought of oral sex, and other forms of non-vaginal intercourse, as ‘fancy’ as opposed to her ‘simple, just normal’ self, meaning those forms of sex were not for her. No woman shared with me an interest in anal intercourse, and it was generally agreed that there was nothing appealing about it – it was considered unbiblical, unhygienic, and offered no pleasure for the woman. As Martha put it, ‘There’s absolutely nothing in it for me, so why would I do it?’ In all of these cases, women based their decisions on ideas of holiness that necessarily included their preferences and pleasure.

4.4.3 Women’s sexual bodies

How is holy sex enacted through, and sometimes in opposition to, the body? In the discussion of sex as orthopraxis and ethical self-making, it can be easy to overlook the fact that lovemaking between spouses must also take into account the physiological limitations of
an individual body. Married conservative evangelicals are taught that a wife’s duty, in her role as helpmeet, is to make herself sexually available to her husband, citing Corinthians:

‘Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency’ (Cor. 7: 3-5).

However, what ‘availability’ entails in actual practice is a complex matter of mutual agency. Missa suffered from cancer in childhood, and chemotherapy and radiation treatments left her without functioning reproductive organs. She described how the physical pain she always experienced during sex caused her to withdraw from her husband, to which she attributed many of the problems in her marriage. She faulted herself for not doing more to endure or resolve her vaginal pain so that she could give her husband the sexual access he required.

A major point of collaboration, or negotiation, between spouses, is simply whether to have intercourse, when pregnancy, birth, and post-natal recovery are common obstacles. Here the physical limitations of the birthing body become especially relevant. In Arkansas, doctors and midwives urge couples to abstain from sex for a minimum of six weeks after an uncomplicated vaginal delivery. Following that protocol sometimes proved difficult, especially for young couples having their first baby. Husbands temporarily relinquished their right to access, thus sacrificing the fulfilment of their own sexual desires. Wives sometimes sacrificed their physical comfort or healing in order to re-establish sexual access before they were fully physically ready to do so.

Haley gave birth at home and recovered relatively quickly, aside from lingering pelvic pain. Two weeks after giving birth, when post-natal bleeding had ebbed, she and Kyle had intercourse, although Haley described it as ‘a mistake’ and ‘not very comfortable’. Immediately afterward, her bleeding began again, and continued for several more weeks. Although she had been warned not to have sex so soon after giving birth, and she did not
especially desire or enjoy the intercourse, she determined the risk and discomfort were worthwhile. Amanda had a more complicated delivery, and in her post-partum period she could not have physically engaged in sexual intercourse. She gave birth in the hospital after an arduous labour, and ended up with a tear that required stitching. Eight weeks later, Amanda described how sex felt to her:

‘Well for us it’s gotten, I guess for me technically it feels like it’s gotten worse, cuz I just had [the baby] so everything’s still sore and painful. … It turns out really at this point, it feels utilitarian, cuz I don’t really wanna have sex a lot, really I just do it cuz Kevin wants to.’

Although Amanda had a comfortable awareness of her own sexual desire, and what she found sexually pleasurable, pain and extended healing time shifted the parameters of her sex life. Vaginal intercourse became impossible, and then a physically uncomfortable, ‘utilitarian’ task meant to meet the needs of her husband.

During their post-partum recovery periods, Amanda and Haley, as well as several other mothers I knew, discussed the importance of finding other ways to ‘take care of’ their husbands’ sexual needs, most often through manual stimulation. Martha, on the other hand, said she and her husband went without any kind of sex for that whole period, and that she was happy to do so. Women who had been married longer, such as Molly, said they ‘relaxed’ after decades of intercourse with their husbands, and found simple ‘fixes’ such as mutual masturbation to maintain intimacy when vaginal intercourse was impossible.

Referring back to Middleton’s model of human sexuality, it is clear that biology, and the more philosophically conducive approach of embodiment, constitutes a highly complex facet of everyday sex for conservative evangelicals in Arkansas. Sex is fundamentally reproductive, and therefore parallels in one sense the biological imperative invoked in early modelling of human sexuality. Sex is embodied in that it is ‘fleshy’ and sensorial, encompassing physical experiences of feeling and being felt, arousal, and emotion. For conservative evangelicals, sex is also an act of piety, or a matrix of pious actions constructing an ethical identity. As is the case with previously discussed Christian identities, pious action is directed by the embodied Holy Spirit, incorporating yet another layer of meaning to the body’s relationship to sex. The
concept of ‘holy sex’ is not merely outlined by proscription, but left to the discernment of the couple based, in part, on what they find arousing and pleasurable. Mahmood notes that ‘analysis of the particular form that a body takes [in doing an act] might transform our conceptual understanding of the act itself’ (2012: 228). Similarly, Asad’s approach to bodily practice in religious contexts is important to Christian sex in two ways. First, it seeks to understand the body beyond a phenomenological view, in which the body is a ‘substrate’ upon which meaning can be written (Asad 1993; Mahmood 2012: 226). Second, Asad treats the body as a ‘developmental means’ through which a person experiences and acts upon the world, meaning not only that Christianity dictates the sensory experience of sex, but that a Christian’s body dictates how they carry out the act of sex. Folding into this view Alleganti’s assertion that ‘two bodies create intersubjectivity’ (2011: 27), supports the idea that women’s sexual preferences and physical limitations also play a significant role in influencing how the everyday moral action of sex is performed, and how the identity of Christian lover (for her and her husband) is forged.

4.5 Gendering sexual experience

Thus far this chapter has discussed women’s embodied and narrated sexual experiences from an epistemological point of view, examining extant Bible-based and selectively medicalised knowledge, as well as how knowledge is generated from moments of becoming a lover and sexual piety. The final section continues in that vein, with an exploration of discourse around gendered embodiment of sexuality, which forms part of the larger Christian ontological architecture of gender. The chapter has already suggested some of the physical points of difference in men and women’s experiences of sex, mainly that birthing bodies cycle through periods of pain and healing that prohibit intercourse. At this point the chapter looks at the connection between everyday sex and notions of ‘wiring’ experienced by women beyond the ‘newlywed’ stage of marriage, as an example of ongoing intersubjectivity.
4.5.1 Disparate desires

Prevailing conservative evangelical truth regarding gender difference asserts that men are ‘wired’ by God to have a higher level of sexual desire than women. As Chapter 2 showed, God designed them to be more aggressive, more easily stimulated by the visually erotic, and the natural initiators of sexual intercourse. For men, sex is viewed as a need on a par with food – whereas women are stereotypically more likely to favour sleep, or a romantic dinner, to sex with their husbands, common wisdom dictates that men would always prefer sex if given the choice. Women sometimes described to me the ‘grumpy’ mood their husbands would display after going several days without intercourse. Christian marriage guides, church-based classes, and para-church marriage conferences virtually all included an appeal to wives to not let housework, childcare, fatigue, worry, or discontentment stand in the way of accepting their husbands’ sexual advances. Many women found a strong point of commonality by joking with each other about the disparate sexual desire in their marriage. As Jen once quipped, ‘I tell my husband he can have sex, or he can have a gourmet meal cooked for him, and most nights he chooses the gourmet meal’. For others, whose sex lives fell outside of this narrative, the disparity could be a point of confusion, and even alienation.

One case in point is that of Molly and her husband Art. Molly sometimes described herself as doing ‘unschooling’ rather than homeschooling. Her seven kids’ education was mainly self-directed, with independent reading at the core, especially for the older children, which meant she was more comfortable than most having visits during school time. My visits with her often included her two older daughters, while the younger children studied in their rooms (or, because a guest was over, felt emboldened to request time watching YouTube Minecraft videos). If Molly and I found the conversation turning toward the topic of sexuality, she would urge any kids in the living room to ‘leave now, unless you want to be scarred for life’. For much of their marriage, Art suffered from health issues that impeded his sleep and lowered his sex drive. For Molly, this meant having less sex than she felt she needed, putting her in the position stereotypically occupied by men in the dominant narrative. She
explained that the inverse disparity in their sex drives affected her relationship with Art, but also her feeling of belonging in her church and the homeschooling community:

‘It’s one of the things I’ve struggled [within the church] because my husband has always had a very, very, very, low sex drive. And I’m like a nympho. So, I’ve only been able to handle being turned down so many times before it was, like, devastating – “What’s wrong with me, what am I doing wrong?” Because, you know, classically, men are all this way.’

Molly belonged to the summer ladies’ Bible study at Pathway Fellowship, an intimate space where the women of the church, and any visitors, were encouraged to strengthen their interpersonal bonds through prayer and sharing, or ‘being real’. Molly was unsure of how much to open up about this aspect of her personal life. Instead, she put forward a ‘tester’ problem: the toilet seat in the family bathroom had been broken for some time, and her husband had not fixed it. In response, one of her friends suggested she not reprimand her husband, but ‘pray about the toilet seat’. At the time, I had watched Molly laugh and nod along with her friends. Later, however, she told me she was quite disappointed with this advice, not precisely because she disagreed with it, but because she saw it as evidence her experiment with being real had failed. The reaction of her sisters made her feel she could not talk about ‘deeper’, more personal issues, including her need for more sex in her marriage:

‘I was like, I have been praying for God to take away my sex drive, my desire for children … I was so frustrated when we left [the Bible study] because I was like, I have been praying for years that God make me somebody else. And this is just who I am.

Alice: You want sex and a functioning toilet seat.

‘Yeah. Actually, I don’t care about the toilet seat anymore, cuz I’m getting sex!’

Thankfully, not long after our Bible study at Pathway Fellowship, Art had seen a specialist and began new medication that helped him sleep, eased his fatigue, and rejuvenated his sex drive.
4.5.2 Pornography

Much like Molly, Didi, another Pathway Fellowship member, described having a higher sex drive than was normatively attributed to women, and never identified with the narrative of wives rebuffing their husbands. For Didi, the frequency of sexual intercourse was not an issue, because her husband was attentive and concerned with her pleasure. Like all of the women I spoke to about sexuality, Didi and her husband decided what forms of sexual practice, including sex acts, were appropriate for them as a Christian couple. They followed the Bible-based wisdom that anything consensual between married partners will be sanctioned by God, within limits. Primarily, nothing should distract from the marriage partnership or ‘do the work of’ either of the partners. For example, sex toys were not necessarily considered immoral, and a few women said they had visited a sex shop – or other purveyor of sexual objects, e.g. a drug store which supplies Durex products – but they were to be approached with caution. A small vibrating toy, or specialised lubricant (women discussed with me the benefits of lube, different kinds of lube they had experimented with, and which were favourites), were seen as a way to ‘enhance’ sexual pleasure in an innocuous way. The risk, I was warned, was that a toy might somehow ‘replace’ a partner in a way that disrupted the holiness of the marriage bed.

The most dangerous sexual tool, according to married and unmarried interlocutors alike, was pornography. Although some married couples said they’d heard of other Christians who watched pornography together as part of their sex lives, it was not something they would ever consider. One preacher described to me mutual viewing of pornography as akin to inviting another person to have sex in the marriage bed. Consuming pornography as a couple was also considered for the exclusive pleasure of the man, reflecting a sinful attitude of sexual selfishness, and liable to lead to consuming pornography alone. As a practice

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36 The definition of pornography in this context could mean pornographic videos, images, and erotic or ‘romance’ novels. Also included were advertising and television involving women in underwear or bathing suits, but that form of pornography was considered unfortunately ubiquitous, but not part of the bracket of addictive consumable pornography.

37 Several conservative evangelical blogs touch on the topic of women viewing pornography, and a few interlocutors reported doing so as young women, but it was overwhelmingly considered an issue for men.
undertaken alone, consuming pornography was viewed as an especially dangerous sin, which could lead to addiction and destroy marriages and lives. In a sense, pornography emblematicised everything the world offered about sexuality – worldly sex was pornographic sex, and through the influence of pornography, the world could encroach on the holiness of Christian sex.

Didi’s negotiations with her husband about their sex life were influenced by just this kind of encroachment. From the beginning of their marriage, Didi endeavoured, as a ‘brand new Christian’ (the first in her family to be born again), to understand the Biblical ideal for her role as wife and mother, but she did not initially apply the same sort of ethical principles to her sex life. The first time Didi and I got together for a recorded interview, I went for a dinner visit to her cattle farm. Because her husband worked nights, we were able to talk long after the children had gone to bed, curled up in overstuffed armchairs in her dimly lit living room. Didi and I spoke often about fertility and sexuality, but because she lived rurally and had two small children with special needs, we were rarely able to visit in spaces private enough to talk about sex openly, and at length. Instead, the easiest form of communication for her was Facebook messenger, which she used on her phone. When I asked her to tell me how she and her husband determined what was acceptable or unacceptable for them in their sexual life, she spent the day thinking over the question, and then responded that night from her phone, curled up in the same chair from the night before, while her children were asleep. She wrote:

‘[W]ell, what I feel “should” be acceptable and what has actually become comfortable and acceptable to me are different. I have come to this decision first through the Word of God, and secondly, through pain. What I mean by that, is that at the very first, our sex lives were tainted by previous sexual relationships, a lack of sexual education from our parents, and unfortunately, the viewing of pornography. So when we were married (though we never had a sexual relationship with each other prior to marriage, we had with other people), sex was just sex. It was about pleasure, exploring, and of course some bonding and intimacy. We mostly did and tried anything we felt comfortable doing (oral, different positions, unique places, oils, etc.). … [W]e had a good sex life and felt comfortable with the things we did, and didn’t do the things we weren’t comfortable with.'
I[t] was not until years later that my husband would open up about a severe sexual addiction to pornography and some physical affairs he had that our sex life took a turn. I have a strong libido, maybe too strong, so cutting off sex, even during my pain was not an option for me. I still need touch and physical affection too much. I did, however, feel uncomfortable doing things that I know he had seen and wanted to re-create from pornography. Especially oral. When he would backslide into a pornography addiction, he would either not want to have sex with me or want to have strange sex, like things we didn’t normally do, especially oral sex. I would then later find pornography on his computer that had these exact things, and I felt used. So I became where I was no longer able to offer oral sex. I would associate it with the times he’d watch porn and then want to recreate it with me, and those were times where I would feel used and not loved during sex.’

Here the polluting spectre of pornography was enough to require a renegotiation of things Didi would otherwise have felt comfortable engaging in with her husband. The acts themselves, when considered in isolation, were not sinful to either of them. But the sin involved in viewing pornography made their practice sinful insofar as they inhibited one of the primary purposes of sex – to strengthen marriage through bonding. Referring again to the passage from Corinthians instructing couples to ‘defraud ye not one the other’ (Cor. 7: 5), Didi knew she would not be within her rights to withhold sex from her husband because of his sin (although, in her case, she did not consider the option), but she could dictate what the sex they had looked like.

Didi’s example is straightforwardly linked to pornography as a dangerous force, but other interlocutors made efforts to kept worldly sexual influences at bay in their marriages as well. Some described turning down requests from their husbands to dress up in lingerie, do a sexy dance, perform a striptease, or engage in certain sexual positions (particularly with the man entering from behind). None of the women who described these personal prohibitions to me cited specific Biblical or spiritual objections to the acts, nor did they express a negative opinion of women who were comfortable with them. For them, the requests for these acts reflected expectations and motivations, on the part of their husbands, that did not reflect a Biblical picture of sexuality. They felt that their husbands desired these things not because
they thought the acts would bring mutual enjoyment, or enhance the holy bond that sex facilitates, but because they had learned of them from a worldly source. Wives used that rationale to refuse such requests, without worrying that they would be unduly negating their husbands’ sexual needs.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the methodological significance of gendered space to ethnographic research on sexuality, as women-only spaces facilitate autobiography and ‘first sexual experience stories’ (Plummer). I have argued that the Christian lover is a distinct identity that a married woman becomes through an intersubjective ethical process she shares with her spouse. The chapter has further shown how the process of discernment is made more nuanced as embodiment comes to more prominently entail ‘fleshy’ experience as a means of experiencing and acting on the world as a Christian subject. Rather than only discerning everyday moral action through the embodiment of the Holy Spirit, the Christian lover must also bring to the fore phenomenological considerations of sexual pleasure and pain to an extent not previously experienced.

The chapter contributes to the anthropology of sexuality by offering a contextual analysis of Middleton’s holistic model of human sexuality. Within that analysis, presenting sexual embodiment as holy intersubjective offers a theoretical approach to religion and sexuality in which body as inscribed upon, imbued, and influential. Sexual intercourse is also presented as a subject of ethical investigation beyond existing discussions of sexual morality, positing simple acts and decisions around lovemaking as examples of pious action that brings women into accord with ideological womanhood. From a methodological standpoint this chapter’s major contribution is its approach to women’s intimacy – both in the sense of private sharing of autobiography and sexual narratives, and the quotidian intimacy of sexual intercourse – as worthy potential subjects for ethnographic research.

The themes of embodiment, epistemology, and authority will continue to be relevant in the next chapter’s exploration of the identity of Christian mother. In that chapter, we return
to the discursive image of the relational Christian woman, boundary work and ontological architecture in the exploration of how a Christian mother is defined, and the gatekeeping she provides for her family. Similar to this chapter’s discussion of what sexual acts and materials constitute Christian sexuality, Chapter 5 will look at the conservative evangelical delineations around reproductive health. Lastly, authoritative knowledge or expertise, as well as embodied knowledge, take on another kind of significance as they are applied to the divinely orchestrated processes of conception and giving birth.
CHAPTER 5: The Mother

5.1 Introduction: Birthing Christians

This chapter discusses the entrée into motherhood, a Christian feminine identity paradigmatic with Christian pro-natalism in Arkansas. Overall, the chapter asks how a woman becomes a true Christian mother, by examining the landscape of reproduction and family-building for conservative evangelicals. Beginning with various ways motherhood may be understood, the chapter discusses academic and conservative evangelical conceptualisations of motherhood and women’s reproduction.

The remainder of the chapter deals first with local strategies of family building, followed by an examination of birthing practices. To further the discussion of Christian pro-natalism begun in Chapter 1, I explore the pragmatism and nuance in Christian pro-natalism, in contrast to its typical characterisation as uniformly ideological and stringent. With this context in place the chapter establishes other aspects of the ontological architecture around becoming-motherhood by discussing fertility, contraceptive choices, vasectomy reversal, adoption, and repudiation of reproductive technologies. Fertility is managed by pro-natalist Christians with the paramount goal of building large, godly families, with minimal interference from the secular world. Therefore, fertility and reproduction are situated within a larger framework of health choices aimed at supplanting mainstream biomedical interventions with alternatives underwritten by locally identified Christian sources, managed by mothers who act as gatekeepers for their family’s everyday healthcare.

Pregnancy and birthing care choices are supported by a net of local feminine wisdom, which the chapter explores with a discussion of homebirth and Christian midwifery. After touching on the historical transformation of homebirth in the American South, I outline the current status of midwives, and Christian midwives in particular, in the Ozark region. The chapter demonstrates that mothers and birth practitioners aim to facilitate ‘ideal’ births regardless of the settings or epistemologies within which they take place. Toward that end, the chapter discusses differing conceptualisations of ‘authority’, ‘authoritative knowledge’,

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and ‘expertise’. It employs Brigitte Jordan’s concept of authoritative knowledge (1993[1978], 1997), which for decades has been instrumental in understanding the relationship between mothers and birth practitioners in varying ethnographic contexts. Lastly, in a theoretical look at embodied intersubjectivity within conservative evangelical birth, the chapter examines how women use the resources at their disposal to exert influence over their moment of birthing through the conscious act of submission. Thus far, this thesis has discussed the relationship between Christian feminine identities and the body, a theme this chapter continues by framing the female body in a new way as it is temporarily transformed into a birthing body, under the control of God. Such an approach takes into consideration the multi-dimensionality of embodiment in Christian birthing, as God’s presence is made uniquely tangible.

5.2 Perspectives on birth and motherhood

Motherhood is of course a wide subject, intersecting with innumerable aspects of Christian living, and potentially covering a long span of a woman’s life. Anthropological literature on motherhood, including reproduction, is also more wide-ranging than the scope of this chapter. With that in mind, the following sections introduce a few key subjects in the discussion of motherhood in anthropology that are relevant to how the true Christian mother is characterised, and what examinations of conservative evangelical approaches to birth can contribute to extant knowledge. The first of these sections outlines social science research on tensions between different kinds of authoritative knowledge when it comes to birthing, including how homebirth in America has supported non-medicalised forms of knowledge, and gives a brief historical context for midwifery in the American South. The second section sets up notions of motherhood, including its relationship to identity, when a woman is recognised as a mother, and how conservative evangelical motherhood relates to conceptualisations of babies and children.
5.2.1 Birth and authoritative knowledge

In the study of pregnancy and birth, much attention has been given to the question of expertise, including which forms of knowledge are legitimate, and who holds such knowledge. Anthropological work on birth and authoritative knowledge was largely pioneered by Brigitte Jordan, who began by looking at how pregnant women in California in the 1970s employed embodied knowledge (Jordan 1977). Jordan then went on to conduct and inspire research on the cultural variability of knowledge around pregnancy and birth. Jordan defines authoritative knowledge as rules or modes of action that are privileged over others ‘either because they explain the state of the world better for the purposes at hand (“efficacy”) or because they are associated with a stronger power base (“structural superiority”), and usually both’ (Jordan and Davis-Floyd 1993[1978]:152). Authoritative knowledge and its many contextually specific iterations has since been part of the analytical foundation of research on birth across disciplines, inspiring Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (1995), Carolyn Sargent and Robbie Davis-Floyd (1997), and innumerable others.

Research on birth in the United States is most often situated within the broad history of competing forms of authoritative knowledge around birthing with the emergence of formalised medical education and hospital-based birth interventions. In the twentieth century in America, legitimacy for birthing expertise shifted from the domain of women, including mothers, female relatives, and midwives, and became situated in hospital settings with mostly white male doctors (Klassen 2001a; Cassidy 2007). Authoritative knowledge quickly became associated with modernity and technology, two things hospital birthing came to exemplify (Fraser 1998:42; Davis-Floyd 1992; Rapp 1987; Browner and Press 1996: 142). Birth in America has been described as a ritual metaphor, conveying the country’s deeply ingrained beliefs about the value of science (Davis-Floyd 2004: 45). Davis-Floyd argues that Cartesian views of the body-as-machine have led to a ‘technocratic model’ of birthing in which women’s bodies require a kind of crisis maintenance. He writes:

‘The demise of the midwife and the rise of the male-attended, mechanically manipulated birth followed close on the heels of the wide cultural acceptance of the metaphor of the body-as-machine in the West and the accompanying acceptance of the
metaphor of the female body as a defective machine—a metaphor that eventually formed the philosophical foundation of modern obstetrics' (ibid. 51).

Over time, women in America began to question biomedical authority in favour of their own embodied knowledge – what Browner and Press refer to as ‘subjective knowledge derived from a woman’s perceptions of her body and its natural processes’ (1996: 142). Embodied knowledge, in pregnancy and birth, involves perceiving and interpreting ‘idiosyncratic phenomenological indicators’, a form of knowledge only the mother can hold (ibid.). This has led to an increase in women seeking alternatives to birthing in hospital settings, including utilising the care of midwives, and giving birth at home or in midwife-staffed clinics (Craven 2005; O’Donohoe et.al. 2014).

The shift away from midwifery, and the movement to reinvigorate it, has looked different across the United States. Gertrude Fraser describes the transformation of reproductive care in the South as ‘the destruction of the African American midwifery tradition and its replacement by medicalized, hospital-based births’ (1995: 42). Eventually this was followed by the countercultural pendulum swing that can be seen today, but whereas in the old tradition the majority of midwives and their clients were African American, in the new configuration practitioners and clientele are mostly white (ibid. 45). Of course, as Chapter 1 explained, the historical demography of the Ozarks was reshaped dramatically by the decades-long expulsion of African Americans from towns and counties, beginning in the late 19th century (Loewen 2009). As a result, midwifery in Ozark counties, including Benton, Madison, and Washington counties in Arkansas, traditionally was the domain of white ‘granny women’, whose role was similarly usurped in the mid-20th century by male medical doctors (Madison Co. Folklore Collection). Throughout the United States, efforts have emerged to re-establish Black midwives and doulas within communities, particularly in larger cities (Suarez 2020). In Northwest Arkansas, although demographics are changing, the majority white conservative evangelical population has been reflected in Christian midwifery care for many decades.

Later in the chapter, I argue that, as in so many other contexts, authoritative knowledge includes collaboration (as well as tension) between practitioners and women’s embodied
knowledge, however this view does not always take into account the authority of God as an active participant in births. This is similar to the context of Jill Fleuriet’s research in the American Southwest, where Mexican women sought prenatal care from Catholic sister-midwives at a Church-run birthing centre. Fleuriet contends that the sister-midwives’ clients ‘saw traditional mainstream biomedical care for pregnant women as rejecting the authority of the spiritual’ (Fleuriet 2009: 227). Like conservative evangelical women, wherever the Mexican clients received care, they said ultimately ‘their labors and birth outcomes were in the hands of God, como Dios quiere (what God wants) and solo Dios sabe (only God knows). God has the ultimate authoritative knowledge’ (ibid. 229). Making allowance for spirituality and divine authority is a foremost consideration for pregnant women in Arkansas, and it is part of a larger matrix of ‘counter-cultural’ considerations that motivate women in the West to opt for homebirth, often in tandem with support from medical professionals and technology.

As an example, Pamela Klassen’s work on home birthing mothers in North America is an excellent look at the motivations, politics, and practicalities of home birth as a counter-cultural social movement.

‘In the process of home birth ... [home-birthing women] participate in a culture of birth that challenges the control wielded over women’s reproductive lives by a biomedically focused obstetrical establishment. Without entirely relinquishing the techniques and knowledge base of biomedical obstetrics, they insist on birth as a natural process that can be infused with and understood through religious perspectives’ (2001b: 776, emphasis mine).

Klassen’s argument fits within a context in which control is seen to belong to a powerful/knowledgeable biomedical establishment against which home-birthing women push. Affirming birth as natural, religious women in Klassen’s research chose to utilise a faith-based perspective within the biomedical establishment to manage their birth experience. This chapter will examine how, by comparison, conservative evangelical women use biomedicine as a tool to support births already under the auspices of God.
Moreover, the chapter’s later discussion of conservative evangelical birthing preferences in Arkansas, it will be important to recall that families did not always have the luxury of basing decision-making on their own preferences. As studies of birth have shown, in many cases, women’s choices about care are less about ‘pregnancy and birth epistemologies than about practical decisions centring on individual and family needs’ (Rapp 1999, Fleuriet 2009: 213). Mothers in Arkansas juggle both, however ultimately the setting and care provided for birth are seen as immaterial compared to God’s presence and work.

5.2.2 True mothers and little sinners

In current anthropological and sociological literature, the subject of motherhood has been analysed in relation to identity, more so than the other Christian feminine identities this thesis unpacks. For Jewish pro-natalists in Israel and the United States reproduction is tied strongly to Jewish identity, wherein becoming a mother transforms the self but also projects meaning outside the self, in service of a collective project (Fader 2009; Ivry 2010). Black motherhood in the United States has been recognised as embodying its own inscribed meaning with significant implications for treatment in pregnancy and birth outcomes (Bridges 2011; Nash 2019). Work on motherhood in Western contexts also has referred to identity in relation to the self, sometimes conflating them as self-identity, and to the ‘identity of motherhood’ as a separate emergent discursive construct that must be reconciled with self-identity (Oakley 1979; McMahon 1995; Bailey 1999; Brubaker and Wright 2006; O’Donohoe 2014; Laney, et.al. 2015; Shea et.al. 2016). By contrast, women who become mothers in conservative evangelical Arkansas do not describe their experience as entailing a self-identity conflict, but rather a ‘natural’ becoming-process engendering continuity with the conceptualisation of true Christian womanhood. As a comparison to conservative evangelical motherhood a particularly illuminating example of identity conflict brought about by motherhood is found in Shea, Bryant, and Wendt’s (2016) sociological study young mothers in the United States. Across race and class demographics, women in their teens and early 20s describe motherhood coinciding with notions of shame and identity disruption, combatted with efforts to reconcile or reshape self-identity (Shea et.al. 2016: 842, see also Brubaker &
Wright 2006). This bears an interesting contrast to the positive social reception for Christian mothers in their teens and 20s in Arkansas, who are invariably married, and seen as blessed and successful. For conservative evangelicals, becoming a mother or father for the first time is received as a cohesive transformation, a coming-to-fruition of the latent identities of Christian woman or man.

This brings me to one of the most fundamental questions about motherhood: when does a woman become a mother? The question is, of course, relational in that a woman is not a mother without the recognition of a child. Recognition, a concept attributed to Mauss, ‘implies a pragmatic acceptance, conferring on the embryo, foetus, or infant at the least a provisional “personhood” and an extension of basic physical care’ (James 2000: 170; Mauss 1979[1934]: 111). As Lupton reminds us, ‘personhood … is both biological and social, both natural and cultural, phrased in different ways according to the specific context in which it is debated and understood’ (Lupton 2013:15). Personhood, and the recognition of personhood, is not only culturally variable but often nebulous, lying somewhere between ‘the diagnosis of the beginnings of new life as such’ and ‘a child’s conventional admittance into a public identity, for example at baptism, or a naming ceremony’ (James 2000: 177).

Therefore, when discussing when a woman becomes a mother, we must ask when life is recognised in conservative evangelical ontology. Lupton further argues that pregnancy, especially early pregnancy, can be a stressful liminal period in which a foetus is and is not an infant, and a woman is and is not a mother (Lupton 2013). Christians in Arkansas will attest that life begins at the moment of conception, most often citing either this passage from Jeremiah: ‘Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou comest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee’ (Jer. 1:5); or a line from Psalm 13938: ‘For thou has possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother’s womb’ (Ps. 139:13). In one sense, a woman’s transformation into a Christian mother is consonant with the recognition of human life, i.e. it is instantaneous and eternal. However, as Chapter 1 explained, Christian personhood is

38 In this case the NIV translation (‘For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb’) was also commonly referenced, with the image of being knit together used as shorthand for God’s loving creation of the person in utero.
effectively two-tiered, with salvation bringing a person into the ‘fullness’ of humanity through eternal life, the implications of which will be discussed shortly.

Quotidian Christian motherhood, and how mothers relate to their children, is a deeply complex topic. In the extensive library of social science research on mothers, one particularly interesting trend over the last decade has been a focus on ways in which ordinary mothering ‘draws on and is shaped by the cultural context in which it occurs, gives insights into questions about culture, change, personhood, and agency, and suggests avenues for further research’ (Barlow and Chapin 2011: 325; Seymour 2010). In religious contexts, one such avenue is the transmission of practices and values through everyday interaction between mother and child, something explored for example by Fader (2009) and Strhan (2019). What those interactions look like and signify are often predicated on notions of the basic nature of children, and how a mother is charged with relating to them.

As women become mothers, one ontological truth about children shapes the image of Christian motherhood and a mother’s cosmic responsibility. From the moment their babies were born, the mothers I knew acknowledged an existential paradox brought about by the incomplete status of a child’s personhood before salvation. Scholars of evangelicalism and the family have observed that Western institutional parenting advice (for example from church seminars or Christian parenting guides) emphasises the notion that children, contrary to the philosophy of the world, are not innocent ‘blank slates’ (Strhan 2019: 89-90). Some have pointed out that popular advice emphasises children’s obedience and parents’ absolute authority, while also often promoting ‘expressive and nurturant’ parenting styles based on attachment (Wilcox 2004; Bartkowski and Ellison 2009: 46; Strhan 2019: 86). One way to frame why this might be comes from Lupton, who describes the four dominant discourses framing notions of the infant body in Australian popular media: babies are regarded as precious, pure, vulnerable, and uncivilised (2014: 343). This is also an apt reflection of conservative evangelical understanding of babies and young children, which informs parenting styles. I found that conservative evangelical mothers in Arkansas regarded their

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39 See for example: Walks and McPherson 2011; Fran Flaherty’s Anthropology of Motherhood Project
small children as precious, and needing constant maternal care and protection, while at the same time, regarding that without salvation even babies are ‘slaves to sin’. To be a mother meant coping with the existential paradigm in which babies and children are both pure and lost, with all of the cosmological burdens that implies. They had to reconcile babyhood, the state of being that is most highly treasured, with the metaphor of the ‘walking corpse’.

One aspect of becoming a Christian mother, therefore, is learning to teach, or ‘train’ children to be obedient, such that they will be prepared to accept obedience to God. Women learned from popular advice that children’s unwelcome behaviour, from a very young age, should not be considered ‘naughty’ as much as ‘sinful’, insofar as they are unable to regulate their base, ‘of-the-flesh’ nature. During a Bible study on the subject of motherhood one Friday morning, Martha, heavily pregnant with her second baby, paraphrased something she heard from Christian author and speaker Todd Friel at a recent homeschool conference held in Northwest Arkansas: ‘Who cares if your child can hold a fork right if they’re gonna die and burn in Hell?’ Friel reasoned that a child might present excellent manners and seem ‘perfect’, but without salvation their good qualities would be meaningless. The idea that ‘good’ lost people were destined for damnation – as one preacher attested, ‘Don’t be fooled and think good little Susie or sweetest old lady Grandma won’t burn!’ – reinforced the Baptist doctrine of ‘salvation by grace alone’. With so much at stake, it is unsurprising that epistemologies of discipline were invaluable to conservative evangelical mothers and fathers. In Arkansas, books by Gary Ezzo and Robert Bucknam, including their On Becoming⁴⁰ series and Growing Kids God’s Way, were popular from their first publishing in the mid-90s. Books such as these shaped a Christian practice around discipline that emphasises authority, obedience, and corporal punishment. Young mothers like Martha, who grew up with this epistemology of discipline, were tasked with discerning how they would reproduce or modify it with their own children.

More broadly, parenthood was a core topic for teaching, preaching, and group study in Arkansas, and in such discussions, the question of ‘good’ parenthood invariably was linked

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⁴⁰The first edition of the first book in the series, On Becoming Babywise: Giving Your Infant the Gift of Nighttime Sleep, was published in 1990.
to salvation and Biblical living. As Chapter 2 demonstrated Christian parenthood is defined by selflessness and self-sacrifice, contrasted to the perpetually single person, who rejects the responsibility of having children in order to ‘do whatever they want’. Later in that same ladies’ Bible study the group discussed what mothers sacrifice for their children, including time, energy, and personal plans. Missa said she had sacrificed the dreams she had had for her daughter Faith to live a ‘normal’ life, due to her cerebral palsy. Wondering about personal health, I asked the ladies if childbirth itself, and the toll it takes on the body, is an example of a mother’s sacrifice. Helen was quick to answer in the negative, explaining:

‘The pain [of childbirth] doesn’t compare to what you receive on the other end. Christians don’t even see it as a sacrifice. Being a Christian, you just think the pain is what it is, because that’s the selflessness that comes with being a Christian.’

Whether or not other of the Christian mothers I knew would agree with Helen (some who had particularly painful or difficult births said birthing was a ‘sacrifice’ they were willing to make for their child), her larger point was about the nature of Christian personhood and how it shapes identities; as was the case with the identities of woman and wife, the key to success (being a good ___) was first and foremost to be a true Christian. Missa further explained, ‘If a mom loves the Lord with her whole heart, and worships from the heart’ rather than out of a sense of duty, she will be a model for her children. From this starting point, a mother is positioned to teach her children, the Gospel first and foremost, train her children, by first recognising their sin nature and need for salvation, and sacrifice for her children, ultimately submitting to God by ‘sacrificing’ her children to Him, i.e. giving them over to His will.

This context begins to form a picture of the ‘what’ and ‘when’ of the figure of the true Christian mother. The remainder of the chapter will fill in that identity and unpack some of its nuances by looking at the various stages of becoming a mother, starting with a closer look at pro-natalist formulations of family.
5.3 Pro-natalism and Christian family-building

Conservative evangelical parenthood is, of course, ideologically pro-natalist, which has led scholars to commonly rely on a portrayal of the ‘Quiverfull’ Christian woman as one who uniformly eschews birth control methods, giving birth to many children without any purposely implemented breaks (Denson 2013; Joyce 2006, 2009; McGowin 2016). In these sections, the chapter problematises the image of the ‘Quiverfull’ woman by illuminating the pragmatic, imperfect choices evangelical pro-natalist women and men make about reproduction.

5.3.1 Adoption

Chapter 1 showed that within conservative evangelical ontology, one’s biological family is valued, but born-again kinship, the most important form of kinship, is predicated on adoption. Therefore, it was quite common to hear the word ‘adoption’ mentioned in preaching and teaching, as an allusion to this passage from the New Testament:

‘For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God’ (Romans 8:14-16).

This passage was used as a reminder that no person is born a child of God, and Father God is essentially an adoptive parent. One of the practical implications of this Biblical truth is that biological reproduction is not superior to, or more valid than, family-building through adoption. Additionally, it may be inferred that children do not have to be born to Christians to become Christians, but a child brought into a Christian family has a far better chance to hear and believe the Gospel (Moore 2015). This bears an interesting contrast to other examples of faith-based pro-natalism, for example in Israel, which hinge on lineage (Ivry 2010). For this reason, Christian adoption has also come under scrutiny for its dominionist inclinations, as Chapter 1 touched on (Briggs 2003; Joyce 2009; Smolin 2012).

Adoption was a familiar fact of life in Northwest Arkansas, for families with and without biological children. Some of the young adults I knew from ACHC were adopted,
including the few young African American members of the community. Two couples, Lily and Bobby, and Missa and Brad, adopted infants at birth after learning they would not be able to conceive naturally. Some families, like Didi’s, adopted children after having biological children, in some cases because they experienced secondary infertility (infertility after at least one previous birth). Additionally, it was quite common for families who adopted to seek out children with disabilities or other special needs. Didi and her husband adopted two children at birth, in both cases knowing that the in-utero environment of their babies would cause them to be born with health issues. ACHC had a designated play group for children with disabilities, and their teachers would often create elaborate ‘Get Well Soon’ cards, signed by all the children and parents, whenever a child with disabilities had to spend time in hospital.
For many families, adoption represented a new opportunity to add to a family, as well as a very specialised form of missionary work. For those couples with reproductive issues that limited or prevented conception, it became the last option to bring a baby into the family, due to a collective aversion to assistive reproductive technologies, which this chapter will discuss in a later section.

5.3.2 Pro-natalist contraception

While it was widely acknowledged that families sometimes had legitimate, godly reasons for employing contraceptive methods, couples, and church leaders, were quieter about which methods of pregnancy prevention were acceptable, and when. It is important to recall the social sanctity of the nuclear family when discussing contraceptive methods in the context of Christian pro-natalism. In a community unified by the promotion of childbearing, adoption, and the Biblical view that children must be openly accepted as gifts from God, primacy was still given to the autonomy of the family, under a husband’s leadership, such that community members rarely speculated publicly on other people’s family planning. As the previous chapter elaborated, newlywed couples relied on communication and negotiation as they undertook an intersubjective process of becoming Christian lovers. Their intimate communication further necessitated mutual understanding of how to manage God’s
commandment to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ within their marriage bed. Before Haley and Kyle became spouses and lovers, they had to agree on the meaning of Biblical reproduction. Haley explained the path she and Kyle chose:

‘Well, it’s when we got engaged and that, we started covering every, you know, in-depth conversation, you know, our standards and our beliefs and just how we wanted to raise family. And we just we had that conversation a lot. And we came up with our own theory that we have kids as God wants us to, but take caution. We wanted to be smart about it and making sure we can both handle it. And we’re both prepared for, obviously, if we get pregnant and we don’t – we weren’t intending to, God will prepare us for that. And it obviously was intended for God for us to get pregnant again, if that’s the case. So we leave it up to Him to decide if we get pregnant when we know it’s in His will. But we also take precaution. I mean, we’re not just going to, you know, take no precaution and just say, ‘Y’know if we get pregnant, we get pregnant,’ especially because right after the baby, it can be dangerous to get pregnant again. So we wanted to be smart and not just get pregnant one after the other.’

The idea of simultaneously leaving conception to the will of God and deciding to ‘take caution’ may seem contradictory. However, Haley’s justification for her and Kyle’s reproductive plan was echoed by many of her peers, and intimates a comprehension of God’s allowance for discernment within conservative evangelical ontological architecture. Haley additionally deploys her understanding of reproductive health, by citing the potential risks of having multiple consecutive pregnancies without time in between for the body to recover. Certainly for some women, including Jennifer, Jane, Sylvia, and Didi, God-ordained reproduction was defined by total refrain from attempts at pregnancy spacing. On the other hand, women like Haley invoked personal responsibility, and God’s ultimate authority over the reproductive organs, to justify using some methods of family planning, such as condoms and coitus interruptus. Both paths relied on submission to God, and both were supported as legitimate options based on a married couple’s sovereign discernment.

Of the older couples I knew who said their families were complete (barring a miraculous divine intervention), many had continued to conceive until the onset of menopause. Others stopped because reproductive issues were having a serious impact on
their health (two friends, for example, required hysterectomies in their late 20s), or they had determined they were not physically well enough to bear more children. During a fellowship lunch at Pathway Fellowship one Sunday, my friend Marnie and her husband Elder Ed told me they had absolutely wanted as many children as God could give them. After their eighth child, however, Marnie experienced two miscarriages, which took a significant emotional toll on the family. When she eventually gave birth to her youngest daughter, the couple decided Ed would get a vasectomy because, as Ed put it, ‘We thought it was better to end with joy, rather than risk another miscarriage and ending with that sadness.’

Finances, including health insurance, also played a significant part in couples’ decision-making about when to get pregnant, although my interlocutors often stipulated that financial considerations are not meant to impede childbearing. Hospital and clinic costs weighed especially heavy on young parents who were in the early stages of full financial independence, and perhaps still adjusting to living on a husband’s income alone. While discussing when she and Steve would have their second baby, Martha mentioned with some reticence that they would have to weigh the cost of a pregnancy with their need for a new car in the near future. She added:

‘I mean, we’re never really going to have enough money to be, like, completely financially comfortable with having children, just because [the pregnancies and births] cost thousands of dollars over the years. And we just don’t make that much. But at least, in a communist country you wouldn’t even have a choice of hospital. But our hospital here has options for payment, so you don’t have to pay it off at once.’

Still others found balancing the pressures of a growing family so untenable that they took steps to keep their family size relatively small, only to regret their decision.

5.3.3 Vasectomy reversal

Many of my interlocutors in their 30s and 40s grew up in Baptist or other evangelical churches, but had not encountered the ‘full quiver’ mentality until adulthood. In a few cases, including Didi and her husband’s, couples said they did not feel the conviction from the Holy Spirit to relinquish control of their reproduction until after they had decided to stop having
babies entirely. In one of our first conversations in their home, Pastor Rex and Helen told me what led Rex to have a vasectomy procedure after their fourth pregnancy (their first having ended in miscarriage), and why they had both come to regret the decision. At the time, they said, Rex’s relatively new career path as a Baptist pastor meant salary and medical insurance coverage were not stable variables in their lives. With Helen at home caring for three small children, the cost of care through more pregnancies, and more children to bring up, was a daunting prospect for the young couple. Rex revealed, with ironic overtone, that it had been the elders of the church they attended at the time who pushed him to conclude that sterilisation was the most responsible course of action.

Didi had a similar story. During her second pregnancy, she was so overwhelmed by sickness and caring for a toddler that she and her husband decided on vasectomy. Within a couple of years, they had both had a shift in their faith and were convinced (or ‘convicted’) that their family size should be ‘decided by God alone’. Didi’s husband underwent a procedure to reverse the vasectomy, and later testing determined it had been a success. Sadly, for Didi it was around this time that she began to develop symptoms of polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), which in her case led to secondary infertility. Local Christian midwife Grace said her husband also decided on a vasectomy as a young father, and agreed to a reversal when, several years later, Grace appealed to him saying, ‘God is making me feel like I’m not done yet’. It took a few more years for Grace and her husband to conceive their youngest child, Clara, whose own story of motherhood will feature later in this chapter.

Rex, despite he and Helen’s regrets, did not eventually have his vasectomy reversed. By the time the couple realised they had been poorly advised, Rex’s doctor told him a successful reversal was unlikely. Instead, he presented a cautionary tale warning men that when it came to childbearing, God is to be trusted above all other authority, even the very potent authority of church leadership. Regretting vasectomy became an object of evangelisation for Rex and other families like his, and featured in a larger testimony about fertility as an arena of Christian life in which control should be given over to God.
5.4 Technologies of becoming-motherhood

I have mentioned previously that one defining aspect of Christian pro-natalism is, paradoxically, submission to God’s will for family size even when God determines a couple will have few, or no, biological children. On the other hand, a desire to be a mother is fundamental to the identity of the Christian woman. These sections look at how conservative evangelical women find the balance between these two truths through the ontological architecture of fertility promotion. In Arkansas, women were engaged with the cultivation of knowledge around fertility, especially in periods (either temporary or indefinite) of fertility struggles. Determining what action to take to promote their fertility involved critical assessment of knowledge and resources based on morality and notions of efficacy.

5.4.1 Playing God

In extant literature on kinship and reproduction, investigations of fertility politics include the various reproductive technologies people employ to aid conception (Strathern 1990; Shore 1992; Birenbaum-Carmeli 2008; Ivry 2010; Kavash 2011). Less work has been done on contexts in which women or couples reject some or all forms of reproductive technologies (see for example Lublin 1998; Clarke 2006; Czarnecki 2015; Ecklund et al. 2017). Many of the women I knew in Arkansas were highly interested in fertility, and motivated to increase their chances of conception through diet, cycle tracking, medical consultation, and prayer. That being said, Christian pro-natalism did not consider reproductive assistance godly if it usurped God’s authority. For example, forms of new reproductive technologies, including in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), were considered outside the scope of conservative evangelical reproduction. For pro-natalist Christians, therefore, positive reproductive intervention can be just as detrimental to the Christian ethic, if not more so, than preventative intervention. The first reason for rejecting new reproductive technologies falls in line with the conservative Christian rationale for opposition to abortion, certain kinds of oral contraception, and stem cell research. Conservative evangelicals denounce the use of ex vivo embryos created for the purposes of IVF because they understand a definition of life as
beginning at conception, i.e. the generation of an embryo, whether or not it occurs within a womb, and whether or not it will be allowed to grow into a fully formed baby (Lupton 2013).

Not all biomedical reproductive technologies involve ex vivo embryos, and therefore the permissibility of their use was less clear. Couples considering the solicitation of medical help to conceive were faced with questions about where to delineate boundaries between benign fertility support and de facto infringement on God’s sovereignty over the reproductive body. For example, when Lily and Bobby had questions about their inability to conceive, they consulted a reproductive specialist and submitted to non-invasive tests. Women who experienced reproductive issues such as PCOS, endometriosis, multiple miscarriages, and molar pregnancies, also sought out medical treatment without being concerned that they were infringing on God’s will. When it came to the option of medically assisted conception, however, couples, including Lily and Bobby, invariably recognised a marked difference. When Lily told me they had ruled out IVF because of its treatment of embryos, I asked if they had considered intra-uterine insemination instead. She replied, ‘I just feel, if it involves doctors and needles and tubes, that’s too much like playing God. It’s like using science to do what God does, so that’s not good.’

5.4.2 Fertility and alternative health

I have touched on the ethical limits conservative evangelicals put on reproductive biomedical intervention, but those limits do not imply that women are passive about their fertility when conception is desirable. In this section the local differentiation between types of authoritative knowledge, or expertise, is relevant, as women selectively choose to eschew worldly medical expertise and supplant it with ‘godly’ alternatives.

Additionally, conservative evangelical women’s strategies for promoting fertility fit into a larger matrix of alternative health strategies managed by Christian women on behalf of their families. Just as women learn to utilise non-medicalised forms of treatment for an array of ailments, they also develop their own knowledge around their reproductive bodies, while still acknowledging the ultimate sovereignty of God over the womb. When it comes to
medical knowledge, including reproductive knowledge, conservative evangelical women seek a thread of epistemological consistency: the Bible is the most trustworthy authority on all things, including health and wellness, therefore secular biomedicine is only trustworthy insofar as it is congruous with identifiably Christian knowledge about the body and care. Many, of the women I knew in Arkansas expressed frustration with their secular doctors, especially when it came to diagnosing and treating chronic health issues such as suspected endometriosis and autoimmune disorders. Arriving at diagnoses involved jumping through hoops set by medical insurers, and once a diagnosis had been reached prescription medications were expensive and accompanied by undesirable side effects. These were the most common reasons women said they chose to rely on holistic remedies, special diets, and topical treatments, such as those offered by ‘Biblically based’ companies mentioned in previous chapters, as well as magnesium treatments, probiotic supplements, raw garlic, apple cider vinegar, and alkaline diets. Additionally, women were more likely to believe in the efficacy of these products because their sisters-in-Christ used them, and they trusted the experiential knowledge of fellow Christian women.

I have mentioned that this ethnographic research would have unfolded very differently if I had been a man, a single woman, or in a relationship other than a hetero-passing marriage. If any of my friends in Arkansas wondered why my husband and I did not yet have children, they did not express that curiosity to me, which might be attributable to the fact that we were newly married. About five months into my fieldwork, I let people in Arkansas know that my husband and I were trying for our first child. I began including this fact in all of my prayer requests, which were an integral part of every Bible study, Sunday School, and some intimate fellowships. Pastor Rex and his wife Helen wrote ‘Alice and Keith’ on the prayer chalkboard next to their dining table, indicating that the family regularly prayed that we would conceive (and, I presume, that we both would come to know the Lord better). When I spoke with local Christian midwives to arrange meetings, I mentioned to them that I would be grateful for any advice they might have on how to aid conception and have a healthy pregnancy.
From that point, each time my husband left after one of his visits to Arkansas, my friends waited expectantly to hear if I had fallen pregnant. Any small ailment I complained of – a headache, the sniffles – was interpreted as a sign of early pregnancy. They were openly hopeful on my behalf and suddenly eager to share their own experiences of conception in a way they had not done before, sharing their wide knowledge on the subject of fertility, from their independent research and folk- and faith-based bits of advice. Through these conversations I came to realise the extent of the wealth of knowledge women held and cultivated amongst each other about the reproductive body, and the web of knowledge-sharing about reproduction that women maintained with one another. Occasionally, I encountered a woman who was flippant or uninterested in the science of conception because falling pregnant had always come easy to her – ‘My husband just has to look at me and I get pregnant’, one mother of five told me. However, the majority of my friends came to learn about human reproduction through reading, experiencing their own reproductive issues, hearing about reproductive issues from a friend, or some combination of these.

As was the case with reading and interpreting the Bible, women in Arkansas had the individual autonomy and responsibility to discern what was best for their physical health, which for years or decades was strongly linked to their reproductive health. Naturally, the most common fertility-related advice I heard was to ‘Relax, and remember everything in God’s timing’. Prayers of intention on my behalf asked God to ‘Bless Alice with children, Lord’, but also to ‘Let her remember that You open and close the womb, and everything happens according to Your will’. After months of hearing this same prayer from friends, men and women alike, I asked Cheryl, Pastor Brent’s wife, whether God also opened and closed the male reproductive organs. Cheryl paused for a moment, but did not look in the least taken aback by my question. ‘Yes, I suppose, absolutely, yes’, she answered. ‘Because sometimes it’ll be the man who has an issue [with fertility], for sure. It’s just that, in the Bible, it was probably more clear to say “womb” than, I don’t even – testicles? I’m not sure that has the same poetry to it’. However it was expressed, God’s sovereignty over human fertility maintained a literal, physical quality, which took on more significance as mothers (and would-be mothers) incorporated anatomical reproductive knowledge.
Didi taught me the method of sympto-thermal tracking, using her copy of Toni Westchler’s *Taking Charge of Your Fertility* (1995), sparing no detail on the science of progesterone surges and luteal phases. Westchler’s guide, along with Ina May Gaskin’s work on birth and breastfeeding (2008, 2009), were favoured resources for mothers in Arkansas. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, young newlywed women did not necessarily track their menstrual cycles until they were married or, like Didi, they had had their first baby. Didi took an especially thorough approach to researching the science of female reproduction but most mothers provided predominantly anecdotal or folk fertility advise. Many of my friends who were mothers had little to say about the ethics of pre-natal self-care because their day-to-day lifestyles already precluded most of the prohibited foods and activities that dominated popular medical discourse around pregnancy. Catherine, a mother of nine, had strong opinions on what would help a woman stay strong and avoid excessive sickness during pregnancy (e.g. plenty of beef), as well as what foods and other ingestible substances had an impact on fertility. Knowing that I was trying to conceive at the time, she firmly recommended I discontinue eating wheat and dairy immediately. Her rationale was that those foods had an inflammatory effect, which would restrict the fallopian tubes and impede or completely inhibit the ovum’s descent into the uterus.

Fertility was a subject undergirded by secular scientific knowledge from medical doctors and scientists. Importantly, and in line with a trend that can be seen throughout this thesis, conservative evangelical women discerned their own course of actions around conception according to internal ethical guidance, and a growing awareness of their reproductive bodies. They accepted advise from pastors and spiritual authority figures, while simultaneously scrutinising the reliability of medical advice, thereby curating knowledge that could be shared and critiqued within a local maternal network. In the last portion of this chapter, I continue to explore the theme of autonomous ethical scrutiny as it applies to childbirth, and considerations of authority and knowledge in birthing.

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41 The notable exception was coffee and sweet tea consumption, which women reduced or abstained from in their diets during pregnancy with some chagrin.
5.5 Christian birthing

The same mistrust of medicine, and desire for ontologically consistent authoritative knowledge that drives bespoke fertility research, motivates couples to make careful choices about where, and under whose care, they choose to give birth. The sections that follow discuss God’s role in birth, and how it is facilitated in different spaces, and through different actors. Here the chapter shows the importance of ‘making space for God’ to orchestrate births with the Christian mother, which is best done where attendants have enough expertise to allow for that intersubjective process. Because a woman’s interaction with God is foregrounded, women aim to give birth under the most conducive circumstances, although this is not always possible. To ground this discussion, I begin with Christian midwives, and their relationship to the medicalised aspect of birth, as both state-sanctioned personnel and godly birth attendants.

5.5.1 Christian midwifery

Among my informants, home birth attended by a midwife was a popular choice, particularly for subsequent pregnancies when mothers said they gained more confidence in their ability to give birth. In the United States, the status of midwives, and the legislative tolerance of midwifery varies depending on state regulations. In Arkansas, there are two routes to licensed midwifery (Halverson 2008). One who is already licensed as a Registered Nurse may complete a master’s level degree programme to be licensed as a Certified Nurse Midwife (CNM). Alternatively, the Arkansas Department of Health and Human Services offers an apprenticeship programme to become an Arkansas Licensed Lay Midwife (LLM). Independent birthing centres (of which there are few in the state) and hospital-based low-intervention birthing suites employ only CNMs. Compared to other US States, even in the South, Arkansas law allows LLMs to operate as small businesses, relatively unencumbered and well connected to local hospitals.

In Arkansas, forms of non-institutional care for expecting and birthing mothers existed on a spectrum. Independent birth centres employed licensed nurse midwives, but sometimes midwives chose to structurally devalue their official status in the form of state
licensing (Jordan 1997) in order to give care that better facilitates divine control over the body. One notable example amongst the midwives I met in Arkansas was Peggy, who attended Haley’s birth. Peggy ran a multi-denominational Christian ministry in Madison County called Open Arms Pregnancy Center which, up until the summer of 2016, included her midwifery services at no charge to her clients. Haley was one of the last mothers whose birth she assisted. The Center’s main mission was to help new mothers in the area get baby equipment, nappies, Medicaid assistance, and to navigate local social services. Peggy began her career as a nurse, and quickly became a fully certified nurse midwife. As time went on, she found her certification connected her to state laws and regulations that took precedence over her and her clients’ authoritative knowledge, and authoritative submission. Eventually, she relinquished her nursing certification in order to become a direct-entry midwife, and then gave up her midwifery certification as well. By the time she attended Haley’s delivery, Peggy technically had no state-sanctioned right to call herself a midwife, which to her mind allowed her to be the most effective Christian midwife possible. By not being beholden to regulatory rules about when a mother must be taken to the hospital, she said she could ‘let mother and God work things out in their time.’

Other Christian midwives chose the strategy involving compliance with state guidelines, and using a business model to cultivate enough medical authority to liaise with local doctors who were sympathetic to Christian birthing. Just off a busy main road, tucked into a brown brick one-story office block in the middle of a parking lot, is the base of operations for Grace’s midwifery business, Warm Heart Midwifery. Her office was colourful, cosy and inviting, a stark contrast to the building’s bleak exterior. One half was occupied by a wooden desk and several chairs, where she talked with clients. Behind the chairs was a bookcase with an array of toys for little ones. The other half of the office included an exam table, a clinical feature that Grace managed to integrate into the homey décor. The client, Laura, came in with her 3-year-old boy, who immediately sat down in front of the shelf of toys, pulled out a fire engine, and quietly started driving it around the office. Shortly after Laura’s appointment with Grace began there was a knock at the door, and Clara, Grace’s
youngest daughter, entered with her baby in her arms. Rather than disrupting the appointment, their presence was welcomed.

Grace and Laura chatted with the ease of old friends. Laura was 32 weeks into her pregnancy, which was her sixth pregnancy and would be the fourth carried to term. Laura did not know the sex of the baby, but as she already had three boys, she said she hoped for a girl. As with nearly all of Grace’s clients, Laura was planning to give birth at home with Grace as her midwife. After the chat, Laura moved to the exam table, behind a standing room divider. Grace palpated and measured her belly, and used a handheld Doppler to listen to the baby’s heartbeat, a tool not normally used in prenatal care in the United States. ‘I love this part’, said Laura as the pulsing sound of the heartbeat came through, ‘So much nicer and safer than a sonogram’.

As she continued her examinations, Grace explained some of the professional difficulties she experienced in her effort to offer mothers certain alternatives to local biomedical procedure:

‘We’re licensed by the state of Arkansas, the State Health Department. And but they put so many regulations on us that it’s hard to even practice practically. I mean, like they have time limits for how long a woman they have to go from zero to four [centimetres dilated] in a certain number of hours and from four to ten in a certain number of hours. And that’s just one example.’

Each of the midwives I spoke to was keen to communicate to me that she would not hesitate to transport a mother to hospital if she determined it was necessary, although what constitutes medical necessity for transport is always subjective. Grace and other Christian midwives in the area who retained licensure trod a fine line between adhering to official guidelines and allowing for the flexibility they and their clients wanted.

5.5.2 Space for God in birth

As Sylvia once pointed out to me, there are ‘really significant similarities and overlaps between homeschooling and homebirth’ as desirable options for conservative evangelicals, because both allow for non-interference and maximised personal choice, thereby ‘allowing
the most space for God’. My Christian friends who were mothers praised one another for delivering at home, encouraged each other (and me) to try home birth if they had not already done so, and openly celebrated and advocated for home birth. However, mothers were also not shy about disclosing that they chose to deliver in hospital, or that they received interventions such as induction, epidural, or C-section. Taking this into consideration, what makes a birthing experience ‘ideal’ for a Christian mother? Where, from a Christian perspective, is the best place for her to give birth, and who is most suited to attend her? The answer, in some important respects, is that it does not matter.

I argue that ‘authoritative knowledge’ in the conservative evangelical birthing context refers a willingness on behalf of women and caregivers to defer to divine authoritative power. A more clarifying way to refer to authoritative knowledge in this context might be to separate the idea of ‘knowledge’ (or ‘expertise’) from ‘authority’. Women in Arkansas preferred to give birth at home with a Christian midwife because they trusted the midwife to have an appropriate level of medical knowledge and the spiritual knowledge to guide a mother to relinquish control, including to some degree her own idiosyncratic phenomenological indicators, over to God’s authority.

An ‘ideal’ Christian birth setting, therefore, is one that allows all parties to acknowledge God as the author of the process, and responsibly incorporates His sovereignty. That enmeshing of medical knowledge, risk management, and God’s will over the birth can take place in any setting, from a remote cabin to a hospital room. Birth practitioners in America have advocated for birthing environments in which authoritative knowledge is horizontally distributed between the midwife/doctor and the mother (Jordan & Davis-Floyd 1993[1978]; Gaskin 2011), but have not necessarily considered God as the ultimate arbiter of a hierarchical system. The mothers I knew chose the setting of their births based on a variety of factors, knowing that in a more secular biomedical setting they would have to contend with an ostensible authority whose expertise may clash with God’s authority, i.e. by taking a technocratic approach rather than one that envisages a woman’s body as divinely designed for birthing. For example, several women I knew were happy to give birth under the care of a
local obstetrician because he was a Christian homeschooling father whom they said understood the need for prayer and minimal intervention.

As I have mentioned, Klassen’s work (2001a) demonstrates that people choose home birth in America for myriad, ostensibly disparate reasons, but they usually share a countercultural motivation to experience birthing care outside the biomedical establishment. Conservative evangelicals in Arkansas might not see home birth as a counter-cultural struggle, insofar as it fits seamlessly into their ontological architecture, but it is as political as the other actions they take to position themselves as separate from the world. The fact that they are able to take that positioning for granted and physically enact it in the ostensibly oppositional world around them is also demonstrably political. Furthermore, for conservative evangelical mothers and midwives, birth is not a ‘process that can be infused with and understood through’ the spiritual (Klassen 2001b: 776), but rather a fundamentally divine process that can benefit from the inclusion of biomedical perspectives.

As in other areas of domestic life, choices about where to receive care in pregnancy and birthing were left to the discernment of individual couples, and mainly guided by women. Some, like Helen, only ever wished to give birth in a hospital, with the aid of medical interventions such as an epidural. Mostly, women had varying experiences across their births. One friend gave birth to her eldest in a cabin with only her husband to attend her. Another gave birth in hospitals or birth centres with her first nine children, and had a nurse midwife and a Mennonite midwife attend her home water birth with her tenth child.

The ubiquity of God’s authority allowed flexibility for mothers and Christian birth experts when home birth is not possible. Clara, Grace’s daughter, offered one example of this precise scenario. Clara had wanted her mother to attend her in the birth of her son, Killian. Unfortunately, she developed a blood clotting condition, anticoagulant antibodies, for which she was required to take blood thinners during pregnancy, and which meant her birth would come with added risk. Grace explained the compromise she was able to make with Clare’s doctor, who allowed Grace to maintain her professional authority as a midwife in Clare’s hospital room:
‘[Clare] had planned a home birth for her whole entire life because I’ve been a midwife her whole life. And that’s what she really wanted. And but, you know, we weren’t willing to risk her life because, because she was on the blood thinners that gave her a much higher risk of haemorrhaging after the birth. And so we worked really hard to try to find a really natural, friendly O.B. and to make her home— her hospital birth, very natural.’

Figure 14: Clara, assisted by her mother, Christian midwife Grace, as she labours on a birthing stool

Several of my friends who delivered babies in hospital described terrible experiences, which they attributed specifically to the intervention they received. Amanda’s labour was induced, and she had inordinately painful contractions as a result, ending up with quite significant tearing. Throughout her pregnancy Amanda and her husband Kevin would often complain that their obstetrician was dismissive and unknowledgeable. As I have mentioned, American healthcare, including prenatal and maternal care, is costly, and medical insurance can determine a great deal about how, and when, women experience birth. After giving birth to her first baby in hospital, Martha hoped to deliver her second in a popular local birthing centre, which had a reputation for its Christian and Christian-friendly nurse midwives. She
was disappointed when she found out that, due to a change in the family's medical insurance, the cost of the birthing centre compared to the hospital would be exorbitant, with a difference of several thousand dollars.

5.5.3 Embodying God’s authority

This section discusses birth as an embodied process, and how different, disparate conceptualisations of authoritative knowledge is relevant to creating Christian mothers. It has been well established in anthropology and across numerous other disciplines that birth stories form a narrative genre that envelops a veritable sea of meaning, revealing widely variable notions of power, taboo, morality, subjectivity, and cosmology (Dwinell 1992; Callister 2004; Murray 2012; MacLellan 2015). In the course of my fieldwork I heard countless birth stories, from mothers and practitioners, about births taking place at home, in hospitals, birthing centres, cars, and log cabins. Haley’s story of birthing her daughter, Emma, is in many ways the story of an ‘ideal’ Christian birth, in terms of its setting, and the support she received from her husband and Christian midwife. The story begins before the birth, during pre-natal care, which for Haley included Peggy’s professionally directed intentional prayer:

Haley: Peggy had us, when we first met with her, the first thing she had to do was write out what she called our vision for the baby, for the pregnancy, to write down exactly everything that we wanted to go, how we wanted it to go, how we wanted [the baby] to be head down and in the right position, how we wanted her heartbeat to be there and how we wanted the delivery to go well, no complications. And she told us to be very specific and write down each thing – that she’s not going to give any breathing troubles, that she’s going to come at the right time. And just something for us to focus on and pray about specifically because praying specifically is better than praying just in general. Let the pregnancy go well and it’s not an early delivery. Please let the baby be head down and please let my water to break naturally and for her to come out smoothly. And so she just had to pray every time we could, and any time I would like to – stop and pray specifically for everything you want and God will provide. And she firmly believes that if you pray hard enough, that God will allow us, or at least give you the comfort you need if something does go wrong.
Alice: And there was that moment you mentioned where Peggy couldn’t find the heartbeat, what did she say to reassure you?

Haley: She said that God was in control and that He’s taking care, or He’s taking care of me and the baby and he knows exactly what’s going to happen and that nothing is going to change that. Just relax and it’ll all work out the way it’s supposed to… She started pray and ask God to find the baby, to show us the heart and let her know that she’s OK. And then the heartbeat came and then we both just like, *relax and trust God is there and he loves you and He’s taking care of you*. And that was such a sigh of relief for me.

In Haley’s narrative she describes the experience of mentally and physically submitting to God’s authority, with the guidance of someone who possessed medical and spiritual expertise. In this context the concept of ‘structural superiority’ can be equated to both God’s design for a woman’s body, and the authority God holds over all persons and things in the process of birth. The mother must work in collaboration with God, with the help of her expert(s), in a collective effort to deliver the baby. Peggy prays, and encourages Haley to relax by reminding her of God’s very active presence, and that he designed Haley specifically to give birth. Meanwhile, Haley incorporates this assurance of plan and presence into her labour. This again stands in stark contrast to the technocratic model (Davis-Floyd 2004), as Peggy and Haley reject the notion of body-as-machine, and refer to Haley as an embodied being doing divinely diagrammed work.

Haley additionally touches on the physicality of God’s role in the birth of her daughter. Her and Peggy’s prayers addressed specific bodily aspects in literal terms – the water sac, breathing, the heart, the baby’s head and position in the pelvis. It is God who makes the heartbeat identifiable to Peggy’s instruments. This is an example of God’s presence enacting on the body (Csordas 1994, 1997, 2002), but articulated in what I would argue is a much different manner than previous examples involving the Holy Spirit’s indwelling influence over the mind or ‘heart’. It is a different way of understanding God’s role in, for example, the multi-dimensional embodied intersubjectivity of sexual intercourse in producing the Christian lover. From conception to birth, God is described as present in the body in more specifically physical ways than in other ethical processes. Whereas God is
described ordinarily as more nebulously omnipresent in the body, guiding a person’s thoughts and ‘sense’ of morality, in reproductive matters. He conducts work on particular organs and movements, such as the uterus, labour contractions, or foetal heartbeats. Moreover, while divine indwelling is usually associated with the person of the Holy Spirit (metaphorically visualised as a white dove), in descriptions and prayers around birthing, God was invoked more commonly as Lord or Father, bringing to mind the divine characteristics of parental care and protection.

5.6 Conclusion

The making of a Christian mother, in some ways, does not require much in the way of new ethical action on the part of a Christian wife and lover. On a cosmic level, the moment an embryo is created, before she is even aware of the change, the identity of mother is already bestowed on her. However, this chapter has shown that before and after the instantaneous moment of becoming, women come to understand Christian motherhood by discerning answers to profound questions. What is God-ordained family planning? What manner of person is a baby? What role should institutional medicine play in reproduction? How, exactly, does a Christian mother bring children into a family?

This chapter has given ethnographic insight into how these and other related questions were managed in Arkansas. In doing so, it has broken down the simplistic representation of evangelical Christian pro-natalists in America, demonstrating the many pragmatic considerations that complicate desires to have and promote large families. The chapter has additionally contributed to the multiple meanings of authoritative knowledge in different birthing contexts, taking into account religious frameworks that foreground spiritual authority over all other forms. Finally, it has furthered discussion on manifestations

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42 Notably this did not seem apply to sexual intercourse in the everyday visualisation of my married friends. Women would readily agree that God exerted His will on the uterus when it came to conception, but whenever I asked if God was present, for example, in the vagina during sex, my friends would laugh or look confused at how ‘weird’ the question was.
of intersubjectivity and embodiment in women’s quotidien processes of becoming, adding to the picture of how conservative evangelical women understand womanhood.

The last chapter in this thesis takes a rather different tone from the rest, while retaining the same major themes. Up to this point the thesis has by and large represented moments of becoming feminine identities as linear, smooth, and almost inevitable. Naturally, this is rarely if ever the case. Therefore, the next chapter unpacks the many ways Christian women struggle in their persistent ethical work, and how those struggles are woven into the tapestry of womanhood to create what I argue is yet another unique feminine identity.
Chapter 6: The Failure

6.1 Introduction: The value of failure

Hope sent me a text around 7 o’clock that night. Her husband was going to be out until 10:30pm at his second job, and she was home alone with her one-year-old daughter, Leah. She said she felt terrible. Hope’s chronic endometriosis had been nearly asymptomatic during her pregnancy, but since Leah’s birth it had come back with a vengeance. She was dizzy and in pain, and without her husband or nearby family to support her that night, she did not think she could cope with the baby. When I arrived at their bungalow, Hope was dressed in basketball shorts, a loose T-shirt, and flip-flops – her usual attire when she was home for the evening. Leah was freshly bathed and dressed in pristine pink floral pyjamas. The living room was dark apart from the black-and-white glow from an episode of Honeymooners playing on the television. After offering me a drink and a brownie, Hope sunk into the sofa, put her hands over her face, and took a few deep, rhythmic breaths. She apologised profusely for interrupting my night and asking me to come all that way (I had been doing nothing and was a short drive away), but she said she was not used to being alone, and her daughter just would not go to sleep. Leah laughed and clapped as Hope blankly gazed in her direction.

‘I feel like I’m failing’, she said, flatly. ‘I want lots more children, but how can I when I can’t cope now?’

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In her conservative evangelical community in Northwest Arkansas, Hope was far from alone in perceiving herself as ‘failing’ as a mother. Previous chapters have shown that the course of Christian living does not run smooth; to the contrary, to be a true Christian is to accept a life fraught with challenges and pitfalls. Recent literature in the anthropology of religion has begun to more critically examine the popular approach to religious adherence that privileges the ‘pursuit of ethical perfection’ (Kloos and Beekers 2018: 2). Instead, scholars of religion, particularly in the anthropology of Christianity and Islam, have recognised the intrinsic imperfection in piety, and challenged the latent presumption that Christians ‘lead
coherent, consistent, or stable religious lives’ (ibid.). In the edited volume *Straying from the Straight Path*, contributing authors discuss the value of directing attention to ‘self-perceived senses of failure’ in the study of lived religion (2018: 1). Editors Beekers and Kloos define ‘senses of failure’ as ‘experiences that religious adherents themselves understand in terms of shortcoming, inadequacy, or imperfection, and that may include feelings of struggle, the perception of sins, negligence of religious obligations, and lack of religious confidence, faith, or belief’ (ibid. 2). Work on perceptions of religious failure has illuminated the value of failure as an inroad into the study of religious life, as well as the value of failure to believers in their cultivation of piety. Studies by Tomlinson and Engelke (2006), Luhrmann (2012), Pelkmans (2013), and Cooper and Pratten (2015) discuss uncertainty and doubt as positive impetuses for cultivating faith-in-action.

Taking up that argument, this chapter is dedicated to the idea of failure, in its concrete and more ambivalent forms, in conservative evangelical Arkansas. Within this context, it discusses messaging and narratives about failure, and how they relate to sin, salvation, and gender. Referring back to women’s exclusive spaces and conceptualisations of ‘realness’, the chapter looks at self-perceptions of failure and how women talk with one another about their everyday failures as a means of building intimacy. Alongside common, productive modes of failure, women encounter failures that are much harder to confront, because they do not result from sin or personal shortcomings. Finally, the chapter turns to those failures which are unproductive, destructive, even exclusionary, at least in theory. This chapter’s focus on failure as a Christian feminine identity further illuminates the nature of sin and salvation in conservative evangelical Arkansas, as well as the deep connection between piety, and womanhood, and how women challenge and alter community boundaries through ordinary influence.

Throughout, the chapter asks what makes failure a Christian feminine identity, and how women ‘become’ failures. Unlike the other identities discussed in the thesis, ‘the failure’ represents an interstitial identity that women become concomitantly with other key feminine identities throughout their lives.
6.2 Productive failure

To understand Christian notions of failure, it is important to look at the myriad ways Christians ‘fail’ as a matter of course. In other words, I argue that certain modes of failure – otherwise framed as struggle, sin, or imperfection – are accepted, and indeed expected, as part of Christian sanctification. Robbins and Green affirm the positive potential of failure, arguing, ‘Whatever else human failure may be in Christianity – a disappointment, a curse, a source of frustration – it is also motivating, both in the nature of Christianity as a religion and of the ways many believers live their lives’ (2017: 21). Wrestling with sin (Bielo 2004), and combating Satan, are the primary modus operandi of born-again Christians, and the ways in which conservative evangelicals regularly and publicly address sin reveal the everyday productivity of failure. For failure to be productive in Christianity, it must be paired with repentance. As Chris often pointed out in Bible studies, ‘There is no such thing as salvation without repentance’.

This section therefore examines the public, ‘motivating’ conceptualisation of failure, big and small, that Christians regularly contended with in Arkansas. In church messages and Bible studies, speakers shared and addressed everyday struggles with an aim to foster accountability. Unsurprisingly, we see that failure was framed in gendered terms, meaning women and men frequently fail in unique ways. Furthermore, viewing failure through a gendered lens reveals the quotidian nature of piety in conservative evangelical Arkansas, insofar as domestic life is not separated from a privileged ‘sacred’ sphere (McKinnon et.al. 2013). Although everyday failures were usually relatively minor, narratives of life-changing failures, culminating in repentance and salvation, were also commonly shared in the form of testimony.

6.2.1 Auto-critique

Kloos and Beekers recognise that perceived failure does not occur in a social vacuum, rather it is ‘embedded in the complex social, political, and historically shaped interactions between individual believers and the normative forces … that claim authority to formulate
and disseminate the “proper” context, the boundaries of religious traditions, its codes of conduct, and its routes to salvation’ (2017: 11). The everyday ways Christians fail was the subject of formalised discourse, most prominently in church messages.

Chapters 1 and 2 described counternarratives as tools for producing ideological boundaries around the conservative evangelical community in Arkansas. Conservative evangelicals approach the world – i.e. non-Christians, the American education system, and feminists – with counter-cultural narratives that describe a polemical tension. Failure discourse reflects back counternarratives about the world in the form of auto-critique, based on imagined criticism from non-Christians. For example, a common admonition I heard was: ‘Don’t allow lost people to call you a hypocrite because you say you’re a Christian but you’re cussing, seeing bad movies, or buying alcohol’. This was a reminder that the ever-watchful world perceives Christians as strange and unfashionable, and there is nothing to be gained, for the Christian or the unbeliever, by trying to fit in with the world. In that vein, the other most common public failure is the failure to evangelise (Strhan 2015). Church members, especially those who commonly come into contact with non-Christians through employment or volunteer work, are counselled to, ‘Be brave enough to declare God’s truth. Don’t be wishy-washy!’

Failure to act publicly as a Christian through speech, dress, or consumption, are examples of blatant, visible sins that apply to all Christians regardless of age or gender. The thesis has discussed how the Holy Spirit convicts Christians, giving them awareness of right and wrong action based on peace or unease. This is similar to the Urapmin Christian “calm” (isi) “heart” (aget) filled with good thinking’ (Robbins and Green 2017: 25). Therefore, Robbins and Green argue, failure is productive in that it motivates Christians to seek that peace through pious action.

Furthermore, Kloos and Beekers note the distinction made in the anthropology of religion between ‘everyday’ spheres and pious ethical living, and ‘religion proper’ (Beekers and Kloos 2018: 9). The thesis has thus far demonstrated that, for conservative evangelicals the everydayness of gender-normative family life is at the core of what it means to be a true Christian, due to the value placed on it by God. Conservative evangelicals collectively grapple
with failures relevant to gender and family in everyday life because there is no division between these things and ‘religion proper’.

Everyday domestic failures were also built into perpetual auto-critiques within churches, extolling women and men to not fall into traps that would undermine their marriages and godly family lives. Women and men constantly were encouraged to mitigate the negative points of their ‘wiring’ in favour of Biblical ideals of womanhood and manhood. A pastor or preacher might advise:

‘Ladies, stop thinking your house has to be spotless before you invite anyone over.’

‘Men, spend time doing something romantic for your wife, like taking her on a dinner date.’

The purpose of this type of admonition was to acknowledge the gendered nature of sin in gender-specific ways, and to ‘convict’ listeners to do better, for example in the area of hospitality, or demonstrating affection. Moreover, pastors employed the lexicon of failure in such a way as to flatten church hierarchy, by sharing paradigmatically male ways to stumble, for example times they did not show their wives affection, or got angry and shouted at their children. Sharing everyday failures and struggles in public and private discussion spaces was productive in that it granted speakers authenticity and invited accountability.

6.2.2 The realness, revisited

For women, practical support and emotional encouragement formed around the discourse of failure was a significant aspect of everyday sociality. By the standards of Hope’s conservative evangelical family, community, and husband, she was nowhere near abject failure, a subjective concept that will be elaborated in a later section, even in her moment of struggle described above. The idea of failure, and more so the honest sharing of failure narratives, creating closeness, is reflected in Bielo’s (2009) ethnography of American evangelical group Bible studies. Chapters 2 and 4 demonstrated that Bible studies were one of several kinds of space where women foster intimacy and lend emotional support. Bielo notes: “Accountability”, “encouragement”, and “sharing” are all key signifiers in the Evangelical
lexicon of building relationships’ (79). Bielo further notes that, for participants in Bible studies, ‘prayer requests and praise reports were often extensive and the subject matter very personal. Among other matters, participants raised issues of emotional turmoil, spiritual struggle, troubles with romantic relationships, and difficulties with their children’ (88). Without the personal discourse of private struggle, spaces like Bible studies were said to lack ‘realness’. In effect, narratives of failure were necessary to give spaces authenticity.

Of course, not every study space generates the same kind of intimacy. As Chapter 5 intimated, mixed-gender Bible studies, which invariably were led by men, were intimate in different ways to women’s studies, in that participants were more likely to joke and poke fun at one another, but less likely to share personal or sensitive information that might make them vulnerable. Additionally, not every participant in any given Bible study felt free to share struggles equally. This was evident in Chapter 4, in the case of Molly feeling unable to share the issues in her sex life. However, for my interlocutors, much of the experiences women shared in order to cultivate intimacy involved the same recurring small, acceptable forms of failure.

Like Hope, women in Arkansas perpetually felt that their actions or inactions made them failures as women, wives, and mothers. They shared examples of ways in which they did not respect or appreciate their husbands enough; they did not always enjoy being pregnant or mothering; their homeschooling was disorganised because the house was a mess and life was chaotic; or they were sometimes vain or materialistic. One afternoon in the Pathway Fellowship ladies’ study, a mother who had just started homeschooling her four children threw her hands up and shouted, ‘I tell my kids, “Sorry, the house is going to be a disaster forever because we’re doing homeschool now!”’ These particular forms of failure, and the process of sharing them with other women, transformed failure into ethical continuity. The moments of being failures allowed them to form an authenticating interstitial identity that strengthened their other identities rather than weakening them.
6.2.3 Prodigal daughter

Examples of everyday failure in conservative evangelical Arkansas were relatively minor when compared to abject, boundary-breeching manifestations of sin, which evidenced a person’s need for salvation. In these cases, Christians employed testimony as a narrative form for relating how God transformed their failure into redemption through repentance. At the ACHC high school graduation ceremony, a young man in the 2016 graduating class stood up at a podium on stage, with his peers sitting in blue caps and gowns behind him. In front of hundreds of homeschooling parents and family members, the graduate spoke about his experience with pornography addiction. He told of how, over the previous two years, he had spent hours each day consuming pornography online, until one day he cried out for Jesus to help him, and was saved. At the end of his speech, the boy received a standing ovation, and was hailed by the master of ceremonies (a homeschool father) for his bravery for giving such a ‘real’ testimony. The importance of testimony, and the failure it invariably describes, cannot be overstated. Chapter 1 explained salvation as non-generational, meaning despite the fact that Arkansas is a multi-generational Baptist stronghold, individual adults are not members of God’s family until they experience the event of being born-again. Theologian Alan Jacobs has noted that testimony ‘is a classic speech genre, which (within its sphere) has a specifically defined form. The basic outline of that form has been succinctly described by John Newton: “I once was lost, but now am found; I was blind but now I see”’ (2008: 22). For young people in evangelical families, it was common to experience being born-again as a process of failure that motivates salvation, the story (i.e. testimony) of which then became an invaluable tool to evangelise to others.

One such young person, Rachel, was exceptionally adept at putting the narrative of her failure to good use. Rachel was the eldest of ten children, seven of whom were boys, and Elizabeth’s sister. As a teenager she started to rebel against her family’s faith, and by her early twenties, she had abandoned the conservative evangelical lifestyle altogether. On the afternoon when a group of us had gathered at Hopewell Baptist to decorate for Elizabeth and Chris’s wedding, Rachel and I sat in the church conference room, surrounded by boxes of
mason jars and burlap ribbon. We had some time alone, meticulously threading burgundy ribbons through wedding favour bookmarks featuring a picture of the bride and groom, giving us the perfect space for Rachel to tell me her testimony. As commonplace as testimonies were for born-again Christians in Arkansas, Rachel was more used to sharing her story than most. Rachel said she reached her low point when she left her family home in her late teens, and found herself unemployed, addicted to prescription pain medication, and sleeping with men indiscriminately. Although her parents did not allow her to come home at that time, they offered to send her to a national Christian rehabilitation programme, which she reluctantly accepted. Within a year Rachel said she had so much success with the programme that, in addition to getting saved and recovering from her addiction, she had taken a full-time staff position at the centre’s residential facility.

After her salvation, Rachel’s visits home to see her family in Northwest Arkansas were always met with excitement. Elizabeth, made her the maid of honour in her wedding to Chris, so Rachel attended every pre-wedding event she could. She and her mother, Jane, went on the same popular Christian diet programme, Trim Healthy Mama43, and together they lost a great deal of weight. Occasionally Rachel visited Pathway Fellowship, to publicly share her testimony as part of a Sunday service. She and Pastor Brent presented her story of salvation as proof of what God can do in the life of any person, no matter how lost, if they are willing to repent. The Northwest Arkansas homeschool community saw her as exemplary, and her past failures, rather than being a source of shame, were imperative to her success in embodying the conservative evangelical ethic. The testimonial narrative of those failures, and her willingness to perform that narrative – during a service, in a Bible study, or just to me – were as vital as the redemption itself.

Importantly, Rachel never attributed her transformation to her herself, but always to God, whom she often called ‘Abba Father’, and whom she said continued to guide and change

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43 Trim Healthy Mama was wildly popular during my fieldwork, so much so that a THM group was established with occasional meetings at Pathway Fellowship to explain the diet programme to interested women and share recipes and tips. The programme was founded by two daughters of Christian author Nancy Campbell, founder of the ministry ‘Above Rubies’ and staunch proponent of the ‘full quiver’ approach to reproduction.
her. Rachel centred much of her testimony around her physical body: when she was lost she was obese, and abusing her body chemically and sexually; as a saved woman imbued with Holy Spirit, she was wholly ‘purified’, and made physically fit by a ‘Biblical’ eating regime (Gerber 2011). Rachel’s story suggests an interesting form of corollary relationship between sin (or divine presence) and the body: that both sinfulness, and the path of redemption, emerge from the body, and are reflected by the body (ibid.; Hardin 2013). For Rachel, and conservative evangelicals, the body can be a tangible testimony to the power of Jesus, but that did not negate the warring nature of the Christian body. Everyday failures, even after a person is saved, highlight the dual nature of the Christian person as an immortal spiritual being encased in a decaying sinful form. The embodiment of salvation entails submission to God’s sovereignty over the human body. Rachel said giving over to God’s will over her body transformed her body in positive ways. For many other Christian women, however, God’s sovereignty over their bodies, specifically their reproductive bodies, brought concerns about what it means to fail as a woman.

6.3 Faithful Failure

Thus far, this chapter has discussed modes of Christian failure that are variable, productive, and necessary, but unambiguously driven by sin and combatted by repentance. This is in keeping with Kloos and Beekers’s presentation of perceived failure as tied to the struggles of piety, as well as the question of how Christians in different contexts understand the source and nature of sin in their lives (Meyer 1999; Robbins and Green 2017). This section asks how conservative evangelicals contend with a different kind of ‘failure’, one that is unstraightforward, and usually outside the resolution of repentance. I argue that, in a community faithfully committed to pro-natalism, reproductive challenges and tragedies can be perceived by women as forms of failure. The section therefore introduces Beekers and Kloos’s view of religious failure the idea of faithful failure – instances whereby the Christian person has not sinned, but circumstances have led to a breakdown in the picture of a Christian woman’s life.
6.3.1 Infertility

For pro-natalist women, infertility can be one of the most difficult burdens to bear. In addition to the devastating emotional impact infertility can have, conservative evangelical women in Arkansas contended with a barrage of pregnancy and birth announcements, gender reveals, baby showers, and first birthday parties. Women experiencing infertility told me of hiding in bathrooms at baby showers, crying and praying for strength to join the festivities. Some tried to temporarily avoid baby showers, but this was not always possible, as women in local churches were often the ones organising, catering, and hosting them. For a woman to opt out would mean withdrawing from her church family, and withholding her gifts of hospitality from the church body. Living with infertility required grappling with a facet of Christian ethical life over which they had no control, creating a paradoxical scenario in which appropriate pious praxis amounted to resigned inaction.

The women I knew had deeply ambivalent feelings about ‘failure’ when it came to their own infertility. They all said they knew they were not failures, and expressed certainty that, as Missa often put it, ‘God is in charge, and God can be trusted’. As this thesis has explored, the sovereignty of God to ‘open and close the womb’ (Gen. 29:31-30:22) was something Christian pro-natalists understood to be variable, and the ‘ideal’ of a large family was not a taken-for-granted outcome. Didi summarised the feelings of the conservative evangelical community when she told me: ‘When you say you accept however many God gives you, that doesn’t mean 10, 12, however many. It means exactly what He gives’. Women experiencing fertility issues said they usually kept negative emotions to themselves with this in mind, and for fear of ‘making others uncomfortable’. In private spaces, especially among friends who also experienced infertility, I found women were more apt to discuss the details of their experiences, share their disappointments, and express their emotions. I found this to be the case at Hopewell Baptist, where the ladies’ Bible study group included three women with fertility issues.
Lily, explained the emotional turmoil she went through during the years she and her husband, Bobby, tried to conceive. After discovering their issue was due to her polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), she said she was wracked with guilt. In addition to worrying she would never conceive, Lily fretted about her husband’s feelings of loss. Telling me of the moments in which she felt most like a failure, Lily did a faux-dramatic re-enactment of shouting at her husband, with arms thrown over her face: ‘Just leave me and find someone else who can give you babies!’ Bobby had assured her he did not marry her ‘for babies’, and eventually they adopted their daughter, Sophia, at birth. Lily and Bobby accepted that it was God’s will for them to be Sophia’s parents, which would not have happened if they had been able to conceive, but that did not stop Lily from hoping that they might have a biological child in the future.

Missa had cancer as a child, and her treatment drastically disrupted her reproductive development. By the time she was a teenager, she knew her ovaries did not function and she would likely never have a menstrual cycle. Unlike other women I knew who began wrestling with fertility issues like PCOS and endometriosis after they were married, Missa and her husband Brad knew she would be unable to conceive naturally going into marriage. Still, Missa prayed for a miracle: ‘No matter what is happening in my body, I know that if He wanted to, God could give me a baby, if it was His will’. Missa constantly grappled with trying to accept that God took care of her and knew what was best for her, while still wondering if there was something about her that made Him unwilling to allow her to have a biological child. This was a profound theme for all of my friends who struggled with fertility or reproductive issues. After all, nothing will prevent a couple from conceiving if God wills it, a fact women often brought up by pointing to the Biblical example of Sarah, Abraham’s wife, who in Genesis miraculously conceived their son, Isaac, at the age of 95 (Gen. 18:10-14, 21:1-6). In light of God’s work in Sarah’s life, women like Missa could not help but ask themselves, ‘What is wrong with me, that God thinks I should not have a biological child?’ Many of those women were mothers through adoption, or/and had given birth before developing secondary infertility, indicating that motherhood did not always ebb feelings of inadequacy.
Women who spent longer than about three months actively trying to conceive were policed with advice, the most common being, ‘Relax, it won’t happen until you quit stressing about it’. Women often brushed off comments such as these, and asserted, with a hand in the air, ‘I’m not worried! God’s in control. He’s got me’. The advice to ‘relax’ reflected the architecture of wiring, specifically that women are naturally prone to worry, and in turn susceptible to the sin of not trusting God. The suggestion that a woman must not worry did not imply that being in an un-relaxed state somehow impeded the biological process of conception. Rather, it was a means of reminding women that being a new wife and lover opens their bodies in new ways to God’s authority, and the opportunity to sin by not submitting to that authority. The ultimate supremacy of God’s will over the reproductive body also applied to incidents of pregnancy loss, including miscarriage, stillbirth, ectopic pregnancies, and molar pregnancies.

6.3.2 Loss

Rosanne Cecil’s (1996) edited volume *The Anthropology of Pregnancy Loss* was the first cross-cultural anthropological work dedicated to women’s experiences of miscarriage and stillbirth. She and the other contributors critiqued the presumption that it is ‘self-evident that pregnancy loss cannot have the social impact of either birth or death’ because ‘[i]t does not result in the creation of a new person who is to be incorporated into society, neither is it the loss of one who has been a recognised part of the existing social order’ (ibid. 1). Cecil points out that historical and ethnographic evidence show that a variety of factors determine how women and communities respond to pregnancy loss. The age of a foetus or child, ideas about spirits and blood, and practices around death and mourning all contribute to how actors manage the emotional and material aspects of miscarriage and other kinds of child death. However, Cecil argues, from an ethnographic perspective, that ‘[i]f a woman’s primary role is considered to be the bearing of children, then the loss of a pregnancy or the birth of a non-viable baby will be considered a failure’ (ibid. 2).
My fieldwork complicates this assessment. Much as in cases of infertility, in spite of the fact that bearing and nurturing children is predominant in Christian life to the point of being paradigmatic to feminine identity, conservative evangelicals do not perceive pregnancy loss as a matter of personal failure. The same concern about sin and worry that hovered over conception was usually irrelevant in the case of loss: although I did encounter some Christians who implied miscarriage could be the result of personal sin, or a failure to submit to God’s authority, most considered the implication unpalatable. Instead, conservative evangelicals concerned themselves with how to best recognise a miscarriage as the death of a socially incorporated person, by negotiating between the Christian ethic, and the practical hurdles of living in the world.

At church one Wednesday evening, I asked Julia how she was getting on with her morning sickness. She had announced her pregnancy with her second child to the ladies at the church just a few weeks prior, as soon as she had determined she was pregnant. In Chapter 5, I discussed the fact that a child is seen as having full personhood (and therefore the woman full motherhood) as soon as it is conceived. In light of this, women I knew very often announce their pregnancies immediately, rather than waiting until the start of the second trimester. To my shock, Julia shrugged and said ‘Oh, I lost the baby’. She was upset, but tried to wrap herself in pragmatism, reasoning that the pregnancy was still very early, and women miscarry at nine weeks quite often. That Friday, a few other ladies with toddlers and I planned to take Julia and her boy Hunter to Chrystal Bridges in Bentonville. As Lily and I finished loading up her SUV, she received a message from Julia saying she was bleeding heavily, and did not feel well enough to join us. Rather than going to Chrystal Bridges, we drove the short distance from Lily’s farmhouse to Julia’s apartment, armed with frozen pizzas and ice cream, to watch Hunter and the other littles while Julia rested. Twenty minutes after our arrival, she came out of the bathroom with the colour gone from her face.

‘The blood is like a faucet I can’t turn off,’ she said.

Calling an ambulance was out of the question, and Julia was adamant that she did not want to go to the emergency room. Like many families, Julia and her husband relied on his income while she was home full time, and Cody’s employee health insurance plan did not
spare them from very high out-of-pocket costs for medical care. Instead, we decided Lily would stay at Julia’s apartment with the littles, and I would drive Julia to her obstetrician’s office in Lily’s car. Julia put on black maternity jeans to help disguise the blood that soaked through her clothing. On the mercifully short drive to the doctor, Julia phoned her husband to let him know what was happening, and insisted that he not leave work to meet her – again fearing he would lose wages. Julia only rang her doctor as we pulled into the parking lot, wanting to be sure she would see her, and not force her to go to the emergency room at the hospital next door to the office suite. By the time we made it into the doctor’s waiting room, Cody was right behind us.

I had always known Cody to be a calm, easy-going man who spoke little at church and social gatherings. As Julia’s doctor led the three of us into an exam room, however, he was wide-eyed and seemed frantic with worry, until the doctor sent him to collect anti-haemorrhage medicine from the hospital’s pharmacy. I stayed with Julia until her mother-in-law arrived, at which point I made my way back to Lily to sit with the littles. Before long, we received an update from Cody that Julia had haemorrhaged again and lost consciousness, prompting her doctor to send her to the emergency room after all. Julia responded well to treatment in the hospital, and was able to come home early that evening.

Julia’s ordeal was one many women I knew had in common, although thankfully few of them had such life-threatening experiences. Just as pregnancy, birth, and large families were a part of life in evangelical Arkansas, so too were miscarriages (Layne 2000, 2013, 2016; Komaromy et.al. 2016). Many women spoke without hesitation or embarrassment of their ‘babies in heaven’ alongside their living children. In conversations about miscarried babies, the ‘age’ of the baby in utero often was not central to the narrative. For example, when Helen told me the story of losing her first child to miscarriage, the fact that the pregnancy had been four months along (past the point of statistically significant risk) was relevant to the distress she endured, but it did not make the baby more or less of a person. When I experienced my own miscarriage several months after leaving Arkansas, an older woman in the Hopewell Ladies’ Bible study group reached out to offer sympathy. To my surprise, she told me, ‘My first was a stillbirth, so I know how you feel. It’s just the same’. Helen and Rex told me they
mourned after their miscarriage, and named the child Thomas, despite the fact that they did not 'officially' know the baby's gender, as it was too soon to see on scans. Schepet-Hughes posits that mothers of new babies in Brazil delayed 'the process of anthropomorphisation' by waiting to name their children (1991:1145). In contrast, conservative evangelical families were often heavily invested in anthropomorphising children as early as possible. Determining gender, and naming, even in the case of very early miscarriage was common, and parents related that it allowed them to 'know' the babies they lost more fully.

Julia did not give her lost baby a name or try to discern the gender through prayer, but she was concerned about maintaining a memory of the baby. Because they lived in a large apartment development, where they rented their apartment, she was not free to bury the baby herself, as she said she would have done had they owned their own house with a back yard. Their situation being what it was, the best she could do at the time was take a photo of the amniotic sac before having to dispose of it in her home. At Hopewell Baptist, members offered the couple prayers and practical support such as childcare and grocery shopping while Julia recovered, but nobody questioned what would or should have been done with the baby's remains.

Julia’s ordeal, and each of the life struggles described above, involved no doubt or stumbling in terms of faith per se. Moreover, they are struggles that may befall many women across social contexts, and they affected most of the women I knew in Arkansas at some or multiple points in their lives. On the other hand, considering the American conservative evangelical ethical context, and the foundational importance of pro-natalism, I contend that the palpable expressions of perceived failure should not be understood as somehow outside the realm of the 'sacred'. The previous section showed that everyday domestic struggles – and, importantly, discourse about them – bring conservative evangelical women into accord with the ethical model of womanhood as they adopt the locally recognised identity of the Christian failure. In that same line of argument, we must recognise examples of ethical breakdown in which women are adhering to the model of womanhood but experience moments in which alignment is obstructed. Just as Das describes ordinary ethics as the interweaving of domestic action into the fabric moral cosmological significance, perceptions
of failure in domestic reproductive life can be ascribed to a mode of ethical subjectivation, even if those perceptions are not upheld by local demarcations of actual failure. Following this line of argument leads to the question of whether instances of circumstantial struggle can surpass the affirmative identity of the Christian failure, bringing about a deterioration of subjective cohesion.

6.4 Exceptionable Failure

Anthropologists have mainly written about religious perceptions of failure within the context of pious adherence, with less consideration for the category of failures, sins, and struggles that threaten an actor’s religious subjectivity, or create ex-adherents. Up to this point this chapter has looked at women’s perceptions failing that do not threaten their inclusion in the conservative evangelical community in any practical sense. In this last section I turn to two cases of ‘exceptionable failure’, in which women I knew grappled with the knowledge of their own marginality. While women experiencing infertility and other reproductive health issues commonly felt marginal, i.e. different from the perceived pro-natalist norm, they still adhered to everyday moral action, and were embraced and supported as sisters in Christ.

6.4.1 A Foot on Each Rock

Natalie and I had just finished a long coffee shop interview, in which she told me about her emotional road to accepting that she was no longer a Christian. For her it seemed to start when the scandal surrounding Josh Duggar first broke in 2015 (Bailey 2016). Hit with confusion and disillusionment, she had stopped attending church with her parents and four brothers, and then stopped going to church altogether. At the end of the interview, Natalie said she saw herself ‘balanced between two rocks in a stream’ – one was her old life and a belief in God, and the other was a new life away from the faith. Most of her weight was on

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44 Exceptions include Pelkmans 2013.
that second rock, she said, but she could not quite bring herself to push off completely. Now, after the interview, we relaxed with a walk around the Bentonville town square with our coffees, chatting and trying to decide if we should make a trip to Walmart. At 21 years old, Natalie belonged to a group of teens and young adults that I often socialised with, many of them from Pathway Fellowship and Hopewell Baptist. Our conversation turned to the hypothetical question of what might happen if someone in our social circle was gay, how their families would react, and what support and prayer the person might be offered.

Eventually Natalie asked, ‘Do you actually suspect anybody is gay?’ But we decided there was not much point in speculating.

Two months later, Natalie sent me a message saying she thought she was gay, or perhaps bisexual. When I asked what she thought would be the consequences of other people finding out, she replied, ‘I don’t know what would happen. Which is why I’m going to pretend I’m not [gay] for the time being.’ This was understandable for several reasons: first, Natalie was still in the process of working out her own sexuality and what it meant for her; and second, she was doing this internal work while also contending with a significant spiritual struggle, and the social ramifications that came with it.

When I first met Natalie, she had not been to church at Pathway Fellowship, or anywhere, for months, but it took some time before people within the community began to notice her non-attendance and see the danger in it. Once word had spread that Natalie was ‘no longer walking with God’, books from anonymous senders started arriving at her family home. Rumours had gradually begun to swirl that she might be ‘considering homosexuality’, after falling under the influence of a non-Christian lesbian friend. Christian friends and family would show their concern by warning her of the impression she was giving, and inviting her to church events. If womanhood is isomorphic with personhood, and homosexuality is a radical inversion of womanhood, LGBT identity forges existential dissonance for the Christian person.

Whether or not homosexuality was something naturally acquired, through genetics or foetal environment, was a matter of some casual debate during my fieldwork, but ultimately considered a moot point. As I have previously mentioned, my interlocutors likened
homosexuality to alcoholism, in that one might be born with the predisposition, but that did not negate the responsibility to reject the sin. For Natalie to say she was not a Christian was certainly serious, but not an insurmountable obstacle. Rachel exemplified the not uncommon scenario in which young adults question their salvation, or push away from Christianity, only to be born again with a compelling testimony. On the other hand, were Natalie to admit she was not heterosexual, and that she accepted this fact about herself as immutable, the public reaction would be different. Such an admission would be taken as concrete evidence that, rather than weathering a crisis of faith, she actively had chosen to reject Jesus and embrace the most extreme antithesis of womanhood. Natalie understood the doctrine and public opinion on homosexuality, but at the time, she was apprehensive about the reaction of her friends and family should she embrace her sexuality openly. Before returning to Natalie, the following section will explore another example of exceptional failure tied to ideas of gender and sexuality.

6.4.2 Win Without a Word

In Chapter 4, Molly dealt with feelings of marginality in her church’s ladies’ study group and fellowship, because the sexual trouble in her marriage did not align with the common standard of women’s and men’s wiring. While her friends lamented or joked about their husbands’ desire for sexual access, Molly’s husband had a lower libido than she did, thrusting her into the normatively male role of rebuffed sexual instigator. Although their sexual life eventually improved, Molly’s struggles in her marriage continued to mount as she felt ever more marginalised in the church. Her husband, Art, was ‘not walking with God’, but Molly endeavoured to carry the responsibility of maintaining a Christian marriage by being a godly wife and homeschooling mother.

There is a common joke in Arkansas Evangelical churches: ‘How do you know if you married the right person? Just look at your marriage certificate.’

At one of Pathway Fellowship’s Sunday parenting classes, a church elder shared an anecdote about his cousin. When she was about to marry someone the whole family found
unsuitable, they did all they could to counsel her to end the engagement. Despite the family’s warnings, the cousin went through with the wedding and, from the moment they were married, the family vowed to do everything they could to support the couple’s relationship. The elder explained, ‘Once you’re married, that’s it. What God has joined let no man put asunder. Divorce is not an option!’

At the time, I found his statement surprising, not because it did not ring true, but because two of the women sitting in the small class had gone through divorce and were happily remarried. Both women were active, full members of the church, attended ACHC, and were very well liked – in other words, they were far from marginal. Although these facts were apparently contradictory, the circumstances leading to each woman’s divorce from her first husband significantly mitigated what might have been an unacceptable failure. Both women suffered abuse, and their husbands ultimately left them, and the faith, making the resultant divorce non-optative. From a Biblical perspective, the women had grounds for divorce based on their husbands’ infidelity alone, but the men’s abandonment of their wives and children additionally made reconciliation after the infidelity practically impossible. The men they chose to remarry was also an important factor – one woman married a widower with two children, and one married a man who had never previously been married. Both men were conservative evangelical Christians, and prepared to adopt their new wives’ children as their own.

Molly, by contrast, struggled in her marriage without the kind of clear-cut mitigating circumstances her sisters-in-Christ experienced. Her husband, Art, had quit going to church, much like Missa’s husband, Brad. The difference between Missa and Molly was that Missa felt her church, Hopewell Baptist, continued to support her through her difficulty. Missa could cry in the ladies’ Bible study, and divulge her woes as she wished, whereas Molly felt hampered during fellowship. Part of Molly’s concern was that she no longer felt like a fully integrated part of the church community without Art, even though she and her seven children attended Sunday services regularly.

Molly’s conundrum shed ethnographic insight on some of my own experiences as a woman mostly attending church services and activities on my own. At Living Water Baptist,
the largest of the churches I regularly attended, I would go weeks without being approached by anyone other than my few friends; however, when my husband visited, suddenly members I had barely or never spoken to would rush to chat with us, sometimes already knowing us both by name. Even in churches where I had a wide friend group, and regularly went alone to people’s houses for dinner, it was more common for my husband and I to be invited as a couple. In part this can be explained by the fact that some men did not want to appear unseemly or make me uncomfortable by approaching me when I was unaccompanied by my husband. (My close friends also wanted to take the opportunity to show genuine interest in him.) But the phenomenon also speaks to an unspoken collective tendency to privilege intact married couples. Molly and Art’s marriage was suspended on a liminal bridge between ‘success’ and ‘failure’, depending largely on Molly to maintain its ethical congruity.

Molly had no support from Art in homeschooling, and had to take on the role of the spiritual leader in the family, teaching scripture to the children on her own. A vital point of departure for conservative evangelical marriage and boundary work is the Biblical exhortation to ‘[b]e ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers’ (2 Cor 6:14). As a man who had stopped engaging with the church body, and discontinued family Bible time, Art was perceived by the community as an unbeliever, but that did not negate Molly’s responsibilities as his wife, both from the church’s perspective and Art’s. Art was not living as a Christian, but he explicitly expected Molly to fulfil her role as a Christian wife, employing the lexicon of submission and male headship. She looked after his domestic needs and spent money on herself and the children with his permission. She continued to encourage her children to show him respect and defer to his wishes, and emphasised the ways in which he was an active and loving father. Above all, Molly prayed, as her friends at Pathway Fellowship urged her to, that her husband be led back to Christ, and in the meantime, that she learn to let go of her discontentment.

Despite Molly’s membership in the church, she had little recourse to confront Art about her unhappiness without ‘failing’ as a Christian wife. If circumstances were different, if Art were still part of the Pathway Fellowship body and acting like a counterfeit man, Pastor Brent would seriously be remiss if he did not confront Art with formal church discipline.
Outside of adultery or illegal activity, men’s poor behaviour was theoretically meant to be dealt with by fellow men in the church, brothers-in-christ, through informal, intimate confrontation, who form a network of accountability (Biolo 2009). Men who removed themselves from the church, however, eschewed that accountability. If a man, who at one time identified as born-again, chose not to police himself according to conservative evangelical ethics, there is little a church can do on behalf of his wife. Ultimately, the American Christian home was a sovereign space, where men were tasked by God to lead their families, and outside interference must be well justified.

This does not suggest that men were never at risk of public unacceptable failure except in the most extreme circumstances. The most egregious sin a man could commit against his family, and his manhood, was to refuse to work. Cultivating a strong work ethic and an ability to support a family financially are essential to becoming an adult man. For Christian men in Northwest Arkansas, so many of whom depended in some way on Walmart Corporate for their livelihoods, the spectre of unemployment was the cause of legitimate concern. Elizabeth and Rachel’s father was one of several men I knew whose position at Walmart head office was made redundant around the time of my fieldwork, and who remained unemployed for more than six months. During his search for a new position, a deal of care was taken in church and social settings to publicly point out what a hard worker he was, and what a difficult job market he was facing. To hint that he was somehow not doing all he could to secure provision for his family could have been socially devastating for him. Molly’s husband, Art, on the other hand, was unaffected by the waves of Walmart layoffs, so his material support for his family, and consequentially his status as a good man, husband, and father, remained intact, despite his spiritual lapse.

Wives contended with husbands-turned-unbelievers commonly enough that it was a topic of discipleship literature and pedagogical discourse. The Biblical answer was found in the Pauline Letters: ‘Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives’ (1 Peter 3:1-2). In this passage, the first use of ‘word’ refers to the word of God (scripture), and the second ‘word’ refers to wives’ verbal confrontation. The interpretation of this passage
taught women whose husbands do not obey the word of God, that they could be won back to God by faithful example. If a wife were instead to directly confront her husband insisting he resume his masculine responsibilities, she would be sinning by undermining his authority, and risk driving him farther from faith. Molly was acutely aware of this; she had learned the passage from 1 Peter, along with corresponding pedagogy. She had also read an exegesis on the subject by Christian author and commentator Nancy Leigh DeMoss, in her popular book Lies Women Believe (2001), which was also the subject of a year-long ladies’ study at Hopewell Baptist. The book outlines what women in unhappy marriages, whose ‘passive’ husbands refuse to lead in a godly manner, should do about ‘winning’ them back to the faith by humbling themselves (135-153). To tell Art outright that he needed to lead would be a form of ‘taking charge’ in her marriage, something Molly was cautioned not to do by her friends and Pastor Brent’s wife.

The more Molly struggled without satisfactory answers in her marriage, the more marginal she felt from the church. This was compounded by the other ways in which she already felt like an outsider. The story of her marginality, and Natalie’s, is revelatory in part because both of these women remain members of their conservative evangelical community, despite their ongoing processes of questioning the community’s ontological truths. The fact that they were not ostracised is an indication of how the women around them influenced the very architecture of collective Christian boundaries in Arkansas.

6.4.3 Outsider, Still Inside

Before arriving in Arkansas, I had had conversations with people in other parts of the country who had ‘left’ conservative evangelical homeschooling communities. Two became regular interlocutors after I contacted them through the organisation Homeschoolers Anonymous, which curates one of several online forums for adults with traumatic personal histories of abuse facilitated by religion-based homeschooling. Stories of leaving, whether they centred around a drastic break away from an abusive situation, or a more mundane shift away from religious spaces and everyday ethics, somehow involved a visible social rupture.
Scholarly research has been done on ‘religious retention or switching,’ including why individuals choose to leave the religious traditions or communities in which they were raised (Smith and Sikkink 2003:188). This final section, by contrast, is interested in cases of ontological shifting without demonstrable social rupture, and how they complicate extant theories on Christian subjectivity and agency.

For Natalie and Molly, dramatic personal changes did not translate into dramatic changes in their everyday lives. As they each became disenchanted with conservative evangelical ontological architecture and found themselves axiomatically marginal, how they understood the world shifted, but the way they exist in the world has not. Even as they piecemeal withdrew from church-based worship, they remained firmly embedded in local social and kin networks. This draws attention to the very real but as-yet under-investigated experiences of people living within faith-based communities, but as outsiders – or, more accurately, marginal insiders. Within Hasidic Jewish communities in New York City, Fader identifies the phenomenon of outwardly faithful, socially integrated people living “double life” or “ITC” (in the closet), or what Yiddish-speaking ultra-Orthodox call bahaltna apikorsim (hidden heretics)’ (2020: 2). For men and women living ‘double life’, feelings of doubt clash with ideas of collective Jewish history and the contemporary self, which Fader attributes to conflicting notions of authority and morality in the digital age (ibid. 8-9). Like marginal conservative evangelicals, ‘hidden heretics’ often develop doubt out of or alongside feelings of disparity, and experience different ‘journeys’ of losing faith based on gender (ibid. 4-5). In both contexts if doubt is detected, the community has measures for intervention such as religious counselling (ibid. 6-7). One marked difference for Natalie and Molly compared to ultra-Orthodox Jews and people in many other non-liberal religious communities, was the absence of sudden exclusion.

Over several months after her revelation, Natalie slowly started to talk about her sexual identity with close friends and family. She said she chose to communicate privately with each person one-on-one, emphasising in each conversation that she was still going through a process of discernment. If at any point she was expecting a hostile reaction, or the breakdown of a relationship, none happened. Natalie said she continued to be a welcome part
of Christian friend groups, and occasionally attended church activities. She lives in her family home, with her older and younger brothers, where she maintains a healthy and loving relationship with her parents.

On the other hand, Molly found herself at a nebulous crossroad. Although she would like to look for a new church community, she has found solace in a new friendship with another woman whose husband is ‘no longer walking with God’. She maintains her relationships with women from her church, educates her children and takes care of her husband – her day-to-day life is, on the surface, hardly different than it was before she began to question everything.

Change, and breakdown, are not always as visible as we might expect, therefore, what can this tell us about the Christian ethical subject? Echoing Foucault, Strhan advocates an approach to the religious subject that de-emphasises self-regulatory practice: ‘Subject formation involves more than just learning to follow rules of behaviour: it is also to do with how individuals establish their relations to these rules and how they recognise themselves as obligated to put these rules into practice’ (2015: 67). In their own unique ways, Natalie and Molly’s experiences further complicate the idea of subject formation based on regulation. Their struggles are less with rules of behaviour than with ontology; in other words, as I have shown throughout the thesis, existential modes of being influence praxis but are not necessarily defined by it.

For Natalie, managing a marginalising sexual identity had surprisingly little to do with her relationship to or obligation toward rules of behaviour. She was not sexually active, and as of yet relatively unconcerned with sexual codes of conduct. Instead, she worried about preserving social and familial continuity in spite of a potential emic breakdown to her very personhood. Her sexuality and her salvation, as perceived by her community, are equally vital. She may have a complex relationship with the ‘rules’ of church attendance, but her subjectivity as an ‘outsider’ developed from a shift in the way she came to understand how the world works – in other words, she approached conservative evangelical ontology with new recognition, and broke from it. Molly recognised that rules about behaviour in Christian marriage kept her from accessing certain kinds of support. She continues to act in line with
those rules, not because of her relationship to them as obligatory, but because they are woven into how she has lived her everyday life, a life she wishes to maintain despite her own ongoing ontological shifting.

Within the process of becoming a Christian failure, or for that matter a woman who fails outside the bounds of Christian identity, it is once again women who influence ethical demarcations. Perceptions of failure are articulated in women-only spaces such as Bible studies, and identified as affirmative struggle or indiscretion by other women. Testimony and redemption occur with regularity over quotidian sins and trials in these and more casual spaces as well. Although women can and do discuss feelings of failure with husbands, fathers, and pastors, fellow women were very often the first port of call, especially in domestic concerns such as sex or homeschooling. In these interactions, women generate becoming-failure for one another, thereby determining what struggles foster sanctification and cohesion. In cases of actual ethical breakdown, women are often the first to step in with counsel, even, as Molly’s struggle exemplified, when the initial point of breakdown comes from a man. Ultimately this degree of influence in small everyday dialogue shapes how feminine identity is formed, and the ontological architecture around who is and is not a true Christian.

6.5 Conclusion

It is abundantly clear that, in myriad ways, failure is vital to a successful lived-out conservative evangelical ethic. Failure is often the precursor to salvation, and the ongoing tension between sin, prayer, and repentance is the groundwork for born-again Christian development. Struggling with everyday domestic life as a man, and as a woman, cannot be separated from ‘formal piety’ in conservative evangelical ontology, because the identities of wife, mother, husband, and father take precedence. However, because this community is characterised strongly by pro-natalism, women with reproductive issues and experiences of loss contend with difficult feelings of inadequacy, which are mitigated through avenues of narrative and social support. Here the acceptance of God’s sovereign authority over the
reproductive body is paramount to women’s sense of self. Therefore, in addition to studying perceived failures and shortcomings based on sin, it is important to focus on ‘faithful’ struggles caused by uncontrollable circumstances, which require the Christian actor to meet a new set of expectations. As much as failure, both individual and circumstantial, is built into the emotional topography of the good Christian life, certain actions and modes of being will always fall outside the bounds of acceptability. In those instances, it is important not to overlook where marginality does not translate into social rupture, and where failure is much more about ontology than regulatory praxis.
Conclusion

My last day of fieldwork in Northwest Arkansas happened to be Christmas Day 2016. My husband, Keith, and I attended every worship service and Christmas event we could in order to say goodbye. We attended Pathway Fellowship’s teen Christmas play, and enjoyed surf-and-turf lunch at the home of Lily, Bobby, and their daughter. Everywhere we went, friends gave us their Christmas cards, invariably done in the style of a glossy family photograph. By the time we left Arkansas I had a bag filled with cards, many of them images of long lines of children in coordinated outfits, flanking a central figure, their mother. After so much time meditating over womanhood and its significance, there was something poignant about carrying away with me these material, produced pictures of Christian women.

What is a Christian woman? That has been the fundamental question at the centre of this thesis. In this thesis I have put together a schematic of womanhood, and its levels, based on the resources my interlocutors trusted, such as the Bible, and the pedagogy they formed and disseminated. Atop the ‘official’ schematic I have overlaid ethnographic accounts of women coming to grips with what womanhood is and what women do as they traversed significant moments of transformation. In doing so I examined the decisions women made about pious action, and differences women made to Christianity as it is lived in the minutiæ of the domestic everyday.

Overall, this thesis has proposed a nuanced approach to Christian womanhood that takes into account its ethical basis in embodied practice, and its formidable role in how conservative evangelical persons shape themselves in the United States, but also its fluidity. On one hand, womanhood seems fixed into pedagogical discourse, a load-bearing facet of the ontological architecture that surrounds Christian women throughout their lives. It provides an image, an epistemological imaginary, and a mirror through which women evaluate themselves. On the other hand, living out the doctrine of discernment inevitably entails change, a modification of architectural features, engendered individually or collaboratively. With womanhood and notions of the family at the core of Christian personhood and ethics,
everyday discernment of moral action is not simply one aspect of ‘religious’ life, but seeded into consciousness in all manner of mundane actions.

Because everyday piety for conservative evangelicals encompasses so much subtle action and variation, the thesis has chosen focal points in which ethical decision-making carries the most weight, and women are confronted with pressing questions about womanhood, and true Christianity. Moments of becoming wives, lovers, mothers, and failures provide an analytical focus while also representing thematic areas that make up ever-present discourse about Christian living. Conservative evangelicals were not preoccupied with a singular born-again Christian identity, but male and female identities, which are built upon by graduating, cohesive identities. By looking at these, the thesis took into account more fully how women conceptualised themselves, striving to follow holy trajectories.

It has been an aim of this thesis to foreground conservative evangelical ontology, discourse, and experience wherever possible. When it comes to the embodied nature of subjective transformations, this has involved considering multiple aspects of embodied knowledge and performance. The first of these, vitally underpinning ideas of ethical action and fully-formed Christian personhood, is the bodily indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The second consideration, particularly relevant in the creation of sexual subjects, is the interplay between phenomenology and performance – how the body experiences and acts upon the world – both of which allow for collaborative moral action, or intersubjectivity. Third, in the experience of pregnancy and birth, the ways in which women encounter God through the material substrate of their and their baby’s bodies exemplifies another kind of embodied process of becoming.

Methodologically speaking, this thesis has contributed to avenues being forged relatively recently in anthropology, namely the ethnographic study of everyday religious ethics, sexual ethics, integrating digital methods, and looking critically at interlocutors’ engagement with popular discourse. This required no particular new method, but rather a decision to pursue avenues of enquiry that veered somewhat from the institutional and the organised, into the personal and haphazard – more into the church nursery than the worship hall. In this pursuit, I have endeavoured to examine areas of living that have tended to be overlooked in scholarly
research on conservative American Christianity, such as romance, sex, domesticity, and the cosmological stakes of quotidian intimacy.

Going forward, a great deal more may be explored in the anthropology of religion around questions of everyday experience and gender. This thesis has touched on how race might shape conservative evangelical life in America, but a more diverse fieldwork context would provide an actual picture of Black and ethnic minority formulations and experiences of Christian womanhood. Furthermore, a deeper investigation into the atmosphere of whiteness, so often the default standard in the evangelical Ozarks, is certainly necessary. This would further illuminate ideas of Christian identities, and how race, ethnicity, or nationality, intersect with them. More broadly, this thesis has shown that in certain contexts everyday ethics is understood to be grounded in a variety of forms of action, and subjective frameworks. Additionally, each of the above mentioned ethnographic modes of looking at embodiment has the potential for further academic exploration of Christianity in a number of contexts.

Before I had even arrived in Arkansas, the community had begun a period of change, one that has carried on since my departure. This has only proved to me that the gears of discernment and boundary work that engender such changes are persistent, and unlikely to halt any time soon. On 6 September 2019 I had my own significant moment of becoming-motherhood when my son was born. Since his birth I have often wondered how it would be to visit with my friends in Arkansas with him in tow, and I believe I have grown to better understand some of their experiences and motivations. At the very least, I understand how small things can bring big transformations.
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